Rituals of Belonging

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Rituals of Belonging

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Fine Arts

by

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Abstract

This ensemble is a (geo)autobiographical affirmation of the activities of water bodies, fiberboard drum barrel\(^1\) containers, and sound as well as their attendant rituals of belonging amongst People of Sub-Saharan African descent, particularly those belonging to the Caribbean diaspora.

Water as an ever-present life source serves as a dynamic metaphor for Caribbean people’s instinctive travel in and outside of the region’s soluble boundaries. The barrel container, often in transit analogizes the apprehension of displacement, congregation, arrival, or destination towards the desired feeling of security or place.

Elements of ritualistic practices located in migratory movement, music and labor are means of reconciling the interconnectedness of diasporic Peoples through various forms of material and visual culture and customs.

\(^1\) A fiberboard drum or sea container used within the Caribbean Diaspora to ship care package items and articles of clothing.
Introduction

Grounded in notions of belonging, nativity, and migration, the relationship between the corporeal and the land is amplified in the work. My creative process considers the movement, memories, and homemaking of peoples of the Afro-Caribbean region (migrant and remaining native) activated through various processes of affinity, inclusive of various rituals and labor of survival and living, care-packaging, burial rites, and ancestral veneration.

This interdisciplinary work relates to the co-convening of memory, time, and historical cross-references formatted as multiple installations that are cohesive. The amalgamation of cultural objects, video performance, music, film, photography, sculptures, screen-printing on paper and fabric, as well as DIY approaches to sound quality editing and installation. Visual and material artifacts such as calling cards, shipping barrels, family photographs, manipulation of sugar cane’s likeness, sugar, and raw cotton are used throughout. To recall the past and existing cultural exchanges; auditory elements such as recordings of long-distance telephone conversations, stereo speakers, home videos, field, and visual recordings were documented during my return home. Also included are observatory footage of the Atlantic Ocean from the coast of Ghana, home videos and conversations with members from the Jamaican diasporic community.

At its nucleus, “Rituals of Belonging” is a witnessing of perpetuity: processes, (re)imagination of time(travel), and inventiveness that unifies Afro-Jamaican Peoples to their antecedents in Ghana, West Africa. Through the tradition of forced migration for economic gain and overall safety, barrel care packaging/shipping and, reveals the desire of closeness to mitigate the polarities between extended sites of home and native sites of home.

As a Caribbean person birthed and raised in Jamaica, I’ve witnessed my maternal grandmother’s movement from rural Jamaica to the inner-city of Kingston, as well as my mother’s
emigration to the United States. As a result, I was left in my grandmother’s care until I migrated to the States in my adult life. This generational practice of homemaking outside of one’s native land is an attempt at survival, body autonomy, and a self-determined social reality.

This activity of movement is preceded in the life rituals of Jamaican Maroons and Taino societies² who concurrently inhabited several islands in the Caribbean region. Born from “postcolonial” precarity imposed on the lives of working-class people in the region—this longstanding intervention to living is reflected in the extensive presence of Caribbean diasporic communities north of the region, namely Canada, England, and United the States.

² Maroons are descendants of African Diasporic Peoples in the Caribbean and the Americas who escaped enslavement and found settlement within mountainous terrains, often forming refuge and independent communities with Taino, an Indigenous people of the Caribbean.
Process, Materials, and Methods

Coinciding with the COVID19 Stay at Home order, I shifted from making work in my studio on campus to creating in my home space. Later that year, between May and November of 2020 my maternal relatives; my granduncle, grandmother, great grandfather, and my cousin transitioned from comorbidities of diabetes and hypertension, other non-covid related illnesses, and natural causes. During this time, my ability to return home for my grandmother’s funeral service was severely hindered by delays in my immigration proceedings onset by the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

This series of losses brought deep feelings of anguish, separation, and anxieties around death, and dying. I became hyperaware of my reliance on communication devices/technologies, as well as my intimate relationship with large bodies of water and geography. This revived curiosities about my ancestry with regards to our continuing histories of moving across land and water, our means of sending and receiving information over a long distance, in addition to navigating the challenges of emigration.

Consequently, the symbolism of the barrel container became the focus of my work. Within eight months of my Grandmother’s passing, I was able to return home. I spent a lot of time on the interior of the island in the Blue Mountains and frequently submerged myself in water. I began recording conversations with my mother over WhatsApp audio calls as well as conversations between my intimate friends. Further research into familial history as well as my ongoing experimentation with sugar cane corroborated musings that I immortalized in the forms of video and performance. My analysis surrounding the resources of sugar cane and its byproducts were mediated through various forms of storytelling including fantasy geography—DIY world-making,
in addition to multiple re-enactments of manual labor that reference the historical events surrounding the human enslavement and extraction within the region.

Finally, a variety of outdated technologies including my collection of World Talk calling cards, a component tv set, stereo speakers and amplifiers, fiber drum barrels, imagery of telephone booths, and personal recollection are decisive in signaling the 90s era of Jamaica in which the exhibition is staged.
Untitled Barrel Piece

The importance of discovering the work of contemporary Jamaican artist Kelly-Ann Lindo and her use of shipping barrels was pivotal in affirming the power of this object’s ability to transmute into vivid storytelling. By horizontally suspending vertically conjoined barrels that have had their bases removed, Lindo emphasizes the accumulation of distance, time, and longing. Here, *Send Love Inna Barrel* (**Fig 1**) is staged as a channel for the dramatization of individual and interpersonal experiences of memory, identity, and migration.

![Figure 1. Kelly-Ann Lindo *Send Love Inna Barrel*, 2017](image)

Mixed media installation

Citing Dionne Brand’s *In Another Place, Not Here*, Kristina Quynn recalls the text’s narrative of “mobile Caribbean women who have been exiled by colonial history; where is home for those seeking an elsewhere in flight from some evil, seeking solace?”³

Concepts of separation, nostalgia, displacement, and longing, processing of geography, grieving, time, and long-distance communication are reorganized and situated as aids to memory. In *Untitled Barrel Piece* (**Fig 2**) empty barrels are suspended horizontally, posturing as a communicative device indicative of transnational separation and void. The overlapping conversations scored by environmental sounds and audio notes from everyday life are

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³ Quynn, Kristina. “Elsewheres of Diaspora: Dionne Brand’s ‘In Another Place, Not Here.’” *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*
continuously panned from one speaker (barrel) to the next. Here, I am using the auditory movement of water and voices as a way of conducting distance in between. The first barrel observed from the entry of the gallery is draped in the Jamaican flag and hovers in opposition to the barrel that is covered in multiple impressions of my US permanent resident card (green card). The use of dated communication devices; 16-gauge speaker wires and stereo speakers are useful in relating to time travel and/or the influence between one time (early-mid1990s) and another (the present).

This arrangement is transtemporal in its choice of material and structure — where the weightiness of sound is amplified through an audio receiver (Fig 3) situated in between the two barrels. The use of a recorded telephone conversation between my mother and I is used in place of goods and articles of clothing to fill the barrels. Transmitted from the speakers mounted at the base of the barrel drums are inquiries from child to mother about the processes of shipping a barrel from the United States to Jamaica—in tandem with an overlapping conversation between my friends about the strategies involved with the packing/unpacking and retrieval of barrels from Jamaica’s Customs Agency. At the same time, ironies concerning the implied value of American material goods vis-à-vis what is desired by relatives on the receiving end are discussed in succession.
Figure 2. *Untitled Barrel Piece*, 2022
Installation, Barrels, Stereo Speakers, Amplifier, Photographs, Calling cards, Halftone prints

Figure 3. *Audio Amplifier with ported speaker wires*
Installation From Untitled Barrel Piece, 2022
Figure 4. *Grandma in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.* 2022
From the Same Place, Same Time series ca. 1988-1992

Fig 5. *Before Conception - Spanish Town, St. Catherine, Jamaica.* 2022
From the Same Place, Same Time series ca. 1988-1992
Fig 6. Baby Needs a Calling Card. 2022
From the Same Place, Same Time series ca. 1988-1992

Fig 7. Memories After Birth and Departure, Vineyard Town, Kingston, Jamaica 2022
From the Same Place, Same Time series (1988-1992)
The sense of longing is supported by my use of enlarged family photographs (Fig. 4-8) evenly spaced apart and pinned to the walls behind the installation of the barrels. As a backdrop to the concerns of belongingness these photographs storyboard the intimacies of intergenerational mobility (and immobility), separation, place, time(travel), and my (re)imagination of spatial memory. These family photographs are unified by similarities in tonal quality and proportion altogether underscoring the relationship between memory and detail. The images were selected based on their resemblances in stature and isolation of the subjects, a narrative which is resolved into the final photograph *One as in Plural* (Fig. 8), a triple exposure of three individuals— a generation apart, unified through image manipulation of superimposing three images into one.

The use of calling cards in a shadow box lends to the preservation of memory and time. The centerpiece installation *Calling Cards Memorabilia* (Fig 9.) is opposite the wall of the *Same Place, Same Time* series and is flanked on either side with duplicate images of a dilapidated
telephone booth taken in Clarendon, Jamaica. These images are identical except in tonal and print quality (Fig 10.) again to emphasize the relationship between recollection and detail.

**Fig 9. Calling Cards Memorabilia, 2022**
Jamaican Calling cards (from 1990s-early 2000s)

**Fig 10. Phone Booth Clarendon, 2022 (left)**
*In Memory of … Phone Booth Clarendon, 2022 (right)*
Digital Print
Not of Continent

Through a series of recorded performances and DIY map-making, I am separating the Caribbean from the context of the world map. By increasing its scale, I am presenting the region as formidable as its continental counterparts. This is critical because, despite its varying histories, distinct cultures, and practices, the region still contends with visibility that is enveloped in a monolithic embodiment. In the exhibition catalog *Infinite Island: Contemporary Caribbean Art* (2007) Tumelo Mosaka posits that “throughout the region’s history, those in power have attempted to delimit the Caribbean as a fixed entity for particular strategic ends.” In direct response to this, I use raw cotton liberally in *Caribbean Map of the World* (**Fig 11**) to establish the association of massive colonial project of raw material production to offset the external view of the region as a tourism haven and a site material ambitions.

In this map I use a variety of embroidery thread colors to represent the nation flags respective to their geographic placements, directly I am rejecting the idea of a homogeneous Caribbean culture. In *To Bare, or Bear, Witness: Decoding Ebony G. Patterson’s Tapestries* (2020) Caira Moreira-Brown writes on the arrangement of objects in mixed-media works by Jamaican artist Ebony G. Patterson stating, “she forces materials and signifiers to understand an evolving dialogue on Jamaican culture.” Similarly, I am using embroidery thread with needles in a repetitious weaving pattern to give shape to each island. As a secondary product, embroidery threads suggest a process of continued extraction through manual labor from a delimited resource that is, cotton.

*Not of Continent* (**Fig 12**) time lapses the re-making of Caribbean geography in addition to labor-related activities with other artifices of the slave trade; sugar cane, its byproducts, and
indigo. The act of braiding the weaving threads into one is a gesture of unity concerning its shared and equally different ethnicities, political systems, social realities, and geographies.

Fig 11 Caribbean World Map, 2020
Mixed media, aging raw cotton, needles, embroidery thread

Fig 12. Not of Continent, 2020
Video
The importance of documenting the activities of making in Not of Continent Series (Fig 12.) underscores the overwhelming process and exploitation of labor that took place in the region. Much of this large-scale projection is formatted as 9 channels, this gives perspective to multiple activities involving the passage of this time, separately and concurrently.

Fig 13. Not of Continent Series, 2021
Installation
De’t’ Kumz in T’rees

De’t’ Kumz in T’rees (Fig 14.) is a multimedia installation that stages the burial of sugar cane crop. Through the assembly and production of this work, I am ultimately factoring in the impact of the slave trade on the genetic disposition and dietary lifestyles of Caribbean Peoples. Mediums such as video, performance, cooked sugar sculpture replicas of the island’s morphology, and halftone prints offer visual accompaniment to the longstanding history of the means of production, labor, and consumption of the sugar cane crop and its byproducts - raw sugar and rum.

Mounted above the three barrels draping in a dark brown fabric are quasi radiographic images titled Anatomy of Saccharum Series (Fig 15.) which culminated in numerous processes of smashing, scanning, digital composites, and multiple exposures of sugar cane stalks, before ultimately creating halftone prints. These images are framed in their likeness with byproducts ranging from molasses, dehydrated sugar cane trash, and sugar cane stalks.

Fig 14. D’et Kumz in T’rees, 2022
Installation, Video Performance, Screen prints, Barrels, Candles, Sugar Sculptures
In Untitled Burial Piece (Fig. 16), I use composites of two separate performance works on video as a means of bringing closure to my concerns about the sugar industry and its omnipresence and role in the lives and deaths of Caribbean people. As the main source of labor until the abolition of chattel slavery, sugar still dominates the economy and foodways within the region.

The synchronized enactment of consuming and burying are indicative of past and present realities of overconsumption and morbidity. By performing this burial ritual, I am calling for an end to the sugar cane plantation(industries) and its ramifications.

By using the barrels to stage this installation, I am acknowledging a parallel relationship of movement and extraction between sugar cane and Afro-Caribbean descendants concerning dynamism and labor. First domesticated on the islands of New Guinea, sugar cane was later transplanted and hybridized in other parts of the world. As with the displacement of Afro-diasporic peoples — the migration of sugar cane was used to facilitate the Atlantic triangular slave trade and production of raw materials (Fig. 17). The altar presentation here is to mark the intention of death in ritual practices and performance broadcasted from a small component tv set. As an
accompaniment, the competing sounds of clinking spoon and the shovel digging in the dirt works well in completing a burial scene. This piece is heavily self-referential, through the pervasive use of its secondary products; browning, molasses, rotting cane stalks, halftone prints framed with its likeness, living sugar cane plants, and sugar sculptures—in this way, I am allowing the sugar cane to function as the author in its elegy.

Fig 16. Still from Untitled Burial Piece, 2022
Video, Performance

Fig 17. Depiction of the classical model of the triangular trade
Rituals of Belonging – An MFA Thesis Exhibition

My experience with grief and creating works outside of the physical academic space has impacted my approach to making and researching in a transformative way. Curiosities about my concept of home and family, belonging, death and my growing spirituality remains integral to my survival and liberation. As an expatriate whose nativity has been marred by maternal void—collective history and individual memories are vital to my ability to return home.

When dealing with death, there is a need for closure that permeates. In Afro-diasporic Religions the use of altars in ancestral veneration rituals are commonplace. Along with their beliefs, rituals and cultural practices, religion is one of the most significant practices that ties Afro-Caribbean people to their African heritage.

In Jamaica alone, there are at least six varying diasporic religions developed among enslaved Africans and Jamaican Maroons—who are known to be direct descendants of Akan Peoples⁴. These religions have offered ways of returning to the motherland where physical traverse had presented impossibilities. Through spiritual healing, ancestral veneration, justice-making, spiritual possession, dancing, music, and drumming; Caribbean people can transmute loss and separation, and bridge interconnectivity through affirming rituals.

In Rituals of Belonging (Fig 18) my efforts to return to my people are transfigured by the regeneration of my ancestors through a process of personal epistemology and art making. Screen prints of my deceased relatives are printed on dark brown fabric to recall their relationship to the land—their nativity and land stewardship. These prints are mounted on barrel covers and then fastened with barrel rings. All prints are mounted on the wall except for Nanny of the Maroons’ (Fig 21) which is placed directly on the ground in between two living neon pathos plants.

⁴ A poly-ethnic group living primarily in modern-day countries of Ghana and Ivory Coast of West Africa.
While these placements are non-hierarchical, the separation of Nanny of the Maroon and the burlap adornment of her portrait is to signify her role in the leading enslaved people into sovereignty. The candles inside the semi-circular boundary vary in color and correspond with the respective nation flags of modern-day Ghana, Ashanti Peoples (a sub-group of Akan ethnicities) and Jamaica. Rum and molasses, which are byproducts of sugar cane are routine in rituals of libation and veneration in addition to other offerings of fruits and a cooked ackee\textsuperscript{5} meal.

In Patterson’s Untitled (Haitian Flag Project) (\textbf{Fig 19}), she uses altars to summon piety around her subjects. The similarities of setting an altar on the ground are mnemonic of Kumina\textsuperscript{6} and Haitian Vodou death ritual practices – using objects related to elements of the physical world; fire (lit candles), earth (plants, food), air (incense) along with other enticements of red stripe beer, blueing powder, machetes (cane knife) donned in flags. To further invite energies of reverence and protection efun chalk is used to draw a boundary and is fortified by lighting on nine white candles.

As homage, my ancestral altar sits directly across the non-audible screening of Not of Continent performance video (\textbf{Fig 12}) and is instrumental in making a direct correlation to my people’s history with hard labor and my gratitude to their survival.

\textsuperscript{5} Ackee is Jamaica’s national fruit and dish, it is known as Ankye in Ghana.
\textsuperscript{6} An afro-Jamaican belief system associated with wakes, burials, and ancestral commemoration
Fig 18. Rituals of Belonging (ancestral altar full view), 2022
Halftone prints on the fabric of; Grandmother, Great-grandmother, Great-Great Grandfather on band Grand cousin, and barrel covers.
Fig 19. Ebony G Patterson, *(Untitled Haitian Flag Project)* 2009
Installation, Tapestry

Fig 20. *Rituals of Belonging (Ancestral Altar floor view)* 2022
Installation
Conclusion

The over-arching motif in this thesis is the exercise of agency and designation of home. For me, this calls into question the importance of birthplace, and negotiations involved in the process of same. In a Cooper.edu\(^7\) press release of Torkwase Dyson’s *I Can Drink The Distance*, the reoccurring displacement of Black Diasporic People is contextualized “from the history of global trade to contemporary colonization and extraction—Dyson thinks through the various ways humans oppose the violence of these synergistic systems with methods of improvisation and spatial planning.”

Migration, through this title and context, necessitates movement as a method to facilitate ongoing survival. While diasporic consciousness was not solely born out of historical experiences and conditions that coincided with the Atlantic slave trade, the ability to survive such lived experiences is persevering and an attestation to Black People’s indigeneity (to land and water) free from the concepts of nations or borders. In Dionne Brand’s *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2007), she asserts “Too much has been made of origins. All origins are arbitrary. This is not to say that they are not also nurturing, but they are essentially coercive and indifferent. Country, nation, these concepts are of course deeply indebted to origins, family, tradition, home. Nation-states are configurations of origins as exclusionary power structures which have legitimacy based solely on conquest and acquisition.”

For me, the idea of a home outside of my place of origin is an ongoing negotiation. In this mediation, I consider my ability to survive and to have a quality of life where that provides a sense of security, identity and belonging.

\(^7\)“Cooper.edu,” *Cooper.edu*, 2019, https://cooper.edu/architecture/events-and-exhibitions/exhibitions/torkwase-dyson-i-can-drink-distance
Bibliography


Vita

Trécha Gay Jheneall is a fluid Jamaican visual and performance artist currently living in New Orleans, LA. Their work engages mediums of screen printing, installation, performance, and video. Through consolidating personal and collective memories and antecedents of Afro-Caribbean origin, Trécha’s work serves as a conduit for communal movement toward liberatory consciousness.

Trécha studied Interdisciplinary Studio Art at Marylhurst University in Oregon and is currently pursuing a graduate degree in Studio Arts at the University of New Orleans in Louisiana.