

The 'West Indian' Front Room: Reflections on a Diasporic Phenomenon

(Abstract)

West Indian identity was created in the context of Diasporic migration and the West Indian front room as the 'special' room designated in the domestic interiors of migrants was reserved for guests with restricted access to children. In response to the trauma of displacement, these migrants brought with them a sense of dignity, 'good grooming', aspiration and desires for social respectability as remnants of a 'colonial time' as suggested by Richard Wilk. The front rooms they created when they eventually acquired homes was based on the Victorian parlour of the Caribbean colonial elite in terms of social function and prescribed behaviour. But Diaspora as Stuart Hall's suggests has to be treated metaphorically here, since social and cultural identity is a performative process that is dialectically continuous and disruptive. West Indian migrants were engaged with modernity and aesthetically, their front room's floral patterned wallpaper and carpets, plastic covered sofas, artificial flowers, photographs, religious icons such as *The Last Supper* and the reappropriation of crochet into colourful homemade sculptural displays represents a creolisation of the Victorian parlour. To use Mary Louise Pratt's conception, the West Indian front room was therefore a transcultural 'contact zone'. Consumer fetish in this context was less an expression of social status, than the fruits of black women's labour and their desires to be seen as 'good' mothers as a counter to racist stereotypes of flawed women. In fact the aesthetics of the West Indian front room and its maintenance raises issues of 'good grooming' amongst people of African descent and echoes Daniel Miller's duality: *transcendent* and *transient*: 'artificial things which are viewed as long-lasting, and things covered over which are seen as cherished for the future.' Social entertainment was done publicly in the Caribbean, whereas revelry for West Indian migrants took place to their front rooms as they were also excluded from dancehalls and pubs in England. Their front rooms also became a space for safe physical refuge in a highly racial climate. *The West Indian Front Room* exhibition curated by Michael McMillan (Geffrye Museum 2005-06) attempts to critique the heritage orientated representation of West Indian migration, which to use Krista A Thompson's and Leon Wright's perspective is a 'framed ideal' of the 'tropical picturesque'. The legacy of the West Indian front room in a Black British context for instance is that it reveals how diasporic identities have been contested through inter-generational identifications, disavowal and the negotiation of gendered practices in the domestic domain.