“ ‘I just want people to know I was here’: the polyperspectival Diasporan art narrative”

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Introduction

In the article, "Unfinished Migration: Reflections 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." [17] Inter | Sectionality: Diaspora Art in the Creole City 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,[18] Diaspora Vibe Cultural Arts Incubator considers the contours of contemporary, transnational, lived Diasporan art and culture identities found across many nations. Given the impact of the slave trade, colonialism, and ensuing processes of Creolization, art praxes are necessarily Inter | Sectional at the interval of the Amerindian, African, European, South Asian, and Middle Eastern cultural substrates in place. Additionally, ethnicity, class, gender, and age bring to bear constructions and paradigms of power across the Diaspora.

With its headquarters in Miami, Florida, the Incubator is comprised of creatives living and working in the U.S. Either born or raised in the United States, these culturally hyphenated citizens confirm the irreversible demographic trend 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 U.S. was 14% compared to 5% in 1965. Presently, the majority of immigrants come from Asia and Latin America, with Mexico, China and India leading. This trend will grow exponentially. By 2060, the percentage of foreign-born U.S. citizens is estimated to reach 19%.[19]

An equally important part of DVCAI's pool of artists reside and work across the Caribbean, Central America, and South America. They are a testament to the fact that Diasporan art making rethinks community. It questions borders, both figuratively and literally, as social constructs. The turbulent history of slavery, colonization, and decolonization of the region resulted in lasting harms. For instance, communication is extremely difficult given the segmentation of Anglophone, Creolophone, Francophone, Hispanophone, Dutch, and Papamiento linguistic zones, with no common language capable of bridging the gap. Consequently, it is easier to travel to Europe and the West from any of the region's capital cities than it is locally. As we were sadly reminded in March 2020, while traveling to Guadeloupe from Miami for our International Cultural Exchange project, Jamaican subjects, such as Michael Elliott, 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. Surinamese artist Kurt Nahar traveled by way of French Guyana to catch a flight to Guadeloupe, as is no direct trip between his home country and the French department.

17. Tiffany Ruby Patterson and Robin D. G. Kelley Patterson, "Unfinished Migrations: Reflections on the African Diaspora and the Making of the Modern World," *African Studies Review* Vol. 43, no. 1, 2000, 20.
18. In the Gilroyan sense of the term, the Black Atlantic means the Caribbean Sea and Circum-Caribbean bodies of water.
19. "United States Population 2020 (Demographics, Maps, Graphs)," World Population Review, n.d., https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/united-states-population/.

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 communal cultural development, capacity building, and civic responsibility. The two italicized terms above refer to the reality of 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 dissemination on the plantations. With respect to this, 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.[20]

The pattern was similar throughout the territories. Enslaved Africans fled to places inaccessible to law enforcement and established their own modes of existence. The endurance of those communities was predicated on collaboration with other enslaved subjects on nearby plantations (through bartering) and integrating Amerindian 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. In *Creative Communities: The Art of Cultural Development,* Don Adams and Arlene Goldbard outline seven principles that practitioners of community cultural development readily agree upon. They are:

> 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. [21]

DVCAI enjoys an impressive roster of artists that cover a large geographic expanse. In addition to its 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.

20. Michael Gomez, *Reversing Sail: A History of the African Diaspora.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 110.
21. Don Adams and Arlene Goldbard, *Creative Communities: The Art of Cultural Development.* (Rockefeller Foundation, 2001), 17.

All these members of the creative community answered the call for the Inter | Sectionality exhibit at the Corcoran.

The DVCAI Model: Diaspora in the Making

Since she founded DVCAI in 1996, Rosie Gordon-Wallace has sought 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 of black and brown endurance in the south of the United States and, by extension, outside of it. In a pre-Art Basel Miami era, where transnational African descended art histories 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 dismissed by the industry.

In its twenty-four years of existence and active advocacy, DVCAI has markedly shaped the arc of the art ecosystem in Miami, the Caribbean, Central America, and South America. Gordon-Wallace has strategically positioned the art collective as an innovative 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 this cutting-edge vision. The online *pinacotheca* markets directly to collectors, art advisors, gallery owners, and museum curators, as well as acquisition and accession 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 this time, Gordon-Wallace was exposed to and benefited from the Caribbean Federation doctrine that progressive young political leaders of the region championed. Central to the theory was the idea of inter-island cooperation. In an effort to build each other up, the independent island nations intentionally shared not only their natural resources, but also their respective expertise and manpower. As a result, Jamaican professionals, (teachers, engineers, doctors, nurses, to name a few) like some of Gordon-Wallace's instructors, volunteered to teach and practice on sister islands and vice versa.

DVCAI's international cultural exchange set-up descends from her 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 U.S. Even if it is pushed forth at colleges and universities across the country, studies show that African American and Latinx students travel less than their white counterparts. Using data from the National Association for Foreign Students Affairs: Association of International Educators (NAFSA), the study 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

22. "Trends in U.S. Study Abroad," NAFSA (NAFSA: Association of International Educators, 2019), https://www.nafsa.org/policy-and-advocacy/policy-resources/trends-us-study-abroad.

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. [22]

By offering her artists the opportunity to learn and create abroad, Gordon-Wallace is considerably expanding their knowledge base of the Diaspora beyond U.S. borders. She is also addressing two persistent flaws that have gained increased traction in the age of populism we live in: monoculturalism and monolinguism. These flaws masquerade under the guise of protectionism that 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, Malcom X delivered a speech in which he called the attention of his American audience to 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. With much foresight, he stated:

> And 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. [23]

23. Malcom X, edited by Bruce D. Perry, *The Last Speeches (Malcom X Speeches and Writing)*. (Atlanta: Pathfinder, 1989), 151.

It is all the more fitting that X delivered this address a few weeks after he was denied entry into France by the authorities despite his invitation to speak there. The black nationalist and civil rights activist travelled extensively across the globe to 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 U.S. Influenced by the Organisation of African Unity, 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. Proceeding this globally minded lineage, DVCAI advances notable and measurable collaboration between Diasporan artists through its residency program. An extension of the International Cultural Exchange (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.

Twenty-four years ago, Rosie Gordon-Wallace saw the lack of visibility and adequate representation of Caribbean and Diasporan practicing artists in Miami, as well as the struggle that Caribbean and Diasporan creatives faced trying 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 her vision is its resonance with the emerging direction as 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 worldviews—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." [24]

24. Patterson and Kelley, "Unfinished Migrations," 27.

25. Toni Morrison, *Beloved.* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1987), 324.

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 is worthy of documentation. Consistent visionaries Gordon-Wallace and her husband, photographer Roy Wallace, 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.

Over the years of travel to France, the Dominican Republic, Barbados, Jamaica, Guadeloupe, Belize, and Surinam, by engaging local artists on their practices, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges inherent to creating art in the global south and the south of North America, DVCAI creatives have developed an unmatched fluency in intercultural competencies. They have also developed Diasporan art and culture consciousness as a practice. They contribute to the polyperspectival nature of the Diasporan narrative. The Antillean, Jamaican, Cuban, and African American flows commingle in storytelling. The artists underscore the black and brown act of being present, accounted for, and how this presence is constantly on the brink of annihilation and erasure by the white gaze. In the recent Lena Waithe and James Frey film *Queen and Slim*, which depicts black love despite 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 aforementioned 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."[25] That is precisely what Biabiany, Elliott, Gabon, Naday Garmendia, and Tandiwe Bell do—they refuse to disregarding black life. They choose to relay the account. Their art embodies the assertion of the right to be.

Naday Garmendia is a thought partner to organizations like the Equal Justice Initiative in her concern with the paucity of historical sites marking the history of Africans in America, in particular black oppression and resistance to racial terrorism. Naday Garmendia addresses the absence of justice for black and brown citizens and their families who regularly fall victim to police homicides. Part installation and part performance, *Rituals of Commemoration* invites museum goers to physically pick up the stories of these casualties 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, *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 in pillar or domed tombs. In Kenya and Ethiopia, the burial sites of important figures and rulers are flanked by stelae.[26] Naday Garmendia inverts the criminalizing of black people 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 one tall wall remind visitors, slab upon slab, how captive Africans built America and contributed to its economic prosperity. This contribution, a testament to the enslaved population's advanced technological acumen, went unrewarded while white slave owners amassed large fortunes as Eric Williams has masterfully demonstrated in his opus. As James Newton further elaborates:

> The old cities of the south are much indebted to black craftmanship 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 Mecklinburg County; slave Isaiah Wimbush designed and aided in the supervision of a colonial mansion in Greenvillle, Georgia; the architectural feats of free black men are clearly demonstrated in the form of Harvey Castle, near New Orleans, a three-story high ceiling mansion of thirty rooms which was built in the phenomenal time of ninety days. [27]

26. Kathy Curnow, "Art and Death." *The Bright Continent: African Art History.* (Cleveland: MSL Academic Endeavors, 2018), 187.
27. James Newton, "Slave Artisans and Craftsmen: The Roots of Afro-American Art." *The Black Scholar,* Vol. 9, no. 3, (1977): 40, DOI:10.1080/00064246.1977.11413962

With the names of the fallen victims engraved on the blocks, Naday Garmendia lays out a striking roll call that contests the reductive and devaluing carceral mug shots publicized after black people are arrested, detained, incarcerated, or killed. The vertical erecting of the constructions work as a counter narrative to the horizontal laying of 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 withstands the test of time. It is an analogy to the black presence in America. Brick by brick, Naday Garmendia pieces together the interrupted narrative(s) and contests biased official reports (police officer accounts, medical examiner autopsy results, investigator accounts, and jury verdicts) which, in some instances, prove to be falsified.

Michael Elliott reflects on Great Britain's uneasy negotiation of post coloniality. He echoes Garmendia in confronting 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, Elliott communicates the empire's deception of its colonized subjects in *Brixton One*. The prospect of a better life in the UK was a lure, an empty promise Elliott represents through the sunken tea bags attached to 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*, Elliott reflects on the alienation of the Caribbean subject to the British domestic setting. 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, describes what W. E. B. Dubois called "the problem of the twentieth century." He declared that the race problem was the flip side of the labor problem because "empire is the heavy hand of capital abroad." [28] The allocation of tasks and salary is predicated on the color of the laborer's skin, regardless of their qualifications. 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 Black humanity. The seal's usual caption, "Am I Not a Man and a Brother?" 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 as British citizens, 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. They are rendered invisible.

28. W.E.B. DuBois, "Worlds of Color." *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 3, no 3, (1925): 423-424.

With their art displayed on opposite sides of the museum's staircase, Gabon and Tandiwe Bell both further the conversation on the lack of representation and visibility of the black figure. More specifically, they contest the stereotypical reading and picturing of black and brown bodies in the West. Both artists lend a gender and feminist lens to the conversation. They address the limiting and devaluing mold Afro descendants are cast in as they operate in white-majority spaces. Tandiwe Bell's ephemeral performance of a character wearing a seashell trail dress floating up the museum' magic

stairs anchors the two installations. The performance must be read in tandem with Tandiwe Bell's *Breaking Head* installation piece.

As a ceramicist, Tandiwe Bell continuously produces 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 levels in the art displayed and performed. Firstly, the white-dressed presentation challenges flatness through an African-based cosmological prism embodied by the shell trail. Tandiwe 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." [29] The performance references 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 with the spirits. Tandiwe Bell portrays a black American not cut off from, but in full command of her Afrocentric spiritual side. She offers us another allusion to the Kongo religion in her performance. The persona alludes to 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." [30] Tandiwe Bell creates an interstitial space where the black identity exists and is fully expressed.

The second level at which Tandiwe Bell addresses the entrapment of African Americans is through ceramic masks. The *Breaking Head* pieces speak to the fragmented identity of black people torn between "being" themselves and "performing." It is a gloze on the DuBoisan *double consciousness*, the coping mechanism put in place to handle being black and American at the same time in a white majority society. Paul Laurence Dunbard (*We Wear the Mask*, lines 1-9) echo this:

> 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 black people have to make as subordinates whose lives are impacted the dominant group's parameters. They represent a commentary on how complex it is to form one's identity.

29. Kevin Dawson, "Moros e Christianos: Ritualized Naval Battle Baptizing American Waters with African Spiritual Meaning." *Afro Catholic Festivals in the Americas: Performance, Representation and the Making of Black Atlantic Tradition.* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2019), 35.
30. John Vlach, "Graveyards and Afro American Art." *Southern Exposure,* vol. 3, no 23, 163.

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 as a creative, executive and consumer? Despite the increased purchasing power of black buyers, nearly all 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 its 126 years of existence.

Second, 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. This examination of labor exploitation correlates with Naday Garmendia and Elliott's perspectives. It is also in line with Walter Rodney's thesis on the cause of Africa's underdevelopment. The Guianese scholar demonstrates how exploitative trade relations that Western powers maintain with Africa pillage its natural resources and abuse its laborers, resulting in its supposedly inexplicable impoverishment. [31]

As a land art and eco designer, Gabon fashions her art into a site for eco-criticism. She calls attention to 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 these frames. She invites them to employ 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 to factor the intersectional dynamics present in the struggle against hegemonic power structures. If the installation is viewed as a fashion show on the runway, the artist points to a necessary recalibration in the choice of top models, designs, designers, fabrics, and accessories. African references are as valid as Euro-centered ones. Gabon also addresses the issue of cultural appropriation that has permeated the fashion world. [32]

With her sculptural video installation *Toli Toli*, Minia Biabiany explores the concepts of knowledge construction, storytelling, and fact making in a postcolonial environment. She addresses the malaise Antilleans experience as symptomatic of the impoverishment of the Guadeloupean imaginary. Culturally caught between their de facto Frenchnness 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*, or 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 make way for the European one.

31. Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. (London: Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, 1972).

32. Peter Shand reminds us that the practice of appropriation is not new, but developed with the expansionist desires of Western nations through the colonizing enterprise. See his commentary in, "Scenes from the Colonial Catwalk: Cultural Appropriation, Intellectual Property Rights, and Fashion." *Cultural Analysis*, vol. 3, 2002, pp. 47-88.

Biabiany reflects on the irreparable damages caused by modernity and its powerful 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 is lost to individualism and even egotism. Television and radio sets have replaced storytelling sessions which served a didactic purpose. The intergenerational gatherings aimed to teach the youth and transmit (hi)story and knowledge. Martinican novelist and essayist Patrick Chamoiseau paints a grim picture of this predicament. 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.[33]

33. Patrick Chamoiseau, *Écrire en pays dominé.* (Paris: Gallimard Folio, 1997), 17.

Biabiany's artwork provides two examples of the loss of this 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, living urban existences that shut out nature. They are not acquainted with the butterfly chrysalis mentioned in the song. Should they come across one, without knowledge of the accompanying song, they would not be able to play. Living indoor existences, they miss out on tapping into the power of the imagination. Their dreams are mediated by television, 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.

Biabiany's second example of lost know-how is also a commentary on the estranged relationship between man and his environment. The Guadeloupean forest provided fishermen with the raw material needed for their livelihoods. The technique of weaving bamboo fish traps has disappeared with the introduction of more affordable, manufactured fishing gear. The communal dimension of fish trap making loses to individualism and monetary gain. Additionally, the rejection of traditional technique has far greater adverse environmental consequences. Flying in factory-made merchandise leaves a larger gas and carbon emission footprint, which furthers the destruction of the fragile, local ecosystem. Through the interplay between the fish traps and the television set that plays the video, the viewer experiences the dilemma Guadeloupeans are faced with.

Conclusion

Inter | Sectionality: Diaspora Art from the Creole City asserts that colonization, the slave trade, and colonialism adversely affected 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, Central American, North American and South American basin. The conscription of a displaced people into forced labor was 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, diminished Amerindians, indentured East Indians laborers, and numerous immigrants who exported their labor, bred an ongoing process of Creolization. How does one reconcile all those components in their construction 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 the 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, White Masks,* 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.[34]

34. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask.* (New York: Grove Press, 1952), 18.

It is striking how, forty-five years apart, Fanon and Chamoiseau echo each other. The latter provides a vivid illustration of the former's theoretical postulate based on his observation and study of the Algerian war of independence. 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 have both theories been verified more than in Guadeloupe. During our three consecutive visits, and most strikingly 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 paradigms of power and the practice of art in a Diasporic context. Founded and run by a female director, who curates and is recognized in the field, and supported by nine

accomplished trustees (seven of whom are women), DVCAI challenges the traditional model of leadership and management in the art industry. Generally, at the helm of art institutions, the white male constitutes what Audre Lorde labels the *mythical norm*. According to Artforum, in 2018 museum leadership was still predominantly white. 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. [35]

35. "Museum Leadership Remains Predominantly White in 2018, Study Finds," Artforum International, January 29, 2019, https://www.artforum.com/news/museum-leadership-remains-predominantly-white-in-2018-study-finds-78507.

The exhibit invites viewers to journey on with the artists. The twenty-five artists featured 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 illuminate 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 collective 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, these five personify five distinct languages: American, Jamaican, French, Creole, and Cuban. 60% of the fellows speak a language other than English at home. They express their creativity through different mediums including ceramic, painting, installation, video, painted bricks and vinyl, textile, and mixed media. Four of the five are women, the final member a man.

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 generations to come. The collection of works exemplify Édouard Glissant's *poetics of relation*. Minia Biabiany, Michael Elliott, 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 a conversation across mediums, they bring to the fore the challenging conversation on the post-colonial landscape we inhabit. From their distinct geographic, racial, ethnic, gendered, and age-based positions, 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. Visitors walk away from the show with a vision of an art world constructed in relation, not isolation, and one which contests all forms of monolingualism and monoculturalism.