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ROOTS AND ROUTES
MASTER DEGREE REPORT
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KONSTFACK
Aim

My Masters project, titled Roots and Routes, began with what feels like a great entanglement of threads, overlapping themes that are impossible to disentangle. Researching has felt like a process of unravelling, laying out unspoken histories amongst shared experiences.

A primary focus of my work is so well articulated by the Swedish phrase *mellanförskap*. I wanted to create a space where the lived experience of the diaspora can be explored, without romanticising it as some kind of utopian community that privileges diasporic peoples above those directly from the global south. There is a danger in doing this as being part of the diaspora in Europe is often still a position of privilege comparatively.

In reference to the feeling of in-betweeness, Sepidar Hosseini said when talking about my work:

> It’s not only the gap of time, it’s the gap of place.

And this describes so perfectly these layers of longing and possible frictions. What happens on a cultural and interpersonal level when families move through borders? What I hope to show with this work is that this friction can be found between a place of both privilege and longing.

Another important element of my work has been to challenge the hegemonic representations of Jamaican British histories, that centre the narratives of men and often speak of the difficulty to assimilate into a white British culture.

Although this project takes narrative form, wavering in between a work of fiction and reality, it pulls on the threads of history, sociopolitical and literary knowledge in ways that is intended to inspire the reader to delve deeper into subjects. The book becomes a base point in which to direct readers into certain areas. This has been further emphasised in the work by the decision to include a glossary of terms featured in the book. I carefully considered which words or phrases belonged in the glossary, with an intended reader in mind, which bodies of knowledge would they have already and which did they need to be guided towards. I am not going to translate patois, but I will explain what the SUS laws are or what non binary means, because I want to make sure that the people I am trying to reach can understand as much as possible of what I am saying. I don’t want this book to become a colonial, voyeuristic fantasy.
From the beginning of my project, I have been interested in an idea coined by Audre Lorde, the term *autobiomythography*. In this work I hope to highlight the subjectivity of experiences that is always present in the retelling of histories, but rarely discussed. I wanted to keep the dialogue direct, without narration. But this became impossible as I finished the project, as it was an effective way of tying different scenes together. I also tried to keep as much of the original dialogue from the transcripts as possible, so that the real voices that the characters are based on would come through.

**Background**

The project began last year with a smaller project based on the accounts of Auntie Winsome. This was a short publication illustrating her experiences of arriving in London from Jamaica as a child. I collected her story from interviews with her and worked with photographs that she had from the time, creating illustrations. My intention was to challenge the singular narrative often presented of the Windrush era, which largely
documents the narratives of men arriving on boats from the West Indies. I wanted to centre on the experience of a girl and explore not only what it is to travel to an entirely new continent, but what it is to do so as a child without your parents.

Part One: Winsom

Rudy Loewe

Part One: Winsom, 2017
I can give you some of my recollections of the time when I first came.

One thing to say though, that when I came over, I didn't live with my mum, I didn't live with grandma, because you know how sometimes West Indian families are. I stayed with my father.

I lived in Kingston, and I know Kingston has a bad reputation now. But I didn't know that it was that bad. I didn't feel that it was dangerous as a child. Kingston, 2B Nelson Street, which is in a town called Denham Town. And that was in Kingston.

I was talking to somebody last week and I think he knew of that address and that place. And... it hasn't changed much.
Arrival
- BOAC
  - Newfoundland
- Guy Falk's Night / War
- Houses (churches)
- Smoke from chimneys

Sch
Lewisham Bridge Primary Sch.

Home / Housing
- Lived at 11 Halesworth Road
  - Loampit Vale Lewisham
- Parents part ownership / Partnership
- Tenants / Lots of people sharing
  - Kitchens
- Coal fires - then Paraffin heaters
- Later - electric one bar fire
- Really Cold / Lots of snow in winter
- Fog / Paper coins in gas meters
This then developed into a series of longer interviews with other aunts and my mother, which I then transcribed to create a narrative. I was particularly interested in the way that narratives differ, depending on where they were born and when they migrated. For example, of those included in *Roots and Routes*, two migrated as children, and two grew up in London and travelled to Jamaica for the first time as adults. I wanted to create an intergenerational narrative that could look at how a family changes over time because of migration.

The work is based in three locations: England, Sweden and Jamaica, dating from the 1960s to the present. The thread tying together all of these places and moments is my own family; our personal stories and shared histories looped with several layers of migration.

**Research**

I approach my work somewhat like an academic, linking my work to theory and looping quotes into my narrative. Some of the references for this have included Audre Lorde, Katherine McKittrick, Gloria Anzaldúa, Langston Hughes and Edouard Glissant. In this way, my reading has brought me to think about geography, history, gender, travel and race amongst other themes.

The name of the work relates back to a quote from Paul Gilroy’s seminal text *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. My work is concerned with both the root of these narratives, which is to say my own family histories. And the routes that brought us to this point, the lines of migration that create this triangulation.

One of the texts I read as part of my research is Migrating the Black Body, which references much of Paul Gilroy’s work:

*Gilroy’s work in particular has been enormously influential as a model which understands diaspora as a set of transnational connections “rooted” in conceptualizations of common racialized experiences and “routed” through a set of “cultural and political resources black people” draw upon in their struggles against various and divergent forms of oppression. Diaspora then is an “imagined community” that must be forged, constantly made and remade; diaspora not as a priori essence but diaspora as labor and practice.*

- Leigh Raiford and Heike Raphael-Hernandez

Early on in the project I knew that I wanted to include quotes from texts that I have been reading as part of my research, to give a broader contextual understanding of where I situate my work. But also because I want there to be a pedagogical aspect to the book. I have been very clear that the intended reader is one that can relate to experiences of the
diaspora. And because of this I don’t want to over explain certain things in the book that I expect the intended reader to understand. However, I would like to spark an interest to read other texts that the reader may or may not have read.

Research Trip to Jamaica

Last year I made a research trip to Jamaica, which was also my first time going there. Before arriving, I looked at a number of places of interest to visit, such as the national archives and plantations. Although the narratives in the book are from living relatives, rather than historic sources, taking the time to look back on older histories was a way of looking at the roots and tying this into the longing for a sense of belonging.

I also used photography to collect imagery, thinking about architecture and colour; as well as considering other things that couldn’t be documented through images such as sound and smell.
Method
From the beginning I have been wary of being nostalgic towards a day gone by. So quickly this can descend into a colonial fantasy. So in the back of my mind has been the need to have these tensions present in my work, because in real life there are tensions.

When early on my work was described as the story of a flaneur, it didn’t sit well with me but I didn’t know why. Now I can say, the flaneur is comfortable in his body and his place in the world. He is casual and grazing. The black body, the black queer body, does not usually take this casual loafing position. That’s not to say that this is a narrative built solely on struggling. But rather highlight from the very beginning that the position in relationship to travel is really where the story begins.

The book moves through different periods of time. And it was suggested to have different types of panel or colour combinations, depending on the time period. So that the reader would understand that some of it is set in the past. I chose to not distinguish through these methods what the time period was, and instead just use text boxes with the date e.g. 1965. This was because I felt that if I created these barriers between form and colour,
it would affect the reading of the work. I didn’t want to make the reader only think about how different these time periods are. But instead, feel a sense of fluidity between them and understand the parallels.
A FEW MONTHS LATER

Roots and Routes, 2018
This also gave me an opportunity to work with colour schemes true to the time periods. For example, I had long phone conversations with my Mother as part of my research about 1970s carpet patterns and wallpapers (such as fake wood wallpaper print), which informed my choices for the scenes in my grandparents’ house.

There are a number of key scenes that I wasn’t able to include in the work because of time constraints. So I had to work hierarchically thinking about which were the most important scenes and how these could be linked together. As I would like to get this book published in the future, there are a number of other scenes I would like to work with that will make the jumps in time a lot smoother.

My desire to create a graphic novel is linked both to the accessibility of comics, where they exist for example, outside of the “white cube”; and to the representations of blackness in comics. Comics have had a complicated and sometimes problematic history. And from the beginning of this work, I have wanted to remain playful and thoughtful of my depictions of black people.
My working method began with making a lot of lists. I listed moments that could then become scenes. But I also listed dynamics that I felt were important to include in the narrative. And then I had to find a way to condense all of these down.

Structure
From the beginning, I decided to split the book into sections: Identity, Becoming Familiar, Arriving, Returning and Journeys. The way that I organise all of the information for what will be potentially included in the book is by creating lists of “moments”. I then split these into whose moments they were and created a timeline to work out the chronology. I then decided where each of these moments belonged in the sections and headed each of these with a quote. It helped to divide the book in this process, rather than just thinking chronologically, as it highlighted the themes as the main point rather than the timeline of events. It helped to piece together different individuals’ experiences under one subject.
"... Of equal value are the oral traditions of the Maroons. Like other Afro-Caribbean groups, they carry their past in their heads. Their storytellers are charged with the sacred and professional responsibility of preserving the historical narrative intact... To do justice to the actual and symbolic presence of a Nanny, as Braithwaite has stated, implies "the commitment of the researcher to undertake an investment in the veracity of our oral traditions and enlist those traditions in the reconstruction of a broken legacy.""

- Caribbean Women Writers, Ed. Selwyn Cudjoe
Keeping a diary
The body of this work has been built from lived experiences. And the process of collecting these has been to interview family members and work with my own personal experiences. Whilst in Jamaica, I kept a diary for each day and then this formed a large part of the narrative set in Jamaica in the present day.
I created transcripts of almost all of the interviews and then worked out how this could be sewn together into a narrative.

The Graphic Novel
I made a conscious decision for all of the main characters to be women or non binary people. History is so often focused on the experiences of men, and least of all children. I wanted to look at the ways families are affected when part of the family migrates and part of it does not.
A common trend in Jamaican families during the Windrush era was for parents to migrate to Britain, and send for their children later. This often meant that children grew up in households without their parents, but with cousins, aunts and grandparents. I wanted to challenge the expectations of family and offer a different representation of how this sometimes functions in reality. This is also further highlighted by the relationship to friends, who often in queer communities become integral family members. I wanted to show platonic intimate relationships that can emphasise this idea of alternative family structures.

My own voice is predominantly the main character and I use this as a way to thread all three locations together.
I consider first hand accounts to be crucial in creating a multiplicity of narratives. And this is more true than ever when thinking of histories relating to black peoples, which more often than not, have been told from a white outsider perspective in the western world.

As I mentioned earlier, autobiomythography also became a theme in the work. How to document histories, that are always subjective. How to make space for this subjectivity whilst simultaneously naming it as truth. As I began interviewing people, I started to find different versions of the same stories. And rather than searching for an ultimate truth, I made room for these truths to coexist, further highlighting that reality is subjective.

A large element of this work is if you know, you know. It was created for black people and even more specifically for people living in the diaspora. I have been very intentional in the way that I tell these stories, what I choose to explain and what goes unspoken.
It has also been important for me to think about the use of black and white versus colour. I have always been drawn to the high contrast black and white images often seen in comics. But at some point this became insufficient for what I wanted to do. I thought about the way that characters can sometimes seem white washed in high contrast black and white images. And race and the representation of race is such an important element of my work.

As I started to depict the scenes in Jamaica, colour became more important to me than ever. I want my work to be colourful and reflect the environments I’m documenting. Jamaica is one of the most beautiful places I have ever been to. But this is in stark contrast with high levels of visible poverty. I felt like I would never be able to show this contrast truly in black and white.

As the work progressed, colour also become more of an indication of the environment and people in each of the places. I wanted to point to the differing aesthetic choices that form the culture of a city. For example, everyone paints their house in a different colour in Jamaica. Whereas in Stockholm, the architecture can be seen to be more uniform or monotonous.

Working in colour also allowed me to make the stark contrast of whiteness in Stockholm more apparent. In both London and Jamaica, virtually all the characters are black, and this then can point to how this could further the feelings of loneliness or isolation in Stockholm.

Roots and Routes, 2018

Roots and Routes, 2018
For the scene in London, shown below, I wanted to create a feeling of intimacy between the characters and also with the reader. We see the four of them sitting around a coffee table in conversation, and we are then brought up close to the different characters’ faces. I hoped that the feeling of togetherness, that is sometimes lacking in other scenes, could be visible; the feeling of family, of closeness and generations.

Roots and Routes, 2018
I also consider the arts canon in which I want my work to sit. Aesthetically, I want to think about how my work relates to artists such as Emory Douglas, Sonia Boyce, Rudi Patterson and Lubaina Himid. Artists that show the vivacity and full colour of black life and blackness itself.

I’m a bad interviewer. It’s been a way to have conversations with my family that I would never be entitled to otherwise, and in that way, my hungriness for the stories becomes clear. When I find out that my Mumma was supposed to be at a party where so many young people died, I can’t help but break character by exclaiming loudly “Wait, you were going to that party?”. Some of the quality of this is lost in translation, from audio to comic, which is one reason why I wanted to work with sound in the exhibition.

*Roots and Routes*, 2018
I hope that the reader sees my position of privilege changes. I try to take the piss out of myself to show this. For example, when planning the trip to Jamaica I assume we can just find a place to stay on Airbnb and am frustrated when I learn we won’t be using GPS to find the hotel. First world assumptions. Even in moments of sentimentality, I hope to show a self awareness that shows my lack of knowledge. I accidentally pick up a piece of goat poo mistaking it for a keepsake.
My family have decided I'm not allowed to go to Jamaica alone!

Here I was thinking I'm living my adult life!

Hahaha! This is too much. They decided I need a chaperone!

Do you know where you will stay?

I've been looking at some Airbnbs, we'll work it out.
Initially I collected handwriting samples from everyone I was interviewing, with the intention of creating a typeface for every person in the story. I wanted to represent different people’s voices through their own handwriting. So that for each main character in the book, their speech would have a different typography. There were several reasons that I wanted to do this. We live in an era where people are less and less familiar with another person’s handwriting. There remains an intimacy in handwriting that I thought would sit well with people sharing their own narratives. It also further accentuates the feeling of traces of a real human being, a personal legacy. After discussing this with my tutor Joanna Rubin Dranger, she suggested that it was not necessary, because it was going to create a lot of work and not add much to the narrative. However, I struggled to find a way to address the text. I tried to commission someone to create a typeface of my handwriting, but it was going to be too expensive. In the end I used an online font generator to make a typeface of my handwriting. This was the best possible solution, given the time constraints however there are still a lot of issues with it as the font generator is not very accurate (kerning, line spacing etc). I considered writing the entire text out by hand, but this would have been extremely laborious and would have meant that any further changes to the text later on will be difficult.
The Exhibition
For the exhibition I played with a number of different ideas. I wanted to create a place where the visitor could choose to sit and soak up the work for a considerable time, putting the pieces of the conversation together, or pass by and take it on face value. The work is intended to create a feeling of having its own room.

The main components of the exhibition are the book and a sound installation, created from a number of the interviews and sound recordings. The sound installation and the book are in dialogue, some of the information in the book is the same as in the sound installation, some of it is entirely different but related. There will be recordings in the exhibition that only some people will understand. Some people will experience a language barrier and this also felt important to me. That in decentering the white gaze, I don't have to let everyone in to every element of my work. There are layers, that create layers of understanding. Without necessarily naming it, art and visual communication always has a specific audience. People who understand the codes or the rules, people who have previously interacted with the guidelines. My intention is to code my work for a group of people who are not usually specifically considered in the white cube. I hope for my work to be pedagogical, without over explaining things for a white audience.

First Scenario
Initially I decided that the book would sit surrounded by textile walls with large drawings scaled up to bigger than life size. The sound installation in this scenario, was to be installed inside of the arms of the sofa so that when the visitor sat down at either end, they would hear the audio. The sound would be localised so that it is only audible from that part of the sofa.

I considered using other options such as headphones and sound showers, but many visitors don't bother to listen to audio when it's on headphones, and sound showers can be difficult to work with.

Parts of the sound installation also points to politics, work and labour. It felt like something that came outside the main thread of the story in the book, but is an important part to feature. In the book I briefly mention that we visited a sugar factory. However in the sound installation, this is expanded upon, involving sound recordings from inside the factory, and an interview distorted by the never ending noise of the machines. The workers work six days a week for six months of the year and one of the workers compares it to modern day slavery. This then links to the parts of the story in the book based in the archives reflecting upon the history of plantations and slavery.
In another part of the sound installation, one interviewee discusses how sugar plantations were considered the worst places for slaves to be sent to. The pieces of the work are laid out so that the visitor can put the different parts together.

One crucial element of the exhibition has been to make it for my Auntie Joy, who features in the work. She has Parkinsons, so she needs somewhere she can sit comfortably. She also doesn’t usually go to exhibitions and I want to make a space where she can feel at home, undaunted by the white institution.
Second Scenario
When planning the exhibition, one consideration has been to make an environment that speaks to people from the Caribbean diaspora. For this, I researched the concept of the West Indian front room. An important reference for this was Michael McMillan’s Front Room: Migrant Aesthetics in the Home. My idea was to recreate a sense of the front room, in which the visitor could sit and spend as much time as they wanted to read the book and listen to the sound installation. I wanted to use furniture, wallpaper and colour combinations that would be reminiscent of the aesthetic.
Again in this scenario, the sound installation was going to be situated inside of the sofa, installed into each of the arms.
I decided to change this because it felt difficult to balance the aesthetic of the sound installation with that of the book. I also wanted to create something that gave the book the main stage. It was important that visitors know what the main focus is. This is why I decided to strip back the exhibition and use simple furniture for the sound installation.
Third Scenario
In order to make it clear that the main element of the exhibition is the book, I decided to paint directly onto the wall the front cover of the book as a mural. The book then has a space to sit within this, directing the visitor here visually. The sound installation is still present within the seating, however, this is simple constructed furniture that is not overbearing in the space.
I felt strongly against exhibiting the book on a plinth, as I think that for people who are familiar with exhibitions, they may know they can pick the book up from a plinth. But throughout my process, I have been trying to think about how to engage people who would not usually go to exhibitions.
Feedback
During the process of making the book, I sent the manuscript out to people from the diaspora of Jamaican heritage. I wanted to check how the book was being read, if it fed the white gaze.
Even in a story with virtually an absence of white people, whiteness can still become at the centre.
I also published excerpts of my work on Instagram to get general feedback. The feedback was very positive, many people being able to relate to some of the experiences documented. Two pieces of advice I received that I needed to work with, was to have more patois in the section based in Jamaica and also to represent colourism in Jamaica, as this is such a big issue. Sadly I wasn’t able to finish the scene in time that discussed colourism, although it is discussed in the sound installation.

Post Exhibition
The exhibition space looked as I had intended it, however I had issues with the sound installations, due to the poor quality of the mp3 players that I was using. I would have liked to have been able to work more with the sound quality, but this wasn’t possible as I was given the mp3 players the day before the exhibition opening.
The feedback from my opponent, Alle Ericsson, was very positive and showed that much of what I wanted to put across, had been conveyed. I also spoke to the scholar Jayna Brown, who gave the advice of finding other references which relate both to a queer perspective as well as the black diasporic experience.
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