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Nuff Love: From Me to You

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art
at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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Nuff Love,
From Me to You and Jamaica too...

To Denise
from your daughter

And to the people who made this two-year journey happen.

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Abstract

The thesis exhibition, *Nuff Love: From Me to You*, explores the profound impact of diasporic memory on identity within the family structure, particularly for those who were born after immigration. This unpacking of memories is achieved through photographs, collages, and installations that reveal the distant and absent attributes that reside within the home. As a second-generation American of Afro-Jamaican descent, this thesis navigates how the dual identity becomes too complex and is never allowed to exist in a binary state. The constant state of in-betweenness between both cultures led to further questioning of selfhood beyond the Caribbean identity maintained by generations in the family space, which is not just transnational. The themes of alienation, assimilation, and authenticity are often overlooked but are important to address. By combining lens-based practices with textiles, the exhibition aims to provoke conversation about a shared interconnectedness among immigrant experiences that could potentially blur the lines of what constitutes a transnational identity, particularly for Black/Brown communities.

Nuff Love: From Me to You reveals we are all connected by complex common threads found within our family memories.

Introduction

“It’s like a photo album. It’s like our missing pieces of the puzzle [are] in your work. It’s like I’m connected with someone in Africa I have never seen but they look like me or they talk like me. There’s somebody in Louisiana, somebody in California, somebody in Jamaica. And it’s like “Isn’t that...Aunt Betty? Isn’t that Shadonna? Isn’t that my cousin? Isn’t that Uncle Mick? It’s like my family is coming back together, [it]is gelled back together in some kind of way. And it’s not just the look of what people look like, it’s the spirit of it. It’s like our spirits are connecting us like you connect them to pieces of the puzzle that’s missing in our history. It’s like a gap that was missing and you’re just linking it back together. So when we do that, it’s like, oh man, we [are] actually putting back our heritage. It’s like we’re fitting the pieces together. It’s a journey of, you know, connecting the dots. And I love that. I love being a part of that. And it makes it easy. And when you believe that, it makes the journey so much better.”¹

As a second-generation child of Jamaican immigrants who migrated to the United States in 1990, my experience growing up was shaped by the blend of American and Jamaican cultures in my household. I was born in the United States, but my parents brought with them their Jamaican heritage, traditions, and values that they still instill in me and my siblings. I grew up listening to what could be a blend of both English and patois, enjoying traditional Jamaican food, and celebrating Jamaican holidays alongside American ones. As a child of immigrants, I faced challenges in navigating two cultures and feeling as if I didn't fully belong in either. My parents had to work hard to provide for our family in a new country, and I often felt like an outsider amongst my American peers when I couldn't fully relate to their experiences. This continuation of being a part of a Caribbean and American culture, but not fully fitting into either can be a nuanced experience. To be American, the culture is often defined by the sense of individualism, while in the Caribbean it is placed greater on community and family. Myself and others, who straddle two cultures can experience feelings of cultural dissonance and may struggle to reconcile the different values and expectations of each. It can also be a source of strength and resilience, providing a unique perspective on the world and a deeper understanding of what it means to be a part of a greater collective.

This has led to the visual story of *Nuff Love: From Me to You*. This thesis focuses on the generational connection from the past to the present. This Caribbean presence in a space captures how intergenerational the immigrant experience is and the effects on the children, who have

¹ Dana Brown, Deana Lawson sister, Quote from Lawson’s Centropy Film by Deana Lawson

subconsciously created a sense of displacement and further loss for a place that wouldn't claim them as their own. It also interrogates the relationship between the home and how certain things are continued or passed down through generations. But this isn't always a trope. To counteract that, I begin to create my version of what traditions/rituals could have been in place of what was lost. While contemplating how much visibility is appropriate to give away.

Touching: The “Black” Vernacular Family Image



Fig. 1, Personal Archive, My Mother, 1980s



Fig. 2, Personal Archive, My Father, 1990s.

Black vernacular photos serve as a powerful means of challenging stereotypes and narratives that are associated with Black people. By offering a counter-narrative to the dominant white gaze, these photographs underscore the complexity of Black experiences. Through them, black individuals can reaffirm their humanity, dignity, and agency, while also resisting the erasure and dehumanization that has historically been a part of their story. Essentially, black vernacular photos are not simply pictures; rather, they are cultural artifacts that embody those who are encapsulated within.

Family photos are one of the vehicles that narrate our history through generations of genealogy and the idea of a visual representation of the community as a reflection of the home. In Black culture, they are a vital component of the black home and image. They serve as a tangible representation of everything we have rebuilt as a community. I cannot seem to remember my first encounter with my family's photos but I do remember when I became aware of where I came from while looking at them. I look at photographs of my young mother (Fig.1) and father (Fig. 2), I witnessed them at a young vibrant stage of their lives before I existed. However, their sense of vulnerability regarding their individuality persisted, as they departed from loved ones before embarking on their journey to a foreign land. They made efforts to take

with them what they could, ensuring that their photographs from the past would aid in securing a stable future in the United States. Upon stumbling upon these very photographs years later, I am left to ponder my own identity in relation to their past.

To start this process, I wasn't sure if the amount of information from my family archives would have been enough, both physically and figuratively. The beginning stage was collecting various source materials: family archives and textiles. This act of searching, acknowledging, and gathering "things" was a reflection of my thoughts and the history that wasn't transparent. I questioned, "What could be found in another family's photograph other than my own?" Once I obtain them, what will become of them when in my possession? Am I the keeper of these "keepsakes"? In the documentary, *Through the Lens Darkly* directed by Thomas Allen Harris, during an interview with visual artist Carrie Mae Weems discussing the use of 19th-century photographic archives of Black slaves, she reflects on using, "I couldn't leave where I found them if I could reconstruct them, build context around them, new life, new meaning – something questioning their past while propelling them into the future, responsibility to that family"². As Weems stated during her process of using historical archives, I was in a similar position. After acknowledging this, my way of thinking shifted to how I could not only "decolonize" these materials but also myself. To have this transference of their original origins and historical meanings especially the found Black family images to then tittering on visibility/invisibility when it comes to vernacular photography, especially Black photography, what still gives me the right to use and display these images as my own?

"Accordingly, now that the term "vernacular photography" is firmly established in the lexicon. I proposed that we henceforth abandon it altogether and instead speak only of "photography." At least that way we can entirely focus our critical attention on what photographs do, wherever they are found, rather than on what they are, or what they were. For, it is only by engaging with what photographs are actually doing in the present that we can mount an effective argument about what they still might become." (Pg. 33, Camp T, Hirsch M, Hochberg GZ, Wallis B, Azoulay A)³

² Carrie Mae Weems, *Through a Lens Darkly*. First Run Features,; 2017.

³ Camp T, Hirsch M, Hochberg GZ, Wallis B, Azoulay A. *Imagining Everyday Life : Engagements with Vernacular Photography*. First edition. (Camp T, Hirsch M, Hochberg GZ, Wallis B, eds.). Steidl Verlag; 2020.

These photos served their original purpose when they were initially created but now it's more important to continue their narrative and to think only about it. For many black families, these photos hold immense cultural and sentimental value, as they document family histories, traditions, and legacies. They provide a way for families to connect with their past and to pass down stories and memories to future generations. In many cases, these photos are the only visual records of important moments and milestones in black families' lives, such as weddings (Fig.3), graduations, and family reunions. My first thought was "The more photos, the stronger the narrative will be " for me to create this atmosphere of what I think Blackness is and its impact on the self. Using this thought to create my deconstructed collage piece; could act as an extension of my interruption of the diaspora with less emphasis on the Caribbean but the combination of my family and these "ghost" faces of other Black homes (Fig.18).



Fig. 3, Collection Mother's archives and found archives, 2021

Tina Campt argues that photographs can evoke sensory experiences beyond visual perception, activating memory through other senses such as touch. Campt views photographs as complex, multi-dimensional, and non-singular objects that can generate a range of sensory effects "both a sensibility and a range of sensory affect they display and invoke in others"⁴. To illustrate this point, Campt refers to Brian Massumi's definition of "affect/affection" from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, in which affect refers to the capacity of an

⁴ Campt, Tina. *Image Matters : Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe*. 13

object to both affect and be affected⁵. In this sense, a photograph can act as an anchor that affects the viewer or owner. In the context of the circulation of Black vernacular photographs, this affective relationship extends beyond mere documentation, the possible effect of resonating with the African diaspora. In *Nuff Love: From Me to You*, the use of the madras fabric in the photographs evokes the sensory experience of touch, registering both the emotional and tactile qualities of the photographic object. This tactile sensation plays with the viewer's sense of touch, generating a desire to physically interact with the material depicted in the photograph.

As I dived deeper into the archives, I found myself feeling increasingly connected to the stories and individuals captured in the photographs by merely touching them. I have become the keeper of these keepsakes. The tactile experience of holding and touching the photographs, and feeling the textures and weight of the paper, brought a new dimension to my relationship with the images. This reinforced the power of photography to connect us to the past and each other, and it continued to inspire the ways in which we can use visual media to tell meaningful stories and create connections across time and space.

The Chosen Cloth

Textiles can be a powerful means of preserving history and culture. In terms of dual consciousness, both patterns and prints can also be used to explore the tension between Black and other cultural identities. For example, a piece could incorporate elements of African, American, and Caribbean designs, or could just use contrasting colors or patterns to represent the dual nature of black identity. In the Black diaspora, these heavily designed fabrics continue to essentially be the dressings of the home and its dwellers. Most homes were “bound to notions of Europeanness, such as respectability, aspiration, and memories of a colonial past that formed this creative act of creolized cultural expression”⁶ through various mediums but here it would be photography and textile. In many African countries, there is a long tradition of using fabrics and the photography of these fabrics to remember certain occasions, events, or social tiers. “The ‘Wax Prints’ that were once factory-made fabrics that have been imported from England, Holland, and Switzerland to West and Central Africa since the end of the nineteenth century.”⁷

⁵ Campt, Tina. *Image Matters : Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe*. 14

⁶ Checinska, Christine. “Aesthetics of Blackness? Cloth, Culture, and the African Diasporas.” 124.

⁷ Kerstin Pinther & Julia Ng. “Textiles and Photography in West Africa, *Critical Interventions*.” 106.

These wax prints are significant to both the culture and content. The strip-woven cloth, Kente (Fig.4), was the Asante people of Ghana and the Ewe people of Ghana and Togo, being the best known of all African textiles⁸. With its origins being in a festive dress (Fig.5) from the former Gold Coast of West Africa, this textile was adorned by men and women. Similar to the individuals it represents, this fabric gained popularity in various regions around the globe during the 1960s, due to its Afrocentric identity and association with Pan-Africanism across the African diaspora.



Fig. 4 - Reappropriated “Kente cloth (Asante and Ewe peoples)” of Ethnic Cotton Fabric African Kente Print

⁸ Ross, Doran H., and Agbenyega. Adedze. “Wrapped in Pride : Ghanaian Kente and African American Identity”. 4.

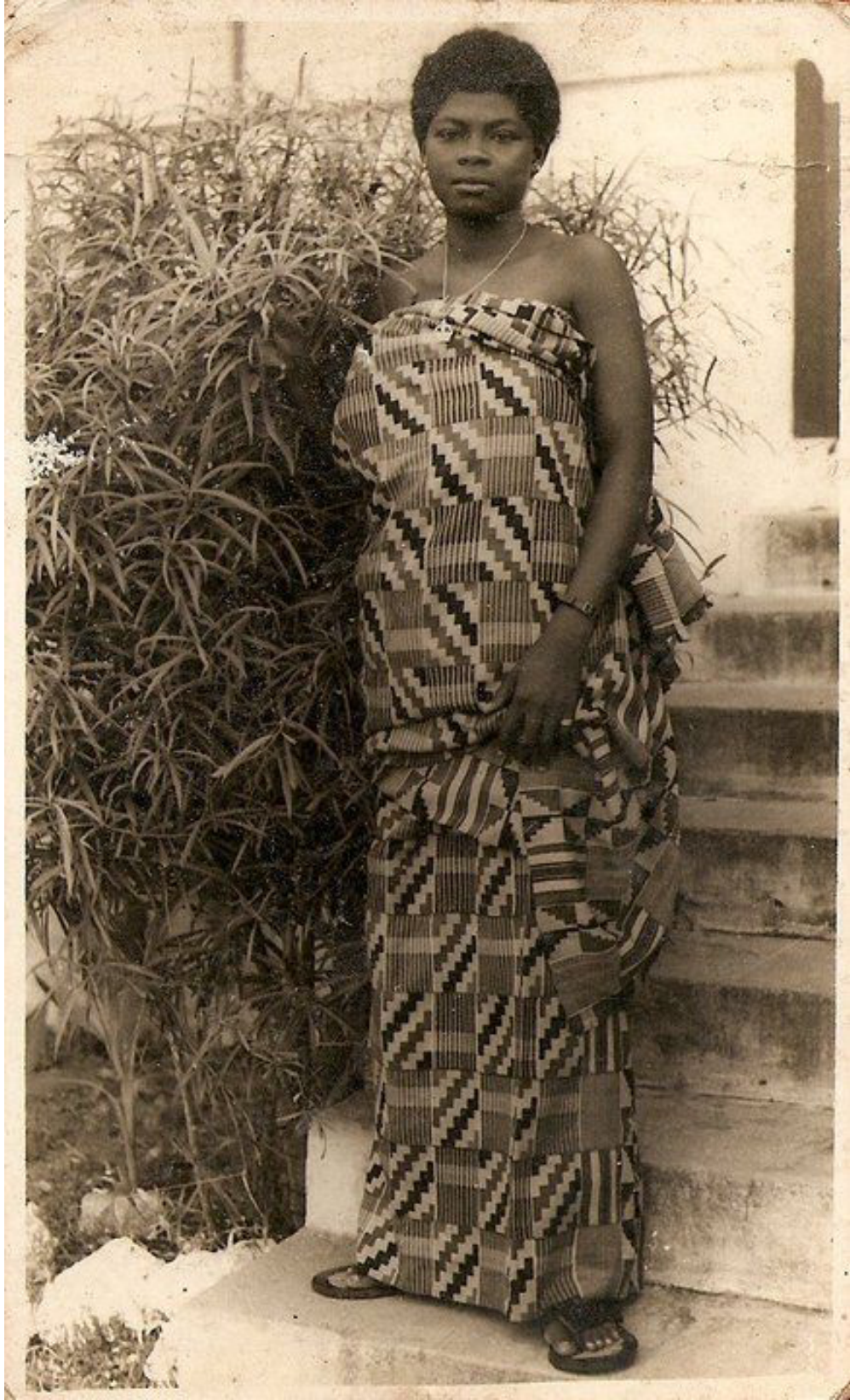


Fig. 5, Woman's dress in Kente fabric

During the course of my research to identify a fabric from the Caribbean possessing comparable qualities to kente cloth, I was introduced to the Jamaican "bandana," or Madras, print. What sparked my interest in this particular material was its history. Upon Jamaica gaining independence in 1962, a national costume was created which featured a peasant-style design made from fabric sourced from India, specifically lightweight plaid cotton known as "Bandana" or Madras⁹ (Fig.6). Originally, the fabric was cut and sold in squares as handkerchiefs. It is said that a shipment of this fabric intended for Bombay, India mistakenly ended up in Bombay, Manchester in Jamaica. Slave owners then purchased and distributed the fabric to their slaves, who used it to create head ties and long skirts for festive occasions¹⁰ (Fig.7). The national costume is typically reserved for cultural events and is not considered everyday attire. As such, the developing modern garments are shaped by the unique cultural experiences of Jamaican people, with a particular emphasis on African roots and cultural accents from other groups. These garments would be suitable for national events and could be adapted to meet various occasions and preferences.



Fig. 6, Traditional Jamaican Bandana/Madras textile

⁹ McKenzie, Jeniffer, O. 2

¹⁰ McKenzie, Jeniffer, O. 2



Fig.7, Women dressed in Jamaican Bandana Print

Kente and Madras prints share certain similarities in terms of their visual characteristics. Both fabrics are known for their bright colors and bold patterns, and they are frequently used in traditional African clothing. Additionally, they are both lightweight fabrics, making them ideal for warmer weather. However, while kente is made using a unique weaving technique with strips of silk and cotton, Madras is a printed cotton fabric. However, what was particularly noteworthy was their parallel employment of Pan-African color schemes, characterized by the prominent use of yellow, black, green, and red. Also known as the Marcus Garvey colors (Fig.8) through the movement.



Fig. 8, Madras Plaid print with Marcus Garvey colors

The interest lies in the process of how textiles evolve beyond their homogeneous formal structure, resulting in fragments that acquire a diasporic quality for those living outside of Africa or the Caribbean, thus existing within a liminal state of in-betweenness. This is further pushed within this thesis as it also speaks to the historical “Otherness” captured through a colonial lens, both subject and textile. Moving as objects that appear to be companions to the aesthetic of Blackness, through the African gaze, were able to cross invisible borders and act as “placeholders.. that may be the gap between performance and memory or between African histories and the new audiences for African objects elsewhere”¹¹. Upon analysis of the characteristics inherent in photography and textiles, certain facets highlight the performative nature and the memory-imbued qualities of the materials. In this manner, the material substance transforms into a tangible repository of lost cultural practices or historical eras, metamorphosing into an emotive artifact available for external scrutiny.

Choosing these two patterns was based on their historical weight and how they can indirectly intersect one another. My approach in selecting the madras pattern involved the utilization of this Jamaican symbol as a means of conducting a personal ritualistic practice. By adorning both the individuals in the archival material and myself in the madras pattern, I sought

¹¹ Peffer, John. “Africa’s Diasporas of Images”. 355.

to establish a reconnection with Jamaican culture via the medium of materiality. Rather than altering the original context, I intended to expand it by integrating my own unique perspective into the cultural space. By covering myself in the madras pattern (Fig.16), I sought to establish a recognizable entry point into Jamaican culture, so individuals observing the pattern would recognize a shared cultural identity. The kente represents our link to the homeland and even though we may never return, we will never forget home. Attaining a sense of oneness with the materials, where the patterns acted as signposts guiding me along the path to a greater understanding and acceptance of my Black identity, held great significance for me.

Tracking Histories: Materials and Patterns To the Body

The correlation between Black/African photography and the incorporation of fabric as a component of the photographic frame, both of which play an integral role in shaping the African diasporic experience. There are also diasporic attributes that have been recognized or reinterpreted throughout Black contemporary photography. Both materials have their own vernacular space but they function similarly in the diasporic sphere. John Pepper's consideration of "art objects from Africa as themselves diaspora, as opposed to the traditional view of African diaspora's as a spread of persons, as containers of cultures, around the globe"¹² as a different mode of viewing how objects circulate then are activated. In other words, we as artists could potentially be what activates not only them but the narrative. I then question myself, "Similar to people of the diaspora, can these art objects (photographs and textiles) be diasporic?" The term "diaspora" generally refers to a group of people who have been displaced from their original homeland and spread out across different regions of the world. However, the concept of diaspora can also be applied to objects, including textiles.

Jamaica: The need to keep my culture alive

"What is the point of culture? Culture functions ultimately to ensure the preservation and continuity of a people."¹³

¹² Pepper, John. "Africa's Diasporas of Images". 339.

¹³ Adichie, Chimamanda N. *We Should All Be Feminists*. , 2015. pg. 45

As a second-generation Afro-Jamaican-American, maintaining a connection with my family's cultural heritage is of utmost importance to me. In my quest to acknowledge and preserve this cultural legacy, I turned to family archives and African textiles as conduits for the transmission of cultural knowledge. By delving into the familial archives, I uncovered a wealth of images that not only spoke to the history of my family but also to the larger history of the Caribbean and its people. These images became touchstones that allowed me to traverse the vast cultural terrain and discover aspects of my family's culture that had hitherto remained hidden. In a similar vein, African textiles played an integral role in the manifestation of my cultural identity. The textures, colors, and patterns of these textiles provided me with a tangible connection to the African continent, which in turn served as a vital link to my ancestral roots. Through the utilization of these textiles, I am able to create a visual dialogue between my Caribbean heritage, African ancestry, and absent American presence ultimately facilitating a deeper understanding and appreciation of the three.

Through incorporating the vibrant and distinctive colors of the Jamaican flag that hold a deep cultural significance for those of Jamaican descent, serving as a visual reminder of the country's history. As a Jamaican-American, I have always felt a strong connection to these colors and the legacy they represent. When paired with the reprinted archives, I used these colors as cultural shadows, a subtle nod to the enduring legacy of Jamaican culture (Fig.9).



Fig. 9, Katherine Thompson, “Where my Fam at: Stage 3”, 2023. Installment photo.

By incorporating the colors of the Jamaican flag into the work, I can pay homage to the lineage of my ancestors, while simultaneously adding my unique perspective to the cultural dialogue. Utilizing these colors as cultural shadows, I can construct a visual language that conveys the intricacies and subtleties of Jamaican culture, while also situating the essence within the individuals captured in the photographs. By infusing these colors, I can keep the cultural heritage of Jamaica alive and thriving, passing it down to future generations and ensuring that it remains an integral part of the diasporic experience. In essence, the use of cultural shadows serves as a powerful means of cultural transmission, enabling the legacy of Jamaican culture to endure for generations to come.

The combination of family archives and African textiles enabled me to keep my family's Caribbean culture alive and thriving, despite the barriers of distance and time. By utilizing these cultural artifacts as conduits for the transmission of cultural knowledge, I then maintain a connection with my cultural heritage, while simultaneously honoring the legacy of those who came before me.

Large Format + Studio Photography

The incorporation of a large format 4x5 camera constituted an additional layer of photographic depth to the project and played a crucial role in contributing to the ceremonial process of constructing a personal archive. I intended to adopt the fundamental aspects of how familial photographs are produced and apply them to the process of using a large-format camera. But that grew rather difficult in the process. I sought inspiration from photography in the studios of West and Central African photographers, Ibrahim Sanlé Sory (Fig.10), Francis K Honny (Fig.11), Malick Sidibé (Fig.12), Oumar Ly (Fig.13), and many others during the 1960s and 1970s. Mali photographers, Malick Sidibé and Seydou Keïta were Africa's most celebrated artists ahead of their time and were the pioneers of African black and white studio photography. My curiosity was piqued by their approach to conveying their culture through printed motifs with their subject. Against the backdrop of other cultural symbols prevalent in popular culture, the use of textiles in conjunction with distinct posing and gestures takes on an added significance as a means of expressive decolonization. The group arrangements and photographic poses are influenced by sculptural traditions.



Fig. 10, Ibrahim Sanlé Sory, *Les sœurs "jumelles?"*, 1975, Bobo Dioulasso



Fig. 11, Francis K. Honny (b. Elmina, Ghana, 1914–1998) Portrait of man and woman, Elmina, Ghana, circa 1975.



Fig. 12, Malick Sidibe, Quatre amies au studio - 1976



Fig. 13, Oumar Ly - Untitled, Bush Portrait, Madonna, Podor, Senegal, 1963

I took this opportunity to use my mother as my decolonizing subject, here in an American environment, her home. Through the act of relinquishing control of the shutter release to my mother, I gave her agency over her own identity. The resulting images showcase her in a state of ease and simplicity, while clothed in contemporary clothing paired with an interpretation of the traditional madras pattern (Fig.14). The fabric itself, reduced to a commodified entity, becomes an integral part of the composition, blurring the boundaries between the human form and the material world. Together, they form a sculptural gesture that challenges the viewer's perception of where my mother's body ends and the fabric begins, inviting contemplation on the nature of identity and materiality. (Fig.15). This visual structure also relied on the "...continuity, another ideal in photographic image making, preserving the unity of the pattern by having lines....meet in such a way that the people appear to be one cloth."¹⁴ I find utilizing this technique adds another dimension of materiality, both within and beyond the photographic frame.



¹⁴ Kerstin Pinther & Julia Ng. "Textiles and Photography in West Africa, Critical Interventions." 115



Fig.16, Katherine Thompson, Jamaican bandana & I, '91-'93" 2023.
Archival Inkjet Print.
105" x 44" (35" x 44" *individual frame*)

Through the lens of the camera, I position myself as the subject, utilizing it as a powerful tool for decolonization (Fig.16). Enveloped in the fabric of my culture, I become a living embodiment of my heritage, forging a deep connection with those who have come before me and are captured within the frame. The tactile presence of the material serves as a powerful symbol of my identity, both within and outside of the photographic space, reinforcing my sense of belonging to Jamaica. But the ground I stand on is American. Yet, within the very fibers of my being, they run through my veins. The resulting visual expression of this dichotomy serves as a powerful embodiment of the complicated and often fraught relationship I have with my dual identity. To take it a step further, I incorporate my family and myself into the work (Fig.17). This creates a moment where all identities are defined and the relationships are both evident and safeguarded. The visible, clear signifier is the mask that I wear while shielding and defining me. While subtly shifting the viewer's ingrained gaze, I aim to create a new perspective that challenges the preconceived notions of identity and belonging.



Fig. 14, Katherine Thompson, "Self-Portrait of Denise", 2023. Archival Inkjet. 29"x 37"



Fig. 15, Katherine Thompson, "Self Portrait of Denise 2" 2023, 2023. Archival Inkjet. 29"x 37"



Fig. 17, Katherine Thompson, "Mother and I", 2022. Archival inkjet print. 42" x 53".

The process of large-format photography, with its limited accessibility, reinforces the perception of it as an exclusive and elite form of photography, particularly for Black artists. By capturing Black and Brown bodies through this medium, I am subverting this notion and exposing the harm inflicted on these communities by the history of photography, which has often documented them in an exploitative and dehumanizing manner. For centuries, marginalized groups have been objectified, commodified, and dehumanized in the West by becoming known as the “Other”. By reclaiming the black body, we can challenge the dominant narratives that have historically oppressed and erased black lives and celebrate the diversity of black culture.

Reappropriating, Rephotographing, Repurposing

In my search for a visual language that speaks to this identity, I have turned to the reappropriation, rephotographing, and repurposing of Black archives and fabrics. By utilizing these materials, I am subverting the traditional power dynamics present within the realm of photography and providing another narrative that speaks to the Black experience while exploring my proximity to Blackness. Taking control of the photographic process, I am then able to reappropriate and repurpose these images as my own.

Reappropriate to Storytell

"Stories matter. Our personal stories matter. We learn from them and change from them. They provide connective tissue that allows us to explore questions of home in historical, political, and contemporary contexts. Stories serve as a mirror that can raise levels of consciousness and deepen public understanding of shared values, histories, and principles. Exchanging stories helps us contextualize and participate in this web of relation..."¹⁵

¹⁵ Shields, Tanya L. pg. 3

Through the inclusion of other images in my process, I have gained a profound perspective that has allowed me to cherish the memories of others as if they were my own. The physicality of these photographs, ranging from the 1940s to the early 2000s, with inscriptions in languages and figures of speech that transcend my current understanding, evoke a yearning to connect with a time and culture that was once distant to me. "Sharing stories reminds us of other stories and creates a chain or web that reveals the ways we are connected and, just as often, how we differ."

¹⁶ By arranging these images in a manner that mimics a family gallery wall and removing the additional barrier of the frame, the photographs are allowed to metaphorically breathe. Their vernacular nature highlights the connection we share through the act of storytelling. Preserving the original form of the photography is vital to uphold the integrity of the individuals captured within the frame. The shape serves not only as a physical barrier to protect those within but also as a symbolic boundary that demarcates their individual and collective identity from the external world. Fig. 18 was the first construction of this notion, printed on adhesive photography paper, the act of the images encountering one another on the same plane. I then create my own visual story of people who could have been family. This also visually captures the ideology of a shared interconnected consciousness mentioned by Stuart Hall during the Pan-African movement.

¹⁶ Shields, Tanya L. pg. 10



Fig. 18, Katherine Thompson, "Where my Fam at Stage 1", 2022. Collage. 42"x 50"

Rephotograph to Alter

The act of rephotographing myself, my family, archives, and fabric serves as a means of reclaiming agency over our narratives. This process allows me to investigate and decenter dominant narratives that have historically oppressed Black and Brown communities. By the act of rephotographing, I assert this multi-cultural identity, and Blackness, of the communities that I belong to. Ultimately, this process is not about erasing the histories of those who came before me, but rather about building upon them to create a more inclusive and accurate representation of our shared experiences.

We follow this by rephotographing the reappropriation. This was achieved by scanning and reprinting the source materials, including images and textiles. I sought to photograph them outside of the normal context of what constitutes a photo. With this unconventional approach, it gave another contextual layer to what or who was being scanned. But the original, what happened? The original image or textile was, at times, not physically present. I considered this approach as a method to enhance the safeguarding of the original copy while providing the audience with the reprinted appropriation, thereby granting them access and subsequently denying it. Fig.19 is one of the multiple pieces that exude this process. It is comprised of various regional Dutch Wax Prints and the madras, scanned and then reprinted to be treated as if it were actual fabric. The reappropriated fabric then prompts the viewer to contemplate not only the physicality of the work but also their relationship with cultural artifacts and the ethics of their consumption.



Fig.19, Studio shot of collaged textile piece, 2023

Repurposing Text to Reclaim

As a method of repurposing, it becomes a form of reclamation, as it helps to keep the narrative from becoming singular or fixed. As I progressed through this process, I began to view it as a means of liberation and deepening my understanding of my heritage. The use of the

Pan-African colors, also known as the "Garvey colors," is a constant variable throughout the series. Consisting of the colors: red, black, green, and gold/yellow, they are symbolic of the Pan-African movement. The colors represent different concepts:

red for the bloodshed,

black for the people,

green for the land, and

gold/yellow for the sunshine.

To replicate the impact of these colors on the island, it was necessary to infuse them into specific pieces. Laser engraving the corresponding concepts of each color into matching acrylic sheets generated another perspective for the viewer to delve into (Fig.20-21). They became textual windows without an additional image layer usually associated with a framed piece.



Fig. 20, RGBY, 2023. Engraved Acrylic, Yellow, 19"x 25" Fig. 21, RGBY, 2023. Engraved Acrylic, Green, 19"x 25"

Though some did not require an image (Fig. 22), others did. In Fig. 22 and Fig. 23, the marriage of the text and image further pushed the meaning of the color concept. The “Red is for the Bloodshed” statement heightens as it is juxtaposed with an archive of a man with flowers as if he is in a position to commemorate those who fought for liberation. While “Black is for the People” is paired with an archive dated around the late 1980-90s of a young couple capturing a moment of celebration or occasion. This particular artwork stands out from the rest because of the transparent acrylic material, allowing the image behind it to be visible (Fig. 23). The accompanying text serves as a counternarrative, challenging the notion that Blackness is often rendered invisible in society. To take it to the next level, the images begin to push and expand outside of the frame, becoming a soft sculpture that mimics the folds and drapes of fabric (Fig. 24). The words maintain their didacticism and significant meaning across the diaspora, but they are now reclaimed through the lens of a second-generation child.



Fig. 22, RGBY, 2023. Engraved Acrylic, Red, 19"x 25"



Fig. 23. RGBY, 2023. Engraved Acrylic, Black, 19"x 25"



Fig. 24. RGBY, 2023. Engraved Acrylic, Black, 19"x 25" (Detail Image)

Reclaiming the narrative involved utilizing the familiar space of family archives. Upon reviewing my archives, I discovered a barrier that impeded my full access: the messages left behind. These textual footprints served as indicators of the past, providing valuable insight into our family history. My father was in the military and often was stationed at army bases in different locations in and outside the United States. He wrote messages, accompanied by a photo, to my mother about longing and waiting to return to his family (Fig. 25, Fig. 26). I remove the text from its back and bring it into the foreground by enlarging and recontextualizing it alongside the image, allowing it to become an integral part of the narrative and giving it a new significance. As engraved in Fig. 27, the words serve as an external element of a decontextualized frame, simultaneously serving as a form of protection around the images, which are enclosed within their own four sides.

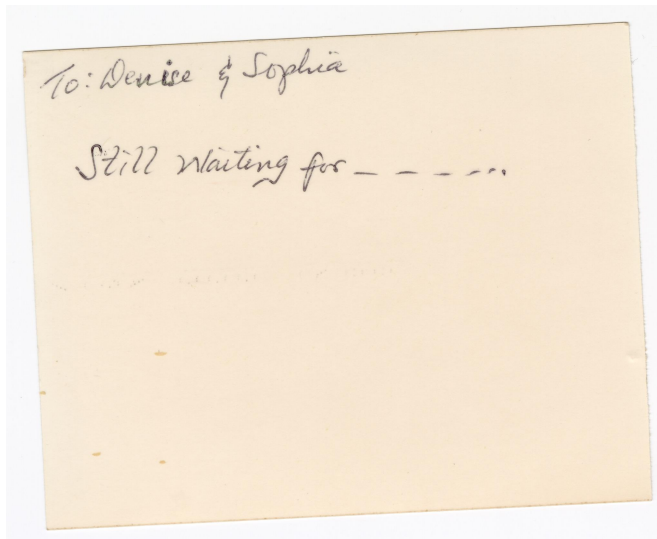


Fig. 25, Personal Archive

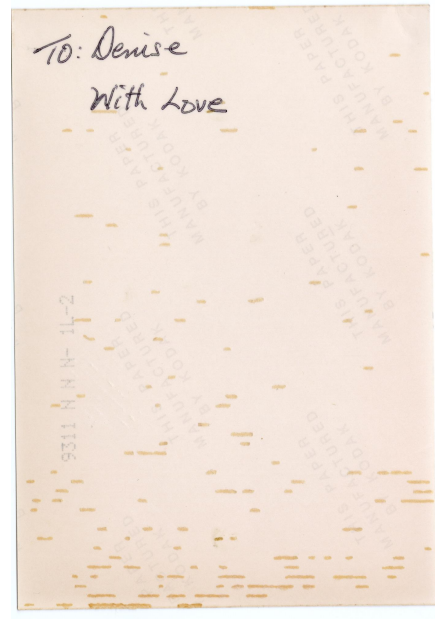


Fig.26, Personal Archive



Fig. 27, Katherine Thompson, "Nuff Love From Me to You" 2023. Archive reprints on adhesive vinyl, Wood, Paint, Fabric, and Thread. 81" x 35 ¼" x 29".

The act of removing the Olan Mills studio logo from a found archive and engraving it on frosted acrylic with my photos was a deliberate choice. It was a way to reclaim ownership of my image and time to challenge the notion that a corporate entity has more control over my representation than I do (Fig. 28, Fig. 29, Fig.30). The Olan Mills logo served as a reminder of the commercialization and commodification of photography, where personal images become standardized and mass-produced. By removing it, I am asserting my agency as both the subject and creator of the photograph. It is also a way to question the power dynamics of representation and to disrupt the idea that certain images are more legitimate or valuable because they are backed by a recognizable brand. Ultimately, it is a statement of my right to control how I am seen and how my image is circulated in the world.



Fig. 28, Katherine Thompson, Jamaican bandana & I, '91-'93", Archival Inkjet Print. 35" x 44"



Fig. 29, Katherine Thompson, Jamaican bandana & I, '91-'93", Archival Inkjet Print. 35" x 44"



Fig. 30, Katherine Thompson, Jamaican bandana & I, '91-'93", Archival Inkjet Print. 35" x 44"

burying/layering/sewing these faces, bodies, textiles

There is no denying that photography and fabric are tied once placed together into one medium with multi-layered elements. The technique of layering serves to reflect the metaphorical narrative and generate a visual impact that functions as a barrier or means of camouflage for the individuals depicted in the photograph. Placing one image on top of another, it further creates a sense of depth and texture. This technique helps to obscure or protect certain elements of the image, in this case, the identities of the people in the photographs.

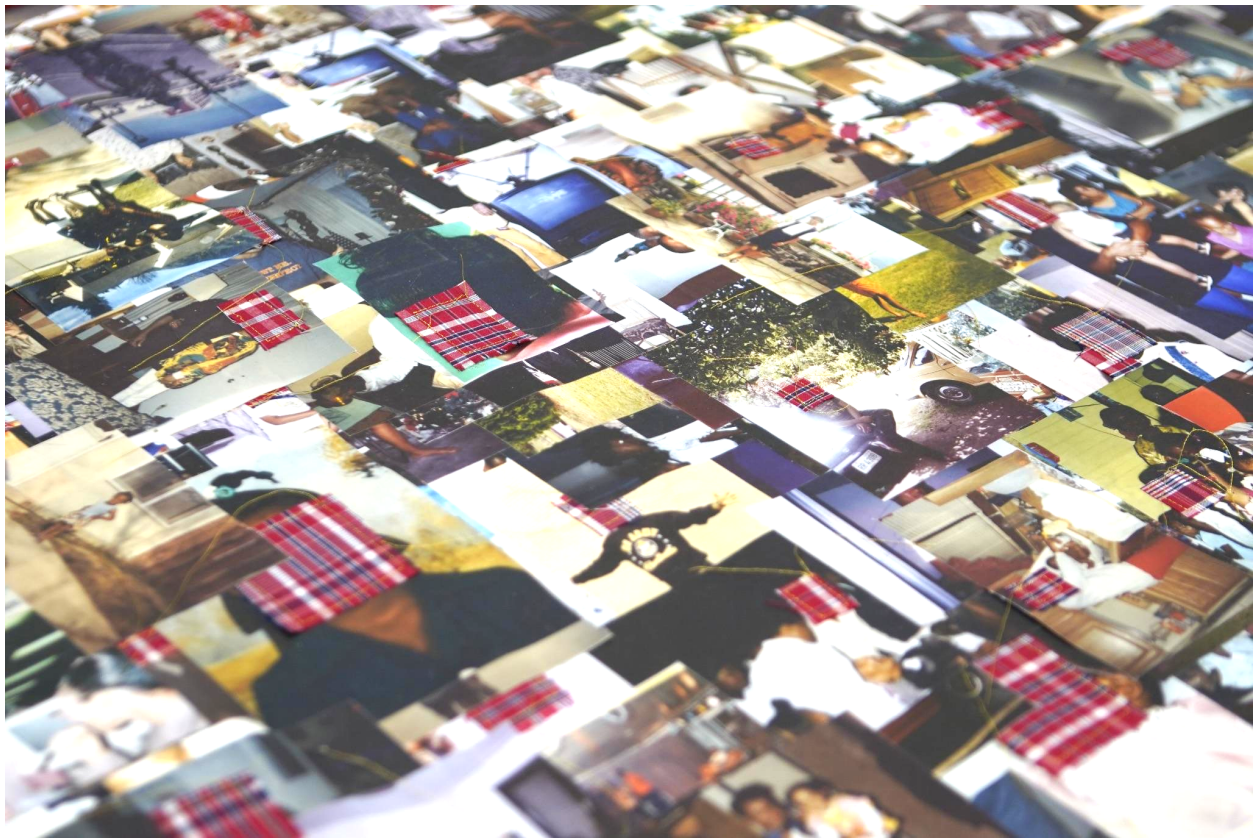


Fig. 31, Katherine Thompson, “Nuff Love From Me to You” 2023. Archive reprints on adhesive vinyl, Wood, Paint, Fabric, and Thread. 81” x 35 ¼” x 29”. (Detail Image)

“Nuff Love From Me to You” (Fig. 31) emulates that layering technique of concealment while turning into a commentary on vernacular images of Black life. Though consisting mainly of personal and found archives, the works also incorporate elements of cultural symbolism of the madras pattern as another layering material, inviting the viewer to engage with the larger themes of identity, memory, and belonging. The results are a multi-layered, collaged family “gallery”

that functions as an anchor that connects each piece in the space. The piece undergoes a transformation into a red deconstructed informal gesture with characteristics of a table, engraved with lettering, which provides the viewer with a metaphorical seat. I find this similar act of building up layers and then letting them breathe, and continue interacting with one another, so the dialogue is a constant from visual artists Lyle Ashton Harris and Deana Lawson (Fig.35). In *Blow IV* (Fig.32) Harris “...[creates] a dynamic environment of hundreds of images, in varying degrees of scale and detail, layered rhythmically in relation to one another, each one meticulously placed so as to activate, or perhaps even act out, a complex network of meaning.”¹⁷ The ritual of assemblage causes the images to either diminish or strengthen the integrity of the deliberate construction and arrangement of images, materials, and text. This process of building is an intentional act of storytelling of experiences that intersect within a collective.



Fig. 32, Lyle Ashton Harris, *Blow Up IV (Sevilla)* 2006.

¹⁷ Coblenz, Cassandra, Anthony Appiah, Senam Okudzeto, and Lyle Ashton Harris. 50.



Fig. 35. Deana Lawson, *Assemblage*, 2021



Fig. 33, Katherine Thompson, Untitled Self Portrait 2023. Archival Inkjet Print. 35" x 44".

Physically sewing the Madras fabric into the face represents more than just the use of material, but rather another layer of a cultural veil that symbolizes complex dual identities.

Sewed with gold thread (Fig. 33 and Fig.34) is an aesthetic choice. Gold in this context, represents the light connecting and shining on. At the beginning of Krista Thompson's *Shine: The Visual Economy of Light in African Diaspora Aesthetic*, she references mainly Jamaican dancehalls, the mode of light, and its role in making those visible and un-visible. "Light has the power to bring geographic, transcendence, and social ascendance."¹⁸ Thompson describes her time in the dancehalls with dancers trying to capture the light of the videographer (same with photographers) to be seen. The same message is conveyed through the gold thread, which, when light refracts off it, creates a shimmering effect on the person in the frame.



Fig. 34, Katherine Thompson, Unknown Woman Studio Portrait, 2023.
Archive reprint on adhesive paper, Paint, Fabric, and Thread.
7" x 8" (Image print size), Install size 4 ½' x 10'

¹⁸ Thompson, Krista A. 6

By sewing the Kente pattern with the Madras, Unknown Woman Studio Portrait, 2023 (Fig. 34) showcases the juxtaposed yet parallel identities, which are interconnected while simultaneously disestablishing the third identity. The opposing colors or patterns symbolize the dichotomous nature emanating from a single origin, while the individual is being viewed as an extension of both cloths.

Conclusion

I am the one who controls what the viewer can see through my gaze because I have cleared the “colonial” gaze from my work and myself. Too long has the black image been entirely skewed throughout history and unfortunately continues to this day. Taking these domestic fabrics and repurposing them into another form of being mirrors how I am recontextualizing the Black photographs. The more there is, the greater the sense of a multiplicity of identities and experiences, like the diaspora. The marrying of the materials once everything comes into formation and is executed properly, it is an undeniable gesture.

Using diasporic images and textiles to tell stories as a second-generation Jamaican American has been a way to explore and understand the complex layers of my identity and heritage. Through deconstruction, layering, and re-contextualization, I have been able to offer a new perspective on traditional materials and challenge the conventional narratives surrounding Black identity and culture. The thesis, *Nuff Love: From Me to You*, serves as a platform for others to engage in dialogue about their own experiences and contribute to a broader conversation about the intersections of race, culture, and identity. I hope that through this work, I can continue to push the boundaries of representation and create a space for those who feel marginalized to be seen and heard.

I end this with a quote I heard while watching an interview with a Jamaican native discussing the island as a whole having a strong sense of pride from anything they face. Ever since I try to bring this into everything I make going forward due to my lack of ownership in the work. Though the diaspora is large and heavily populated with various Black identities and experiences, that feeling of what gives me the right to make this work. But now I have found that sense of belonging through the art I create and it gives me pride to be Jamaican.

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