

Connecting Across the Gaps: Experiencing the Black Diaspora

At the height of the summer of 2004, I arrived to the blistering heat, suffocating humidity, and late-afternoon tropical downpours of North Miami, and was thrown into a closely-quartered living situation with seventeen graduate students from Africa, the Americas, and Europe at Florida International University's Biscayne Bay campus. For five weeks, we lived together in FIU's air-conditioned dorms, isolated from the main campus and from Miami proper, surrounded by the Black and Hispanic workers and students composing the bulk of the population on campus and seemingly exiled from the heart of the FIU system, if not the world at large. Marooned in this outer space on the shores of the Atlantic, our group was engaged in the deliberate act of "interrogating" the African diaspora: attempting to discern the various ways in which it has been historically imagined in different cultural and political contexts.

Initially, our concerns and projects, our ways of seeing the world and living in it, often seemed as if they were in collision with one another. Yet in everyday moments — in acts of pooling financial resources, cooking together, eating together, going to the beach, engaging in intense dialogue, sharing our frustrations and elations — points of convergence and divergence in our past histories and present circumstances emerged. These moments of connectivity were generative: they sparked the development of more imaginative work amongst our community at Biscayne Bay, and helped expand the regional notions of diaspora that we had brought to Florida from our respective homes. During that summer, the concept of diaspora as a lived communion with others who are dispersed became palpable and real to me. We transformed Biscayne Bay's outer space into a central site of diaspora. Black diaspora was no longer an imagined group of people and practices; it was a self-consciously created place located, albeit provisionally, in North Miami.

The exhibition *Reading the Image: Poetics of the Black Diaspora* is a gesture towards continuing the black transnational dialogues I was a part of in Biscayne Bay. Its inspiration is also derived from two additional sources. First, it emerges out of the many conversations I have had over the past two years with artist Deanna Bowen about her work and the complex ways in which the movement and migration of the black body, beginning with the slave trade, are articulated in visual artworks produced by black artists in the Anglophone world. These discussions led to a period of research and development that was jointly undertaken by Bowen and me. Out of this synergy, the exhibition took its shape.

Secondly, following on the tropes of movement of migration at the basis of my discussions with Bowen, *Reading the Image* emerges from my desire to move the conversations on diaspora from Biscayne Bay into the context of Canada — a space generally marginalized within histories of the African diaspora, despite the long history of African presence in this country and the historic role it has played as a node in the journeys of African peoples worldwide.

Reading the Image: Poetics of the Black Diaspora brings together the works of artists Deanna Bowen (Canada), Christopher Cozier (Trinidad and Tobago), Michael Fernandes (Canada), and Maud Sulter (Scotland). The exhibition is comprised of photography, video, and installation works. While the works are not aesthetically linked, the artists represent common issues, and the medium each artist employs allows for self-conscious expressions of embodiment, subjectivity, and agency. The contributors explore questions not only of diasporic movement, but also of the role of African people in, and their relationship to, modernity and its incessant march of progress, of the history of Christianity and the church as a social institution in the black world, of trauma and self-making, of community and racial formation, and of the relationship of systems of representation to colonial and postcolonial histories. The exhibition is premised on the idea that diaspora and its creative manifestations are very much about the doing and creating of spaces in which the starting point for conversation positions the contemporary black diasporic subject squarely at the centre of every utterance while incorporating varied articulations of the conditions of black diaspora. The artworks represent a range of aesthetics and worldviews that express, reflect, and retell stories of modernity from the perspective of subjects. Within these stories, blackness and diaspora are posited not as essences, but as social constructs that are dependent upon geographical specificity for their meanings and articulations. At the same time, they are not bound to static interpretations of place that render black subjects as isolated and provincial.

The works brought together in the exhibition highlight the importance of this geographical specificity. The ways in which geographical location and the "places" from which the artists speak, as well as from which the viewer reads,

have their own syntax and internal logics in relation to the creation of meaning. Deanna Bowen's experimental video projection, *(truth)seer* (2005) utilizes the biblical story of David and Goliath to talk about struggles between opposing forces in the world. She uses this narrative to express her own narrative of trauma: specifically, her relationship to the Christian church as she has experienced it via a long line of pastors. Bowen inserts herself into the story by drawing symbols such as guns, chromosomes, and crosses over the video image. This technique interrupts the normative telling of the story and allows the viewer to extract new meanings from her symbolism. The work is a personal narrative that is extrapolated from a lengthy history of the movement of black bodies across the Atlantic to New World and the taking up of a new form of religion. It recodes the struggles to create a coherency of self within the doctrine and practices of Christianity.

Michael Fernandes' *Room of Fears* (2006) incorporates others into the process of developing the work by sending out a "call" for fears via email to a diverse range of individuals. Fernandes creates a condition in which a fleeting coming together of artist and audiences/authors is possible. The responses, which range from the whimsical to the unimaginable, are hand drawn onto black gallery walls in white chalk. On the surface this interactive call and response device used by Fernandes appears to erase him from the collective portrait, yet he remains the author of the piece. The work is participatory and allows for polyphonic voices and identities to emerge and coalesce around and identify with a category and emotion called "fear."

Christopher Cozier's multimedia installation, *Once You Have Bread and Wheels You Good To Go* (2006), consists of developmental drawings, a video projection, and loaves of bread on wheels. The installation takes up the relationship of the Caribbean — and in particular, Trinidad and Tobago's relationship to capitalist expansion — to empire building, then and now. Cozier is concerned with Caribbean modernity, and he employs white bread as a metaphor to enter into a discussion about the anxieties that the hollowed-out products of this modernity have produced within contemporary Caribbean societies. Cozier also takes up the issue of fear in his box piece called *Available in All Leading Stores* (2006). In this work Cozier alludes to the fact that fear has become an object that is packaged and sold globally. In those instances when fear is not being directly sold to consumers and citizens, it is the driving force that is used to sell the product or service; for example, surveillance services and products are marketed to reduce the fear of intrusion. In other words, they are promoted as a form of risk reduction. Cozier invites the viewers to actively participate in constructing and consuming their own 7.5 cm square box of fear, which they can then stamp and take away.

Maud Sulter's photographic self-portraits *Les Bijoux* (2002) directly engage with the notion of the exclusion of blackness from the narratives of European modernity and place the black subject back into the centre of its processes and production. Sulter takes as her starting point her own body and the disappeared figure of Jeanne Duvall (19th-century poet Baudelaire's muse) to re-present individuals who have been erased in the annals of history. Sulter's video *My Father's House* (1997) documents the three-day funeral ceremonies held for her Ghanaian father, an eye doctor and village chief. Up until the event of his death, Sulter had had very little contact with him and his homeland of Ghana. This video, like Fernandes' *Room of Fears*, blurs the boundaries between the private and the public and re-presents a particular form of cultural hybridity — the fusion of both Fanti and Christian traditions. *My Father's House* allows the viewer a raw, intimate and sometimes uncomfortable view of an event of pomp and circumstance that most of us can only access through what the image and sound connote. The grainy, low-tech, home video aesthetic of the seventy-two hour funeral ritual is performed primarily in the local Ghanaian vernacular of Fanti. Sulter is a participant in the rituals and is visually present in short snippets throughout the video. In an email correspondence with the artist, Sulter explains, "They are speaking Fanti which is a branch of Twi. The point of my being 'in' the video is that I do not speak — or beyond the emotional understand — Twi. The artist is no more privileged than the common viewer, adding somewhat to the poignancy of brutal fact that, much beyond the moment of my conception, my father and I never ... spent any other time together but these 72 hours."

Taken together, the aesthetic strategies employed by the artists in *Reading the Image: Poetics of the Black Diaspora* illuminate the fact that black diasporic expressions are multifarious and variegated. The leitmotif in these works is a concern with authority, self-realization, agency, and the development of counter-narratives and ways of perceiving

the past and present. The works in this exhibition blur the boundaries of national geography and identity categories, and although they critique modernity, their existence depends on the events of this period. The use of visual representation as the grounding for the dialogue brings to the surface questions about how we as viewers and makers of meaning read works produced in other locations that have their meanings constituted in other histories, narratives, idioms, and syntaxes of the present and past.

Other questions can be posed about this type of grouping of images. Does the viewer engage in different types of reading and meaning-making processes when the black body is present in the work? How does the viewer locate herself in relation to the work when the body is absent? Questions of translation also become pertinent in the context of international cultural spaces, for they are spaces in which numerous languages and visual styles come together to produce and highlight difference as communicative styles do not readily translate across their local sites. In his book, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*, Brent Hayes Edwards aptly points out the complexities and challenges of translation when working across black international culture. He states, “Diaspora is a term that marks the ways in which internationalism is pursued by translation. This is not to say that internationalism is doomed to failure, but instead to note that it necessarily involves the process of linking or connecting across gaps.”¹

Reading the Image: Poetics of the Black Diaspora is precisely about connecting across differences — national boundaries, sexualities, class, gender, ethnicities — in order to highlight the ways in which black diasporic identities and identifications emerge out of ongoing everyday negotiations of life, specificities of histories and are not defined by mythologies that gesture to an authentic place of origin. Connecting across the gaps as well as coexisting with and within the spaces of untranslatability is very much what an international and diasporic engagement is about.

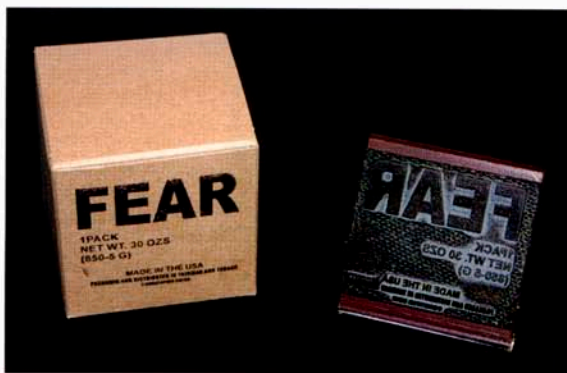
It is significant that the exhibition begins its life in the Chatham-Kent region of Ontario, a region in which fugitive slaves from the United States created spaces in which they could construct, produce, and perform their personhoods. The region is a place that is shaped by and through the imaginative, creative, and very real labour of black people. Every Labour Day weekend diaspora is brought into being by the Buxton Historical Society, who hosts a Homecoming event in which descendants of the settlers of Buxton gather to commemorate freedom and the founding of the community. Over the coming years, *Reading the Image: Poetics of the Black Diaspora* will tour to Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery, Halifax, Nova Scotia; The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, Ontario; Foreman Art Gallery of Bishop’s University, Sherbrooke, Quebec; and Yukon Arts Centre, Whitehorse, Yukon, continuing the processes of movement, dialogue, history, community building, and the enacting of the black diaspora. This exhibition, like the residency at Biscayne Bay, serves as a nexus or crossroads through which the various discourses that shape representations of diaspora and who we are as black diasporic subjects intersect.

Andrea Fatona, Guest Curator

Andrea Fatona is a curator who resides in Peterborough, Ontario.

Notes

¹ Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Massachusetts: Harvard, 2003), 11.



Christopher Cozier; Available in All Leading Stores 2006; ink on cardboard