

28. Being Woke

Visualizing Solidarity and Resistance

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With twenty years between the selected artworks, I was invited by curator Sylvia Theuri to contribute two projects for the exhibition *Thirteen Ways Of Looking* that took place online and at the Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry, between October and December 2020. This portfolio of photographs from the works exhibited, *Virtual Exiles* (2000) and *Moove...[s] In solidarity* (2020), are “women’s resistance narratives” that make visible colonial legacies, racism and injustices that sustain our current conditions as women of color.

Virtual Exiles was originally conceived as photographic prints, text and a participatory Internet site. The work came from my conversations with secondary school friends, family and others in Guyana and those, like me, who had left to settle in another country—whether England, Canada or the US. The return trips to Guyana and the subsequent creation of the website and montaged photographs were from a continued interest to use expanded digital imaging and networked environments as creative spaces for making social commentary. Visual archives of Guyana appeared despicable at times, or at odds with any lived knowledge or experience. The visual archives and conventional documentary approaches to making images, I argue, persistently fail to take account of my ancestors’ narratives or migration journeying between Guyana, the U.K. and North America. Texts by David Dabydeen, Grace Nichols, Pauline Melville and Edward Said’s *Reflections on Exile* (1984) evoked

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motives and judgements for leaving my parents' homeland that in the end did not protect us. It is sustained by memories of Guyana's seawall, the backdam, curry and roti, metem and cassareep. Beyond the legacy of British colonialism is the persistent yearning for what it means to be Guyanese—to sustain a semblance rooted through imagined collective identities whether drawn from first-hand accounts or memories.

How, as a woman artist, am I able to somehow evoke and capture the colonial aftermath and lived experiences that those of us emergent from the dehumanized violent practices and displacement of peoples associated with slavery, land grabbing and indentureship? My ambition then was to re-imagine minor [her]stories of colonialism so they 'speak' to others living exiled or diasporic lives.

The series of photographs *Mooove...[s] In solidarity* was created during these months of confinement. I pose the question—what does it mean to embody the practice as a “hybrid-auto-instituting-linguaging-storytelling species” (Wynter 2000)? What must she look like for others to see her more directly and sharply than before? As I witness the endangerment of black lives, see violence and racism unfolding, some of us as protestors against the racism of the 1980s in Thatcher's Britain, are vigilant to the shifts and changes being demanded. The digital studio portraits, created as someone from another generation, pay homage and respect. They are proposed acts of solidarity to those making efforts to bring about change. The photographs and their relationship to being online recall a state of emergency to our health, to our bodies that will not be stilled, that need to move, to protest and call for solidarity. Influenced by revolutionary writings such as those of the late Kamau Brathwaite and Angela Davis; they take account of the creativity seen online such as *100 Years 100 Women*; formations created by younger political and social lives such as The Free Black University; and a claim for the right to life. This body with knowledge and memories of at least two cultures, imagines our “autonomous and beautiful lives” (Hartman 2019).

Figs 1–6 A selection of images from the series *Virtual Exiles* (2000) by Roshini Kempadoo.

The reality of her daughter's imminent arrival caused a mild fury to fizz up in her...

She stood with the letter in her hand... Hardest of all, she stared at the posed photograph of her three British children by Mr. Maurice Nevins that rested on the mantelpiece over the gas fire.

She bit her lip and tried to remember what Winsome looked like.

Pauline Melville, "A Disguised Land", *Shape Shifter* (1990)





... the 1st week of the second month of this year 28 Guyanese are reported to have died violent deaths... only the 1st week of the second month of this year 28 Guyanese are reported to have died violent deaths... these are only the deaths that have been reported in one newspaper, Stabroek News between December 31st 1998 and February 5th, 1999. It seems increasingly that our chances of being murdered by a knife, or a gun, or uncaring medical practitioners, or some other violent assault are higher than our chances of death from old age. And violence against women and children are dying and being dying in our reality, and our so-called leaders and opinion shapers engage in unending verbal wars trying to score cheap partisan points for their own interests - in a third reality we look on at the world of our people as it has become. It is becoming.





Figs 7–10 A selection of images from the series *Mooove...[s] In solidarity* (2020) by Roshini Kempadoo.

Try
 Try to imagine being arrested at 14
 Fourteen....
 or try
 Try to imagine your child seeing you fall because you were tasered
 Or imagine receiving a letter after 50 years in this country stating
 “LIABILITY FOR REMOVAL”
 It’s happening out there, beyond the boundaries and confinement of
 home in Lewisham
 I see, feel and hear nonetheless.

This body is consumed and rocked by sadness, anger and
 heartbreak as I hear of killings and brutality—by police, by
 politicians’ lack of caring, by abhorrent cronyism, by white
 privilege.
 But I know something unprecedented is coming
 in-between environmental crises and
 outmoded dysfunctional systems of capital
 This body embraces the John Lewis eulogies and black women’s
 sounds of affirmation, affiliation and beauty
 And most of all, humbled by voices of young folk—who persevere
 despite a broke and racist system
 calling for change, for lifeness and futurity.

[...] So love your neck; put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up.
Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987)



Fig. 7 #racismisapandemic, Giclée photographic prints, 80x45cm, 2020.



Fig. 8 #TakeAKnee, Giclée photographic prints, 80x45cm, 2020.



Fig. 9 #OurNecks, Giclée photographic prints, 80x45cm, 2020.



Fig. 10 #blackmoves, Giclée photographic prints, 80x45cm, 2020.

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