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Questionnaire
Response

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About the Author

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Questionnaire

Response

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A single question posed by my professor changed my trajectory as an undergraduate art history student. When she asked why I was writing about European art when Puerto Rico's own visual culture remained largely understudied, I had a moment of uncomfortable clarity. Although I am from the island, I believed in the "greatness" and "prestige" of the European canon and its old masters. I was well aware of local talent in my homeland, yet my relationship with colonialism unconsciously relegated Caribbean subjects as peripheral while it


centralized the "achievements" and "sophistication" that Western artists had established. I had not dismissed the value of Puerto Rican art; rather, I had internalized a hierarchical artistic framework based on centuries of Eurocentric pedagogy and conditioning. My experience was neither unique nor accidental—it reflected the mechanisms through which colonial power continues to operate in "neutral" spaces. The legacies of empire cannot be measured only through the oppressive economic and political regimes of the past. They also reverberate in the cultural and social practices that inevitably shape our collective understanding of what constitutes legitimate scholarship, reinforcing colonial epistemologies that still influence contemporary art historical discourses in the present.

Now, driven by a sense of academic accountability, my research interests have returned home. I decided to focus on the nineteenth-century resurgence of eighteenth-century Afro-descendant artist José Campeche among the island's criollo elite. As Campeche became canonized in intellectual circles, his racial identity was obscured. Blackness was no longer part of the conversations surrounding Campeche's legacy or his contributions to the island's material and visual culture. This biographical omission separates the artist's success from his social position as a man of color in a Spanish colonial city—a feat that required more nuance than simply mastering European stylistic traditions. It seems that, to fit within the narrative of Puerto Rico's brewing national identity, Campeche became *whitened*. The erasure of Campeche's Blackness to serve the "canon" demonstrates how non-white artists are not only excluded but also constructed in ways that conform to predetermined European standards of artistic legitimacy and merit. For Campeche to be accepted as a "master," his persona had to fit within colonial frameworks of prestige, class, virtue, and whiteness. What makes this omission even more significant is that it not only obscured Campeche's African heritage from public memory but also concealed the revolutionary nature of his success as a mixed-race artist in colonial Puerto Rico—an absence that sadly persists in much of the existing scholarship about this artist and his work.

To confront Campeche's racial erasure is to question the legacies of art history that have influenced the methodologies, historiographies, and priorities governing our discipline to this day. As contemporary art historians, how can we engage in reparative scholarship within institutional frameworks that privilege European epistemologies and maintain past hierarchies of knowledge production? Do we participate in the marginalization of non-Western artists and artistic traditions, through our seemingly "neutral" academic practices and research? In my view, a reparative approach in our field demands a willingness both to sit in the discomfort of acknowledging our discipline's complicity in these erasures and to actively work on dismantling the structures that continue to perpetuate them. This requires shifting from surface-level inclusions of marginalized communities in survey courses and museum exhibitions toward revelations of how these same institutions participated in silencing those communities and excluding them from the "canon." It means grappling with questions of accountability and choosing carefully what we wish to perpetuate, among the people we educate.

Empire and its legacies still live in our archives, syllabi, and everyday lives. If we resist the urge to follow Western universals, we create space for other forms of knowledge that

challenge, rewrite, and reshape the scholarship that has long defined what merits art historical value. For me, this work carries a weight of responsibility, to prevent others from internalizing the same hierarchies that once made me overlook the richness of my own culture. Put simply, the stakes are both academic and human.

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