

## Caribbean Contours

By Rianna Jade Parker

Like nationalism, the biting phrase 'diaspora' can be a powerful stimulus of myths, historical reconstruction and redefinition of a collectiveness. Academically popular keywords and concepts have a way of exhausting their usefulness, but the heart has its own reasons. Caribbean diasporic or transnational movements are more than just 'place to place'. Under the critical authority of Stuart Hall (Professor of Sociology at Open University), the Caribbean can be understood as the only group that is twice diasporised and "constantly producing and reproducing itself". In his 1995 essay *Negotiating Caribbean Identities* for the *New Left Review*, Hall pronounced: "the Caribbean is the first, the original and the purest diaspora". But has the theory, practice and purpose between it all been affirmed yet?

New World history is often too blurred, intertwined, and unambiguous, leaving us with only one interpretation. Whilst principally African, the Caribbean also constitutes well-recognised diasporas, such as the Chinese, Jewish and Indian. *Reverb* at Stephen Friedman Gallery is a new grouping of these human adventures of history and fate. Here eight leading artists from the Caribbean diaspora seek salvation and comfort through intellectual, creative and vicarious living.

Barbadian-Scottish, Alberta Whittle's sculptural installation *A knock, a kick and we grapevine* (2024) centralises a slanted threshold on a gradient coloured frame and grounded by sacks of sandbags. At this angle, a bronze-casted foot rests on the lower half on a repurposed white door decorated with fluorescent pink glass panels, typical in the Anglophone Caribbean. This foot could belong to an impatient visitor or a playful child, both wanting access through this foyer to a new potential.

Four anatomic-configurations by French-Martinican Julien Creuzet are substantially weighted by an assemblage of found materials such as pearls, steel and plastic, implicative of the amalgamating process unique to the Caribbean. *Dans nos yeux, words come from far away, from my ancestral memory, astral, sky, I'm not alone on the way anymore (rouge et jaune)* (2020–2024) features a humanoid figure with a protruding chest, leading the charge, roofed by a tri-coloured wide-palmed leaf. For Creuzet the body's positioning is a construction for "experiential agency and self-determination", a theoretical nod to Martinican writer Édouard Glissant (1928–2011) and his theory of relatedness and creolisation.

The Caribbean transatlantic triangular world was formed through mercantilism, the slave trade and settler colonialism of European empires. It is not possible to separate the concept of diaspora from the experience of economic and political migration, asylum seekers and refugees, or even of the transient traveller.

Dominican military dictator Rafael Trujillo ideated and executed a massacre of nearly 20,000 people living on the Haitian-Dominican border in 1937. They were quickly identified by soldiers because when prompted, they would incorrectly pronounce the Spanish word 'perejil', which translates to 'parsley.' In Rita Dove's (b. 1952) two-part poem *Parsley* (1983), she uses the plant as a euphemism for emotional and psychological endurance. Kathia St Hilaire's three new paintings directly reference this poem, using parrots to play the role of foreshadowed martyrs of migrants. In *Azaka* (2024), she immortalises one victim of the massacre; the tropical bird flies above the head of a blue-collared young man, skin emboldened with the same burning gold hue as the parrot.

In her delicate and sophisticated tapestry, *transference* (2024), Guyanese Suchitra Mattai sets a scene of Indo-Caribbean women's agency and actualisation. A brown-skinned woman dances in the centre of the surface framed by a medley of ghungroo bells, traditionally used to emphasise complex footwork and dance skill. Privileged white Europeans surround her, but their faces are blurred through horizontal over layering of blue and yellow thread. Centuries-long Indo-Caribbean heritages were transferred to Mattai; it was her grandmothers who taught her fine embroidery skills and her mother shared other cultural fibre materials, such as the sari woven into the work.

Hulda Guzmán's fantastical panorama of her immediate surroundings at her studio in the countryside of the Dominican Republic, *A little tune-up* (2024), is a tropical surrealist demonstration of how to rebalance, recuperate

and recommit. In this world, Guzmán has conceived an equilibrium of colour and space for plant life, domestic and roaming animals, living and transcendental spirits, otherwise known as family. She remarks: “I hope to understand the delicate balance between man, wildlife and the environment and to transmit a perspective of synergy; to portray trees and plants as glorified, deified, as to inspire worship, respect and reverence upon Nature”.

Diasporic consciousness nearly always involves an aspiration of establishing an original homeland and a degree of commitment to an eventual turn, or simply a referent of spiritual or emotional renewal. To be truly fruitful the descriptive, evaluative or explanatory powers of a diaspora must expand beyond recognition of a lineal heritage — these finer contours are more alluring.

The British-Caribbean diaspora has well defined itself in the last 70 years since mass migration upon invitation. Denzil Forrester is still able to recall and directly reference old sketches and his first-hand accounts of dub clubs popularised in 1970s and 80s London, built and sustained by the early Windrush Generation. In honour of the late London-based DJ Jah Shaka, Forrester's *Zulu Chant* (2023–2024) is a yellow, orange and purple toned mise-en-scène of the cultural intervention of Reggae in Britain, revellers and revolutionaries with sting and style.

Additionally, two British-Jamaican artists with research-led art practices, Charmaine Watkiss and Zinzi Minott, are well-placed in this presentation. Minott's sound work *WATASOUND* (2024) utilises public and personal archives to reference political speeches, carnivals, thrashing water and other field recordings of conversational Jamaican Patois in social settings. Her sonic passage is the most sensitive to the concept of reverberations that uniquely require a sense of hearing and touch. Rhythmic dub and bass, Rastafari chanting and contemporary Dancehall are blended with street talk and alighting political speeches with calls for reparations. Working predominantly in sound and performance, Zinzi's practice loops lived bodily experience with fiction and fact despite afflictions the archive can weld.

Through sustained botanical research, Charmaine Watkiss continues to extend her women-dominated *Plant Warrior* series with five new drawings. An African-Caribbean woman, based on the artist's likeness, is perfectly poised for her portrait in *The Warrior's presence is safeguarded for generations to come* (2024). She is characterised by the anchovy pear tree that is indigenous to Jamaica and produces fruit sweetly similar to mangoes. With her haired braided backwards, she is framed by a collar made up of large green leaves seemingly growing through and around her body and neck, where more adornments rest. I warmly recognise the Abeng resting on her leg. A Twi word translating to 'whistle', the Abeng is a cow-horn instrument that was used by Jamaican Maroons for ceremony and crucial communication in opposition to British colonialists.

Generalisations about the transnational characteristics and caricatures of Caribbean life are only mildly helpful as a guide to the uninitiated, to our differences and similarities, divergences and parallels that begin to emerge and overlap, as they must. One can also trace the convergences and divergences through the literary and intellectual formulations of: C.L.R James (1901–1989), Amy Ashwood (1897–1969) and Marcus Garvey (1887–1940), Suzanne (1915–1966) and Aimé Césaire (1913–2008), Claudia Jones (1915–1964), Arturo Schomburg (1874–1938), Elsa Goveia (1925–1980), Kamau Brathwaite (1930–2020) and the still living Sylvia Wynter (b. 1928).

The postmodern and debatably postcolonial condition brings uncertainty in rapid waves. When the global Caribbean meets in the metropolises, we often sign temporary treaties to act as a continental squadron, especially when faced with quandaries bigger than our borders. Some cultural enthusiasts, myself included, can confirm that these patterns of continuity and insurgency are felt at home and abroad.