The Front Room 'Inna Joburg': A hybrid intervention

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ABSTRACT

The material culture of the front room, created by the Windrush generation from 1948 through to the 1960s, and later by black British families, expresses a shift from the "sacred" codes of respectability, propriety and decorum, to the "profane" stylistic signification of modernity and consumer culture. This dynamic formed the basis of an installation-based exhibition entitled *The West Indian Front Room: Memories and Impressions of Black British Homes (WIFR)* (2005-2006, Geffrye Museum, London) that I guest-curated. The exhibition evoked and invoked a range of responses from a diverse range of audiences. Many of the responses from black British visitors spoke to their lived experience of the material culture of the front room. In recognition of thetranscultural appeal of the installation, subsequent iterations of *The Front Room (TFR)* were staged in various locations, the most recent being an installation-based exhibition entitled *The Front Room 'Inna Joburg' (TFRiJ)* (2016, FADA Gallery, Johannesburg). Instead of focusing on the end product, in this article I concentrate on the process through which it was created, looking at how *WIFR's* theoretical framework and other *TFR* iterations informed the curatorial intentions, as well as what practical strategies were developed to support the curation, production and public engagement activities of *TFRiJ*. Rather than seeing *TFRiJ* as a replication of *WIFR*, through this approach, I revisit the process that led to it becoming a "hybrid intervention".

Keywords: Hybrid, intervention, trans-diasporic subjectivity, creolisation, front room.

FIGURE **Nº 1**

Michael McMillan, *The West Indian Front Room*, 2005-2006. Installation comprising found objects, home furnishings, wood. 2 x 4 x 3 metres. Geffrye Museum, London. Courtesy of John Neligan.

Introduction to *The Front Room* project

There is often a designated space in the domestic interior, if space is available, where the ritual of receiving guests takes place. This is usually the living room, sitting room or lounge, where the "outside world" has an opportunity to view the private lives of the family or individual. The aesthetics of this room would therefore suggest how these acts of hospitality are socially and culturally modulated, and how the family or individual want to represent themselves externally. The quintessential example of this material culture is the traditional African-Caribbean front room in Britain, where there was a shift from the colonial "sacred" codes of respectability, propriety and decorum, to the "profane" stylistic signification of post-colonial modernity and consumer culture.

The dialogic relationship between theses tropes is distinctly expressed in the front room of the Windrush generation 1948, and later by black British families. My experience of growing up in such a household formed the basis of an installation-based exhibition entitled *The West Indian Front Room: Memories and Impressions of Black British Homes (WIFR)* (2005-2006, Geffrye Museum, London) that I guest-curated. *WIFR* attracted

over 35 000 visitors, and invoked a range of emotional responses from a culturally diverse audience. Coming from a kaleidoscope of generational, gendered and familial perspectives, many expressed recognition of, and identified with, the material culture of the front room because it resonated with their lived experience. It spoke to creative agency in the formation of black British subjectivities, notions of working class respectability and aspirations and cultural adaptation of migrant aesthetics in the home. In recognition of its inter-cultural appeal, subsequent iterations of *The Front Room (TFR)*[1] were staged, the most recent being an installation-based exhibition entitled *The Front Room 'Inna Joburg' (TFRiJ)* (2016, FADA Gallery, Johannesburg).

TFRiJ was produced in collaboration with the Visual Identities in Art & Design Research Centre (VIAD), University of Johannesburg (UJ), as part of a two-month artist residency I undertook in Johannesburg. However, unlike previous *TFR* iterations, *TFRiJ* was not preceded by an extensive organic research process that would usually enable me to work peripatetically in the field with local communities to identify and source specific materials. This work includes identifying and sourcing specific materials, and gathering oral history interviews and archival images that might be used to dress the installation.

As practical circumstances did not provide the time and space to faciliate this kind of research process for *TFRiJ*, VIAD staff made preliminary contact and conducted informal audio-recorded interviews with selected respondents in their homes on my behalf. This was challenging for them, firstly, because I could not be present to lead the research, and secondly, because at the time, the VIAD staff comprised middle-class, white females. In a post-apartheid Johannesburg where, amongst other complexities, race is still contested, and our choice to work with the local black, coloured and Indian communities (taking account of apartheid's legacy of racial hierarchies), were factors that compounded the situation. We were acutely aware of these cultural politics. Any attemps to "re-present" these local communities in an installation-based exhibition based on research carried out by white women and remotely by a black British man, ran the risk perpetuating an orientalist 'grand narrative' that paternalistically claims 'knowledge of the unknowable' (Said 1978:72; Lyotard 1984:52). I was also aware that in contemporary Johannesburg, the cultural politics of globalisation might resonate in my being seen as a "foreign" black person from the United Kingdom (UK), who has the privilege of being able to travel internationally. It was therefore agreed from a pragmatic and ethical standpoint that *TFRiJ* would be reconfigured curatorially, and that I would draw on what had already been tested and proven to work in previous iterations of *TFR*.

1. *TFR* iterations include: *The Black Chair: Rediscovering the West Indian Front Room* (1999, Wycombe Chair Museum, High Wycombe); *The West Indian Front Room* (2003, Zion Arts Centre, Manchester); *Van Huis Uit: The Living Room of Migrants in The Netherlands* (2007-2008, Imagine IC, Amsterdam, OBT: Bibliotheek Midden-Brabant Central Library, Tilburg; Stefanus Church/Kosmopolis, Utrecht); *A Living Room Surrounded by Salt* (2008, Instituto Buena Bista, Center for Curacao Contemporary Art, Curacao); *The Front Room in the African Diaspora* (2014, an inter-cultural workshop project in Accra, Ghana with 24 young people from Tobago, London and Amsterdam). *WIFR* also inspired a BBC4 documentary entitled *Tales from the Front Room* (Percival 2007). It was documented in *The front room: migrant aesthetics in the home* (McMillan 2009), and archived in an interactive website (thefrontroom2007).

In this article, I focus on the process of producing *TFRiJ* by looking at how the curatorial intentions towards *TFRiJ* were informed by *WIFR*'s theoretical framework, as well as how other *TFR* installations were made. I examine what practical strategies were developed in response to the parameters of the residency, and how these approaches supported the curation, production and forums for public engagement with *TFRiJ*. Finally, on a self-reflexive level, I look at my experienceas an artist/curator and black British person during the residency in contemporary Johannesburg. Unpacking the process that led to *TFRiJ* provides an opportuntity to revisit what was "re-represented", not as a replication of *WIFR*, but as a potential "hybrid intervention" that extended my understanding of *TFR* in a different way.

Theorising the "West Indian" front room

The term "West Indian" refers to a particular moment that began with the post-war Windrush generation arriving in England from 1948 onwards. Upon their arrival, these migrants came into contact with other West Indians, such as Jamaicans, Trinidadians, Vincentians and St Lucians, amongst others from the different parts of the Caribbean, which led them to realise that they were, in fact, West Indian. Imbued with an English culture through their colonial education, these migrants saw themselves as citizens of the British Empire coming home to the "Mother Country". Their dreams soon evaporated as they found themselves 'Othered' (Said 1978) in a racist society that accused them of "taking our jobs".[2] Initially, they were forced to live in rented one-room accommodation, but later bought houses and rented council flats. This was also the moment of post-colonial modernity, signified through the 'conjuncture' (Hall 2013:51) of major global cultural political shifts, such as anti-colonial and anti-imperial struggles. These "conjunctures" led to former British colonies becoming independent, emerging anti-racist Civil Rights, Black Power, anti-apartheid movements, and the democratisation of popular culture through mass consumption, mass production and mass communication.

The colonial sensibilities that these migrants brought with them and the post-colonial modernities they encountered in Britain were both manifest in the material culture of the front rooms that they created. Typically, the front room was decorated with colourful floral patterned wallpaper (sometimes velvet flock) and maroon-coloured carpets. Furniture included ornate glass drinks cabinets that displayed rarely-used glass and chinaware; plastic covered upholstered three-piece suites with lace antimacassars or "throw backs"; coffee tables with tapered legs; and side-boards, which preceeded the "space-saver" buffet, although ironically it did not save any space as it allowed

2. Ironically, they were doing jobs in a ruined post-war Britain for wages the English working class were not prepared to accept.

for the display of trinkets. There was also a “Blue Spot” radiogram which housed a phono turntable and radio in a veneer wooden panelled cabinet, sometimes accompanied by a compartment for storing and displaying alcholic drinks. Imported from the United States and the Caribbean, vinyl seven-inch records that were played on the radiogram provided familiar music with which Caribbean migrants could entertain themselves at home, as they were often racially excluded from British pubs and clubs. Family portraits – where the frames were just as important aesthetically as the pictures – were displayed on the walls, together with black velour scrolls depicting a tourist map of a Caribbean island that reminded families of their diasporic ties “back home”. On every available surface there were colourful starched crochet doilies displaying vases of artificial fabric and plastic flowers, bowls of plastic fruit, blow glass fish and a host of ceramic ornaments. The front room was also a contradictory space where the efficacy of the display was sometimes more important than the authenticity of the objects – for example, a reprint of Leonardo da Vinci’s painting *The Last Supper* would be juxtaposed with a reprint of JH Lynch’s painting of a scantily clad, exoticised *Tina*.

Coded in the dressing and maintenance of the front room is a form of “impression management” that pleases by repeating the aesthetics of the familiar or what has been perjoratively termed as “kitsch”. Anthony Giddens’s (1991:40) concept of ‘ontological security’ responds to a form of ‘disembeddedness’, where institutions and practices ‘uproot individuals’ (Giddens 1991:40 cited by Binkley 2000:135). According to Sam Binkley (2000:149), the ‘embeddedness’ of kitsch provides ‘a general corrective to a general modern problem, that of existential and personal disembeddedness’. For Binkley (2000:134), kitsch relishes 'embeddedness' in routines that adhere to conventions rooted in the everyday, which ‘preserv[e] a unique aesthetic sensibility that spurns creativity per se while it endorses a repetition of the familiar’. As uprooted individuals, Caribbean migrants sought “ontological security” in response to the traumatic “disembeddedness” of migration.

Diasporic subjectivity – as Stuart Hall (1993:401) characterises it – is within this narrative a process of ‘becoming’, where identity is constructed performatively by negotiating a ‘complex historical process of appropriation, compromise, subversion, masking, invention and revival’. In this journey, diaspora is less about identity being secured by returning to a “sacred homeland” than a metaphor for a space in which there is no “essence of purity”. In the latter, Hall (1993:401) embraces the idea of difference through heterogeneity and diversity. Diasporic black identities have been culturally, historically and politically constructed in a process of “becoming” within the context of what Hall (2006) calls the ‘multicultural drift’. Within the African-Caribbean and later black British

home, there is a liminality between the political edge of the public realm or 'frontline', and the complications of the private domain or 'backyard', to use Hall's (1998:38) conceptual framework.

Inscribed in the front room's material culture and prescribed codes of behaviour is a deeply-aspirational black culture that idealised Victorian bourgeois tropes. These tropes were, as Denise Noble (2015:21) suggests, 'shot through with colonial Caribbean preoccupations with hygiene, social status linked to gendered *racial* respectability', and therefore signify a conservative element of black domestic life (Hall 2009 cited by McMillan 2009:20). This echoes Daniel Miller's (1996) duality of the 'transcendent' and the 'transient'. The *transcendent* resonates in diasporic vernacular with "good grooming" practices as a register of respectability, where in the front room 'artificial things … are viewed as long lasting, and things covered over … are seen as cherished for the future' (Miller 1996:137). Meanwhile, the *transient* finds a register in reputation, which in a similar vernacular, values the public performances of speech, music, dance, sexual display and prowess.

The culture of respectability has its roots in colonialism and the post-emancipation struggle, where it played a critical part in the reconstruction of a sense of humanity and self-respect out of the brutal circumstances of enslaved plantation life (Hall 2009:19). Registered in the trans-diasporic front room is the 'habitus' (Bourdieu 1984) of being civilised through civilised behaviour, which is not about comfort, but rather, the cultural capital of respectability, dignity and self-reserve. In the front room, an etiquette of decorum, protocol, polite manners and socially acceptable behaviour is performed in ways that echo the rituals of the Victorian parlour. The "bric-a-brac" practice of the Victorians to collect things and cram them together comes through the aesthetics of the front room, where objects of emotional attachment, like wedding and other familial-framed photographs, religious imagery, certificates of educational and other forms of achievement, as well as souveniors and romantised symbols of 'back home', are personally modulated (Hall cited by McMillan 2009: 20).

The dialogic relationship between the transcendent and the transient in the material culture of the front room comes through the joy, pleasure and spirituality derived from displaying objects of emotional attachment in the form of a sacred shrine, and the profane prosaics in their everyday use. In many African-Caribbean families, the front room was out of bounds for children, unless guests were visiting, which would often be on a weekend. It would be ritually cleaned on a Satuday, and come alive on a Sunday with Jim Reeves playing on the radiogram, and adults socialising over drinks after the big Sunday dinner. The front room was also where church prayer meetings

took place, as well as life-cycle celebrations such as Christening, birthday, wedding, and funeral receptions, with the open coffins of the deceased on display (McMillan 2009).

For Michel de Certeau (1984), the practices of 'everyday' life are worth exploring, because they bring life to the ordinary aspects of daily activities that are often taken for granted. De Certeau's approach addresses how the agency of consumers is a form of 'cultural consumption' (Storey 1999:49), which he labels as 'secondary production' (De Certeau cited by Storey 1999:49). In this sense, consumers are active and discerning, rather than passive and compliant agents who re-appropriate goods into their everyday lives. For De Certeau (1988:166), critically interrogating the practice of cultural consumption implies questioning the notion that 'assimilating' means 'becoming similar to' what one absorbs, and not 'making something similar' to what one is; making it one's own by appropriating or re-appropriating. As 'poets of their own affairs' (De Certeau 1988), this sense of consumption is produced in the process of re-appropriation, such as the stylistic creolisisation that takes place in the front room where Western or European aesthetics were appropriated and infused with African sensibilities to create that which was hybridised. Like creole languages, creolisation was seen as a bastardised and uncivilised form of the other (Brathwaite 1984). Yet for Frantz Fanon (cited by Williams & Williams 1993:37), creolisation as entanglement resists this psychic inferiorisation, by providing a political understanding of racial hegemonies at the level of black subjectivity.

This sense of aspirant becoming, the dynamics between the transcendental and the transient, and the creolisation of the material culture in the African-Caribbean front room, was registered during the ethnographic research that I conducted to develop *WIFR* curatorially. In Denise Noble's (2015:14) essay about *WIFR*, she argues that it 'ignited a collective alternative historical lived narrative of black British [diasporic black subjectivity] immigration, one shaped not by problems but by aspirations, creativity, cultural continuity and change'. Noble quotes Toni Morrison (1995 cited by Noble 2005:10, 12) to suggest that while *WIFR* is a 'fiction' that does not require verification because 'much in it can be verified', it is a 'site of culture-making', to 'yield up a kind of truth' that in the re-representation of the front room fuses the subjective with the collective. The narratives enunicated by audiences in response to encountering *WIFR* reveals an aspirational aspect of black interiority in the process of *becoming* (Hall 1993) that is rarely portrayed in the 'regime of representation' of the other (Hall 2013:50).

Noble's analysis of *WIFR* affirms the value of an organic research process in developing other *TFR* iterations, which are intrinsically collaborative and participatory, and in which oral history work is a core operational practice. As part of the process of *TFR* projects, I usually conduct unstructured interviews in the homes of respondents,

FIGURE **Nº 2**

Michael McMilllan, *The Front Room 'Inna Joburg'*, 2016. Installation comprising found objects, home furnishings, wood. 2.5 x 4.5 x 5 metres. FADA Gallery, Johannesburg. Courtesy of Eugene Hön.

where acts of hospitality allow others into the private realm and seek to make them feel comfortable. Jacques Derrida (2000) argues that there is hostility in hospitality, because even as hosts offer themselves and their private domestic space to guests, the host also gains symbolic power or claim over their guests. In offering hospitality, Derrida (2000:9,14 cited by Bystrom 2013:343) suggests that the host becomes the 'hostage' of the guest and that it is impossible 'to open up or offer hospitality, even in order to be generous, without reaffirming: this is mine, I am at home, you are welcome in my home on condition that you observe the being-at-home of my home, the being-itself of what I am'. The 'hostipitality' that Derrida (2000) explores is an agonistic ritual of welcome that enables a sense of being at home, and underscores the host's identity and authority through the very act of surrendering their home to others, even strangers, since this surrender is what compels a kind of recognition of both home and host.

I am aware of this dialectic of "hostiplitality" when carrying out this form of oral history work. During the interview, I subvert the objectivity of the interviewer by sharing my personal experience with the interviewee as a means of developing a relationship based on trust, so that they might feel free to be more open about their oral history (McMillan 2013).

The Front Room 'Inna Joburg'

Before coming to Johannesburg, my memories of witnessing the racist brutality of the apartheid system on television, reading about it in newspapers and books, and hearingof it from South African visitors to the UK resurfaced. This took place during my formative years as a teenager, growing up in the 1970s, and has shaped how I came to understand my own black Britishness, as well as my place within a wider collective diasporic black subjectivity. As a system and policy based on racial segregation, apartheid was legally introduced in South Africa in 1948 and repealed with the democratic election of President Nelson Mandela in 1994. Yet, just as post-colonialism does not signal complete decolonialisation, the current post-apartheid moment raises questions about the psychological and physical legacies of apartheid in terms of contemporary South African cultural politics.

The empire travelled, which meant that colonialism was transnational, but it was also 'transcultural', as suggested by the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Oritz (1995); it was a space wherein 'cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today' (Oritz cited by Pratt 1999:62). Across the British empire, including South Africa, the colonial elite often recreated romanticised – and some would argue kitsch –versions of England through architecture, aesthetics, customs and values as a means of *embededdness* for *ontological* security. These colonial practices and aesthetics, which replicated an idealised sense of home, were often appropropriated and *creolised* into ones of their own by indigenous South African cultures, as happened elsewhere in British colonies. These colonial tropes have also been contested by what has been experienced through post-colonial modernities in popular culture, with what Paul Gilroy (1993) calls 'The Black Atlantic', where there is a culture that is not specifically African, American, Caribbean or British, but all of these at once as a "black Atlantic culture". It was this sense of an entangled rhizomatic "trans-diasporic black subjectivity" that informed my curatorial desires towards seeing *TFRiJ* as a "site of culture making", where domestic practices and aesthetics could reveal that was similar, yet differently mediated kinds of hybridised constructions.

Once in Johannesburg, the VIAD staff member who had carried out preliminary research prior to my arrival took me to the homes of respondents whom she had initially interviewed. This included Indian families living in Lenasia, coloured families in Eldorado Park, and black families in Soweto. These townships were created under

the apartheid policy of "forced removals", which was a key instrument of racial segregation from the 1950s into the 1960s. For instance, in former multicultural areas of inner-city Johannesburg, such as Fietas (currently the suburbs of Pageview and Vrededrop), Indian families were forcibly removed, while the same happened to black families in Sophiatown (or Sof'town), which was renamed "Triomf"– meaning "triumph" in Afrikaans. That said, in post-apartheid Johannesburg, there has been an exponential growth of the black middle class and those in the high-income earning bracket (colloquially known as "black diamonds"), who have moved to previously white-only upmarket areas such as Sandton and Hyde Park. There are also immigrants from other countries on the African contintent, such as Zimbabwe, Congo and Nigeria, who have settled in "informal communities" in Johannesburg. These immigrants are often subject to hostility and xenophobic attacks from local black communities. The complexities of the current post-apartheid moment are mediated by the trauma of apartheid, such as forced removals, which are still remembered.[3]

Before coming to Johannesburg, I also liaised with VIAD staff to identify materials that could be used to dress the *TFRiJ* installation. As there was limited space at VIAD for objects and furniture to be stored before and after *TFRiJ*, we decided to source most of the objects and furniture from The Cottage Hire – a company that hires out props for film and television shoots. Some objects like a rug, soft furnishings like lace curtains, plastic doilies and other small accessories were bought from the Oriental Plaza.[4] Materials to build and decorate the installation structure were bought, while some fine glassware was loaned. It was evident from VIAD's research that while colourful crochet doilies could be locally sourced, none were starched, so in keeping with the aesthetic of *WIFR*, I brought some from my collection, which had belonged to my mother.

The FADA Gallery is essentially a large white cube, with a large upper level and a smaller lower level.[5] *TFRiJ* was accompanied by another thematically-related installation-based exhibition entitled *The Arrivants* by Christine Checinska.[6] In *TFRiJ* and *The Arrivants*, Checinska and I were exploring similar themes: how through Caribbean diasporic migration a black British subjectivity has emerged, and specifically how this is manifest in the material culture of the front room and masculine dress. We also brought with us either original or reproduced personal family archive materials such as vinyl records, gloves, immigration papers and photographs. These materials were housed in a 1950s period cabinet with glass shelves and doors that was located at the back of the gallery, and was used in an interactive performance piece entitled *Back a Yard* that Checinska and I scripted and presented at the exhibition opening. Beside this cabinet was a black plinth onto which was placed a flat-screen framed with a gold-painted ornate wooden picture frame. The BBC4 documentary *Tales from the Front Room* (Percival 2007), that was inspired by and produced after *WIFR*, was screened on the television.

3. The participants of the Oral History Workshop – the people that the VIAD staff had made initial contact with through home visits – that I facilitated at the FADA Gallery as part of the *TFRiJ* programme of public events, highlighted these legacies.

4. A sprawling shopping mall near to the UJ campus where many Indian and Paki -stani, as well as Afrikaans- and English-speaking housewives, buy clothes and materials for their homes.

5. The Gallery is situated in the Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture building, Bunting Road Campus, University of Johannesburg.

6. The title *The Arrivants* comes from the Barbadian poet Edward Kamau Brathwaite's poetry collection (1981). As a UK-based black British artist-designer-academic of Jamaican migrant heritage, Checinska investigates the relationship between culture, race and dress. The conceptual departure point for the work is the arrival of the Empire Windrush at London's Tilbury Docks in 1948, carrying some 500 Jamaican migrants – colonial subjects invited by the government to assist in rebuilding post-war Britain. The Empire Windrush's arrival marked the first time that African-Caribbeans had travelled to England in great numbers, thereafter establishing themselves as communities in major cities such as London, Birmingham, Bristol and Manchester (Checinska 2016). For Checinska, the inspiration of the Windrush generation provides a route into an exploration of the role of dress in the negotiation of geographical, psychological and social borders and the refashioning of identities, or the recreation and presentation of self.

The front room installation was situated on the other side of the Gallery. It consisted of a 2.5-metre x 4.5-metre x 5-metre four-walled wooden structure painted dark brown on the outside with a mock-pressed steel ceiling, and a 2-metre entrance-exit draped with lace curtains and a wooden pelmet. The walls of the interior were covered in dark maroon floral-patterned velvet flock wallpaper, and the floor was lined with laminated vinyl wood flooring. The ceiling was covered in polystyrene pressed tiles in the centre of which hung a frosted glass globe light fitting. We had initially acquired a 1950s-style long-stemmed three-armed light fitting, but this was changed, not only because it was too large for the space, but also because it would have been used in a middle-class English home, where the ceiling would have been higher than that of a working-class home. Having to source a smaller light fitting made me realise that the design of the installation embodied a working-class or lower-middle-class domestic aesthetic. Moreover, my original floor plan design for the installation was smaller than what was eventually built, because I thought that visitors needed space to move around in the installation. On reflection, it would have been more "authentic" to keep the smaller and potentially more cramped spatial environment that visitors would have had to negotiate, because this would have been more to the scale of the actual front room.

The furniture and fixtures in *TFRiJ* were similar in aesthetics and spatial arrangement to *WIFR*, and featured similar 1970s period appliances, soft furnishings, ornaments and wall hangings. Curatorially, my intention was not that *TFRiJ* should be a fascsimile of *WIFR*, but rather to use its aesthetics to construct a hybrid intervention in post-apartheid Johannesburg, so as to open a dialogue about what was similar locally to the material culture of the African-Caribbean front room, and what was different. Consequently, on the top of the radiogram was a clay bowl that traditionally South African Venda women would have used to make home-made beer to supplement their income. This object would not have been present in *WIFR*, yet like crochet doilies, it pointed to black women's home-made craft practices and creative agency in the domestic interior. Similarly, tunes such as Miriam Makeba's *Pata Pata* (1957), Millie Small's *My Boy Lollipop* (1965), and Jim Reeves's *Distant Drums* (1966), amongst other tunes that were mixed with a selection of oral history interviews from the *WIFR*, could be heard via the radiogram in *TFRiJ*. This incorporation of music marked the importance of music played in enacting moments of revelry across the diaspora as a distraction from the trials and tribulations of daily life.

On the wall above the radiogram was a vintage 1960s modernist styled clock, and on either side were portraits of my family members placed in second-hand frames.[7] Two life-size ceramic dogs flanked either side of the radiogram, as if keeping guard. In the centre of the installation floor, lay a rectangular "Oriental/Persian" styled rug,

7. I felt that it was not ethically appropriate to use portraits of subjects that I did not know and did not have any relationship with.

FIGURE **Nº 3**

Michael McMilllan, *The Front Room 'Inna Joburg'*, (detail), 2016. Installation comprising found objects, home furnishings, wood. 2.5 x 4.5 x 5 metres. FADA Gallery, Johannesburg. Courtesy of Eugene Hön.

onto which was placed a greenish faux marble coffee table. A glass vase filled with artificial flowers and a ceramic bowl containing plastic fruit, under which was one of my mother's starched crochet doilies, rested on top of the table. Against the right wall upon entering the installation, there was also a cream and orange patterned upholstered three-seater sofa with two armchairs making up a three-piece suite. Above the sofa were wall hangings that included a print of Stephen Pearson's iconic painting *Wings of Love*. Beside this was a circular light fitting displaying the painting of a deer in an idyllic natural setting that might have been popular in Afrikaner homes of the era, and on the opposite wall of the installation was a matching light fitting display painted in a similar style as the deer, depicting the Taj Mahal. On the left wall of the installation and opposite the sofa was an ornate black wooden framed drinks cabinet displaying glassware. Above the drinks cabinet were prints that included *The Last Supper* and a black velour scroll displaying a tourist map of St Vincent that I had brought. On one side of the drinks cabinet was a faux marble ornate side table with table lamp, and on the other, a paraffin heater. On either side of the inside walls of the installation was a painted portrait of Nelson Mandela and a chrome etching of Queen Elizabeth II.

"A room of her own"

As mentioned previously, participants had been invited to bring objects from their living rooms or domestic spaces about which they could share stories in an Oral History Workshop that I facilitated. Noble (2015) suggests that *WIFR* enacted the dialogic African aesthetic of 'call-and-response' in the request that I put out for materials that might be used to dress the installation; a call that prompts responses in the form of oral histories. The responses to these calls adds to the experience of the front room as a site of personal and collective memory.

The Oral History Workshop was also a call and response that foregrounded the role of black women's creativity and agency within the domestic sphere. In the dressing and maintenance of the African-Caribbean front room, it was women who were traditionally responsible for, and judged on, the basis of its "good grooming". For Caribbean migrant women, working mothers and wives 'gendered *racial* respectability' was used as a means of 'self-making' or creative agency in the home to counter representations of the black family as 'pathological' (Noble 2015:19). Such practices, along with "spring cleaning" rituals, were inscribed in a moral code as "habitus" (Bourdieu 1984) that fused religion, hygiene and the Protestant work ethic: "Cleanliness as next to Godliness" and "By the sweat of your brow, thou shall eat bread". This ethos would find expression in the presentation of the home and self, where order meant

beauty, and beauty meant order. This was not a simple valorisation of Westernised/white bias or ideals of beauty, but rather the consequence of negotiating cultural hegemony and regimes of power that objectified race in the domestic realm. As Anne McClintock (1994) points out, the institution of the home under colonialsm was used to maintain hegemony over the division of domestic labour and the subordinate 'Other' in the colonies. In hegemonic "regimes of representation" of domestic and popular culture, the black subject has either been erased or stereotyped as objects of servitude, caricature, fear and desire. Consequently, the making of the front room signifies a black woman's aspirant mobility, and functions as a means of expressing her femininity through the fruits of her labour; 'through the slog of long, remorseless and difficult work' (Hall 1998:42).

Shonisani Netshia, a post-graduate researcher and lecturer at UJ, introduced me to the black women from Soweto who attended the Oral History Workshop. One of the objects that they brought and shared stories about was the crochet doilies that they had made themselves and used in their homes. The crochet oral histories recounted in the workshop correlated with Netshia's post-graduate research into Dutch lace, crocheted doilies and Shweshwe fabric (Maphangwa 2010), and for me, both Netshia's research and the stories shared resonated on a trans-diasporic level. Before she came to England in 1960, my mother worked as a maid for a Dutch family for six years in Curacao, yet "seamstress" was put down as her occupation in her passport. Seamstressing, domestic science and crocheting were taught to girls from poor backgrounds in a rudimentary and limited colonial education system in the Caribbean in preparation for the only "vocation" available to them – domestic labour. It was the missionaries who brought crocheting to the Caribbean, but it was women there who transformed the plain colours of traditional European crochet into colourful three-dimensional sculptural pieces with copious folds that, once iron-starched or stiffened with sugar, stood erect. The crochet doilies were amongst the many other soft furnishings that many Caribbean migrant women used to enhance the display of ornaments and other objects in the front room. Like the black women from Soweto who attended the Oral History Workshop, many African-Caribbean women supplemented their income by selling crochet "sets" they had made, with each design being unique to the individual maker. Crocheting practices in the front room in *trans-diasporic* terms could be seen as a form of creolisation of popular culture in a diasporic migrant context diasporic context. In this hybridised culture, the 'dialogic interventions of diasporic, creolizing cultures' speak to a culturally entangled Caribbean where 'there is no such thing as a pure point of origin' (Hebdige 1987:10).

From a self-reflexive perspective, my experience of oral history crocheting practices by South African black women invoked a *rememory* of my mother and how she used

crochet doilies in the front room. In Johannesburg, many of the people carrying out domestic labour and working in the service look like me. This corporeal recognition invoked an epiphany with my mother's experience as a maid in Curacao, and how she took on cleaning jobs in the UK to provide for her family. The audience that visited *TFRiJ* was predominantly white, who like the few black, Indian, coloured and other visitors from other ethnic groups, shared the middle-class inscribed cultural capital of visiting art galleries and museums. Consequently, one of the most rewarding moments for me, was inviting the black security staff and black female cleaning staff whom I encountered whenever I came to the Gallery to respond to the installation. In their responses, they shared with me the aesthetics of their own living rooms, and the importance of having food of seven colours in their Sunday dinner. On a spiritual level, for me, it was like my mother was seeing the installation I had created.

For black women, dressing and investing in the front room was a means of expressing themselves; a form of creative agency. Jacob Dlamini's (2009) personal experience of what he terms 'reflective nostalgia', which he employs to unpack the material culture of township life of his youth in apartheid South Africa, provides a means of *trans-diasporic* identification with the key *conjuncture* where black youths rose up at the Notting Hill Carnival in the summer of 1976, and at that same time, black students rose up in Soweto. These were not homogenous black revolts, but a generation rebelling against what they saw as the complacency of their parents in response of state-legitimised oppression. Critically interrogating how these significant events have been represented provides analytical tools for resisting the homogenisation of the diasporic black experience in favour of a more differentiated and complex portrayal.

It is evident from my discussion above that inthe limited research process, collaborating with VIAD to curate and produce *TFRiJ*, the Oral History Workshop, *WIFR*'s theoretical framework and my experience gained from other *TFR* iterations all played a significant role. It is also evident that as a hybrid intervention, *TFRiJ* did resonate with Johannesburg audiences in terms of the recognition of and identification with the aesthetics of an aspirational culture, as expressed in the material culture of the front room. Experientially, *TFRiJ* also extended TFR as an iteration by revealing how similarly, yet differently entangled, trans-diasporic subjectivity is expressed through the complexities of post-apartheid Johannesburg where the legacies of apartheid remain.

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