

Shifting Grounds:
Black Diaspora Art and Imperial Iconography

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Empire has always relied on foundational narratives, myths, and archival documents for its authority. Narratives work to establish the “order of things” in newly conquered territories. When we think of imperial powers like Britain and the United States, there are a plethora of icons that come immediately to mind, for ill or good. These icons range from the everyday and the mundane to symbols imbued with political and cultural significance which go unquestioned because their historical presence is so enduring. The edifices such as the U.S. Capitol and the White House are among some of the most widely admired and recognized icons of American identity. What is less known about many of these iconic national symbols is the degree to which America’s history of slavery is intimately ingrained in them. Enslaved Africans were integral to the clearing of the grounds, the cutting of sandstone, and the construction and symbolic sculptures that adorn the United States Capitol. The deep irony of an enslaved African named Philip Reid, who actually forged the Statue of Freedom that sits atop the of the Capitol dome, is that he becomes a free man only by the time he completes the casting and it is erected in 1863.³⁶ The most iconic landmarks of the United States are embedded in the legacy of slavery, and until recently these (and other) historic contributions to American history were buried in the archives while memorials to confederate soldiers grace the grounds of numerous cities and towns across America.

36. “Built by Slaves: A Capitol History Lesson,” *Tell Me More* on National Public Radio. Aired on January 9, 2009. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=99549328>

37. “Windrush generation: Who are they and why are they facing problems?” <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-43782241> Accessed on March 21, 2020.

These “dark” histories are no less true for other imperial powers like Great Britain, which gained tremendous wealth from extracting and exporting natural resources from its colonies in the West Indies—including sugar, coffee, and cocoa grown on plantations worked by enslaved Africans. On the other side of the oppressive British rule, India saw even more wealth leaving colonized territories as the East India Company oversaw the export of tea, coffee, textiles, indigo, and cotton, all of which contributed tremendously to Britain’s wealth. After World War II, the British government extended invitations to West Indians from the (then) British West Indies to come to England to assist in rebuilding the country. Tens of thousands of West Indians answered the call, bringing their families not only to the aid of Great Britain, but also in the hopes of improving their lives given the impact of the war across the Caribbean region. However, in 2012 when Britain’s Home Office passed legislation that required all persons to have documentation of their immigration status in order to work, rent, or access their healthcare benefits, the lives of tens of thousands of West Indian immigrants, many of whom arrived as children with their parents, were abruptly upended. After well over a half-century of rebuilding England, West Indians learned they would be classified as illegal immigrants if they could not produce documentation that proved they had arrived in the country legally. Many of these immigrants were British subjects when they arrived and were, therefore, entitled to live and work in the Commonwealth. Just two years earlier, in 2010, the landing cards for Windrush immigrants were destroyed by the Home Office without any effort to notify these persons that they should seek more current forms of documentation of their legal status.³⁷ Almost overnight, the Windrush generation learned that their invitations had undisclosed expiration dates, and now they would be told to leave because they were not British citizens.

Despite concerted efforts to write over the foundational facts of the contributions made by West Indian immigrants and replace them with nationalist mythologies, the obvious intersections between the roots and routes that have informed and shaped

British life are undeniable. These realities are embedded in the iconography commonly associated with these imperial powers. The recent exhibition at the Corcoran School of the Arts and Design's, *Inter | Sectionality: Diaspora Art from the Creole City*, makes this evident. Miami, commonly referred to as the "gateway to the Americas" is also known culturally as the Creole City, in large part because of the intimately bound historical, cultural, linguistic, and political landscapes that are linked with one another in this fairly young cityscape. What makes Miami unique is the broad amalgamation of narratives that constantly collide, sometimes violently, other times in remarkably complex, contested, and enriching ways. The work of the artists gathered for the *Inter | Sectionality* exhibition highlight many of the ironies and contradictions of the deeply entrenched desire within the United States for a *nationalist* narrative. Arguably, Miami, more than any other city in the United States, reminds all Americans of the tenuous nature of this desire, the drive realize it, and the impossibility of trying to control the cultural confluences that threaten to lay bare the mythologies upon which this desire is founded.

The work of three artists in particular—Tyler Mitchell, Michael Elliott and Rosa Naday Garmendia—all shed a bright light on Black Diaspora artistic practices and their engagement with radically shifting iconographic terrains in American and British history. Tyler Mitchell's photograph, *All American Family Portrait 2018-2019*, visually centers representations of African Americans as the constituency that always has to act as fire rescue when their proverbial homes, communities, and institutions are on fire. The common belief that there is "little-to-no help on the way" in times of crisis is borne out succinctly in the technical composition of the photograph. The flagpole, replete with the American flag wavering in the wind, would be an ideal visual anchor because of its iconographic authority as a symbol of American identity. However, Mitchell subverts the iconographic power of the flag by situating the young black subjects as the anchor in the photograph, despite the central positioning of the flag and flagpole which symmetrically splits the center with the young couple. Their laser focus on the two Black babies in their arms also minimizes the presence and stature of the American flag, while subtly modifying our visual expectations and understandings of photographic composition. Typically, when photographing a famous or iconic object, it is standard practice to include a small object, subject, or visual anchor in the foreground. The visual anchor helps magnify the grandeur of the image in the background of the photograph. Mitchell's foregrounding of the two Black subjects in the composition situates them in such a way that they appear to be visually larger than the flag in the background, effectively overshadowing the flag in the photograph.

The "all" in All-American has always excluded African Americans, and at the same time relies mightily on their labor and contributions to anchor America in every conceivable way. All the while, African American contributions are minimized through revisionist history or complete erasure all together. Through these subtle shifts in photographic composition, Mitchell encourages viewers to adjust the lenses through which we consume and experience the authority of American icons like the American flag and the Statue of Freedom. If museum visitors are astute readers, Rosa Naday Garmendia's adjacent installation, *Rituals of Commemoration (2019)*, provides a painfully acute response to his visual subversion of the American flag. The bricks in Garmendia's wall are inscribed with the names of dozens of African American men,

women and children—Arthur Lee McDuffie, Sandra Bland, Tamir Rice, Rodney King and Eric Garner, among others—each of them victims of police brutality. The embodied act of resistance symbolized by kneeling during the National Anthem, like the works of Mitchell and Garmendia in this exhibition, is an aesthetically poignant manifestation of how diaspora artists have resisted, and continue to resist, narratives about the grandeur of American icons, particularly those that are deeply invested in minimizing Black lives in America. Garmendia's use of brick and mortar in her exhibition is a powerful material rendering of the fact of police brutality as a building block in institutional efforts to terrorize African Americans. By engraving the bricks with the names of these victims as well as their dates of birth and death, we are reminded of the importance of commemorating these lives, and in so doing, insisting on the value of Black lives in America.

The Jamaican artist, Michael Elliott, draws our attention to Britain's love affair with tea and the perilous past associated with this herbal stimulant. His contributions to the exhibition, *The Drop* and *Empire's Pot*, effectively disrupt our visual recognition of one of the most iconic symbols of British culinary culture, tea. *The Drop* continues the ground shifting work of this exhibition through Elliott's fusion of two icons of Britishness: Royal Air Force identification tags and tea bags, one affixed to the other while drifting down to the seabed. There is a rich confluence of iconography and imperial history in this painting. The most identifiable RAF tag bears the name Strachan, a Scottish (and Caribbean) surname which would, one could imagine, lead the viewer to wonder about what role the Scottish had in the East India Company's tea trafficking (one can hardly call it trading given the exploitative nature of the arrangements) between China and India. A cursory glance into the history of Britain's love affair with tea reveals that the Scots played an integral role in the emergence of the tea industry in India and the opium trade in China.

Scots were responsible for transporting the finest tea plants and seeds from all over China into India where it became a major crop that would prop up the British economy for hundreds of years. Jessica Hanser, in her article, "From Tea to Opium, How the Scots Left their Mark on China," notes that:

Scots played an outsized role in the intertwined trades of tea and opium, giving rise to social, economic and cultural developments that changed the macro relationship between Britain and China as well as everyday cultural practices and patterns of sociability. By the middle of the 18th century, tea drinkers up and down the social ladder and across the British Isles and its American colonies could be found sitting around the table sipping their breakfast and afternoon infusions from Chinese porcelain cups. Tea consumption in Britain also had profound implications for its Atlantic empire. When British consumers began sweetening their Chinese tea with Caribbean sugar, these two commodities, one from the East Indies, the other from the West, reinforced one another.³⁸

That England has long been known for its traditions of "high tea," "fine teas," and the heritage of tea service sets among the royal family in England, speaks to the vast chasm between this culinary and visual tradition and the history of plantation slavery

38. <https://aeon.co/essays/from-tea-to-opium-how-the-scots-left-their-mark-on-china>. Accessed on January 25, 2020.

and colonial repression across the globe. Elliott's conceptual photographs, like his paintings, close the perceived distance between British culture and the long history of exploitation and oppression that are at the center of these traditions. The hand painted icon of Josiah Wedgwood's (1787) medallion, which typically bore the inscription "Am I Not a Man and a Brother?," throws the Chinese porcelain teapot into stark relief, and so too does the black hand which stands in for the spout. These amendments to the porcelain teapot shift our attention from the centerpiece toward the most iconic symbol of British and American abolitionists and the black and brown hands that labored on the tea and sugar plantations. An astute viewer might wonder about the relationship between these amendments and the history of Britain's favorite drink. Elliott's *Windrush Series* reminds us that the terrain upon which Empire is built is constantly shifting in unpredictable ways, but that the implications are the direst for the Black British subjects upon whose back the Empire built its fortune and rebuilt its glory after World War II. The precipitous deportation of dozens of Windrush generation immigrants who, according to Elliott, "have been strained, used, filtered and then discarded"³⁹ by Britain, highlights the bitter sweetness of belonging for black subjects despite their having been, as the poet M. NourbeSe Philip reminds us, "being long in dis' place."⁴⁰ These abrupt dislocations have necessitated innovative strategies of engagement in Black Diaspora artistic practices, but all of them take seriously the work of navigating the shifting routes and roots that have produced these historical and cultural moments of intersectionality.

39. <http://www.studiomichaeliellott.com/diaries.html>. Accessed on March 6, 2020.
40. M. NourbeSe Philip, "Dis Place--the Space Between" in *A Genealogy of Resistance and Other Essays* (Mercury Press, Toronto, 1997): 77.