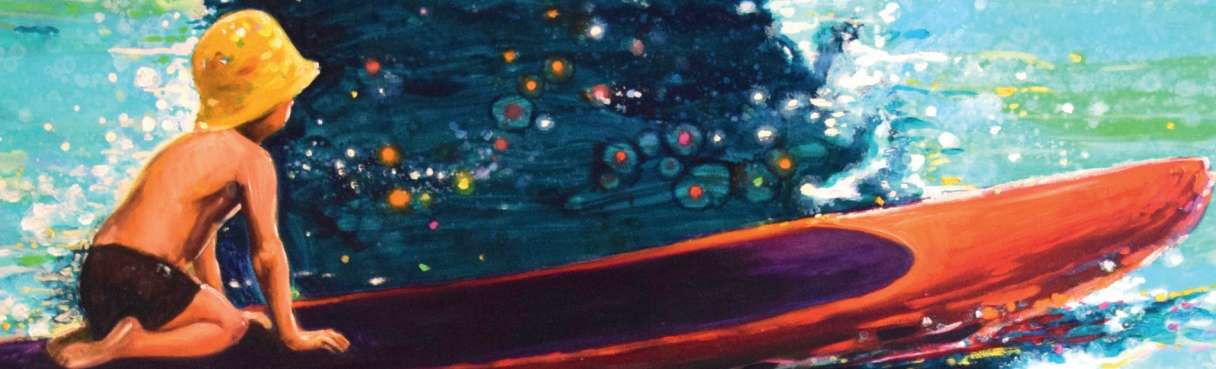


TRANSITION

The Magazine of Africa and the Diaspora 121



Childhood

 Hutchins Center
for African &
African American
Research
Harvard
University

TRANSITION

Transition was founded in 1961 in Uganda by the late Rajat Neogy and quickly established itself as a leading forum for intellectual debate. The first series of issues developed a reputation for tough-minded, far-reaching criticism, both cultural and political, and this series carries on the tradition.



TRANSITION

THE MAGAZINE OF AFRICA AND THE DIASPORA

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*Recently exhibited in Newark, New Jersey, the photo-based work of several Guyanese artists explores migration and the complicated relationship to "homeland." Curator **Grace Aneiza Ali** offers this summary.*

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Cover: The Guardian. Oil on canvas 60 × 42 in.
©2015 Armando Mariño. Courtesy of the artist and Monica & Kim Balle Collection.
Copenhagen, Denmark.

Correction: The issue 120 cover photograph, "Cotton Mouth," was incorrectly attributed to artist Sheldon Scott. The photograph is a staged image inspired by Scott's performance work, taken by Joshua Cogan. Copyright of this image was not properly attributed in issue 120, and should read ©2013 Joshua Cogan www.joshuacogan.com.

Un|Fixed Homeland

exploring the Guyanese experience of migration

Grace Aneiza Ali

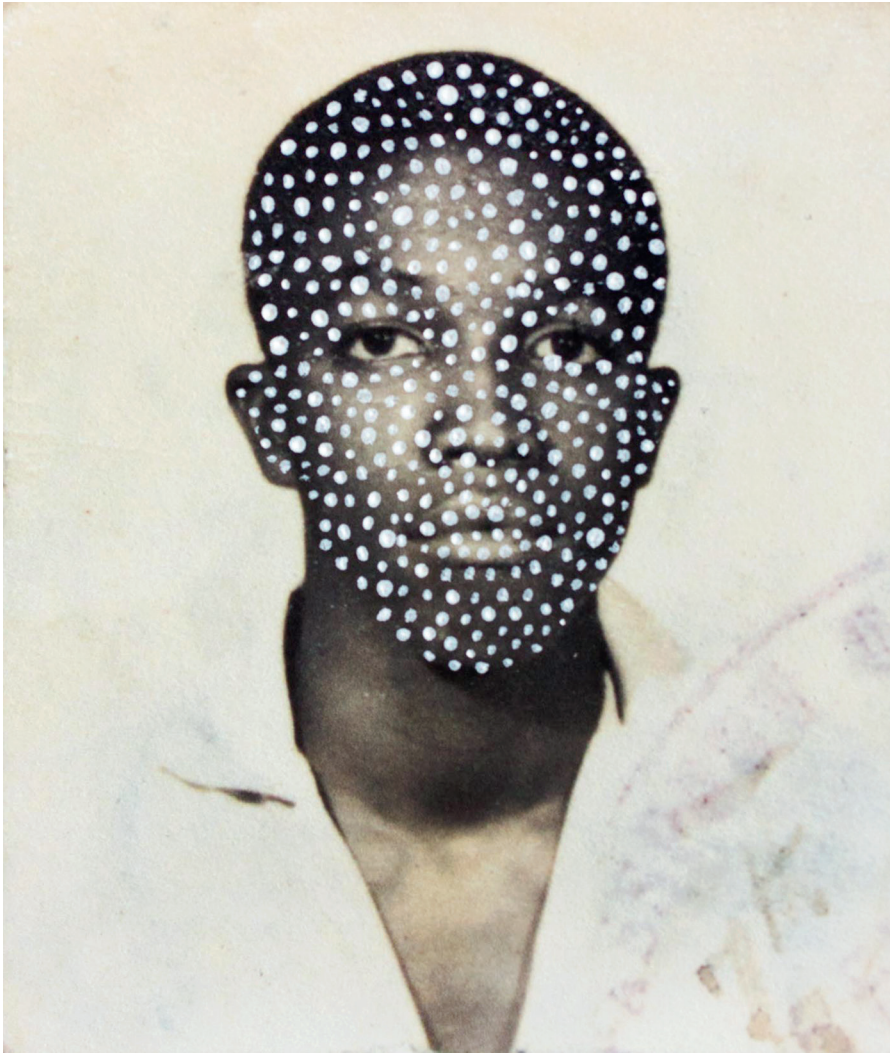
In the exhibition Un|Fixed Homeland, recently on view at Aljira, a Center for Contemporary Art in Newark, New Jersey, thirteen inter-generational artists of Guyanese heritage explore their intimate relationship to the experience of migration: Kwesi Abbensetts, Khadija Benn, Frank Bowling, Sandra Brewster, Erika DeFreitas, Marlon Forrester, Roshini Kempadoo, Michael Lam, Donald Locke, Hew Locke, Maya Mackrandilal, Karran Sahadeo, and Keisha Scarville.

Via an Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts Curatorial Fellowship, Guyanese-born curator Grace Aneiza Ali sought artists who reflect the reality of the country's diaspora—artists working in Guyana, as well as those living in five metropolitan cities: Boston, Los Angeles, New York, London, and Toronto. Utilizing photography in their artistic practice as medium, object, and archival language, the artists examine “homeland” as fixed and unfixed, a constantly shifting idea and memory, a physical place and a psychic space.

IN 1995, MY family emigrated from Guyana to the United States. We became part of what seemed like a mythical diaspora—an estimated one million Guyanese citizens living around the globe while the country itself has a population of around 760,000. In other words, my homeland is one where more people live outside its borders than within. For those who leave one place for another, fueled by choice, trauma, or entrenched poverty, sustaining the vulnerable threads to homeland is at once beautiful, fraught, disruptive, and ever evolving.

Making the journey with us were a handful of photographs chronicling our life. Owning photographs was an act of privilege; they stood among our most valuable possessions. There were no negatives, no jpegs, no double copies—just originals. Decades later, these photographs serve as a tangible connection to a homeland left behind. Many of them are taken at Guyana's airport during the 1980s and 1990s when we often bade farewell to yet another emigrating family member. Guyana celebrates its fiftieth anniversary of independence from the British in 2016. These last fifty years, however, have been defined by an extraordinary ebb and flow of its citizens.

What then does it mean to have a homeland that is no longer home? This question underscores the Un|Fixed Homeland exhibit. Employing



Untitled.
Detail from the
series *Passport*.
Mixed media,
2 ¼ × 2 ¼ in.
© 2012–2016.
Keisha Scarville
(b. United States
1975). Image
courtesy of the
artist.

innovative use of photographic mediums—archival images, documentary photography, self-portraiture, studio portraiture, painted photographs, passport photos, family snapshots, and selfies—the artists unpack global realities of migration, explore symbols of decay and loss, and avoid trappings of nostalgia by envisioning avenues out of displacement and dislocation.

One of the most defining movements of our time is migration. Few of us remain untouched by its sweeping narrative. Guyana *is* a country of migrations. Presented here is a selection of artists who intimately understand this liminal space of leaving and returning. Through their work, they represent the ones who *leave* and the ones who are *left*. Some of the artists return to Guyana often and some rarely. Others examine what survives and what is mourned.



Untitled.
 From the series *Passport*.
 Mixed media.
 © 2012–2016.
 Keisha Scarville
 (b. United States
 1975). Image
 courtesy of the
 artist.

Keisha Scarville

The passport photo is a document of agency, of one’s freedom, or lack thereof, to move about the world. In Keisha Scarville’s *Passport* series, a singular photo of her father at sixteen years old, taken in British Guiana in 1955, becomes a canvas for the transformative effects of migration. Visible in the photo, preserved by the New York-based artist in her family archive, are signs of age and decay via its yellowing tones, frayed edges, and faint timestamp marking a period when the colony was rife with political turmoil and haunting racial violence between Africans



Amalivaca.
Archival pigment
print, 48 × 32 in.
©2012 Khadija
Benn (b. Canada
1986; works in
Guyana). Image
courtesy of the
artist.

and Indians. In 1968, two years after Guyana gained independence, a young Keith Scarville left Guyana, transitioning from citizen of a British colony to a young, black, immigrant man immersed in America's civil rights era.

The tension within this fragile space of departure and arrival is deconstructed in Scarville's varied collaging, distorting, scratching, and layering of the portrait with found objects. In several reinterpretations, Scarville masks her father's face with items that almost eclipse him. Black-eyed peas, basmati rice, sugar cane stalks, and gold dots embody collective histories of a homeland—slavery past, racial strife,

Some of the artists return to Guyana often and some rarely. Others examine what survives and what is mourned.

exploited labor, colonizers' greed—that this young man shoulders and aims to break free from. In other artistic gestures, Scarville confronts the barriers of invisibility, censorship, and racism—often meted onto those who dare build lives in foreign lands—by doing violence to the image. In one treatment, she blinds and mutes the subject with white-out over his eyes and mouth. In another, the artist scratches out the portrait with a knife using cross-hatch patterns—aggressive acts that result in a ghostly outline of Keith's presence. Yet, there are sweet notes of possibility as one rendering shows the young



Chrysalis.
Archival pigment
print. 48 × 48 in.
©2013 Khadija
Benn (b. Canada
1986; works in
Guyana). Image
courtesy of the
artist.

man shielded behind a mask of tiny white dots—eyes visible, face brilliantly illuminated.

Khadija Benn

Khadija Benn's painterly photographs, lush with color, light, and a heavy-handed brush of glamour and romanticism, might appear as replicating the picturing-paradise aesthetic that dominates Caribbean visual culture. However, it is this aesthetic Benn exploits by inserting the female body in these landscapes, oftentimes her own via self-portraiture, as in *Amalivaca*. Her training as a cartographer led her across Guyana's remote places: the Rupununi savannah plains, Kanuku Mountains, and coral ferns of Linden, landscapes which form the foundation of her digital photography.

Photographed in the Rupununi grasslands, a region bordering the Brazilian Amazon, *Amalivaca* confronts the underlying histories that have created these complex spaces as well as the contemporary framing of them as exotic. While indigenous Amerindian peoples have

called the Rupununi home since the early eighteenth century, this landscape has famously served as muse for the colonial European imagination, notably Arthur Conan Doyle's *Lost World* and Walter Raleigh's El Dorado quest. The Rupununi has also seen much loss: two major measles and small pox epidemics brought on by European arrivals devastated populations of indigenous peoples. In Benn's act of claiming space and ownership of these sweeping vistas, *Amalivaca* becomes an image bridging the land's past and present. Benn states, "Not wanting to contribute redundant pictorials of Guyana, I sought a re-interpretation of these places through portraiture . . . by anchoring and abstracting the female body within the landscapes." While foregrounding the body, Benn simultaneously employs an "erasure of the faces of the women photographed" (seen also in *Chrysalis*) to remind us of the ways in which Caribbean women are often exoticized and hypersexualized in Western art. The rendering of the subject's face as pseudo-hidden allows Benn to shift attention to another artistic gesture of reclaiming—naming the work "*Amalivaca*," a figure of Amerindian legend who teaches harmonious existence with the environment. In addition to these prescriptive acts of reclaiming, Benn offers the ambiguous. The subject's posture is captured mid-turn, leaving the viewer to question: Is she running away *from* or returning *towards* homeland? Is this a site of terror or beauty? Or, both?

Hew Locke

Born in the United Kingdom, Hew Locke arrived in Guyana the year it gained independence from Britain. He was seven years old and would spend the next fourteen formative years (1966 to 1980) there, bearing witness to the birth of a nation. Often, he incorporates into his work remnants of colonial and postcolonial power, interrogating how these artefacts are altered by, or stand the test of, the passage of time. The C-type photograph, *Rose Hall*, in which the artist blurs the line between photograph (the original image was taken in 2013) and painting using acrylic and ink, feature a traditional wooden plantation house on stilts. These impoverished beauties still pepper the Guyana countryside. Within them lie histories of a colonial past embodied physically and metaphorically through architecture and landscape. Drawn to their beauty, decay, and signs of neglect and disrepair, Locke states: "These houses are falling apart, and returning back to the earth from which they originally came as trees. They are like spirit houses . . . I am seeing my childhood falling down. Beautiful houses I dreamed of living in as a child are now wrecks."



Framing *Rose Hall* in all its ruin and brokenness implores the viewer to interrogate the ancestral ghosts haunting its structure. It also calls to mind present-day poor living conditions for many in Guyana. The viewer might ponder the things that led to this state of wooden wreckage—economic depression, abandonment as owners emigrate, and perhaps, a withering away of hope for a country.

In a brilliant artistic intervention of the original photograph, Locke alludes to the constant threat of flooding Guyana endures by rendering the house physically and symbolically flooded. The artist notes, it is “. . . the flood of the mind, or memory, washing away the past.” Floodwaters also create an opening for renewal, an opportunity to rebuild what was lost, to usher in the birth of a new nation.

Kwesi Abbensetts

Kwesi Abbensetts’ roots in Guyana stem from city-life in Georgetown and country-life in the East Berbice-Corentyne coast. From these cross-road-perches, the bustling capital and provincial countryside, Abbensetts became an early witness to constant acts of emigration, observing friends and family leaving for “another land, for gain and training . . . good dollars and education.”

In *Pieces of Land, From Where I Have Come*, Abbensetts embeds into small canvasses key objects, what he calls “helpers of memory,” to aid

Rose Hall.

Acrylic paint and ink on c-type photograph. 81.5 × 122 cm. ©2014 Hew Locke (b. United Kingdom 1959). Image courtesy of the artist and Hales London New York. Photograph by Charlie Littlewood.



(Left) **My Dreams Talk About A Place** from the series, *Pieces of Land, From Where I Have Come*. Mixed media, painting, and photography on canvas. 8 × 10 in. ©2016 Kwesi Abbensetts (b. Guyana 1976; works in United States). Image courtesy of the artist.

(Right) **You Booked Your Passage** from the series, *Pieces of Land, From Where I Have Come*. Mixed media, painting, and photography on canvas. 8 × 10 in. ©2016 Kwesi Abbensetts (b. Guyana 1976; works in United States). Image courtesy of the artist.

him in conjuring a homeland he hasn't seen since 2001. The artist is now based in New York City where Guyanese make up the fifth largest immigrant population. Abbensetts wields a palette of deep, bold reds, blues, and greens, as well as softer, lighter hues of yellows and pinks to frame the photographs of his family and friends. Collected from that last visit to Guyana fifteen years ago, the analog photographs capture public and private spaces: a family wedding taking place on a street dotted with Guyana's quintessential wooden stilt houses or a line-up of mini-buses awaiting passengers in front of Georgetown's Stabroek Market. This choice of photographs tells us something about what is valuable to a person surrounded by movement and transition. Layered onto and around the photographs are abstract lines, handwritten notes, brown mud, white rice, brown sugar, and strips of paper towel baptized in acrylic paint—a symbol of “an identity immersed by all things Guyana,” states the artist.

This trifecta of paint, photograph, and objects functions literally and figuratively as “pieces of the land” Abbensetts poetically references in the work's title. In its layers and complexity lies a simple desire: to



The Impossible Speech Act. Digital photograph. 40 × 40 in. ©2007 Erika DeFreitas (b. Canada 1981). Image courtesy of the artist and Canada Council for the Arts, Art Bank.

reconnect, to reclaim homeland. “I am distant and removed,” the artist says. “The paintings are a contemplation of space . . . a forgotten space.”

Erika DeFreitas

Erika DeFreitas’ grandmother sold cakes out of a humble home in Newton, British Guiana in the late 1950s. She passed down the practice to DeFreitas’ mother who migrated to Canada in 1970, and in turn, taught the Canadian-born artist the intricacies of icing cakes. This act of passing on a sacred craft, from Guyana to Canada, through three generations of women, forms the portraiture series, *The Impossible Speech Act*.

Guyana is “A place I’ve never been to and a place my mother has not returned to since my birth,” states the artist. In this work, rooted in maternal histories, DeFreitas’ mother is subject and collaborator. Together the two took turns in a series of documented performative actions, both poetic and playful, hand-fashioning face masks out of green, yellow, and purple icing. From start to finish, the series unveils the meticulous detail, labor, and artistry in masking a bare face with sculptural objects of flowers and leaves. The diptych featured here is the final portrait in the process. “In a sense these repeated actions situate my mother psychically closer to her homeland as she remembers it, but only places me further away,” says DeFreitas.

The artist’s employ of icing as material and process is symbolic, noting that “historically icing was created with two purposes: to be decorative and to preserve.” However, DeFreitas’ chosen symbol of preservation becomes one of irony as the icing inevitably disappears.



Bridge. Detail from the installation *Place in Reflection*. Photo gel transfer on wood. 8 × 6 in. ©2016 Sandra Brewster (b. Canada 1973). Image courtesy of the artist.

Do the memories of these spaces belong to the artist? Or, are they borrowed, reflecting an imaginary place, a desire for a homeland that never was?

“The masks did not become a substitute object in each of our images,” says DeFreitas, “they melted from the heat emitted from our bodies, the flowers and leaves eroding, sliding slowly down our faces . . . a reminder of the persistence of impermanence.” The viewer is left with the notion

that even when we commit to preserving a homeland’s memories and traditions, loss still pervades.

Sandra Brewster

The first time Toronto-based artist Sandra Brewster stepped foot on Guyana’s soil was in 2008. She was thirty-five years old. Her Guyanese-born parents were part of a great migration of the 1960s to Canada. In fact, in the coming years, Toronto would emerge as a prominent node in the Caribbean diaspora as one of the largest and oldest Guyanese populations outside of Guyana. As a daughter of immigrant parents



living in Canada, Brewster grew up hearing her family's stories of life in Georgetown—stories that simultaneously gave her a connection to as well as “. . . a longing for a home I had never been to,” says the artist. “They would talk about a place that was once beautiful and productive, then debate over the county's troubling economic conditions now.”

These are the questions and stories that Brewster mined, along with the scenes she documented from her inaugural trip to Guyana, to inform a robust collection of twenty-six wood panels in the installation *Place in Reflection*. Here, process and material are just as key as visual imagery of markets, school girls dressed in uniforms, or palm-tree lined streets. The artist employs a gel transfer technique to transfer black and white photographs, many of which are tattered, torn, stained, and scratched, onto small wooden panels. “These transferred images are reflections that naturally, through the material, reveal imperfections,” states Brewster.

In her intent to expose the flaws and make visible the defects in the images, Brewster alludes to the trappings of false memory. We are left to ponder: Do the memories of these spaces belong to the artist? Or, are they borrowed, reflecting an imaginary place, a desire for a homeland that never was? 🌐

Place in Reflection. Installation. Photo gel transfer on wood. ©2016 Sandra Brewster (b. Canada 1973). Image © Aljira, a Center for Contemporary Art. Photo by Argenis Apolinario.

Chris King

To many Nigerian lovers of freedom, especially the younger ones, finding a way to kill Abacha with their own hands seemed a legitimate and perhaps necessary project. And for Soyinka, young people of courage . . . could even make him believe in funding the creation of a secret commando unit, starting with an unpromising cadre of college students and urban professionals living in exile.

Bernard Matambo

Cato and I have booked seats on flights to America with a number of airlines. It makes the journey feel real, palpable even, like it's something that could actually happen. The airline holds your seat for a week at a fixed price, and the best part is you don't need to pay anything. But after that week your booking is canceled and you must start all over again.

Lise Schreier

In a number of nineteenth-century narratives, black children, often presented as gifts to white children, turned them into responsible youths with a proper understanding of French propriety and of their role in society. *Lisette* went further than previous iterations of the theme—it turned the black-child-as-educational-tool into a mass-market product.

Zetta Elliott

As a black feminist, I'm part of a long tradition of black women writers doing whatever they have to do to tell their stories their way. My work is likely to be assessed, acquired, and then reviewed by someone who . . . has limited competence when it comes to my culture(s). So self-publishing allows me to focus on delivering authentic, relevant material to my own community.

Panashe Chigumadzi

I was *Writing Existence*. Would either Marechera, or Fassie, for that matter, have frowned on that? Not that I've ever entertained any ideas of myself as a Comrade, let alone a Radical, but I want to know, would he think less of me because I wasn't writing to destroy? I was *Writing to Live*? That I was writing with the hope that, if words weren't enough to stave Death, each word, each sentence, each paragraph, each page would be a ceremony to cremate the worst in our lives.



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