

Rhea Dillon: *Fractal Being*

20.09 - 02.11.2024

This exhibition brings together two works that have been made in the studio, in community, in my grandma's house, in transit, and in reflection. In all these places I've been seeking the root. This then became the roots, and has evolved into a desire for defining the placing of my ancestors and elders on the fractal grounds of a Jamaican family lineage. Our lineages are often winding, naturally concentric, and inherently vast with the landings and arrivals of the Jamaican diaspora most prominently being in the UK, Canada, USA, and, least commonly but relevant in my great grandmother's family's case, other countries in the Caribbean.

I don't know my father, which has long been his decision, but I do know and love my favourite family member: Joyce Millicent Thompson, née Bailey. The discussion of family has always stemmed from and been experienced through the women of my immediate familial holding: Joyce my grandma, my mother, auntie, cousin, and myself. Yet, the root of our family seems to stop and start at 'Teenie' Bailey, née Anthony S. Bailey. Spiritually, I felt called to know more.

In Jamaican culture, the older generation and those born there often live their whole lives going by a patois nickname, so much so that even family members might not know their original birth names. So far, through making this work, I've uncovered three birth names

unknown to my grandma and her cousins. Knowing the interwoven relationships typical of Jamaican families and the various failed attempts at tracing our family in the linear Western tree system/style, I sought out a truer abstract depiction of us. During my research I came across Erna Brodber's *Nothing's Mat*, a novel whose protagonist is tasked with writing a paper for her final exam project on the West Indian family. Opting to use her own extensive familial constellation as a case study she soon realises that the traditional academic or anthropological format is grossly inadequate and she opts instead to physically create a singular circular mat for each member.

Patricia Noxolo, an interlocutor of mine, has analysed *Nothing's Mat* in her essay *Caribbean In/Securities* (in Issue 57 of *Small Axe*, which she guest edited) where she named the book a '*fractal fabric of community*'. She writes, '*Brodber's narrator explains that these are fractal communities, in which people make complex, multiple connections one with another, generation after generation, in repeating patterns of seemingly ad hoc affinity and adoption, often simply because they care for each other: "We feel for each other and carry each other's pain and blessing so much so that if the designated one cannot or will not perform, we take on the task"'(103).*¹ Novels cannot stand in for lived experience, but they can play their part in articulating that experience. Like in *Nothing's*

¹ *Caribbean In/Securities: An Introduction*, Patricia Noxolo, 2018

Mat, each of the mats that make up this work represent a person in my family.

Sisal, the material used to create this work, was first introduced to Jamaica in 1886 from Yucatan, Mexico. A document I own from the same year titled ‘*Sisal Hemp, its Adaptation to Jamaica, Planting, Working, General management and Final Out-turn*’ by Daniel J. Stoddart describes in detail the way someone could grow, dry, and harvest sisal as well as the best conditions to do so. Purchasing this archival document, sourcing images of Jamaican women working in a sisal factory in Clarendon, Jamaica in the early 1900s, and reading Brodber describe sisal led me to learn more about the plant for myself. Although jute is more commonly used today, it is not grown in Jamaica. Only its close relative, sisal, was brought over and introduced as a potential burgeoning crop by the Jamaican Government for the agricultural industry.

To be of/from the Caribbean is to have a large and extended family. Cousins are childhood friends and aunties are the women living next to you on the street. Community as family is ever-present. I love the vernacular we build for ourselves, much like patois being birthed as the Jamaican Creole from British English making ‘outside child’ commonplace, or the language that poets give weight to like ‘shifted child’ by Olive Senior (Poet Laureate of Jamaica 2021-2024). Both mean the same thing and describe many of the figures that exist in my family mat: *‘What the trope of the shifted child does ...is show a family constituted more by a process of affiliation than filiation. This*

*is an important concept in ideological terms since it challenges the primacy of the nuclear family as the structural unit in homogenised models of a culture’s social matrix. In turn, recognition of affiliative family structures prompts us to interpret child dispersal...as more than simply an index of colonial alienation’.*²

Additionally, I was thinking of the female reproductive system needed for this and the history of the forgotten labour of black women within the slave trade. Therefore, *The stories of her naming; the souls of her Being* is presented alongside *I: Severance From The Spliced Womb*. I realised the wombs the work represents are severed from an ongoing spliced womb. ‘The’ spliced womb instead of ‘a’ as it is in reference to all the black women’s wombs that have been sliced to then be brought back together again for consistent reuse and reproduction for the labour needed for the beginning of the Capitalocene. There are three works in the series representing, in their own way, a triadic theme that has followed me since my birth and is present in Black history. As the first of the series (where the number at the beginning of the title acts like ordinals) this reveals the first attempt to hold the body together as present in the ever-shifting, unstable relationship between body and non-body, between dis-membering and re-membering³ that haunts the Caribbean past, present and thus future.

² ‘Let them know you have broughtuptcy’: Childhood and child-subjects in Olive Senior’s short stories. Helen Gilbert, 2004

³ ‘Post-Colonial Girl-Children in Olive S nior's Short Stories’. Bego na Vilouta V zquez, 2002. University of Santiago.

While the *Severance From The Spliced Womb* series is complete, *The stories of her naming; the souls of her Being* is ever-evolving and to be ever-added to as more family members are discovered and in turn born. This work is for my family, by my family, and belongs to our family. It is not to be stepped on as this would step on the souls of my ancestors and those living. It is not to be sat on as this would sit on the souls of my ancestors and those living. It is not to be sold as this would sell the souls of my ancestors and those living. It is my most important and personal work to date. And it shall remain so.

These works celebrate the beauty and the reality of family structures in Jamaica. Our birth is meaningless until it is social.⁴ Until we are socialised, we are not part of a community, culture, faith, practice or, frankly, we are not beings. *Fractal Being* demonstrates that it is innate to our being to be fractal as Caribbean descendants. Being denotes both the verb as an act to follow and the noun of a human being as reflective of the many souls in and outside of the gallery. I am proud to be a fractal Jamaican and take all the beings I love with me on my journey in the world.

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Rhea Dillon

⁴ 'Part 3: Women and the Laws'. 40:42. Hortense Spillers' Du Bois Lecture Series.
Accessed: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AxzmS49kqv0>

List of Works:
The stories of her naming; the souls of her Being
Sisal and thread
Dimensions variable
2024

I: Severance From The Spliced Womb
Anti-climb paint on metal
48 x 46.3 x 3 cm
2024

The stories of her naming; the souls of her Being was produced in collaboration with Ville de Bordeaux – CAPC and PALO Art Productions. Special thanks to Soft Opening, London.

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