WRITERS MOSAIC

The Front Room: Diaspora migrant aesthetics in the Home

Michael McMillan

The front room is a conservative element of black domestic life, which is more complex and richer than the generality of the society ever understands. [1]

The above quote, from the late Stuart Hall's essay in my publication *The Front Room: Diaspora migrant aesthetics in the Home* (2023), speaks to the front room created by post-war Caribbean migrants in post-imperial Britain. As a cultural translation of the Victorian parlour, their front rooms enacted bourgeois values of decorum and gendered respectability that my parents brought with them as colonial subjects, packed deep in their suitcase 'grips'. It was the special room in the home, where guests and visitors were received and entertained through rituals of hospitality. Today, we might call it the living room, sitting room or lounge and it may be less formal than the front room, yet it remains the public space in the private domain where we manage impressions

[1] Hall, Stuart (2023) 'The "West Indian" Front Room', in *The Front Room: Diaspora migrant aesthetics in the Home* (revised edition), edited by Michael McMillan. London: Lund Humphries, 2023: 19-25.

of how we want to be seen to the outside world. In other words, no matter how poor we are, if this room looks good, then we are respectable.

It is this theatre of desires and the tropes associated with its material culture of the front room and the sacred things in it that informs my installation.

Woman & Cabinet ©Neil Kenlock

But let me tell you a little Jackanory story, as in the BBC children's television series I grew up with. When we were called 'coloured', I am that boy in short pants, who grew up learning that 'Cleanliness is next to godliness' and that no matter how poor we were, if the front room looked good, then we were respectable. See here Saturday when the whole house is ritually cleaned, especially the front room; 'hoovered' (vacuum cleaned), dusted and polished with *Mr Sheen*. I follow my mum to Ridley Road Market with the trolley in tow,

for provisions and ingredients for the ‘Saturday Soup’[2] and Sunday dinner for visiting guests. Smell the air freshener and furniture polish masking the toxic smell of the paraffin heater as the big people, belly full, retire to the front room for big people to chat with Jim Reeves crackling from the radiogram. As children, we weren’t allowed into this hallowed space, but my mum invites me in to meet a relative who I had never met before, and tells me how big I had got. They continue chatting ‘commess’ [3] about who and who dead or who have ‘sugar’ [4], and my mum instructs me to get her two gold rimmed glasses from the glass cabinet that only displayed things we didn’t use. I wheel over the drinks trolley, and she pours two glasses of Stone’s Ginger Wine with ice from the plastic pineapple ice bucket. I sit down obediently on the sofa with the plastic-covering sticking to my skin. Bored, I gaze at a blue-eyed Jesus in *The Last Supper* on floral patterned wallpaper next to a picture with a half-naked *Tina,* who flirts with me. I notice a fly, fooled by the plastic flowers and colourful iron-starched crochet on a fake marble coffee table, then I overhear, ‘I don’t know why she marry him’. My mum realising I am there, asks me if I have any homework to do. From her look, I know this is not a question, but an instruction to leave.

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[2] a cook-up soup made with meat or fish, and ground provisions like yam, dashen, dumplings and green bananas and vegetables.

[3] gossip in Eastern Caribbean vernacular

[4] diabetes in Caribbean vernacular

The front room was an aspirational space of my parents' being and becomingness of postcolonial modernity that signified what Rex Nettleford called 'smaditisation' (being somebody) in the ways that the Jamaican underclass conveyed selfhood through the material culture of their everyday lives. To echo Aimé Césaire's idea of 'thingification' [5], we were once property and viewed as things, own property and possess things that resonates with Sandy Alexandre's sense of 'Black Thinghood'[6], .

Radiogram, permanent 1970s period room, The Front Room, Museum of the Home

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[5] Césaire, Aimé (1972) *Discourse on Colonialism*, translated by Joan Pinkham. New York & London: Monthly Review Press.

[6] Alexandre, Sandy (2022) *Thinghood, Ethics, and Black Material Culture: Up from Chattels*, London: Routledge.

As the sacred space in the home, the front room's aesthetics exhibited a form of creolisation in appropriating European forms and Africanising them: the colourful tropical patterned wallpaper never seemed to match the equally colourful patterned carpet, with a hint of maroon. Call it being a 'poppyshow'[7], but the front room was about packing in as much colour, opulence, glamour and patterning as one could afford, because these people had vibrant lives. We're talking about Black style, folks, that complex and contested commodity, yet if we colourised those iconic black & white British Pathe News clips of West Indians disembarking, we would see them elegantly dressed in tropical coloured frocks with white gloves, and crisp mohair vanilla tinted suits with pocket squares, and hats cocked at a angle. Dressed in preparation for what was about to happen next, it was the colour and drapery of the sartorial style of these Black settlers that cut through the grey smog of Harold MacMillan's 'never had it so good' Britain

As participants in the post-war, mass consumer culture, they bought things for their homes from the same shops as their white neighbours, but they were viewed as the under-class because, regardless of their social, educational or professional backgrounds in the Caribbean, West Indians found themselves class downsized. Regardless, the class-mindedness they brought was

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[7] showing off in Caribbean vernacular

expressed in dressing their front rooms, such as having books on the mantel piece rather than ornaments. At one point, a piano appeared in our front room, which some might see as being poppyshow, because me and siblings never played it or ever learnt how to.

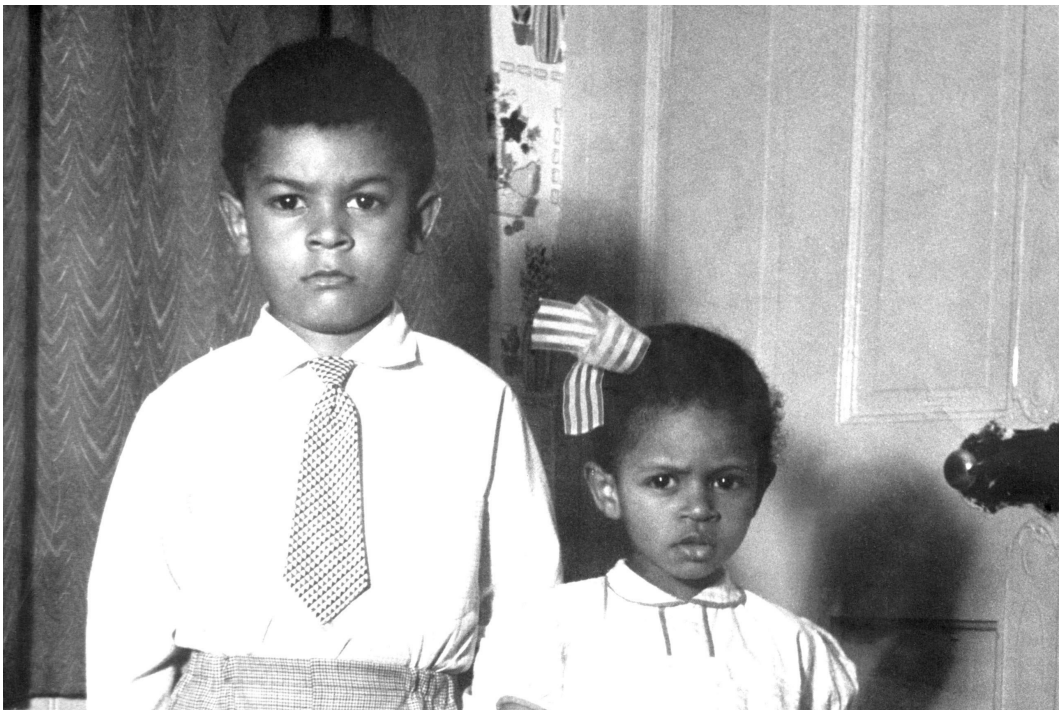
My dad would often entertain guests in the front room playing cards, dominoes and drinking white rum, but it was my mum who controlled how it was dressed and maintained, and being on one's best behavior. And while not denying the patriarchal division of labour in the home, the front room expressed the fruit's of her labour and being seen as a respectable woman, good mother and good spouse in her own feminine style, which challenged racist stereotypes of Black families as pathological and dysfunctional. This feminine creative agency was displayed through crochet doilies that would enhance a vase of artificial flowers or as 'chair-backs' over the sofa. As a monochrome flat form of knitting, it was introduced to the diaspora by colonial missionaries, though Caribbean women creolised it with colourful iron-starched sculptural patterned sets that they made to supplement their income.

The 'blue-spot' radiogram or 'gram', an analogue phono turntable and radio housed in a wooden veneer cabinet, took pride of place in the front room, and signified the importance of music in Black life, especially as West Indians were barred from pubs and clubs. Playing imported vinyl records of jazz, ska, calypso, soul, reggae, pop, they entertained themselves in the home with the

first house and blues parties, which were significant in the development in the sound system culture, with equitable multi-racial spaces unlike the racist terror of the street.

The front room was a contradictory space with the secular and the spiritual beside each other. This was compounded as many found themselves unwelcome in some churches, so they resorted to express their religious identities in the front room wallhangings, with homilies like ‘God Bless This Home’. And along with prayer meetings, the front room was also where life-cycle celebrations like christening, birthday, wedding and funeral events were held. When my parents passed away, this was where their coffins were laid open for friends and family to pay their last respects at their respective Nine Night wakes.

It was at a house party for a birthday in 1981 that a fire began, which would eventually kill thirteen Black young people in New Cross, London; and the front room was where Joy Gardener died and Cherry Groce was shot after police raids. And, as a site of cultural political resistance, it was where the first Black publishers and bookshops, Bogle L’Ouverture and New Beacon were established, and where the Black Parent’s Movement met, amongst other activist groups.



Michael McMillan and sister Valerie, High Wycombe, c. 1969

Although I was not the first to recreate the front room as an installation, it has become a heritage orientated visual motif within the Black History Month and Windrush industries, speaking to the trope of struggle, resilience, and endurance of the Windrush generation. Though recruited into this populist narrative at times, I am less interested in the front room as nostalgia than as a contested space of intergenerational identification, negotiation and a disavowal of being and becoming Black British.

It speaks to Empire that Black bodies have always been at the centre of: those who helped build Hardian's Wall, the 20,000 Black people in 18th century Britain, Black Victorians and Edwardians. Subscribing to the convenient narrative that

we simply arrived after 1948, the moment marking the beginning of post-war Caribbean migration, now conflated as 'the Windrush generation', ignores the importance of interrogating the archive to reveal how our ancestors created spaces they called home, and therefore 'a kind of truth' after Toni Morrison[8] about past Black life and death in the present.

We have come to recognise the front room as a cultural institution; so much so that I am continually being offered radiograms, glass cabinets and other items by families whose parents have passed away. This trend raises a number of questions. What is the legacy of the front room for subsequent generations? How is this affected by gentrification? What values do we attach to the material culture of the Black everyday?

In a time of post-pandemic grief and grievance, our meaning of home has changed. My home is bombed, flooded, on fire, I escape with the shirt on my back. Crossing the open sea on a boat overloaded with people, I pray not to drown. When I reach land, I am put in a detention centre. I find work, but am too ashamed to use the food bank. I live in a tower block with inflammable cladding, like Grenfell. Home is hearing my language, smelling my food, listening to my music, and going to church with people who look like me. I know my family can't look after me, but I don't want them to put me in a care home. Where do I belong, where is home?

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[8] Morrison, Toni. (1995) 'The Site of Memory', in *Inventing the truth: the art and craft of memoir,* edited by R Baker & W Knowlton Zinsser. Boston/New York: Houghton Miffin:83-102.

A recording of this text can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk