

A Journeying Practice: Deborah Jack and the *t/here* series, 2002-4

Every voyage can be said to involve a re-siting of boundaries. The travelling (sic) self is here both the self that moves physically from one place to another, following 'public routes and beaten tracks' within a mapped movement, and the self that embarks on an undetermined journeying practice, having constantly to negotiate between home and abroad, native culture and adopted culture, or more creatively speaking, between a here, a there, and an elsewhere" (Trinh Minh-ha, 9).



Deborah Jack's most current series entitled *t/here* (2002-4) is a fascinating collection of photographs on the historic movement of words, body and image. Interested in examining what happens when black bodies leave and arrive from various sites around the circum-Atlantic world, *t/here* delves deep into the heart of displacement to portray a performance of a wounded and creative self. The series describes the experience of Jack working as a Caribbean artist in the United States, even while showing that experience of displacement to be typical of African diasporic subjects in a 'postcolonial' world. The weight of this collective displacement lends a unique poignancy and resonance to Jack's work as she struggles to recall memories that are "not necessarily [her] own" (Jack). Born in Rotterdam, Holland where her mother was studying to be a nurse, Jack moved as an infant, 'back' to St. Martin, a Dutch colony. While Jack grew up in St. Martin, her adult life has been spent moving between St. Martin and the United States, most recently Buffalo, New York. *t/here* attempts to deal with these multiple displacements and negotiations of varied hierarchical spaces. The series explores what it feels like to belong and not belong, to search for a home after numerous leavings only to find that home can not be locatable in any single geographical site. Rather *t/here* moves the viewer towards an understanding of home, not as an autochthonous place but as a generative performance of self and community that is locatable neither here nor there, but between here, there and elsewhere.

None of the digital photographs from *t/here* are cropped or edited. Rather, manipulation of the images occurs via the framing of the images in plexiglass and through the arrangement of the images into triptychs. The grouping of these images into clusters of three is obviously significant. The grouping of the images into threes represents the various places that Jack as a Caribbean émigré could call home—St. Martin, Holland and the United States (specifically Buffalo, NY). They also represent the various selves that the artist performs, each one different from the other and based on the different locations that the artist lives in. This is especially noticeable in *Triptych #21* where Jack juxtaposes three photographs of her face. The viewer can assume that each image corresponds to a particular performance of self based on the (imagined) location of the artist's body even though it is impossible to say which image is taken in which location due to the limited context of each photograph. In the first image from the triptych the artist stares straight into the camera at herself taking the picture. Her gaze at the photographer/ viewer is an open



confrontation with the processes of objectification that traditionally have resulted when black bodies are photographed. Jack's stare at herself as the photographer is an ironic confrontation with herself as she mediates between the difficult roles of object and subject. She refuses the role of the black body as only object by claiming control of the camera, even as she understands that control to be limited, not the least by the ways in which the photograph itself is read. In the other two images that complete *Triptych #21* the artist looks away at something in the distance that only she can see. The gaze of the artist at something outside the image depicts the artist's search for a 'home' space that would reconcile all her various selves. The fact that this 'home' cannot be found within any of the images of the triptych suggests that the space of reconciliation is not necessarily a physical one. Rather home is created through the medium of photography where three images can be placed side by side to generate a 'journeying practice' that deals with the contradictions of displacement.

In some senses, this 'journeying practice' can be called a third space. However, this "...Third is not merely derivative of First and Second. It is a space of its own. Such a space allows for new subjectivities that resist letting themselves be settled in the movement across First and Second. Third is thus formed by the process of hybridization which, rather than simply adding a here to a there, gives rise to an elsewhere-within-here/-there..." (Trinh Minh-ha, 18-19). Thus the artist's insistence on three broadens the viewer's concept of home. Rather than 'home' simply being a space, it is also a practice, a creative mode of being that requires a negotiation of the various spaces that the artist as an African diasporic subject has left from and arrived at. This practice is encapsulated by the photograph in the series that appears to have been taken inside a bus. The entire image is a blur and the viewer is struck by the overall impression of motion—even the light moves in bright streaks across the photograph's surface. A night sky blurs the edges of inside and outside the bus and one can see only the outline of fellow travelers and the back of seats. This image where inside collapses into outside under the pressure of collective motion depicts the 'journeying practice' of three that gives rise to something that is formed in the movement from here to there.

Jack's emphasis on three via her triptychs moves the viewer away from binaries that usually accompany displacement and immigration such as 'original' home/ new home, familial/ foreigner. Jack's work shows that 'home' for the African diasporic subject can only be a journeying practice as one can never return to the 'original' home anymore than one can banish any traces of that 'original' home in the 'remade' place of belonging. Furthermore, due to the circumstances of colonialism and slavery, the 'original' home becomes increasingly more difficult to locate. There are some that would argue that the 'original' home of St. Martiners is Holland, given the deep impact of Holland and its history of colonization of the southern side of St. Martin. St. Martin was the first of the Netherlands Antilles island group to be settled by the Dutch pioneers. Colonial possession of the island passed back and forth for many years between Holland, France, England and Spain until 1817 when the current boundaries were established, with Holland governing the southern part of the island and France ruling the north. Colonial powers were interested in the island because of its strategic location and abundance of salt. Trade

thrived on a slavery-based plantation economy—the Dutch used slave labor to harvest huge amounts of salt, most of which was shipped to Holland for the herring industry. It is in the evocation of slavery that another 'original' home becomes evident—West Africa, the site from which many Africans were forcibly uprooted. Any understanding of 'home' and 'belonging' for the descendents of African slaves must be made in the context of the displacement both within and from Africa caused by the transatlantic slave trade. Thus Dutch colonialism and the violent use of slave labor to harvest salt resonate profoundly in all of Jack's work. While the *t/here* series does not directly contain photographs of Holland or of Africa, Jack's work gestures to these locales, acknowledging them as she attempts to mediate a space of belonging through diasporic movement. Thus, for example, one can read the evidence of Africa in most of the images in the series. From the body of the artist herself, to the images of St. Martin where slaves harvested salt, and to Buffalo, with its rich history of the Underground Railroad (see *Track #1* that by signifying on railroad tracks, evokes the Underground Railroad that helped slaves to reach freedom in the North and in Canada), one cannot ignore West Africa as it permeates all subsequent recreations of home. *Triptych #24* elaborates on this with its image of a bookshelf and heater. A thin layer of dust on the hardwood floor in front of the bookshelf causes the surface to resemble a huge expanse of water. The floor comes alive as the shelf reflects in its surface—the viewer is reminded here of the oceans that separate the various places the artist calls home. The terrible Middle Passage is also evoked, as one recalls the millions of slaves stolen from their home and forced to travel to the New World. The image of the floor/ water is hung next to lush green hills



that suggest both the Africa that is left behind and the Caribbean at which the slaves arrived. Thus the 'original' and the 'recreated' blur together and can be read as one and the same.

Even while Jack insists that the 'origin' and the 'new' are inextricable from each other, she is careful not to lose the historical specificity of the various locations that make up the African diasporic world. Each piece of the triptych is hung separately so that there is space between the images. These spaces are essential—they prevent readings of the separate photographs that would seek to collapse them into one another. The images that constitute each triptych thus are multiple moments in conversation with each other across the spaces that separate them. The way that the triptychs are installed requires that the viewer make sense of the images both as they stand alone and as they 'speak' to each other. Jack has likened the meaning generated by the triptychs to 'words of a sentence' or 'sentences of a story' and the comparison is particularly apt. Like words or sentences, the meaning of each image changes in relation to the other images. Thus meaning is created by each photograph and also by the relationship of each photograph to the other images that constitute the triptych. Thus each photograph says something very specific about St. Martin or Buffalo, NY even while meaning is generated in the play between the sites, in the movement between the 'homes' and the artist's body. The identity of each place then is "formed out of social interrelations, and a proportion of those interrelations—larger or smaller, depending on the time and on the place—will stretch beyond that 'place' itself" (Massey, 115). St. Martin and Buffalo can no longer be seen as having single, fixed identities that are defined as bounded and closed. Instead the identity of Buffalo, NY is formed in light of the identity of St. Martin and the various people in diasporic flux that move between the sites. Jack through her work describes what Joseph Roach has called the social and economic "vortex" of the circum-Atlantic world, "in which commodities and cultural practices changed hands many times...(Roach, 4).

Given Jack's insistence on the historical specificity of place, one would expect

that the viewer would have an easy time recognizing which site each of her photographs depicts. But "each voyage...involve[s] a re-siting of boundaries" (Trinh Minh-ha, 9). Initially, one finds oneself making easy assumptions about which photograph depicts Buffalo, NY and which is a photograph from St. Martin. *Heater*, a photograph of a space heater is obviously taken in Buffalo while *clouds*, a depiction of a startlingly blue sky with clouds, disrupted by eloquent tree branches in one corner, seems obviously a photograph from St. Martin. But Jack works against the supposed transparency of documentation implicit in photography as a medium. She works against photography's claim of purely recording things 'as is', insisting rather that "photography has always been a fantastic medium, a medium of fantasy..." (Pollock, 225). Jack foregrounds the viewer's participation in the construction of the image, showing us that the photograph is produced not only through the photographer's imagination but also through that of the viewer. The viewer interprets and thereby shapes what she sees and often what he or she sees is what they want to see. It comes as a shock that *clouds* is not taken in St. Martin, as we expect but rather it is taken in Buffalo on a wintery day. Thus Jack insists that the viewer examine his or her stereotypes around space as she repudiates them. She deliberately resists those images that characterize Buffalo only by urban blight. She refuses images that would reduce St. Martin, in accordance with the exotic impulse of tourism, to a 'foreign' tropical paradise. Hence there are no photographs of the beach in St. Martin in this series as the beach has become the predominant image that one associates with the Caribbean and its economic reliance on the tourist trade. The series thus constitutes a "strategic attack on the postcolonial tourist space" (Jack).

When there are images of lush greenery that the viewer would associate with the Caribbean, such as in *Toe Tip*, the photograph is interrupted by the artist's foot. The black booted toe tip reminds the viewer of the photographer's role as mediator, as engineer of the fantasy that belies photography's claim at objectivity. The contemporary styled boot locates the photograph firmly in the present, refusing the timelessness that often accompanies tourist images that obscure the history and present-day reality of living in the Caribbean. The photograph of the sink drain also becomes important here. The drain, with its resemblance to an eye, makes the viewer further aware of the politics embedded in the act of reading the visual. The drain as eye provides the viewer with a meta-commentary on the different ways of seeing. Often the tourist cannot really see something truly different; he or she folds difference into a rubric of the familiar in order to make sense of it. Thus often tourists make sense of new landscapes by incorporating them into what is always already recognizable—difference is consumed and digested as more of the same. Jack distinguishes this notion of seeing as consumption suggested by the drain/ eye from the type of seeing she enacts in her series. Through her 'journeying practice', she sees/ encounters difference by remaining aware, not only of the subject who is doing the observing but also of the tools of observation. Through her practice, she prevents the collapsing of difference into the same, insisting instead on the process that allows a hybrid space of newness.

All Jack's photographs of her body are taken at arm's length. For Jack, this signals the limitation of the body to stand back from itself to gain any form of distance or objectivity. The restrictive space that occurs between body and photographic lens, body and environment defines the limits of the medium, refuting any claims at objectivity. It is for this reason that many of the photographs are taken in the restricted and isolated space of the artist's apartment. Jack juxtaposes images of the fragmented and curtailed black body with images of the sky and clouds in order to foreground how restrictive a space the black body is constantly being forced to negotiate (see *Triptych*



#35). The expanse of sky that gives the viewer a sense of freedom forms a counterpoint to a constricted black body, implicitly still in search of freedom. Jack shows that the black body is still traumatized by the violence of displacement. *Bowed Head* shows her struggling under the weight of an unrealized freedom. The black body remains displaced, terrorized and in pain—bowed by the “crippling sorrow of homelessness and estrangement” (Trinh Minh-ha, 12). The search for belonging is not romanticized but rather exposed in its rawness, as one that racks the body in its attempts to negotiate historic displacement. It is for this reason that the self-portraits in *t/here* are often blurry and fragmented. The blurriness of the images stresses the impossibility of capturing and rendering whole the body that is always in search of home (see *Triptych #6*).

But Jack insists that the “fissures that exist between ruptured spaces, which are evidence of trauma, are...also sites of healing” (Jack). She photographs landscape and body, not just to document the horrors of displacement but also to suggest generative possibilities enabled by movement and the search for home. *Leg* is a particularly interesting photograph in which to examine this dynamic. The smooth expanse of flesh insists on the wonderful corporeality of the black body even as the black sock disrupts any of the sexual commodification/ exoticism that might accompany the Caribbean female body’s bare leg. *Leg* is also a brilliant pun on J.M.W. Turner’s *Slaver Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying—Typhoon Coming On* (1840) which depicts the slave ship *Zong* whose captain threw slaves overboard to their death to collect the insurance money. One of the most discussed aspects of Turner’s well known painting is the leg of a slave in the foreground. The leg belongs to an otherwise submerged slave, presumably female, who was thrown overboard, still with a shackle around her ankle. This leg in Turner’s painting is macabre—fish nibble at it as the slave drowns. Turner shows how slavery reduces the black body to the status of meat to be bought, sold, disposed of and even eaten and one is horrified by this reduction of a human being to her parts. Jack’s *Leg* writes against this history. Hers is a leg that, while acknowledging the colonial history of violent displacement, has survived the brutality of slavery with its reduction of the black body into parts. Instead Jack’s leg forms a new site of generative possibility and mobility. *Leg*, with its allusions to walking and motion, insists on an embodied resistance to the various displacements that result from the legacies of slavery and colonialism. Thus while the black body in Jack’s work testifies to the violence and trauma of otherness and displacement, it also enacts a crucial resistance to discourses of otherness that would define who belongs and who does not. Jack uses photography as a creative practice that counters the trauma of displacement to suggest the possibilities that the search for home between here, there and elsewhere can generate.

-Dr. Hershini Young-

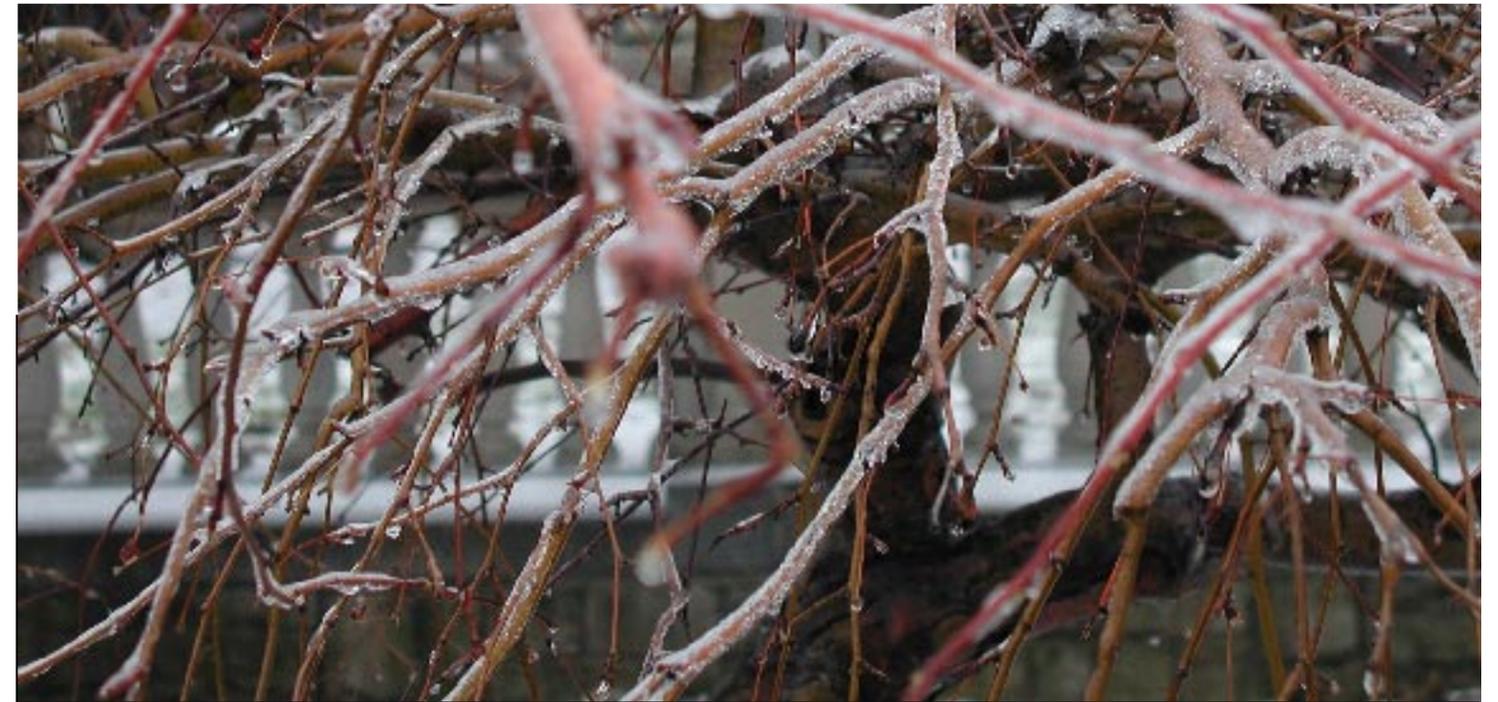
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