The 'West Indian' front room: Reflections on a diasporic phenomenon

Michael McMillan

Follow this and additional works at: https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at:https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol30/iss2/7

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au
The ‘West Indian’ front room: Reflections on a diasporic phenomenon

Abstract
The floors are carpeted, often with the high pile carpet locally termed ‘plush’. The furniture consists of thick foam-based seats covered in a fake velvet, arranged in sets of one or often two couches, plus armchairs often providing upholstered seating... The maroon of the upholstery may be picked up in curtains, carpets, coverings for tables, artificial flowers such as roses and countless other decorations, amounting to a general ‘any colour as long as it’s maroon’ principle, or its equivalent in gold/brown arrays. Artificial flowers are extremely common, often set into elaborate arrangements with perhaps half a dozen examples within the living room. There is a buffet which is a glass-fronted cabinet filled with china and glassware. It may also have internal lining of white or maroon plush. Wall decorations will be dominated by a machine-made tapestry with a religious theme, such as the Last Supper... prints of oil paintings with gilt surrounds... Prints with a West Indian theme would very rarely be found in the normative living room. (Miller 1996 136)
MICHAEL MCMILLAN

The ‘West Indian’ Front Room: Reflections on a Diasporic Phenomenon

The floors are carpeted, often with the high pile carpet locally termed ‘plush’. The furniture consists of thick foam-based seats covered in a fake velvet, arranged in sets of one or often two couches, plus armchairs often providing upholstered seating… The maroon of the upholstery may be picked up in curtains, carpets, coverings for tables, artificial flowers such as roses and countless other decorations, amounting to a general ‘any colour as long as it’s maroon’ principle, or its equivalent in gold/brown arrays. Artificial flowers are extremely common, often set into elaborate arrangements with perhaps half a dozen examples within the living room. There is a buffet which is a glass-fronted cabinet filled with china and glassware. It may also have internal lining of white or maroon plush. Wall decorations will be dominated by a machine-made tapestry with a religious theme, such as the Last Supper… prints of oil paintings with gilt surrounds… Prints with a West Indian theme would very rarely be found in the normative living room. (Miller 1996 136)

This description from Daniel Miller’s essay, ‘Fashion and Ontology in Trinidad’, echoes an iconic aesthetic found in what has been called the ‘front room’. As a social and cultural phenomenon, the front room resonates all over the African Diaspora: from Kingston to Toronto, from Brooklyn to Brixton, from Amsterdam to Paramaribo. Emanating from the Victorian parlour, it was the ‘special’ room in the home, where you weren’t permitted, unless it was a Sunday or a special occasion when guests visited. As an opulent shrine to kitsch furniture, consumer fetish and homemade furnishings, it was a symbol of status and respectability, announcing that no matter how poor you were, if the front room looked good, then you were ‘decent’ people. In the Caribbean, the front room reflected the performance of middle class values — that is, the colonial elite in the domestic interior — whereas in Britain for West Indian migrants it symbolised working class respectability.

Diaspora in this context has to be treated metaphorically since, ‘Diaspora does not refer us to those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must at all costs return’. It is defined ‘not by essence or purity, but recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity: by a conception of “identity” that lives with and through as process, the idea of difference; by hybridity’ (Hall 1993 401). The front room was a contradictory space, where the efficacy of the display was sometimes more important than the authenticity of the objects. The presence of Jim Reeves, the drinks cabinet, the plastic pineapple ice bucket, floral patterned carpet and wallpaper, lace crochet, the ‘Blue-Spot’ radiogram, The Last Supper or plastic covered upholstery was less about valorised white-biased ideals of beauty, than the creolisation of popular culture.
The dressing and maintenance of the front room therefore reveals a form of ‘impression management’ as in the flexible presentation of self, which throws up issues of ‘good grooming’ amongst people of African descent. The front room was very much my mother’s room, and as a second generation, black British person from an aspirant working class family of Vincentian parentage, I have my own memories, reflections and meanings of this space. Unpacking the detail of this space therefore raises questions about diasporic identities, inter-generational identifications and disavowal, gendered practices in the domestic domain and mis(sed)representations, struggles over meaning and authenticity in the museum/gallery culture.

The culturally syncretic nature of black popular culture where ‘there is no such thing as a pure point of origin’ (Hebdige 10) raises questions of authenticity in terms of defining a black aesthetic. Who, where and what is legitimised as an authentic black aesthetic? Given the history of representation of the ‘Other’ in museum/gallery culture, authenticity is problematic in terms of how it is constructed, policed and legitimised.

The term ‘West Indian’ is signified through the classic representation of the front room, and refers to a particular juncture in British history signified by cultural political shifts brought about by anti-colonialist struggles and movements for independence, Civil Rights and Black Power. Post-World War II black settlers in Britain may have been represented as socially problematic ‘Others’, but their participation in an emerging consumer culture meant that the front room came to signify the ongoing decolonising process in an attempt to re-define themselves. The political collapse of The West Indian Federation signified a proto-nationalist chauvinism between Caribbean countries: big island versus ‘smallie’ island. In British society where West Indian migrants were racially visibly invisible minorities, a West Indian identity emerged out of solidarity to resist racism while engaging with each other culturally and socially. One of the areas where West Indians found solidarity was in finding accommodation because signs in landlords’ windows would often say, ‘No Irish, No Dogs, No Coloureds’. Their experience of rented accommodation is a painful memory of the one-room cramped and squalid conditions many of my parents’ generation had to endure. As families and spouses arrived from the Caribbean, more space was needed but many struggled to find a loan or mortgage. Consequently, the ‘Partner Hand’/‘SuSu’, an informal localised saving scheme shared between a small group, was used to raise a deposit as down payment on a house. Whether in flats or houses, the West Indian front room as a product of diasporic migration began to take shape.

THE ‘SPEAKY SPOKEY’ OF THE FRONT ROOM

On British TV, during the 1970s, the front room as communal family space was where The Fosters attempted to reassure viewers that black families in sitcoms were just as ‘normal’ as white ones by sanitising cultural and racial difference (Donley & Taylor). Inscribed in the representation of black experience
on British TV was a race relations agenda about assimilation, and so the front room, as emblematic motif, came to signify ‘West Indian’ parents as conservative, upstanding, god-fearing citizens as opposed to their children (read male inscribed ‘black youth’) as problematic deviants. In a number of plays by black writers, the front room became a site of contested cultural identities and race politics. The tone of Caryl Phillips’s description of the main set in his play, Strange Fruit, suggests this ambivalent relationship.

The action takes place in the front room of the Marshall’s terraced house in one of England’s inner city areas. Whilst the district is not a ghetto it is hardly suburbia. The room is cramped but comfortable and tidy … a cabinet full of crockery that has never been, and never will be used… In the centre of the display is a plate commemorating the Queen’s Silver Jubilee. In the centre of the room is an imitation black leather settee with orange/yellow cushions… As to the surroundings: the wallpaper is tasteless, and on the wall hang the usual trinkets… As I said the room is cramped, even claustrophobic, but tidy. (Phillips 7)

In Obaaal Arts Collective’s From Generation to Generation: The Installation (The Black Art Gallery, London 1985), there is ‘a realistic simulation of the respective living rooms of two generations’. Two rooms are constructed and dressed, like a stage set, with the first room symbolic of a ‘typical’ living room of West Indian parents: ‘a female mannequin is poised over an ironing board, the iron flex connected to the light bulb socket above … opposite, another mannequin, male, dressed in a British Rail uniform and sitting in an armchair with a radio in his lap’ (Francis 41). Reached by a dark passage, the second room is by contrast, alive with music, books and a canvas in the shape of the African continent, stretched on a black frame on which is inscribed the names of African heroes: Patrice Lumumba, Walter Rodney, Amilcar Cabral, Kwame Nkrumah. There are two mannequins: a male dressed in a tracksuit and a female in a batik frock. The domesticated room of the ‘older generation’ suggests a quaint and naive image fixed in the past, while the undomesticated room of the ‘younger generation’ is highly cultured and politicised. Ironically, here a domestic tradition is disavowed for the reconstruction of a contemporary domestic space. In setting a context, the artists’ notes said of African-Caribbean parents, that

their general attitudes, towards their children’s behaviour (was) (they should be seen and not heard); to the language they used (and attempted to use) especially when addressing their children, tried hard to follow the adage ‘when in Rome — do as the Romans do’ and sought to polish up their ‘bad talking’ and speak ‘the Queen’s English.

(Francis 41)

In Errol Francis’s critique of this installation, he sees an over-domestication of the older generation in the idea that African-Caribbean parents wanted their children to be ‘seen and not heard’, because it echoes a well worn stereotype that blames black families for their own oppression by enforcing draconian discipline in the home. This over-simplistic representation of the older generation negates their activism and political radicalism during the era of the Civil Rights and Black
Power movements. Active in labour struggles, they set up voluntary welfare organisations and made protests about the inferior education of their children in the British school system. They also read and supported *The West Indian Gazette*, one of the first black publications in Britain, edited and published by Claudia Jones, a journalist from the Caribbean, who was exiled from the United States for being a Communist. She used the *Gazette* to campaign on behalf of black defendants prosecuted after 1958 race riots in Notting Hill, the suburb that gave its name to the first Carnival during the 1960s which she was instrumental in organising. Therefore, as Francis asks, ‘Can we accept the characterisation of our parents as virtually illiterate, save the Bible and correspondence courses?’ (41)

Francis wonders how, on the basis of this caricature, the younger ‘second generation’ were able to keep alive patois/creole traditions from the Caribbean if they were suppressed in England. This suppression also occurred in the Caribbean, therefore the question is not whether, but how, where and by whom, patois/creole (read ‘bad talking’) was suppressed, hidden and used. The cultural hegemony of colonialism reflected in ‘Orientalist knowledge’, coded the ‘Other’s language as bastardised, pidgin and uncivilised. It is this psychic inferiorisation of ‘Nation Language’ that has ‘provided a systematic framework for the political analysis of racial hegemonies at the level of black subjectivity’ (Fanon 37). It is at this level of subjectivity that Suzanne Scafe, in her book, *Teaching Black Literature*, notes that black British students, weary of the stigma of being labelled as the ‘race expert’, claimed not to know how to speak creole while reading aloud black literary texts.
The performative survival strategy utilised by these students echoes Ralph Ellison’s recommendation to ‘[s]lip the yoke, and change the joke’, and reflects the duality of race politics as a sobering lesson in the paradox of modernity: a means of freedom in expression, but also a means of suppression (45–59). It is the duality of the archetypal ‘speaky spokey’, (imitation of the language of the colonial elite) who spoke or ‘attempted to use’ the ‘Queen’s English’, better than the Queen. The proverb of the older generation that, ‘when in Rome — do as the Romans do’, can now take on a double meaning in a discussion of how inter-generational identifications are signified in the representation of the front room.

In this framework, Stuart Hall argues that identity is a performative process, continually negotiated through a ‘complex historical process of appropriation, compromise, subversion, masking, invention and revival’. In this sense, ‘Otherness’ is not fixed and predetermined. Cultural identity in this formation is an ‘articulation fostered in a complex structure of diverse and contradictory, yet connected relations’ (1993 395). Beyond the essentialising binary opposition between colonialisit and anti-colonialisit, Hall proposes a concept of cultural identity as dialectically continuous and disruptive unstable points of identification, made within the discourse of history and culture. This idea that cultural identities can be dialectically continuous and disruptive reveals duality as double consciousness. Applied to my discussion, identification and disavowal can occupy the same space and enables a repositioning of where the subject sits in the front room. As a Trinidadian shopkeeper notes,

Maroon is a colour which is red but not red, but it is more Englishanese, North Americanese, Europeanese, I have never been there (England) but I believe they use a lot of this reddish off-reddish in their upholstery. (qtd in Miller 1994 214)

Coming through the front door of a ‘West Indian’ home in Britain, there might be a maroon coloured passage carpet with heavy floral patterns covered by a clear plastic ‘runway’. These patterns symbolised the thick, lush tropical vegetation of ‘back home’. As noted above, maroon also has different meanings, including a runaway slave living in remote areas in the Caribbean as well as symbolising the spilt blood of Jesus Christ on the cross. More prosaically it is the official colour of the West Indian cricket team and hides dirt well. The ambivalence of this word, ‘maroon’, invites a rethinking of the concept of difference, as put forward by Stuart Hall in his usage of Jacques Derrida’s anomalous ‘a’ in ‘differance’, which challenges any fixed meaning and representation of difference. This ‘strategic and arbitrary’ conception enables a rethinking of the positioning and repositioning of Caribbean cultural identities suggested by Aimé Césaire’s and Léopold Senghor’s metaphors — Présence Africaine, Présence Européenne and more ambiguously, Présence Americaine.

The dialogue of power and resistance, of refusal and recognition, with and against Présence Européenne is almost as complex as the ‘dialogue’ with Africa. In terms of popular cultural life, it is nowhere to be found in its pure, pristine state.

(Hall 1993 400)
The ‘differance’ in these presences is a strategic and random display in which masking/covering up takes place at the same time, resisting the dominant hegemonic representation of the colonised ‘Other’ as savage/un-educated. The mask is the signifier, while the masquerade is the signified which, as a ritual practice from Africa, served as a means of camouflage in slave plantation society. The masquerade in this masking is the phenomenon of the ‘cool’: ‘To exhibit grace under pressure’ as reflected in personal character or ‘Ashe’, which became a means of inverting and subverting the brutal oppression of plantation society through imitation, reinvention and artifice (Thompson 35). In response to racial oppression, ‘grooming’ became a performance of the socialised and reconstructed Ashe as embodied in the style of black men and women’s presentation.

‘Grooming’ as performance does not reveal all there is to know about black subjectivity, but it does reveal the mythic nature of black popular culture as a theatre of popular desires. ‘Popular culture carries that affirmative ring because of the prominence of the word “popular”’ (Hall 1992 21). Popular culture always has its base in the experiences, the pleasures, the memories, and the traditions of the people. What Mikhail Bakhtin calls ‘the vulgar’ — the popular, the informal, the underside, the grotesque — is always treated as weary by the dominant tradition which fears that the low culture of the ‘carnivalesque’ might overwhelm
it. Therefore cultural hegemony, as Gramsci argued, is made, lost and struggled over, just as carnival was appropriated and reconstructed to subvert and transgress the power relations between master and slave (Bakhtin 60). The unpacking of the aesthetics and cultural practices of the front room reflects a blurring of boundaries between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture, between taste and style, which connects to the ‘dialogic interventions of diasporic, creolising cultures’ (Mercer 1998 57).

It is this layering of complex identities and desires that became the inspiration for The West Indian Front Room exhibition that I curated at the Geffrye Museum (2005–2006). The curatorial framework was for a central front room installation designed and built to specific architectural specifications. It was decorated and dressed with artefacts reminiscent of the front room in West Indian homes from the late 1960s/early 1970s, which were sourced from personal loans, second hand shops, flea markets and car boot sales. It was further contextualised with large-scale photographs of families in their front rooms, iconic artefacts such as the paraffin heater, wallpaper, carpet, artificial flowers and crochet dollies. There were audio interviews about iconic objects found in the front room, accessed through dialling a number on a Bakelite telephone, and two short films reflecting memories of, and critical commentaries on, the front room. The exhibition touched a universal emotional chord amongst its 35,000 visitors during its five month duration and surprised the Geffrye Museum because its appeal went beyond a specific cultural group, much less class and generation. Conceptually, The West Indian Front Room has been the basis for a contemporary living room installation and exhibition, ‘Van Huis Uit’, that toured Amsterdam, Tilburg and Utrecht in The Netherlands and featured iconic domestic objects from second generation migrants of Moroccan, Surinamese, Antillean, and Indo-European (Indonesian-European) descent.1 Coming into the dressed front/living room installation, flashbacks, memories, and anecdotes are evoked, of events, conversations, customs, rituals, encounters, colours, smells and images of the occasional and everyday life experiences in African-Caribbean Diaspora. The great attraction for visitors to such installations is the evocation of a haptic world of touch, taste and smell as well as vision. The sensory domains are for the most part ignored or undertheorised in contemporary scholarship. The senses of smell, taste and touch, in particular, have traditionally been typed as too ‘primitive’ to have any real intellectual or aesthetic functions and therefore as irrelevant to the appreciation or understanding of collections. Yet these senses may also be engaged by collected objects in socially and personally meaningful ways. Similarly, collected objects, particularly when they come from other cultures or historical periods, may have highly significant sensory dimensions which are ‘silenced’ by present visualist methods of display.

Along with examining how and why certain domains of sensory experience such as touch, taste and smell have been cordoned off as inadmissible in the modern art or ethnographic museum, The Front Room project explores a range
of historical and contemporary alternative sites of collections. These sites include
the church, the private collection in its historical and contemporary contexts,
the department store, the theme park, and contemporary art exhibitions with
multisensory dimensions. While diverse in their nature and objectives, these
different sites of collections can all be seen to participate in an overlapping
history of display practices and to play a crucial role in shaping future models
for the presentation of collections. The fact that the emotional realm of the
senses is very much under investigation at present raises questions about the
dominant hegemony in contemporary museum culture: are the glass cases of the
museum cracking under postmodern pressures for a reconstituted and revitalised
sensorium? What will come out if they do?

THE FRAMING OF ARRIVAL AND AMBITION

In his essay, ‘Reconstruction Work’, Stuart Hall looks at images of Post-war
black settlement, such as *Picture Post*’s 1956 pictorial essay on migration to
England, ‘Thirty Thousand Colour Problems’. The documentary realism of these
images, represents these black subjects as ‘social problems’ waiting to happen,
which echoes a colonialist construction of the ‘innocent simpleton’, too slow
for the fast ways of the advanced modern world. The reality is that, ‘they are
probably from a city, like Kingston, as big and swinging in its poverty and style
as any small colonial capital’ (Hall 1984). Hall, who came to England from Jamaica as a young man, notes that they were
arriving at the end of one traumatic journey and uncertain at the beginning of
another. With dignity packed deep in their suitcases, they were formally dressed
as a sign of self-respect; with pressed dresses, hats at an angle in a ‘universally
jaunty cocky’ style, in preparation for whatever was to happen next. For these
immigrants, coming from the colonies, they saw themselves as British citizens and
through education sometimes knew more about English culture than the English
themselves. To wear your best garments on special occasions such as attending
church was part of this sartorial principle, and travelling to a distant foreign land
was no exception. ‘Edwardian portraiture and the codes of the formal photograph,
a formal icon in the domestic gallery of memories, was as common in poor but
respectable homes in Kingston as it was in Kingston-upon-Thames’ (Hall 1984).
Style, self respect and respectability were inscribed in one’s appearance, the
same as in the ‘High Street’ photo-portraits, where we might find photos of

the young woman with the gloves and handbag, holding up or being held up by the
basket of artificial flowers. The well-dressed young man with the clip-on fountain
pens, talking on a phone which is not connected to anything, but sitting on top of a
mock-Greek half-column straight from the disused basement of the British Museum.

(Hall 1984)

Frozen in time, these studio-composed photos in artificial environments, neither
home or work, were how they imagined themselves. A reconstructing of the
subject as document was sent ‘back home’, in the form of photos and adhesive-backed pale blue airmail letters that were also portraiture on the front room wall.

In his essay, ‘Aspiration and Attitude…Reflections on Black Britain in the Nineties’, Hall uses ‘frontlines/backyards’ as a metaphor in the context of exploring the meanings of an emergent black British identity.

In the public realm, frontlines are the politicised edge between black culture and white culture; backyards are where some less confrontational, more informal, more complicated, private negotiations might take place’. (Hall 1998 38)

The front room is a metaphorical ‘frontline’, because through its aesthetics and domestic practices, it displays a subtle ‘politicised edge between black and white culture’ (Hall 1998 42). This ‘edge’ is a performance of private ‘backyard’ imagined and reconstructed narratives, mediated by desire, status, difference, race, class, gender and generation. My parents tell me that an incentive for many West Indians to get married when they arrived in England, was that they could

It was the mother in the home who bought for, dressed and maintained the front room. This is a formal family portrait in Brixton, London, circa 1969. © Neil Kenlock.
claim tax relief. While the home in England reinforced the patriarchal division of labour with the man possibly buying the furniture, it was the woman’s tastes and desires in consumer fetish and the like that made the room a potentially shared investment. Black women have usually had no choice but to deal with the domestic and go out to work. The making of the front room signifies on one level black women’s aspiring mobility through their financial independence from men. The fruits of black women’s labour ‘through the slog of long, remorseless and difficult work’, on show in the front room and the associated gendered practices in the domestic domain, contribute to the narrative of post-war black settlement (Hall 1998 42).

The front room is a generic term, that includes the living and sitting room, and for aspiring white working classes families it was inscribed with middle-class values. The etiquette of decorum, protocol, polite manners and proper behaviour
as performed rituals of this room, echoes the drawing room of the Victorian middle-class two-storey semi-detached and terraced houses. This became the front room of an aspiring burgeoning suburban bourgeoisie of the early twentieth century.

Racism meant that post-war black settlers could only find one-room rented accommodation, but as families were sent for or were being made, these insecure environments did not provide the stability they needed. If they did not get a council flat, then black people found getting a loan or mortgage to buy a house near impossible. The 'Partner Hand'/‘SuSu’, an informal localised saving scheme, enabled a deposit to be raised. In many urban inner city areas, black families moved into properties left vacant by the white middle class who had fled to the suburbs. Whether in flats or houses, the front room began to take shape.

When comparing the front room of post-war black settlers and the white working class, the emphasis is on the desire for social status through consumer fetish. What is not acknowledged is difference: difference in terms of how these settlers struggled to acquire a front room and how displacement, exile and alienation affected the meaning of that space. For post-war black settlers from the Caribbean, the front room was a response of ‘arrival’ and ‘ambition’ to a sense of displacement, exile and alienation in a foreign land. The front room could be an ostentatious display of wealth through material reality, but it was also a treasuring for tomorrow of dreams that had been deferred.

**THE HOARDING OF ‘NICE THINGS’**

In finding a framework to unpack the complex subjective negotiations around identities, desire and ontology practised in the front room, Daniel Miller proposes a duality of two related concepts: the transcendent and the transient. The setting for his anthropological research is the oil boom in Trinidad during the 1970s, which transformed the lives of the poor, wealthy and nouveau riche alike. Materially this short-lived boom found its most manifest expression in people’s homes, cars and clothes (Miller 1996 137). Semiotically, in the vernacular of the African Diaspora, the transcendent and transient have their equivalence in the terms ‘follow-fashion’ or ‘never see, come see’ and ‘poppy-show’ or ‘extra’, respectively. As adjectives, verbs and nouns, they serve as descriptions of consumer fetish and fashion desires in black popular culture.

As modes of expression, the transcendent signifies a desire for conventional form in ‘artificial things which are viewed as long-lasting, and things covered over which are seen as cherished for the future’, whereas the transient is concerned with the expression of style as a ‘highly personalised and self-controlled expression of a particular aesthetic’. The duality of the transcendent and the transient says that fashion can be an agreement to conform and a struggle as ‘a symbol of transience and disconformities’ (Miller 1996 137).

The interplay between the transcendent and the transient sheds light on the contradictory nature of the front room, as a dialogue between being seen to conform to conventions in fashion, certain standards of taste, dealing with the
realities of everyday life, and finding one’s own style. The frisson of consumer fetish is not necessarily what women see in the shop front window but seeing it in a context which illuminates its aesthetic value, such as another woman’s home. Furniture in the front room was ‘cherished for the future’ by being covered over with home-made and handed down lace crocheted mats. Covering also included clear plastic over sofa upholstery or the ‘runway’/passage carpet, a style from the US, which was in vogue from the 1970s when travel in the Diaspora became less expensive and relatives and friends exchanged domestic aesthetics. It was intended to prolong the upholstery’s life, but would often stick to skin, ironically making it uncomfortable to sit on. The three-piece suite was either ‘leatherette’ or upholstered fabric with floral patterns on a maroon background. Victorian gentlemen used Macassar hair oil and to prevent their heads from soiling sofas, anti-Macassars made from matching patterned cloth or lace pieces were put on sofa backs and arms and are now called simply chair backs. Women often knitted thread with a hooked needle to create crochet dollies and though patterns were shared, the intricate designs, colours and innovative shapes were always unique to the individual maker with the added effect of being starched and ironed. My mother found a new method for making doilies from a friend, which involved weaving strands of luminous coloured synthetic wool into a grid and then cutting the knotted junctions to bring up a delicate fluffy effect. She bought for the front room using savings or making down payments otherwise known as hire purchase (h.p.). Green Shield stamps were collected in the hundreds if not thousands and were used in exchange for goods that were chosen from catalogues. Goods were also ordered from catalogues such as Littlewoods and Great Universal.

Crocheting had been a cottage industry in late nineteenth-century Europe and was practised along with seam-stressing and garment making as the ‘proper training’ for women as part of a wider Victorian puritanical ethos. In a colonial context, missionaries taught crochet as well as knitting and sewing in Africa, the islands of the Azores, China and the ‘West Indies’. Colonial education for native women was rudimentary and limited and for those whose parents could not afford to send their daughters onto further education, training in sewing, domestic science and crochet became a valid alternative vocation.

In the Caribbean, the Dorcas Club (based in the local church) was used to share the skills of sewing, dressmaking, knitting and crochet, as well as to train the younger women of the next generation. Like the social settings in which quilting was produced in the United States, the Dorcas Club allowed the women to share their skills, and also offer mutual support in an environment that could sometimes be hostile to the newcomers in what was regarded as the Mother Country. During the era of post-war migration to Britain crocheting was largely discontinued in England, though black women revived these skills using it entrepreneurially to supplement their income. In the dressing and maintenance of the front room, crochet became a symbol of black women’s domestic cultural
Michael McMillan

production and is a counter to the representation of black women as de-feminised and servile domestics. On a subliminal level, crocheting signifies a ‘creolised’ reconstruction of womanhood in response to the hegemonic construction of the black subject in the domestic domain.

Long hollow blown-glass fish with iridescent paint inside; smoked glass bowls of plastic fruits or fibre optic table lamps, bubble lamps; glass vases of artificial or plastic flowers, were often placed on crochet to enhance the lavishness of their decorative appearance. Ornaments were expensive and so creating a sense of opulence in the front room required ingenuity such as artificial flowers made from recycled stockings, metal coat hangers and food colourings, or stitching carpet remnants together to make a unique patchwork carpet.
The exterior decoration of a West Indian home would often give a sense of the interior. The brickwork might be covered with pebbledash or painted in tropical colours with the pointing outlined in white. The gate and front wall were sometimes similarly covered. Perhaps there were garden ornaments such as ceramic animals, and potted plants and flowers adorning windowsills and hanging from the porch. Covering up in the front room extended to windows draped by elaborate lace net curtains and pleated curtains of rich fabrics and colours were gathered in the middle like the opening of a stage show. Curtains also maintained privacy, while visitors and guests could be spotted coming up the road. At Easter and Christmas ‘Spring Cleaning’ was a cleansing ritual of renewal throughout the home. Curtains were taken down, washed and replaced. They announced respectability and decency; showing the best side of the curtains was in bad taste because facing outwards meant ‘dressing up the street’ or ‘just for show’, as if to cover up what the home did not have. This impression management or ‘good grooming’ included smell, and a ‘proper’ fragrance in the front room would come from a can of air freshener even though it may have been used to mask the smell of the paraffin heater or Windolene from freshly cleaned windows.

‘Back in the day’, winters seemed to be harsher and a painfully haunting memory of that time is the paraffin heater. As the eldest child, it was my task
to take a five-gallon plastic container to the local petrol station and ‘punch’ money for either pink or blue paraffin (blue paraffin tended not to smoke) and then struggle home with a full container in the cold. It was poured carefully into the heater via a funnel and if it spilt, the acrid smell was virtually impossible to remove. A cotton wick was lit and adjusted for the required blue flame; otherwise it gave off black toxic fumes. The paraffin heater was versatile: it provided much needed heating and was also used to heat up implements such as the hot iron comb used by many women to straighten their hair. In school, we knew which girls had used a hot comb the night before, because their hair would be shiny and stiff or the back of their necks had burns. We also knew who still had to use a paraffin heater because their clothes reeked of paraffin. Many children burnt themselves
Paraffin heaters were still in regular use in the 1970s in spite of the acrid fumes given off and their obvious dangers. © Dave Lewis.
on paraffin heaters, drawn to their warmth or fascinated by their power and this cheap form of domestic heating caused many fatal fires.

The sensorial landscape of the West Indian front room also extends to taste in terms of the food dishes and drinks that were consumed on special occasions in that ‘special room’. While rum and spirits were the iconic alcoholic drinks favoured by many West Indian men, women usually preferred Babycham, Cherry B or Stones Ginger Wine. There were also homemade beverages such as punches made with condensed milk and spices, known as ‘milk & stout’ or ‘Guinness punch’, or used pineapple or carrot; seaweed was used to make ‘Irish Moss’. Stem ginger was used to make ginger beer, Mauby bark for ‘Mauby’ and the hibiscus flower was soaked and drained to make ‘sorrel’, which was drunk at Christmas. For an added kick, a bit of rum was mixed in. Meals were not normally eaten in the front room, but Christmas Black Cake might be offered, which was made with minced fruit soaked in rum and black wine. For connoisseurs the quality of Black Cake depended on its moisture and how well and for how long the minced fruit had been soaked, sometimes for up to a year. Other snacks included coconut drops or coconut tart, sweet potato pudding and the obligatory peanuts. The sensorial landscape of the West Indian front room is an important aspect of a migrant aesthetic that, by observing, hearing, tasting and inhaling on many streets throughout the African Diaspora goes beyond the domestic interior. This could be the thumping bass from Ragga heard in Brooklyn, New York or the smell of freshly baked Jamaican Patties in Ridley Road Market in Hackney, London. While space prevents a study of the migrant sensorial realm beyond the domestic interior in this essay, it is evident that it requires further study and research.

West Indian migrants were often not welcome in English run churches and consequently they founded their own churches or used the front room as a space to hold bible and prayer meetings. The front room became a site where West Indians expressed their religiosity through pictures, homilies and ornaments. In the wider Diaspora, such as The Netherlands, the contemporary living room was used to create private altars of spiritual and religious devotion associated with the African syncretic religions such as Winti from Suriname and Santeria from the Antilles and Cuba.

Religious prints depicting the life of Jesus Christ were de rigueur and classic amongst them was *The Last Supper*. Homilies on plaques, plates and scrolls had biblical quotes such as Psalm 23, *The Lord is My Shepherd*, or phrases such as, ‘Jesus is the Head of this Home’. They were good luck charms in a home aware of demonised African-based religions such as Voodoo, Pocomania and Santeria. Juxtaposed beside them might be ‘Tina’, by J.H. Lynch, a print of a woman staring provocatively, with lips slightly parted and bare shouldered. After the Second World War, shops like Woolworths sold large numbers of these colourful and sentimental or ‘exotic’ prints such as the pseudo-surrealist ‘Wings of Love’, by Stephen Pearson, or ‘The Hay Wain’, by John Constable. They were affordable and livened up the homes of a population fed-up with austerity. Many
West Indians adopted this style of English prints for similar reasons, but they put them together with other things, in different ways than would be found in English working-class front rooms.

Souvenirs from trips to seaside towns such as Margate, Blackpool, and Great Yarmouth collected by predominantly female black church congregations, projected the image of a seasoned traveller. Decorative plates, straw bags and ornaments with the name of an island painted, stitched or embossed, denoted a sophisticated worldliness, even though it may have been brought back by a friend. The black velvet wall scroll (it was actually made from velour not velvet) with a tourist map of a Caribbean island were reminders of ‘back home’ and embodied a sense of pride and belonging. [See front cover of this issue.] This was later replaced by flat, varnished wooden clocks carved in the shape of the same island. When Cassius Clay changed his name to Muhammad Ali, he symbolised the popularisation of black figures from the civil rights and black power movements. His portrait would be framed and captioned just like Dr. Martin Luther King and his family. All these juxtapositions were usually mounted on floral patterned wallpaper reminiscent of the tropical vegetation in the Caribbean, though the really sophisticated look was baroque, velvet flock wall-coverings in maroon. In the Caribbean, there was not much demand for wallpaper but in homes of a lower income, walls of front room/living room spaces might be covered with newspaper and magazine clippings. Colourful consumer magazines would also be popular,
because apart from bringing colour into the living room, the commodities and subjects represented could provide a glamorous ideal to aspire it.

Some have argued that the front room was dressed by women and used by men. The front room was a convenient space for a christening or wedding reception, party or funeral wake. It was common for a coffin to be opened for viewing in the front room before it went off to the church and burial. In fact, as post-war black settlers were often excluded from pubs and clubs, they would entertain themselves at home. They came round and played dominoes, joked and caught up on news from ‘back home’ in the front room, and held the first blues parties or ‘Shebeens’ where the mother of the home sold homemade food and drinks. Music provided a means of spiritual escape and memories of ‘back home’, and the ‘Blue-Spot’

The ‘Blue Spot’ radiogram (named after its German manufacturer, Blaupunkt) provided music and entertainment at home at a time when many West Indian migrants were unwelcome at, or even excluded from, many pubs and clubs. © John Hammond.
(after popular models made by the German manufacturer Blaupunkt) radiogram therefore held pride of place in the front room. A wooden and cloth panelled cabinet housed a radio and record player which was a mechanism that could play several 7-inch records consecutively, as the needle armature’s movement regulated what was dropped and played. Rock ‘n’ roll, pop, ska, calypso or soul was played for a party or social gathering, though reggae or ‘buff buff music’ was seen as ‘devil music’ and therefore frowned upon because of its association with

The drinks cabinet took pride of place in the front room with glass shelves neatly filled with rows of shining, gold-rimmed glasses that were rarely used, though they provided a sense of achievement. © John Nelligan.
Rastafari. Sundays were reserved for the country & western crooner, Jim Reeves, and other religious inspired music.

Known as ‘Gentleman Jim’, Jim Reeves recorded over 400 songs, ‘from traditional Country to pop, from Afrikaans folk songs to international standards, from novelty numbers to duets, from narrations to secular songs, from seasonal offerings to waltzes, from his own big hits to his covers of the hits of others’ (Morewood). *From a Jack to a King* was a number one hit in South Africa, and after his premature death in a plane crash in 1964, the release of *Distant Drums* and other reworked demos and studio cuts, gave him posthumous cult status, culminating in duet successes with Patsy Cline and Deborah Allen in the 1980s. It is a myth that Jim Reeves was reappropriated just by the ‘older generation’ as he is still popular across the African Diaspora today. The reason lies not so much in the style of his ‘silky smooth’ ballads, but their content. ‘Gentleman Jim’ sang about transcending the trials and tribulations of everyday life in recurring themes of loneliness, love, infidelity and loss. Therefore, it didn’t matter that he toured South Africa at the height of Apartheid, because the lyrics of Jim Reeves’ songs and other artists of the country & western genre, echo the hymns, spirituals and gospel of the black Christian Church, which sang of the ‘intense desire and yearning to transcend the misery of oppression’ (Mercer & Julien 199).

Regardless of how late you came in from ‘raving’ the night before, you had to be ready to go to church in the morning. With its cleaning taking place on
a Saturday, the front room came alive on a Sunday. Children were to be seen and not heard and you were not allowed in the front room if ‘big people’ were chatting. Peeping through the keyhole and eavesdropping behind the door, your mum would call you in to meet a stranger who knew you and would tell you how big you had got. They would then moan about or show off about their children as if you were invisible. The front room was for chatting ‘commess’ (gossip) about the scandals, secrets and stories of people they knew in England and back home: “You hear Miss Smart die?” “Sugar?” (Diabetes) “Pressure as well” (high blood pressure). You then became the waiter, bringing over the drinks trolley with the plastic pineapple ice bucket, though you were not allowed to touch the drinks cabinet to get any glasses. Mum owned it, so she opened it. With glass door and shelves and possibly a light inside, the drinks cabinet had no other function than to store and display rarely used lavish glass and chinaware. The side panelling was invariably decorative, sometimes with buttoned cloth material or had a clock on top that rarely kept the right time.

**Grooming and Dressing of the Front Room**

Some post-war black settlers had their black and white passport photos enlarged, colour painted and proudly displayed in their front rooms. A yellowish brown seemed to be a flesh tone paint of choice in this practice of ‘touching-up’ portraits, regardless of the complexion of the subject. The palette of pigments signify how they imagined themselves and desired to be seen; ethnically inscribed with a valorised tilt towards whiteness as a legacy of a racial hierarchy based on a ‘pigmentocracy’ instituted in plantation societies. This functioned as an ideological basis for status ascription, where European elements both physical and cultural were positively valorised as attributes enabling upward social mobility. On this ‘ethnic scale’, social status was not simply determined by socioeconomic factors such as wealth, income, education and marriage, but also less easily changed elements of status symbolism such as the shape of one’s nose, the shade of one’s blackness or the texture of one’s hair (Mercer 1994 103).

What has been overlooked are the different specifically gendered ways race domination expresses itself in the lives of men and women. For instance, the practical realities of black hair maintenance, in terms of how appearance is gendered, meant that black women had more concerns over how their hair looked than men.⁵

Making similar links between hair straightening and dignity, many black women taught their daughters the importance of hair straightening as nothing more than good grooming. (Craig 403)

In the dressing and maintenance of the front room, it was women who were judged on the basis of ‘good grooming’ in the domestic domain. Washing, cleaning and cooking rice and peas, amongst other Caribbean dishes, were other elements of ‘good grooming’. These practices, along with crocheting and ‘Spring Cleaning’
rituals, formed part of the moral code which fused religion, hygiene and the Protestant Work ethic: ‘Cleanliness is next to godliness’ and ‘By the sweat of your brow, thou shall eat bread’. This ethos would find expression aesthetically in the presentation of the home and self where order meant beauty.

This was not a simple imitation of white bias and ideals of beauty, but rather the consequences of having to negotiate dominant ideologies and regimes of power that objectified race in the realm of the domestic. As Anne McClintock points out, the domestic was a construction in colonialism to maintain hegemony over the division of labour at home and the subordinate ‘Other’ abroad. In the representation of the domestic and popular culture, the black subject has either been erased or stereotyped as an object of servitude, caricature, fear and desire. The first advertisements for soap for instance, used the ethnic signifier of skin colour to depict black people as unclean and dirty, which was a code for savage and uncivilised. Inscribed in the use of soap, was the maintenance of Christian civilised values, as an antidote to moral chaos and disorder (McClintock 515).

Black women did not exist in the colour supplement advertising of kitchen and other domestic commodities. Their (un)-domestic representation in popular culture was that of the ‘black mama’ of Aunt Jemina pancakes and other exoticised

This leatherette (imitation leather) settee has lace chair backs or Antimacassars which were traditionally used to prevent soiling from the Macassar hair oil used by Victorian gentlemen. Such settees were sometimes plastic covered to prolong the upholstery’s life, but it tended to stick to skin and ironically it made the settee uncomfortable to sit on. © Michael McMillan.
objects in the colonial construction of domesticity (McClintock 516). This trope has been critically challenged by many black women artists such as photographer Maxine Walker’s series of images, *Auntie Linda’s Front Room 1 & 2* (1987) that restages the familiar terrain of the Sunday colour supplements. Walker’s starting point is to claim ‘a woman’s room of her own’ — alluding to Virginia Woolf’s *Room of One’s Own* as a means of interrogating the photographic document which frames individual identity and experience in terms of material objectivity. The series plays with human presence, just as with the regular supplement feature the documentary image claims to represent all that makes the subject individual by putting under public scrutiny the material evidence of their private life. Walker though, is suggesting that material reality remains incoherent and ambivalent as the sum of individual fragments until they are invested with specific and subjective meaning. With Auntie Linda’s presence, objects of functional utility and ornamental decoration which surround her as she sits on the edge of her settee, hands calmly placed together on her lap, suggest an order and coherence of her own. The image is transformed from reality into representation through the layering upon layering of memories and experiences as fragments, resisting any complete interpretation. Ultimately the framing excludes as much as it contains (Tawadros 90).

**When the Television Arrived**

It was common for there to be only one telephone in a street during the late 1960s and early 1970s and neighbours would often share it. Calls were still expensive in post-war Britain, so even with a telephone in the home, it remained in the front room where it could be monitored. The arrival of televisions in the home symbolised the changing nature of the front room as children grew up and it became a communal living room. Before colour television, a transparent green plastic covering could be stuck onto black and white television screens, though all the ‘colours’ were green. The family gathered to watch such sitcoms as *The Fosters*, which attempted to reassure viewers that black families in sitcoms were just as ‘normal’ as white ones. Television also marked a shift in the way the second generation born and/or educated in England were beginning to see themselves and therefore what the front room meant to them. Two seminal events on television symbolise this moment. The first was the riot/uprising/revolt at the Notting Hill Carnival in 1976 and its representation on television. The second was the screening of the American-produced epic slave drama, *Roots*, which the whole family saw and felt in the front room. These two events gave expression to what had been difficult to articulate for the second generation for some time.

Parents had worked hard to acquire and ‘put down’ their ‘nice things’ in the front room and these were not easily parted with. They packed the front room like a museum of archived memories and its close arrangement was a metaphor for the closeness of the extended family and community and increasing complexity of their lives. As their children became parents and grandparents themselves, their
response to the front room was much more ambivalent. They saw it as ‘hoarding’ for a better tomorrow that never came: deferred dreams.

The legacy of the front room lies in how, for instance, grown-up daughters have negotiated and imposed their own consumer desires on their mothers’ front rooms, and how they have unconsciously imitated their mothers’ styles, tastes and practices in the making of their own homes. In a post-colonial context, the front room deserves further study because it raises questions about modernity and migrant aesthetics, the process of decolonisation and the subjective desire to redefine oneself through material culture in the home.

NOTES

1 In Holland, *The West Indian Front Room* became *Van Huis Uit: The Living Room of Migrants in The Netherlands* (Imagine IC, Amsterdam January–May 2007 & OBT Central Library, Tilburg May–August 2007 re-titled as *That’s the Way We Do It!*). *The West Indian Front Room* is also the basis of a BBC4 Documentary, *Tales from the Front Room*.

2 Notes from conversations with the Canadian Art Historian/Curator, Francine Freeman, 2005. The emotional realm of the senses is very much under investigation at present. See for example, Mark Paterson, *The Senses of Touch: Haptics, Affects and Technologies*.

3 Notes from Rose Sinclair’s PhD research into crochet, gender and race, Goldsmiths College, London, 2006.

4 In the *Van Huis Uit* living room installation in The Netherlands (2007), there are various altars of spiritual and religious devotion which feature Winti (Suriname), Santeria (Antilles), Hindu (Hindus from Suriname) associations.

5 In the politics of black hair styling, straightening has been interpreted as ideologically imitating a white-bias conception of beauty as opposed to a ‘natural’ counter-hegemonic notion of blackness. Kobena Mercer questions hair straightening as simply a recycling of binary opposition between black and white in its imitation of white-bias, but sees it rather a negotiation between ethnic signifiers in the syncretic process of incorporating other cultural motifs.

WORKS CITED


