

““I just want people to know I was here”: the polyperceptival Diasporan art narrative”

Introduction

In the article entitled “Unfinished Migration: Reflection on the African Diaspora and the Making of the Modern World,” African Diaspora Studies scholars Tiffany Ruby Patterson and Robin D. G. Kelley state, “As a process Diaspora is being constantly remade through movement, migration, and travel, as well imagined through thought, cultural production, and political struggle” (20). “Inter|sectionality: Diaspora Art” is both a statement and an invitation to art and visual culture constituencies.

With twenty-four years of practice in intercultural art competency across the Black Atlantic-in the Gilroyan sense of the term, the Caribbean Sea and Circum-Caribbean bodies of water, Diaspora Vibe Cultural Arts Incubator offers the contours of the contemporary transnational lived Diasporan art and culture identities found across the nations considered. Given the impact of the slave trade and colonialism on local populations and the ensuing Creolization, art praxes are necessarily “inter|sectional” at the interval of the Amerindian, African, European, South Asian, and Middle Eastern cultural substrates in place. But additionally, ethnicity, class, gender, and age bring to bear in the construction of power paradigm.

With its headquarters in Miami, Florida, the incubator comprises creatives living and working in the US. Either born or raised in the United States, those culturally hyphenated citizens confirm the irreversible demographic trend which characterizes the population in this country: it is more diverse than ever. Based on the World Population Review findings, even though whites represented the majority of the population in 2019 at 60.4%, by 2055 the nation’s racial profile will be drastically different according to the Pew Research Center. The breakdown by then is estimated to be 48% White, 24% Hispanic, 14% Asian and 13% Black. The non-white segment of

the population is on the rise. Additionally, in 2015, the percentage of the population born outside the US was 14% compared to 5% in 1965. The majority of immigrants come from Asia and Latin America, with Mexico, China and India leading. The trend will grow exponentially. By 2060, the percentage of foreign-born US citizens will reach 19%.

An equally important part of DVCAI's pool of artists resides and works in the Caribbean, Latin America, South America, and Central America. They are a testament to the fact that Diasporan art making question borders both figuratively and literally as social constructs. It rethinks community. The turbulent history of slavery, colonization, and decolonization of the region where the Western empires fought over the same territories resulted in lasting harms. For instance, communication is extremely difficult given the segmentation of the zone in isolated Anglophone, Creolophone, Francophone, Hispanophone, Dutch, and Papamiento linguistic poles with no common interlanguage capable of bridging the gap. Consequently, it is easier for example to travel to Europe and the West from any of the local capital cities than regionally. As we were sadly reminded recently in March 2020 while traveling to Guadeloupe from Miami for our International Cultural Exchange project Jamaican subjects, as is the case of Michael Elliot, are excluded from the Schengen area and therefore cannot be allowed in the French department without a visa, no matter how geographically close the two islands are. Our Surinamese member Kurt Nahar traveled first to French Guyana so he could catch a flight to Guadeloupe, since there is no direct trip between his home country and the French department.

In spite of or rather because of these limitations and diverse others, DVCAI's creative community lives across boundaries and operates as an inclusive *quilombo* or *palenque*, a site of resistance with a passion for community cultural development through community capacity building and civic capacity. The two italicized terms above refer to the same reality applied to

Portuguese and Spanish-occupied territories in the New World during enslavement, namely that Africans resisted and rebelled at every point of the enslavement process, from the moment of capture on the continent to the dissemination on the plantations. In that regard, historian Michael Gomez points out,

Once in the New World, Africans were again quick to seize upon any opportunity to reverse their circumstances. As early as 1503, Hispaniola's governor Nicolas de Ovando complained that African ladinos were colluding with the Taino population and fleeing to the mountains to establish maroon or runaway communities (110)

The pattern was similar throughout the territories, the enslaved Africans fled to places inaccessible to law enforcement and established modes of existence more suitable to their inclination. And the endurance of those communities was predicated on collaboration with enslaved subjects on nearby plantations (through bartering) and integrating Amerindians societies which at times took the form of intermarriage. Those maroon communities, especially in the case of Palmares in Brazil, were symbols of black leadership and self-governance. DVCAI enjoys an impressive roster of artists that cover a large geographic expanse. Moreover, in addition to the creatives, the organization mobilizes a diverse pool of talents including legal counsels, art appraisers, museum managers, gallery owners and operators, public relations, art critiques and scholars, travel agents, art installers, videographers, photographers, graphic designers, trustees, collectors, and transportation operators. They all answered the call for the inter|sectionality exhibit at the Corcoran.

In *Creative Communities: The Art of Cultural Development*, Don Adams and Arlene Goldbard suggest seven principles that practitioners of community cultural development readily agree upon. They are as follows:

1. Active participation in cultural life is an essential goal of community cultural development.
2. All cultures are essentially equal, and society should not promote any one as superior to the others.
3. Diversity is a social asset, part of the cultural commonwealth, requiring protection and nourishment.
4. Culture is an essential crucible for social transformation, one that can be less polarizing and create deeper connections than other social-change arenas.
5. Cultural production is a means of emancipation, not the primary end in itself; the process is as important as the product.
6. Culture is a dynamic, protean whole and there is no value in creating artificial boundaries within it.
7. Artists have roles as agents of transformation that are more socially valuable than mainstream art-world roles- and certainly equal in legitimacy (17).

The DVCAI Model: Diaspora in the making

Since its inception in 1996, Rosie Gordon-Wallace, founder and president of DVCAI has sought out to provide a platform for Diaspora artists to showcase their lived experience. By promoting the works of southern (from North America and the global south) creatives, the incubator has purposely enriched the narrative on the black and brown endurance in the south of the United States and by extension outside. In a pre-Art Basel Miami era where African descended art history(ies) through an international prism were absent from the art world lexicon and ecosystem, DVCAI has and continues to afford visibility, agency, and voice to art traditions and practices routinely neglected and/or dismissed by the industry.

In twenty-four years of existence and active advocacy, the incubator has markedly inflected the arc of the art ecology in Miami, the Caribbean, Latin America, Central America and South America. Gordon-Wallace has strategically positioned the art collective as an innovation laboratory that has designed a groundbreaking, successful, and replicable modus operandi. The three main components, an art gallery, a residency program, and international cultural exchange program articulate the cutting-edge vision. The online pinacotheca markets directly to collectors, art advisors, gallery owners, museum curators, as well as acquisition and accessioning divisions.

Gordon-Wallace is a product of the Pan African movement which took roots in her native Jamaica. She came of age while Michael Manley was at the helm of the Jamaican government. During such time, the founder of DVCAI was exposed to and benefited from the “Caribbean Federation” doctrine that progressive young political leaders of the region championed then. Central to the theory was the idea of interisland cooperation. In an effort to build each other up, the independent island nations intentionally shared not only their natural resources but respective expertise and manpower. As a result, Jamaican professionals (teachers, engineers, doctors, nurses, so forth and so on) like some of Gordon-Wallace’s instructors volunteered to teach and practice on sister islands including Cuba and vice versa.

DVCAI’s international cultural exchange set-up proceeds from that formative experience and frame of mind. Unique to the organization, it provides artists an unparalleled window into the world and a foray into international and transnational learning, a bedrock of post-secondary education in the US. Even if it is pushed forth at colleges and universities across the country, studies show that African American and Latinx students are at a disadvantage. They travel less than their white counterparts. Using data from the Institute of International Education and the US Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics, the National Association for Foreign

Students Affairs: Association of International Educators (NAFSA) reveals that minority students continue to be underrepresented in study abroad participation despite an increase in overall diversity enrollment. Therefore, although African Americans represented 13,6% of the total post-secondary enrollment at American universities in 2017-2018 they accounted for only 6,1% of US students abroad. For their part, Hispanics constituted 18.9% of the total post-secondary enrollment during the same time period but only 10.6% travelled abroad.

By offering her artists the opportunity to learn and create abroad, the incubator's founder is expanding considerably their knowledge base of the Diaspora beyond US borders. She is also addressing two persistent flaws that have lately gained increased traction in the existing age of populism we live in, monoculturalism and monolingualism. Under the guise of protectionism that posture leads inevitably to self-centeredness, othering and xenophobia as evidenced by the series of incidents at rallies and marches across the country during the last presidential elections. On February 16, 1965, Malcolm X delivered a speech in which he called the attention of his American audience on the interconnectedness of world events. He stressed the need for any student of domestic socioeconomic and political problems to equip themselves with a different lens to appropriately read geopolitics. He declared with much foresight:

An in order for you and me to know the nature of the struggle that you and I are involved in, we have to not only know the various ingredients involved at the local level and national level, but also the ingredients that are involved at the international level. And the problems of the Black man in this country today have ceased to be a problem of just the American Negro or an American problem. It has become a problem that's so complex, and has so many implications in it, that you have to study it in the world context or in its international context, to really see it

as it actually is. Otherwise you can't follow the local issue, unless you know what part it plays in the entire international context. And when you look at it in that context, you see it in a different light, but you see it with more clarity (151)

It is all the more fitting that X delivered the address a few weeks after he had been denied entry to France by the authorities despite the fact he had been invited for a talk. The black nationalist and civil rights activist travelled extensively across the globe to precisely better sharpen his comprehension of global happenings and their impact on the American scene. After accomplishing the ritual Hajj to Mecca and sojourning at length across the Islamic world, he returned to the US and influenced by the Organization of African United, he founded the Organization of Afro-American Unity. In addition to fighting for human rights the OAU promoted cooperation among Africans and Afro descendants worldwide. DVCAI advances notable and measurable collaboration between Diasporan artists through its residency program. An extension of the ICE project, the month-long scheme offers artists from visited countries studio space and time States side to create, while also engaging the Miami art and culture community through talks, studio visits, and exhibits.

In *Capacity Building: An Approach to People-Centered Development*, Deborah Eade offers a remarkable definition. At the basis of development is the strengthening of individuals' ability to determine their proper standards and priorities and to self-organize to take action on these (23). Accordingly, capacity-building is internal to development not external. Citing Clarence N. Stone, Jeffrey R. Henig, Bryan D. Jones and Carol Pierannunzi, Stafford Hood, Rodney Hopson and Henry Fierson define civic capacity as "various sectors of the community coming together in an effort to solve a major problem" (83). Twenty-four years ago, Rosie Gordon-Wallace saw the lack of visibility and adequate representation Caribbean and Diasporan practicing artists living in the

Miami-Dade County perimeter were faced with as well as the challenge of Caribbean and Diasporan creatives to penetrate the American market. She set out to create a viable ecosystem that promotes exchanges and moves the practice of Diaspora art and culture consciousness forward. The strength of the vision is its resonance with the emerging direction African Diaspora Studies scholars are moving the field, providing a transnational bent. Leading the charge, Kelley and Patterson suggest,

Shifting the discussion from an African-centered approach to questions of black consciousness to the globality of the diaspora-in-the-making allows for a rethinking of how we view Africa and the world, and opens up new avenues for writing a world history from below. As Lisa Brock has powerfully argued, "If we shape our thinking about Africa Diaspora as but one international circle with a history and map of consciousness (the conductance of Africanisms is the circle's most resilient cultural manifestation and Pan Africanism the map's most notable political one) that overlap and coexist with other circles and world-views—such as Pan-Americanism, the international left, international feminism, anticolonialism, the movement for native rights and environmental justice, for example—we begin to better understand today's world and the concomitant consciousness evolved among peoples commonly drawn into it"(1996:10) (27)

The community-based, bottom-up, across borders Diasporan art and culture practices that DVCAI has cultivated and perfected for over two decades is an invaluable source of scholarly investigation that needs to be unpacked and documented. The constant visionary, a few years ago Rosie Gordon-Wallace and Roy Wallace, her husband and the incubator's photographer and

videographer, donated the collective's entire archives to the University of Miami for the benefit of students, faculty members, and the general public interested in approaching African Diaspora Studies through a different lens.

By traveling over the years to France, the Dominican Republic, Barbados, Jamaica, Guadeloupe, Belize, Surinam and engaging local artists on their practices, the strength, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges inherent to creating art in the global south and the south of North America, DVCAI creatives have developed a fluency in intercultural competencies unmatched by many. They have also gained practice in developing a Diasporan art and culture consciousness.

Inter|sectionality: Diaspora Art from the Creole City

As the resident scholar that regularly travels with DVCAI and is intimately involved in the artist residency program, we strongly believe that the *Inter|sectionality: Diaspora Art from the Creole City* exhibition, which premiered at the George Washington University Corcoran School of the Arts and Design gallery in November 2019, is the culmination of the work done by Rosie Gordon-Wallace and her group. The show synthesizes the vision and provides the general viewership an excellent entry point into contemporary Diasporan art.

Aesthetically, the collection of works exhibited exemplifies Édouard Glissant's "poetics of relation." As offshoots of the same African derived roots, Minia Biabiany, Michael Elliot, Guy Gabon, Rosa Naday Garmendia and Aisha Tendiwi Bell are in conversation across medium. They contribute to the polyperceptual extent of the Diasporan narrative. The Antillean, Jamaican, Cuban and African American flows commingle in the storytelling. The artists bring to the fore the black and brown act of being present, accounted for, how it is constantly on the brink of annihilation and erasure by the white gaze. In the recently released feature film *Queen and Slim*

written by Lena Waithe and James Frey and directed by Melina Matsoukas on the subject of black love despite the police assault on black bodies and minds, Queen, the lead female character says at a critical juncture: “I just want people to know I was here.” The phrase reverberates throughout the film such as when Slim her partner asks a young man to take his and Queen’s picture for posterity.

Similarly, the five artists choose to bear witness, to tell the untellable, the bleak reality of being black in a world(s) that makes no provision for non-whiteness whether it is in America, Great Britain or France. The narrator in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* concludes with a warning: “This is not a story to pass on” (324). And that is precisely what Biabiany, Elliot, Gabon, Naday Garmendia and Tendiwi Bell do, they accept the challenge of not disregarding black life. They elect to relay the account. Their art embodies the assertion of the right to be.

Metaphorically, Naday Garmendia joins ranks with art collectives and organizations like the Equal Justice Initiative concerned with the paucity of historical sites marking the history of Africans in America, in particular black oppression and resistance to racial terrorism. Garmendia addresses the absence of social justice for black and brown citizens and their families that regularly fall victim to police homicides. Part installation and part performance, *Rituals of Commemoration* invites museum goers to physically pick up the casualties’ stories and carry them on. The artist explains on her website,

The genesis of this commemoration project was ignited when police in Ferguson, Missouri, killed Michael Brown in August of 2014. Rituals of Commemoration is a project that serves as a space holder, a memory legacy that will ensure that the names of victims of police brutality are not forgotten. Giving the lives lost dignity

and respect by creating a physical space of remembrance and a symbolic acknowledgement of a difficult present

The constructions symbolically represent a composite of erect tombs and headstones. They are metaphorically loosely reminiscent of ancient East African burial traditions. In her book entitled *The Bright Continent: African Art History* Kathy Curnow explains that in East Africa, the Swahili have a tradition of burying important members of the community such as traders in pillar or domed tombs. In Kenya and Ethiopia, the burial sites of important figures and rulers flanked by stelae (187). Naday Garmendia inverts the judiciary criminalizing process of blacks and returns some dignity to them in this final rite of passage so they can transition while leaving a trace of their presence on earth behind.

On another level, the five vertically erected towers and tall wall, markers, remind visitors that layering slab upon slab, captive Africans built America and contributed to its economic prosperity. This contribution, a testament to the enslaved individuals' advanced technological acumen, went unrewarded while white slave owners amassed large fortunes as Eric Williams has masterfully demonstrated in his opus. James Newton states,

The old cities of the south are much indebted to black craftsmanship since many of the buildings were constructed entirely by slaves without white supervision. Luxuriously built southern mansions such as Jefferson's Monticello "attest to the quality of eighteenth-century black labor." Other evidence of slave building and masonry skills are: the Virginia State Capitol Building, St. Andrews Episcopal Church in Prairieville, Alabama, under the direction of master builders Peter Lee and Joe Glasgow; in North Carolina the Chapel of the Cross in Chapel Hill, and the Torrence House of Mecklenburg County; slave Isaiah Wimbush designed and aided

in the supervision of a colonial mansion in Greenville, Georgia; the architectural feats of free black men are clearly demonstrated in the form of Harvey Castle, near New Orleans, a tree-story high ceiling mansion of thirty rooms which was built in the phenomenal time of ninety days (40)

With the names of the fallen victims engraved on the blocks, Garmendia lays out a striking roll call that contests the reductive and devaluing carceral mug shots practiced after arresting, detaining, and incarcerating suspects. The vertical erecting of the constructions works as a counter narrative to the horizontal laying of the slayed bodies on the ground, unattended as in the case of Michael Brown whose remains stayed in the middle of the street for four hours. As a construction material, the brick underlines the permanence of the structure which stands the test of time. It is an analogy of the black presence in America. Brick by brick, Naday Garmendia pieces together the interrupted narrative(s) and contests biased official reports (police officers' accounts, medical examiners' autopsy results, investigators' accounts, and jurors' verdicts) which in some instances prove to be falsified.

Michael Elliot reflects on Great Britain's uneasy negotiation of post coloniality. He echoes Garmendia in his treatment of the exploitation of the Caribbean labor force by Great Britain. Through a massive recruitment campaign by the British crown in the Caribbean, the Windrush Generation contributed to the postwar effort of rebuilding the nation by toiling as nurses, cleaners and drivers. Through the metaphor of the most British beverage, tea, which is a product of the colonial project itself, Elliot communicates the empire's deception vis a vis its colonized subjects in *Brixton One*. The prospect of a better life in the UK was a lure, an empty promise represented by the sunken tea bags with the attached military dog tags in one of the works. The hope of serving one's country lies at the bottom of the ocean, unfulfilled.

In *Brixton Brewing*, Elliot reflects on the alienation of the Caribbean subject to the British domestic setting executing menial tasks. The teapot with a black arm instead of a spout, the tea bag hanging outside and retained by the lid improperly closed, along with the cameo of a kneeling African in chains, lifting his hands translates what W. E. B. Dubois called “the problem of the twentieth century” (423). He declared that the race problem was the flip side of the labor problem mainly because “empire is the heavy hand of capital abroad” (424). The allocation of tasks and salary is predicated on the color of the laborer’s skin, regardless of their qualification. In the empire making enterprise, the hardest back breaking and lowest paid jobs were assigned to Africans. The conflation of the raised arm/spout and the Antislavery Society visual lexicon-the kneeling African hallmark-brings into focus the disregard for the humanity of the Black. The caption “Am I Not a Man and a Brother?” that usually complements the seal is made more visible and its message more poignant by its absence. It is a commentary on the terrorist treatment of the Windrush Generation who readily put Queen and Country first and are now served or threatened with job termination, eviction and deportation notices and the denial of benefits on the ground of illegal entrance in the UK fifty years ago when they fought they were British citizens. They are rendered invisible.

With their art displayed on opposite side of the museum’s staircase, Gabon and Tandiwi Bell further the conversation on the lack of representation and visibility of the black figure. More specifically, they contest the stereotypical reading and picturing black and brown bodies are boxed in in the West. Both artists lend a gender and feminist lens to the conversation. They address the limiting and devaluing mold Afro descendants are trapped in as they operate in white-majority spaces. Tandiwi Bell’s ephemeral performance of a character wearing a seashell trail dress floating up the museum’ magic stairs anchors the two installations. The performance ‘s core message must be read in tandem with Tandiwi Bell’s *Breaking Head* installation piece.

As a ceramist, the artist has been continuously producing three-dimensional art. It is her way of pushing against the two-dimensional and flat corporeality African Americans are reduced to. The multidimensionality of black Americans operates at two level in the art displayed and performed. Firstly, the white-dressed presentation challenges flatness through an African-based cosmological prism embodied by the shell trail. Tandiwi Bell's figure wears a long skirt with curling shells trailing behind. In an essay on African spiritual meaning, Kevin Dawson states, "Many west-central Africans believed seashells especially spiral-shaped ones possessed significance as they represent the circular travels of one's soul" (35). The artist is referencing here the mobility of the soul navigating the worlds of the living and that of the spirit. The whiteness of the shells and the attire highlights the allusion to the spirit world.

In Central and West Africa, Kongo religion practitioners associate the color white to the spirits. Tandiwi Bell portrays a black American not cut off from but in full command of her Afrocentric spiritual side which tends to be frowned upon in the majority Judeo-Christian American setting. We see another allusion to the Kongo religion in the performance. The persona metaphorically figures a *bakulu*, a white creature representing a deceased individual. *Bakulus* are believed to inhabit villages located under rivers or lakes. According to John Vlach, "these spirits travel between the real world and the spirit world and their images are often constructed of white material" (163). Tandiwi creates an interstitial space where the black identity exists and is fully expressed.

The second level at which Tandiwi Bell addresses African Americans' entrapment is through ceramic masks. The *Breaking Head* pieces speak to the fragmented identity of black constituents torn between "being" themselves and "performing." It is a gloss on the Du Boisian "double consciousness" and the coping mechanism put in place to handle being black and

American at the same time in a white majority society. Paul Laurence Dunbar's lines echo, "We wear the mask that grins and lies/It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes/This debt we pay to human guile/With torn and bleeding hearts we smile/And mouth with myriad subtleties/.../Nay, let them only see us, while/We wear the mask." The masks are an elaboration on the efforts blacks have to make as subordinates whose lives are impacted by the parameters set by the dominant group. They represent a commentary on how complex it is to form one's identity.

For her part Guy Gabon invites a reflection on female identity as informed by media visual semantic. "Decentering the Gaze: "Ain't I a Human?" examines ways in which fashion shapes the construction of the feminine self. Gabon raises two issues. First, where does the Afro descended (wo)man fit into the multimillion-dollar-generating fashion industry both as a creative, executive and consumer? Despite the increased purchasing power of black buyers, fashion houses, retailers and media companies are controlled by whites. It's only recently that Louis Vuitton and Balmain appointed a black designer (Virgil Abloh and Olivier Rousteing respectively) at the helm of the company. Edward Enninful was named editor-in-chief of British Vogue just last year while Tyler Mitchell became the first black photographer to shoot the cover of Vogue USA in 126 years of existence.

In another register, by placing jute, denim, and African prints at the center of her installation, Gabon brings to the fore the lack of recognition by the West of African technology in fabric making, most specifically weaving and dyeing expertise which denim processing benefits from. Another example of labor exploitation which correlates with Naday Garmendia and Elliot's views. It is also in line with Walter Rodney's thesis on the cause of Africa's underdevelopment. The Guianese scholar demonstrates that the exploitative trade relations that Western powers

maintain with Africa by pillaging its natural resources and abusing its laborers is responsible for its supposed impoverishment.

As a land art and eco designer, Gabon fashions her art into an eco-criticism. She calls attention on the destruction of the environment by the fashion industry. Denim is the most polluting textile in use. Gabon suggests the utilization of more ancestral environmentally friendly African products and techniques such as natural fibers and plant-based dyeing. The title of the piece alludes to the need for Afro descended female consumers of fashion to refer less to Western frames of reference and in so doing to decenter. They are invited instead to appropriate indigenous knowledge. Ultimately, this leads to a reevaluation of Western-centered beauty parameters contrasted with African norms. The oblique reference to Sojourner Truth reminds us of the necessity to factor in intersectionality in the feminist experience and the struggle against hegemonic power structures. If the installation is viewed as fashion show on the runway, the artist points to a necessary recalibration in the choice of top models, designs, designers, as well as fabrics and accessories. African references are as valid as Euro centered ones. Gabon seems to address the issue of cultural appropriation that has permeated the fashion world.

Peter Shand reminds us that the practice is not new but developed with the expansionist desires of Western nations through the colonizing enterprise. He adroitly remarks,

It is a dull fact that the initial phase of modern cultural heritage appropriation was underscored by the twinned ages of Enlightenment and Empire, during which all the world was made over to fit the intellectual, economic, and cultural requirements of first Europe, then the United States. All manner of tangible cultural heritage of indigenous peoples (from design patterns to artifacts to body parts, even the people themselves) were looted, stolen, traded, bought, and exchanged by colonials of

every status (from Governors General to itinerant sealers). These were studied, admired, looked at, and forgotten ... Because of their display, they became available for appropriation into the cultural language of the very colonizers who had initially dislocated them (52)

Precisely with her sculptural video installation *Toli Toli*, Minia Biabiany explores the concept of construction of knowledge, storytelling, and fact making in a postcolonial environment. She addresses the impoverishment of the Guadeloupean imaginary, symptomatic of the malaise Antilleans are experiencing. Culturally caught between their de facto Frenchness and Europeanness on the one hand and their Africanness, Guadeloupeanness and Caribbeanness on the other hand they suffer from neurosis. Their cultural practices are disappeared by what in the 1980s was referred to as “le grand méchant loup,” the big evil werewolf Europe. The integration of the island into the European Community was perceived as a threat. The islanders feared that their cultural identity would be extinct to the detriment of the Eurocentric one.

Biabiany reflects on the irreparable damages caused by modernity and its powerful weapon consumerism. In the Guadeloupean plantation economy, everything including basic goods is imported from continental France. The acquisition of consumer goods has caused the residents to turn their backs on a more traditional mode of existence. The communal lifestyle has lost to individualism and even egotism. Television and radio sets have replaced storytelling sessions which served a didactic purpose. The intergenerational gatherings aimed at teaching the youth and transmitting (hi)story and knowledge. The artwork provides two examples of the loss of knowledge transmission.

The disappearance of the children’s song *Toli Toli* has several consequences. Guadeloupean children are no longer familiar with the fauna and flora because they live in urban

settings and Western modes of construction that shut nature off. They are not acquainted with the butterfly chrysalis mentioned in the song and should they come across one, since they don't know the accompanying song either they wouldn't be able to play. Living indoor existences, they are missing out on tapping into the power of the imagination. Their only dreams are mediated by the television. They are store-bought and Western-manufactured. The escapism provided by *Toli Toli* far exceeded what current TV programs offer. The youth power of invention is depleted.

The second example of lost know-how is also a commentary on the estranged relationship between man and his environment. The forest provided fishermen with the raw material needed for their livelihood. The technique of weaving bamboo fish traps has disappeared with the introduction of more affordable manufactured fishing gears. The communal dimension of fish trap making loses to individualism and monetary gain. Additionally, the rejection of the traditional technique has far greater adverse environmental consequences. Flying in factory-made merchandises leaves a larger gas and carbon emission footprint which consequently further destroys the fragile local ecosystem. Through the interplay between the fish traps and the television set that plays the video, the viewer is made to experience the dilemma Guadeloupeans are faced with. Martinican novelist and essayist Patrick Chamoiseau paints a grim picture of the predicament Antillean creatives encounter. He asks,

How can you write/create when, from the break of day to dreams at night, your imaginary drinks in images, thoughts and values that are not your own? How do you write/create when what you are grows outside of the impulses that determine your life? How can you write/create dominated? The only howling is in you. A howling that slices you open every day. It opposes those radio stations, TV channels,

commercials, so called information, the monologue of fascinating Western images; the howling refuses this active alienation to development (17)

Conclusion

With twenty-four years of practice across the Black Atlantic and Circum-Caribbean bodies of water, Diaspora Vibe Cultural Arts Incubator, Inc. offers the contours of the contemporary transnational lived Diasporan consciousness through an art lens. The exhibit “Inter | Sectionality: Diaspora Art from the Creole City” is both a statement and an invitation to art and visual culture constituencies. First, the show asserts that colonization, the slave trade, and colonialism affected adversely local and imported populations that were forced into cohabitation. The plantation system and the prosperous economic model it fashioned is rooted in the genocide of the original inhabitants of the Caribbean, Latin American, Central American, North American and South American basin. The conscription of a displaced people into forced labor is predicated on the extermination of the initial occupants of the land by the conquerors.

The imposed coexistence in close proximity of the European colonialists, slave traders, slave masters, slave drivers, overseers, the diminished Amerindians, indentured East Indians laborers and numerous immigrants who exported their labor at the onset of changes in status that will lead to the waves of independence or a more favorable status than that of a colony breeds an ongoing process of Creolization. Accordingly, art praxes in the area under consideration are necessarily “inter|sectional” at the interval of the Amerindian, African, European, South Asian, and Middle Eastern cultural substrates in place. How does one reconcile all those components in the way they construct their image of self culturally and by extension artistically? From a clinical standpoint is it advisable to even attempt such a fit given the potential risk of alienation? The Martinican clinician and freedom fighter Frantz Fanon addresses the psychotic entanglement to

colonized subject is faced with. The psychiatrist warns against the danger of falling into the trap of cooption into a dominant cultural philosophy. In *Black Skin and White Mask*, he writes,

Every colonized people-in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality-finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards (18)

It is striking how forty-five years apart Fanon and Chamoiseau echo each other. The later provides a vivid illustration of the former's theoretical postulate based nonetheless on his observation and study of the Algerian war of independence context. Chamoiseau pinpoints the mechanism by which the suppression of one's native culture is orchestrated, the media. In none of the countries DVCAI has visited in the past five years has both statements verified more than in Guadeloupe. During our three consecutive visits, and probably more in 2020 than in 2015 and 2017, many artists shared their ambivalence toward France. Their vacillation was based on their personal experience, their encounter with the motherland. For those who temporarily migrated to continental France to pursue graduate art studies, what they underwent is comparable to a culture shock. Largely, the image of themselves that their fellow European descended French citizens reflected back to them did not square with their own perception of self. They felt a strong sense of social and cultural alienation never experienced on the island.

The artist roster and the eclecticism of the works exhibited at the Corcoran as well as the organizational chart of the incubator emphasizes the extent to which ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation and age bring equally to bear on the construction of the power paradigm and practice of art in a Diasporic context. Founded and ran by a female director who also curates, is recognized

in the field and supported by nine accomplished trustees, seven of whom are women, DVCAI challenges the art industry traditional model of leadership and management. Generally, at the helm of art institutions the white male constitutes what Audre Lorde labels the mythical norm. A 2019 Artforum article stated that museum leadership was still predominantly white in 2018. The majority of the increase in racial diversity came at the curatorial and educational level while the executive leadership echelon remained unchanged. Only 12% of museum directors were people of color in 2018 against 11% three years earlier.

Second, the exhibit invites viewers to journey on with the artists. A total of twenty-five, they represent seventeen countries. In such a paradigm the “Creole City” is not one but multiple: Miami, West Palm Beach, Havana, Paramaribo, Port-au-Prince, Mexico City, Kingston, Pointe-à-Pitre, Washington DC, New York and Atlanta from where the works radiate to the host cities where the exhibit travels. The five creatives whose works we analyzed embody five different countries, the United States, Jamaica, Guadeloupe, Mexico, and Cuba. 40% of the members of the cluster live and work across borders, spending their time between two countries, Guadeloupe and Mexico in one case and the US and Cuba in the other. Collectively, the five personify five distinct languages, American, Jamaican, French, Creole, and Cuban. 60% of the fellows speak at home a language other than English. They express their creativity through different mediums including ceramic, painting, installation, video, painted bricks and vinyl, textile, and mixed media. Four are females and one male.

The exhibition is an intersection, a cosmologically charged crossroad. It is the meeting point between the world of the living, that of the ancestors, and the generation to come. The collection of works exemplifies Édouard Glissant’s “poetics of relation.” Minia Biabiany, Michael Elliot, Guy Gabon, Rosa Naday Garmendia and Aisha Tendiwi Bell are skilled griot(te)s weaving

together the black and brown narrative. Heeding the advice of Toni Morrison's narrator in *Beloved*, they pick up the accounts left out of the metanarrative. In conversation across mediums, they bring to the fore the challenging conversation on the professed post-racial and post-colonial landscape we inhabit. From their position of enunciation, geographically, racially, ethnically, gender and age wise also, they contribute to the trans nationalization of Diasporan cultural artistic consciousness. Diaspora Vibe Cultural Arts Incubator constitutes an incredible innovation laboratory that provides space to effectuate social transformation. The visitors walk away from the show with a vision of an art world constructed in relation and not in isolation which contests all forms of monolingualism and monoculturalism.

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