The preceding chapters have attempted to deliver a cumulative portrayal of the transition from an anti-colonial nationalism to a cosmopolitan postmodernism in visual art and criticism of the Anglophone Caribbean. They have described its particular inflection in a region, that was still negotiating the meaning and direction of postcoloniality, when postmodernism became the lingua franca of the international art world. The book’s three sections have been dedicated, respectively, to the strategies artists adopt in order to succeed in the contemporary art-world, to institutional and organizational developments in the region, and to the conceptual framing of Caribbean art for international survey-exhibitions. It has been proposed that the hesitation, on the part of the Caribbean postcolonial state, to act as patron or facilitator for the visual arts, has driven the more experimental segment of the arts community into an alternative scene and an increasingly self-sufficient creative network. While the artworks at the centre of this network may have a critical intent, their distribution and impact therefore often remains within the network’s centrifugal range. It is one of the most telling contradictions of the present moment, that the political paralysis this autonomy imposes on the cultural sector, seems simultaneously elected by the aesthetic strategies many artists have embraced (from a deconstructive conceptualism to a celebratory culturalism) as well as by the inherently transnational scope of a diaspora-aesthetic.

Since neoliberal Caribbean governments invariably favor ‘the culture that pays’, the official neglect of experimental art at once substantiates the current avant-garde’s sense of marginalization and allows the alternative scene to assume a quasi-institutional character. Moreover, because it is marginalized (and sometimes difficult to decode), the ‘cutting-edge’ expression is almost automatically perceived to be counter hegemonic. Notwithstanding the talk of radical democracy, popular uprising and globalization from below, it can, however, be argued that the 1990s avant-garde effectively has de-politicized the artistic statement, overseen the privatization of cultural administration (in institutionally weak territories), and promoted a network-orientation, which also is an export-orientation—thus leaving little distance between itself and a neoliberal imaginary. The remarkable
convenience for the establishment of the methods adopted by its self-professed challengers is difficult to overlook.

While I have argued that Caribbean art never has looked more critical and yet never been less politically committed, I concede that the more fundamental question of how art can stimulate political action (without mistaking the work itself for political engagement, or substituting increased visibility for social progress) has been insufficiently explored. Rejecting the notion that all art is (or ought to be) inherently political, while also acknowledging that the inflection of particular forms can evolve with time and place, I do, however, insist that art, if it wishes to be seen as politically progressive, cannot denounce collective representation or strive to keep all interpretive options open as a matter of principle. It is often said (indeed it has been a premise for the movement portrayed in this book) that the artist’s role is to raise questions, not to offer answers—but this should not exempt artists from considering the ultimate objective of their activity, defining the values that anchor it or, however difficult this may be, from trying to assess its function in a given political context.

Another area of neglect in the present study is the slightly divergent circumstances that may have incited the post-nationalist momentum in Jamaica and Trinidad, and conditioned its more secondary character in Barbados and the Bahamas (notwithstanding their shared aesthetic orientation, Alice Yard may, for example, have a more directly ‘post-nationalist’ inflection than both Fresh Milk and Popopstudios). While I have suggested a connection between neoliberal policies, weak public institutions and the overwhelming success and visibility of Caribbean alternative spaces, such spaces can, as the record shows, also thrive in environments with strong institutions—though usually with a more equitable distribution of influence. The related assertion, that the post-nationalist avant-garde has consolidated itself through the establishment of such spaces is, moreover, complicated by the fact, that this momentum already (if largely due to external support) had become trendsetting by the time spaces like Alice Yard, Fresh Milk and Popopstudios emerged. It may therefore be more accurate to suggest that it is through these spaces that the post-nationalist movement stakes its claims on the future. And though the suggestion that that momentum has displaced practitioners more attuned to a nationalist agenda certainly held true during the 1990s and early 2000s, it is more difficult to prove that a substantive segment of the artistic field is being actively displaced today—if exactly as a result of this avant-garde’s impact on the emerging generation. With the current mutations into ‘neo-phenomenological’ or ‘archipelagic’ frames of reference, the field does, however, seem to be widening.
Looming large over the present argument is the elementary question of why—without any immediate prospect of material rewards—so many of the region’s foremost critics and practitioners have bought into the post-nationalist movement. To consider this in depth would involve a certain amount of conjecture regarding personal motivations, which I am able to undertake. Yet, in passing, let it be recalled that several pioneers of this avant-garde have expressed frustration with being defined as ‘Caribbean artists’ while studying in a multiculturalist metropole. In the light of such experiences, the appeal of a universal language, which seeks to erase identity-boxes, is not surprising. To such artists, cosmopolitanism may simply represent freedom and opportunity. It must be conceded too, that the nationalist paradigm often was marked by a stale or conservative uniformity and, by the 1980s and 1990s, certainly needed to be confronted with its own biases and limitations. The post-nationalist momentum has unquestionably had a positive effect in holding a previous generation to account, unraveling many forms of prejudice, encouraging (and demonstrating) intellectual flexibility and exploring new ways of engaging the public. What I have always found surprising, however, was the bitterness of the critique initially leveled at the preceding generation—a critique in which many older practitioners were unable to recognize their own positions. The motivation for this must primarily have been strategic: the militant adoption of slogans and terms of reference associated with postcolonial theory was an effective way of enlisting academic and extra-regional support to expedite a generational succession. For many younger artists, however, a post-nationalist aesthetic may now simply be the language with the greatest contemporary purchasing power. Without strong local institutions and canons to instill a historical awareness and context for the contemporary, such artists (who have a global access unknown to previous generations) may, at any rate, see themselves as being in conversation with a global contemporary, rather than with the fledgling and loosely documented traditions of local predecessors.²

At the end of my discussion, however, it may seem that just about every aesthetic, critical and curatorial practice currently in play has been challenged, and it would be hugely ironic, if my argument itself took a deconstructive direction. Though I have been motivated by what I see as the contradictions (and new myths) of the current moment—and by the overwhelming discursive and curatorial consensus, which simply renders current claims of a new pluralism untrue, it therefore seems necessary to own up to the challenge of pointing towards openings as well as closures. I therefore offer the following tentative suggestions:

First, I wish to encourage a less homogenized representation (and production) of the Caribbean contemporary. This not only requires an interruption of the
present critical and curatorial hegemony, but also a better balance between institutional and alternative agents—indeed it requires institutions to be offered the necessary support to properly execute their representational and advisory role. If this (as is likely) proves untenable in the current economic and political climate, a series of ‘alternative’ alternative spaces (perhaps modeled on Buntinx’ micromuseum) might broaden the contemporary field.

Second, without arguing for regression as progress, I believe there was something of value in the movement here referred to as Creole modernism, at its best. Before elaborating on that point, it should indeed be noted with guarded optimism that the current avant-garde in some regards merely (if not without significant implications) has given Creole modernism’s core elements a new inflection. The current preoccupation with the Caribbean as a ‘construct’ thus re-inscribes the region as a critical focal point, though now without borders or political coherence. Alongside the insistence on ‘difference’ and the anxiety about totalizing ideologies and representations, there is an emphasis on community and collaboration, albeit transient and project-related: some notion of collective agency does, in other words, persist. The desire to reach out to the general populace through public performances, video and digital media likewise echoes the fundamental gist of a Creole modernism, which precisely was distinguished from its Western counterpart by its effort to communicate with audiences through an emphasis on narrative over pure form. Unlike the contemporary avant-garde, however, the most sincere Creole modernists of the 1960s and 1970s, not only sought to avoid the colonial picturesque, but also the allure of international fashions (such as pop-art and minimalism), unless it—as Cozier precisely laments—served their idea of culture (p. 1). And whereas artists of that generation thought of modernity and a more egalitarian future as something they had to create, the post-nationalist avant-garde seemingly puts its faith in the globally self-homogenizing character of a cosmopolitan era.

Gradually, of course, the political betrayals, corruptions, social and ethnic divisions of the post-Independence Caribbean—not to mention the fractures of the art-world itself—complicated the anti-colonial modernists’ implicit alliance with the political establishment. It has been a premise for my argument that some of the artists I have followed closely for the last two decades, and who may be regarded as the heirs of Creole modernism, in some sense ‘index’ that trajectory. Their oeuvres display a different kind of double consciousness to the one touted by diaspora-theorists, a double-consciousness which acknowledges the failures of postcolonialism and yet remains committed to the simultaneous assertion and critique of a historically and geo-politically situated Caribbean. Some of these
artists hold up the totality of Caribbean history, including its recent disappointments, as the basis (rather than the impediment) for ongoing nation-building efforts. Their works differ from so much contemporary art through an insistence on continuity and causality, their unapologetic assertion of opposing agendas, and their consciously mediated expressions. Such artists, in other words, assume responsibility for the risky and difficult task of representing a historical dialectic. Far from proposing this as a matrix for the Caribbean contemporary, I merely wish to argue for the equal recognition of artists, who have maintained some of the previous generation’s aspirations—and, of course, also of artists, who have no political ambitions at all, but are invested in some of the many other cognitive, perceptual, tactile, affective or emotional processes that art can induce (with the neo-phenomenological turn, this is already happening). I do, however, also submit that closer attention to extended individual oeuvres may offer deeper and more valuable insights into the region’s aesthetic dynamics than broader survey-shows, which always subsume the individual statement under their overarching curatorial agenda.

Third, I submit that some of the works presently taken in evidence of a post-nationalist, transnational or diasporic turn, actually allow for a re-interpretation as expressions of a ‘critical nationalism’. As has been suggested, the post-nationalist inflection often originates in a contextualizing discourse, rather than in the actual works, and it is thought-provoking indeed, that figures as central to the contemporary moment as Annalee Davis and Christopher Cozier remain curiously connected to a distinctively national discourse—indeed Davis herself has lately advocated a ‘civic nationalism’ (see p. 69). Though it would require a precarious attempt to wrest them from a stated position, such a re-interpretation could do worse than commence with the Laocoon drawings Cozier displayed in his 2013 New York exhibition (plate 28). We might then see the empty enclosures and intimations of territoriality, punishment and impending disaster, not only as truthful testimonies to the nation state as the failed cause of the Caribbean middle-classes, but also as a warning not to let a project, which remains our least bad model for establishing democratic accountability and social justice, slip away.

Finally, in contradistinction to Hanchard, Bourriaud, Enwezor and others, who demand that modernity be acknowledged as hetero-temporal in order to declare the notion of ‘provinciality’ irrelevant, I second Jameson’s observation that such discursive measures merely conceal the economic and institutional inequality, which precisely is reflected in temporal dissonance, and therefore serve a neoliberal agenda perfectly well: “this means that there can be a modernity for ev-
erybody which is different from the standard or hegemonic Anglo-Saxon model. Whatever you dislike about the latter, including the subaltern position it leaves you in, can be effaced by the reassuring and ‘cultural’ notion that you can fashion your own modernity differently, so that there can be a Latin-American kind, or an Indian kind or an African kind, and so forth ( . . . ). But this is to overlook the other fundamental meaning of modernity, which is that of a worldwide capitalism itself”. The implication of Jameson’s statement is notably not that modernism (and postmodernism) can only be articulated in certain prescribed ways. Just as “all paths to capitalism are unique and ‘exceptional’, contingent and determined by a unique national situation”, so are the artistic responses to modernity: within the conception of one modernity, ‘belatedness’ could, in other words, be put to political use by exposing, rather than concealing (as cosmopolitanism precisely is designed to do) the fundamental inequalities that continue to impact artistic practices across the globe.

I close in full recognition that a knotted, unwieldy and often contradictory reality has been tied into a somewhat rigid and totalizing argument. I have done so in exasperation with the ubiquitous, and oddly celebratory references to ‘Caribbean complexity’ as an insurmountable obstacle to positing any truth about the region. While my argument does not seek to monopolize the truth, it is based on a conviction of the importance of naming and mapping our own reality, if only for others to adjust the findings.