Material Objects as Sites of Critical Re-memorying and Imaginative “Knowing”

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Abstract

This article first explores the layers of meaning woven into the intricate and colorful doilies handcrafted by Caribbean women immigrants to Britain in the 1950s and 1960s, revealing the importance of these everyday material objects in Caribbean women’s critical practices of self-making in an often hostile racist environment. The author, the child of this generation of women, then proceeds to re-use these objects in her own critical re-reading and re-memorying practices, revealing the complex intersections and ambiguities of gender, race, class, nation, and empire in the post-war politics of “women’s work” in Britain.

Keywords: crochet; re-memorying; migration; women’s work; Caribbean; material culture
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They are my entrance into my own interior life. Which is why the images that float around them—the remains, so to speak, at the archaeological site—surface first, and they surface so vividly and so compellingly that I acknowledge them as my route to a reconstruction of a world, to an exploration of an interior life that was not written and to the revelation of a kind of truth. (Toni Morrison 1995, 95)

Memories do not allow the distinction between private and public. What is at stake here is cultural memory as an alternative to traditional history on the one hand, and as an alternative to private subjectivism and uncontrollable self-indulgence on the other. Memory is a function of subjectivity. Cultural memory is collective, yet, by definition, subjective (Bal, Crewe, and Spitzer 1999, 180).

Introduction
The impetus to the writing of this article was an invitation to deliver a talk to the Cloth and Culture group at the Stuart Hall library at Iniva in London. The request was to bring along and talk about an everyday object from my own home that evoked special significance. I was also to engage with the Stuart Hall 1984 article “Reconstruction Work: Images of Post-war Black Settlement.” In preparing for the talk I found myself recalling an object that I had never had in my home, even as a child, and recollecting my responses to visiting an installation called the “West Indian Front Room” by British playwright, artistic curator Michael McMillan, at the Geffreye Museum in London in 2008. This installation reproduced the domestic space of a typical Caribbean immigrant front room of the 1960s and 1970s. The presentation highlighted in particular a number of iconic objects and furnishings that were ubiquitous in Caribbean homes in the UK and the Caribbean diaspora (McMillan 2009, 136). Among the objects that kindled most personal memories for me were the brightly colored crochet doilies. This was a strange kind of nostalgia as these crocheted creations never featured in my own childhood homes; they did however feature in my childhood memories, in the form of recollections of encountering them in the homes of family friends. Remembering these objects via McMillan’s Front Room installation, I found myself remembering also my feelings of desire, envy, and disappointment as a child at the fact that not only did we not have these objects—ever—but also at my mother’s explicit dis-identification with these objects. This article deploys the chain of remembering and memories that this recollection instigated and how as a cultural and historical sociologist of the Caribbean diaspora in Britain I was able to weave a personal and collective scholarly narrative from them to bring to consciousness
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...and knowledge, the story behind both these objects and my mother's ambivalence towards them.

This article explores how the emplacement and resignification of everyday material objects within an artistic and cultural context made them visible and viable, not only as sites of meaning or culture making, but also as sites of memory (Morrison 1987) and sources of individual and collective knowledge. In considering the efficacy of everyday objects as mediums for cultural memory and knowledge production, this article concludes by reflecting on their usefulness as sources of social and cultural research data.

**Michael McMillan’s West Indian Front Room Installation**

In his installation, “The West Indian Front Room”, Michael McMillan, a second generation Caribbean Briton born in the UK of parents from the former British colony of St Vincent, re-produced a life-size version of the typical Caribbean front room or front parlour that was almost ubiquitous among the first generation of Caribbean post-war migrants to Britain (Figure 1). In fact the room was in large part based on his parents’ East London home as it still existed at the time, as well as the stories and objects gathered through interviews conducted with post-war immigrants and their British-born children, in which they were invited to talk about their memories and feelings about the Front Room and its objects. The installation was displayed between 2008 and 2009 at the Geffreye Museum, which is a museum specializing in the history of the English domestic interior. Its main exhibits consist of 11 period rooms spanning from 1600 to the present, in which “each room represents the main living space used by a family and their guests.” The aim of the museum is to show “how people would have lived in the rooms, [and] alongside the furnishings, lighting and heating, show how homes and home life have changed over time, reflecting changes in society, behaviour, style, taste and the wider world.” In this regard the Geffreye Museum is very much displaying the white middle-class English home and home life as it has changed over the years, and although the class inflection of the rooms is often noted, their Englishness has largely been taken for granted and unmarked, in its capacity to represent the British home. McMillan’s installation in highlighting the domestic space of Caribbean immigrants disrupted this hegemony and enabled a consideration of the semiotic capacity of the domestic space of the front room to articulate the intersections of class, ethnicity, gender, and national identity. More specifically, the Front Room installation addressed the domestic as a location in which Caribbean immigrants expressed personal and collective aspirations in the face of racist social exclusions and negotiated the terms of cultural transformation and national belonging in Britain. In taking the stylized Caribbean immigrant’s front room, and focusing attention on its material adornments, McMillan’s installation for the first time invited and produced a serious reflection on the everyday domestic cultural lives of Caribbean people.

The West Indian or Caribbean front room was frequently, at least for those who had a home large enough to accommodate a discrete space away from the hurley-burley of the “living room,” was a revered and cosseted room. As such, the iconic front room was in every way a sign of both progress and

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**Figure 1**

respectability; for the possession of a separate front room was largely confined to those immigrants who had been able to purchase a house, since council accommodation was seldom large enough to accommodate anything more than the functional requirements of everyday living, unless you were one of the few Caribbean families that were large enough to merit the allocation of a large council owned house. The front room proudly displayed all the investment of hard labor, money, thought, and time taken in furnishing and ornamenting it. Resplendent with all the signs of material progress that an immigrant family could muster, the typical Caribbean immigrant front room, was “an opulent shrine to ‘kitsch’ furniture, consumer fetish, and homemade furnishings” and functioned as the outward sign of the family’s respectability; “a public space in the private domain, where the external world accesses the private world of the family” (McMillan 2009, 136).

Amongst the individually uniquely inscribed but collectively standardized items represented in McMillan’s *Front Room* were: the stereogram—an essential technology for the transplantation of black music culture and Caribbean sociality in a new and initially hostile environment (Noble 2009); the paraffin heater—a necessity in pre-centrally heated homes for Caribbean immigrants accustomed to the heat of the tropics; the crochet and tulle doilies and knick-knacks, brightly colored, reflecting the tropicality of their home islands as well as enabling Caribbean working mothers and wives to demonstrate their feminine domestic skills and the fruits of their labor outside the home, inside the home (Figure 2). The front room, its contents and their care, was a prime means by which Caribbean working wives and mothers could demonstrate the familial benefits of their public employment, love and care for their families, personal pride and collective cultural respectability and dignity (McMillan 2009). In so doing, McMillan’s installation went against the grain of dominant representations of Caribbean immigrants within British mainstream media and popular representation in the early decades of black settlement.

Figure 2
These were principally arranged along a racially-colored continuum from sociological theories that regarded the domestic sphere of the black home as a site of gender pathology and familial dysfunction (Lawrence 1982), through to cultural studies of black youth culture and popular music that have tended to privilege the spectacular visibilities of black boys and men in the public sphere (Hebdige 1976; Gilroy 1994). This has produced uneven and paradoxical spatial hyper-visibilities and invisibilities. For example, black male culture within the home has largely been hyper-invisibilized, in contrast to black masculinities’ hyper-“street visibility” (McRobbie 1991, 29), in which black boys and men collectively paradoxically come to represent both the popular cultural cutting-edge and a threat to British social and moral order.

On the other hand, black Caribbean girls and women, if visible at all in the mainstream gaze, were largely rendered invisible in the domestic sphere of the family—hyper-visible as a problem for the welfare state (welfare dependency, early pregnancy, and unwed motherhood). In contrast, black girls and women’s creativity and productivity in the public spheres of social activism and the cultural politics of race have been frequently rendered invisible. This has meant that the routine everyday cultural practices associated with the domestic sphere as an important site of self-making and cultural reproduction for both black men and women has largely been overlooked in studies of race and ethnicity in the UK.

The West Indian Front Room installation revealed the private, yet also collective cultural life of Caribbean immigrants and their children in the 1960s and 1970s. In so doing, it revealed how the home and the material objects in it enabled Caribbean immigrants and their children to engage in practices of self-making that transformed “West Indian immigrants” into “black Britons,” and how the domestic space could provide an hiatus and escape from the racism of British society as well as from the disappointing ignorance (given the long history of British colonial rule over the Caribbean) of British people about Caribbean people, their cultures and their place in British history.

McMillan’s installation did not merely “display” the Front Room, a representational strategy that might risk re-inscribing a well-worn colonial anthropological gaze; rather, it offered both a material and discursive reconstruction and re-presentation of the front room that did more than merely “show and tell,” but interpreted or perhaps we should say re-signified the Front Room. This resignification occurred through the process of lifting the front room out of the unintelligibility and prediscursivity “of the frequently unrecorded, unrecognized, unspoken history of everyday life and practice in the Black communities in Britain” (Hall 1984, 258). However, McMillan’s strategies of interpretation were not individual; he did not deploy his status as cultural critic and curator to provide a single authoritative voice. Instead, by incorporating the voices of the people who used the objects and inhabited Caribbean front rooms like the one exhibited, he enacted the dialogic African aesthetic of call-and-response, or antiphony in which the line between audience and artiste is blurred. For the process of gathering objects for the installation, as well as its showing, represented a “call out” to fellow Caribbean people in Britain; a call that required a response to produce the totality of the Front Room as a collective experience and memory, rather than just a curatorial display. This call to remember required a collective response to confirm the relationships of community and mutual recognition, as well as assent to the call and its message. The call-and-response aesthetic that has been reproduced in the African Diaspora is structured in a relationship between either the artist and an audience or more accurately a lead soloist and the chorus of the community. In this sense this antiphonic aesthetic is a moral one, marking the moral relationship between soloist and chorus, artiste and audience, for the response of the chorus/audience functions as a direct form of sanction and opinion (Thompson 1979, 27). As Thompson makes clear, “antiphony or call and response, function, improvisation and audience performance can all be thought of as part of the group or communal nature of art. This theory of art is interactive, process orientated, and concerned with innovation, rather than mimetic, product-orientated, or static” (Thompson 1979, 27). It is this aspect of the exhibition that contributed to its powerful appeal and facilitated a democratization of curatorial, display, and interpretive practices, transcending the line between high art and popular culture, museum display and collective memory.

We see this antiphony further expressed in the installation’s emphasis on the intertextualities of different kinds of interpretation.
or reading required to understand the *Front Room*. This intertextuality occurred across multiple registers: the intertextuality between objects in the room, and between objects and people; the juxtaposition of interview excerpts from users of the *Front Room* with scholarly and curatorial narratives on display labels and in audio-visual commentaries; as well as talks and impromptu conversations conducted in the installation space by the artist, the public and scholars. In bringing these diverse narratives together within the meta-language of the museum location, McMillan’s installation produced a polyvocal interpretation of the *Front Room*, particularly in respect of capturing different generational understandings and meanings of the *Front Room* and how these were linked to the social, cultural, and political dimensions involved in the transformation from being a Caribbean immigrant community to becoming black British. In this regard, its call-and-response aesthetic depended on and was intensified by “audience performance and improvisation, which work together to ensure that the art will be meaningful or functional to the community” (Sale 1992, 41). Invoking functionality in relation to art raises hackles, but all art is functional in so far as it has aesthetic intentions (Iseminger 2004), but art also has unintended effects, that may or may not be functional—in the sense of useful—without that necessarily implying an insistence that the art be “useful.” In the context of the *Front Room* exhibition, I want to suggest that these dialogic practices of production and display facilitated an expanded self-recognition by the audience of the buried layers of taken-for-granted and unspoken meanings and forms of knowing lived through their use and care of these objects. In this context, re-cognition involves deploying everyday objects as sites of memory-work through which new understandings and knowledges emerge.

The community’s response to his exhibition was electrifying, both in terms of the number of visitors to the exhibition and audiences’ engagement with it. The gasps of recognition and familiarity that the exhibition sparked were muted in comparison to the way in which the bright often gaudy objects in this room seemed to ignite individual memories that were also, it turns out, collective community or cultural memories. The exhibition triggered my own memories of the types of front rooms that I encountered when visiting family friends and the ways in which my own family front rooms over the years both shared some elements of the typical front room, but also to a greater degree did not conform to the ornate Victorian-cum-mid-twentieth century highly commodified aesthetic so evocatively represented in McMillan’s *Front Room* installation.

Among the objects that most kindled personal memories for me were the brightly colored crochet doilies. These doilies brought back the memory of my feelings about the fact that we did not have any of these brilliant, intricately designed, hand-made doilies in my home—ever. I found myself remembering visits with my Jamaican mother to the small front room of one of her friends and reliving the feelings of wonder and fascination whenever we visited this home of my mother’s Trinidadian friend. For almost every surface was adorned with the most vividly colored and elaborately shaped crochet doilies, which often fused almost fluorescently colored crochet with billowing waves of equally brilliantly net or tulle frills. The effect of this combination made many of these objects look like tropical and fine-winged creatures that might take flight at any moment (Figures 3, 4 and 5). As I reflected on these objects in the *Front Room* that were never in any of my childhood front rooms, I was captured again by my nine-year-old self’s feelings of rapture, wonder, and pleasure at the sight of these flamboyantly patterned and stiffly starched winged-creations. However, this remembered feeling was soon followed by recalling the feelings of disappointment and confusion I felt after asking my mother why we did not have any of these objects in our home. I remember her curt reply and how it made me feel more than the exact words. “I never learned how to *crochet.*” The tone conveyed annoyance and almost incredulity that I should imagine my mother had such skills. I recalled the sensation of feeling unexpectedly rebuked at my impertinence and being puzzled about what I had said wrong, as my mother certainly knew how to sew and make clothes and was proud of the fact. My bewilderment was only further intensified by my mother’s response to my suggestion that “she pay her friend to make her one.” Her response was quick, “I’d rather have money in the bank than *trinkets* on the shelf,” she snapped with an air of haughty disdain that alerted me to drop the subject.

Knowing we did not have much money in the bank I interpreted this response as indicating that my sin-
gle-parent divorced mother felt such items were both not worth spending her hard earned secretary’s salary on, but also marking some kind of cultural distinction between herself and the other Caribbean women who produce these objects or who festoon their homes with countless examples of these dazzling ornaments. Even as a young child I knew this response was somehow linked to my mother’s often repeated

Figure 3
homilies about certain ‘types’ of Caribbean people that in Jamaica her family “did not mix with,” or her reproachful warnings to my sister and me to “Remember, you are not English working-class” if ever my sister and me appeared to becoming too identified with the English working-class culture around us. Even as a child I recognized she was signalling something about how immigration to Britain and racism had offended her sense of her own subjectivity and social status by corralling her into a collectively denigrated category of “immigrant,” a label that then as now, carries heavy racist and class overtones. As the child of a divorced shorthand secretary-come-typist, living on a council estate in the East End of London, these distinctions left me confused about my own social positioning, and, in relation to the absence of these doilies in our front room, very disappointed.

Material culture and memory

The meanings of the “landscape of the everyday” are often not fully
realized in the present, but largely revealed through the backward glance of future presences. In this way, the past is always understood through the prism of the present and its concerns, and likewise “a ‘sense of history’ is never confined to the past; it is always a seizure by history of the present” (Hall 1984, 261). The transformation of homemade crafted objects and commodity cultural items into narratives of self-making and history telling occurs through the transfiguration of the mundane and the materially taken for granted into sites of remembering as a practice of individual and collective cultural imagination and historical consciousness. In his 1984 article entitled “Reconstruction Work: Images of Post-war Black Settlement”, the black British cultural theorist Stuart Hall, himself a Jamaican immigrant to the UK, explores the use of photographs as a means for reconstructing alternative narratives and histories of black settlement in Britain. Examining pictures originally published in *Picture Post*—a photojournalism magazine published in the UK from 1938 to 1957—Hall considers these pioneering examples of photorealism, that largely functioned within a mainstream media discourse preoccupied with the sudden eruption on the nation of “colored immigrants.” The early pictures depicted the arrival of the first ship carrying significant numbers of Caribbean immigrants are welcoming and present a wide-eyed gaze on laborers coming to assist the post-war British economic recovery. However, in time as racism and the anxieties over non-white immigration intensified along with racism, the regimes of visibility in which these images cir-

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**Figure 5**

culated shifted, altering their meaning. Today, their meanings change again, under the gaze of later generations of black Britons becoming a vital resource in reconstructing the history of black settlement beyond the ways in which it has been typically represented in the British media and popular British consciousness—framed by images of ignorant poor immigrants and the problems of “race relations.”

Hall begins by stating that this body of work is important because “the history of Black settlement in Britain in the post-war years is only just beginning to be written. One of the essential preconditions of such an account is the collection, preservation and interpretation of ‘documents’, public and private, formal and informal, as well as testimonies of those who actually went through the experience in the early days. The past cannot speak except through its ‘archive’” (Hall 1984, 251).

Despite their ambiguities of meaning, these images indicate an alternative history of black people in Britain, one that Hall says is alternative to the documentary or the social problem traditions that came to construct the dominant reading of that history (Hall 1984, 255). Reconstructing this history is not a simple matter of reading off of the images, not simply a matter of deciphering a static texts to discover their “essential Truth,” for not only are their meanings encoded through the social relations of their production and consumption but also the interpretive frames that are brought to them over time also change (Hall 1984). In interpreting these photographs, Hall suggests that we have to struggle to see beyond the surfaces of what is denoted on the surface of the routinize aesthetic norms and practices of high street photography and photo-journalism; that is, what they “have to say,” but also their silences; “for in these absences or silences that lay outside of hegemonic meanings and outside the frame lies ‘what is unsaid, or unsayable’” (Hall 1984, 157).

McMillan’s installation demonstrates how this reconstruction work can be done in relation to everyday material objects. In the Front Room installation McMillan combines his creative imagination, the memories of others and the mundane objects through which everyday life is constructed and in which meaning is created, to illuminate an unexamined and silenced history of how Caribbean immigrants made new lives for themselves in a new but old land. These material objects become not merely archival sources but opportunities for collective empathetic memory-work and creative imagination. Objects have the capacity to facilitate memory at the individual level through the way they can stir the senses and the emotions, bringing back to the consciousness that which has been repressed or simply “fallen out of mind.” The sight of a doily can stir a nostalgic evocation of a childhood disappointment of never having had such an object in one’s own home, and through the resonances that such a stirring produces it shakes to the surface of consciousness the recollection of a passing conversation apparently insignificant, but in being emotionally encapsulated and retained, suggesting a hidden significance, one that perhaps can be tracked through the chain of affective and cognitive memories and in turn transform the insig-

ificant, the unremarkable, the subordinated and forgotten into the significant, the thinkable and narratable knowledge. The material object in this regard can function like a photographic image.

McMillan’s Front Room installation enabled the objects to tell stories through the memories of the people that used or encountered them. In this sense, objects can speak, but never without the mediation of human experience. The latter occurs in ongoing practices, even after the event of display, through the range of ways in which the installation has been represented through museum display texts, accompanying museum talks, interviews used in both the BBC TV documentary and McMillan’s book about on the Front Room, as well as the scholarly essays contained in the book based on this and another immigrant room installation in the Netherlands (McMillan 2009).

McMillan’s installation in transforming these commodity objects into artistic artefacts not only permits their reinterpretation; their very emplacement within the space of the museum, a BBC documentary and an art book transfers them and their meanings out of the non-space of the unremarkable and forgettable routines and rituals of the everyday where they functioned as little more than the background noise or “background memories … of ‘normal’ life” (Bal, Crewe, and Spitzer 1999, vii). In placing these objects in the authoritative and legitimating context of the museum and artistic creativity, McMillan’s installation disinters these “minimal proto-narratives” (Bal, Crewe, and Spitzer 1999, viii) from the pre-discursivity of the
everyday, enabling them to speak the previously unsayable. They also communicate in multiple registers, because of course these objects do not “speak” entirely on their own, since their meanings do not self-evidently reside in the things themselves; rather, they require re-animation through individual and collective memories and through artistic, curatorial, or scholarly representation; for if “the meanings of objects are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories, it is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things” (Appadurai 1988, 5). Appadurai further notes that although it is theoretically culturally embedded human actors who encode objects with meaning and significance, “from a methodological point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context” (Appadurai 1988, 5, emphasis in original). In this regard their existence as things-in-motion requires both individual remembering and collective cultural memory-work in order to enliven their human and social contexts and make them available as archival sources or forms of social and cultural “data” for scholars.

However, remembering is an unruly and unreliable capacity, carrying the risk of inaccurate or false recollections. In addition, by often being driven by the senses and the emotions, memories have an unexpected non-linearity to them that can disrupt both time and space. It is this non-linearity of remembering that can construct new and alternative chains of signification that brings to the fore margin-alized narratives of both the past and the present that hegemonic histories of Britishness would prefer to forget. What then is the epistemological value of both individual and collective remembering through everyday domestic objects, as sites of memory? Can memories linked to material objects count as reliable archival sources for the social scientist, or are their uses limited largely to the artistic and cultural?

Toni Morrison, discussing her use of memory within her own literary practices as a novelist, introduces the concept of re-mem-oring as a creative act of imagination; one in which she as a novelist must “trust her own recollections and also depend on the recollections of others” (Morrison 1995, 91) in order to undertake “a kind of literary archaeology” whereby “on the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply” (Morrison 1995, 92). This imaginative act of fiction-writing for Morrison is constituted in two parts: (i) the image and (ii) the recollection. The imaginative process of fiction-writing combines the image (the “remains” and the feelings that accompany it), to recollection and in so doing they “yield up a kind of truth” (Morrison 1995, 92). In calling this fiction and invention, Morrison teasingly distinguishes fiction from fact and then unsettles this distinction when she says that although fiction does not require verification, “much in it can be verified,” and that the distinction between fact and fiction is less important than the distinction between fact and truth, because facts can exist, she says, independently of human consciousness but truth cannot (Morrison, 1995). The truth Morrison invokes here is clearly a subjective one, fused to the personal as well as the collective. Although Morrison goes on to make a distinction between fiction as imaginative creativity and “research” as the pursuit of “facts,” I want to challenge this opposition. For much of what counts as scholarly writing in the social sciences and humanities, is also in part a form of imaginative creativity—as is the practice of research itself.

Imagination is not the preserve of the artist or novelist alone. In an article “Materiality, Memory and Imagination: Using Empathy to Research Creativity,” art theorist and practitioner Treadaway stresses the “importance of spontaneity, happy accident and intuition in the creative process” (Treadaway 2009, 235). I want to suggest these are no less important for the researcher in the social sciences and humanities. We too employ intuition, hunches, speculations, and a plethora of remembering of things read, experienced, felt in the process of research, analysis, and writing. Qualitative research can also involve reinterpreting the memories presented to researchers by the researched; their memories can ignite our own and through empathy penetrate into the researcher’s interior being, setting off his or her own chain of remembering and signification. Again the analogy to artistic creation can be found in Treadaway’s assertion that “memory is vital in the creative process and the ability to experience sensory stimulation: to engage in an emotional response and then remember it is crucial in the germinal phase of
concept development” (Treadaway 2009, 231). For the artist, crafter or novelist, so too for the social scientist, “new ideas rely on stored information for their creation” (Treadaway 2009, 231). Both the memories and associations that material objects stir, lie outside the materiality of the object, outside the frame of denotative representation, so that both can function as a haunting.

In Toni Morrison’s work, hauntings are the remains of the painful past of slavery in the present, which for Morrison “surface so vividly and so compellingly that I acknowledge them as my route to a reconstruction of a world to an exploration of an interior life that was not written and to the revelation of a kind of truth” (Morrison 1987, 95, italics added). For a social or cultural theorist, these “hauntings” can also refer to the shadow of powerful discourses and ideologies and relations of dominance and their lived resistances—that are inscribed in the production, consumption, and life of everyday objects as things-in-motion. Social and cultural researchers and critical theorists can use these objects to make new connections between the facts on the surface and the traces just outside the frame; for what are intellectual theories but attempts at arriving at some kind of truth, based on facts, yes, but also involving the creative imagination of the scholar in putting together images, recollections as well as facts.

Re-memorying is not historical research in the disciplinary sense, although historical inquiry is part of re-memorizing. It is an imaginative exercise of reading and of making connections that is similar to the types of re-memorizing creativity that Toni Morrison does in her fiction writing. Imagination can have scholarly even scientific legitimacy. Toni Morrison refers to her fiction writing as a “kind of history” and scholars of the African Diaspora regardless of discipline often find themselves required to do history-work, as part of the process of relating the alternative modernities of the former colonized and enslaved and deconstructing and decentring hegemonic Western narratives of modernity.

The next section of this paper shows how re-memorying through the doilies in McMillan’s installation sparked a chain of affective and cognitive memories, linkages, and intuitions that enabled me to connect the objects in the West Indian Front Room to my own research on the post-emancipation formation of the black Caribbean woman as a subject of British liberal freedom (Noble 2017).

**Memory-work as history-work**

Signs exist in relation to other signs and the regimes of representation in which they circulate, and we must be mindful of these, because the meaning of an object, such as a crochet doily, may be hard to read in isolation from its placement alongside other objects, such as the Caribbean immigrant front room and all its other material objects or other regimes of representation such as the discourse of immigration as problem. These doilies speak in multiple syntaxes as personal stories of those who made, bought or used them in their homes and those who were their “audience,” as intentional forms of self-presentation and status positioning within a given social and cultural context. They also circulate within broader Western imperial discourses of social reform tied to the family, gender relations, and the international global order in the period between the World War I and World War II, extending into the period of the Cold War. So although these crochet doilies tell a particular Caribbean story of immigration from the Caribbean to the UK, we can find different iterations of these objects, inflected by different but overlapping aesthetics of the home, norms of femininity and family respectability. In connecting images, objects to other signs—signs that may exist outside the frame of a picture or outside the legible text of a room—we are recognizing or creating linkages, which in turn produce different interpretive schema (Hall 1984, 259), as events, objects, people, and narratives “are repositioned in a field of inter-discursivity in which ideology constantly intervenes with its ordering and re-ordering power” (Hall 1984, 259)

However, how reliable are these forms of representation as sources of knowledge? As Hall reminds us, “there is no one system of representation” or one system or mode of reading (Hall 1984, 259). This is where memory comes in as a lived and personal sensibility that may have links to public modes of re-memorizing, such as elicited by McMillan’s exhibition. As I reflected on the Front Room and the meanings that McMillan’s work revealed, I thought about how this had ignited a collective alternative historical lived narrative of black British immigration, one shaped not by problems but by aspirations, creativity, cultural continuity, and change, hinting at the multitemporal
heterogeneity (Cheah 2015, 10) of Britishness and the British nation. The next part of this discussion shows the coming together of my own and other people’s personal memories about objects in the Front Room, accessed through McMillan’s incitement to remember. My own reflections arising from the installation enabled me to make connections between the installation, my own childhood and my research work through the chain of remembrances and insights that emerged. What follows demonstrates how intuition, speculation as well as sensual and cognitive remembering, can be legitimately deployed in the interactive processes of personal reflection, research analysis and writing as a scholar and cultural theorist of the Caribbean and African Diasporas.

I began to reflect on my own relationship to these very recognizable objects, as both the child of first generation post-war Jamaican immigrants and now as a cultural critic and sociologist I found myself moving between different personal and collective temporalities of memory. My own research on the cultural history of the trope of the “independent black woman” produced a genealogy of the formation of the black Caribbean woman as a subject of British rule and liberal freedom after emancipation in 1838. This work began with interviews with Caribbean women living in London. One of the first parts of the historical sociology undertaken involved an examination of the arrival of Caribbean women immigrants to Britain in the post-war period of mass immigration from various parts of Britain’s empire. A key dimension of this included an analysis of the lived and structural insertion of colonial Caribbean women’s labor into the reconstruction of post-war British national identity (Noble 2009). What this revealed was that in the immediate post-war period New Commonwealth immigrant women’s labor mediated the tensions between state maternalist policies towards white British women, middle-class feminists’ claims to a professional working identity, and the state’s need for women to work in the expanded feminized domains of work within the new welfare state, such is in nursing, care work, cleaning as well as in the newly publically-owned sectors of the economy such as the public transport system (Noble 2017; Peach 1991). In this context, Caribbean women who came to Britain principally to work rather than as the non-working wives of immigrant male labor, were ideologically as well as economically important in mediating the classed, racialized, and gendered contradictions that post-war social changes were producing (Holloway 2017, 187). Caribbean women’s labor, imagined as only low-skilled and low-paid, could to some degree reconcile the discrepancies in the post-war social agendas between the need for working-class female labor (national economic recovery), the acceptance of the respectable professional work of white middle and upper-class women (the bourgeois feminist agenda), and state welfare maternalism towards working white women (national social recovery). The maternalism of the new welfare state was explicitly intended to support the white working-class and lower-middle-class family, and especially the capacity of the male breadwinner to support a non-working housewife whose role would be to address the wartime population slump through her maternal work in replenishing the white-national population. As the Beveridge Report that established the blueprint for the new Welfare State made clear,

The attitude of the housewife to gainful employment outside the home […] is not and should not be the same as that of the single woman. She has other duties. … in the next thirty years housewives as mothers have vital work to do in ensuring the adequate continuance of the British race and of British ideals in the world. (Beveridge cited in Jones 2001, 328)

However, the Caribbean immigrant working wife and mother was also pathologized and viewed as falling short of a patriarchal ideal of proper family life (Lawrence 1982; Webster 1998, 2005). It is in this context that “Caribbean women in particular—seen in terms of an incapacity for family life, especially through constructions of Black motherhood—used their employment for familial goals, reversing the way in which their construction as workers denied them a domestic or familial identity” (Webster 1998, 131, italics added). This confirms the ways in which the money, time, and care spent on the immigrant front room was one of the most pragmatic ways in which Caribbean women could contest the racist stereotypes of black mothers and black families.

But how do we account for the great skill in crochet that Caribbean women brought with them to Britain and for the very English aesthetics and values of Christian propriety, and the bourgeois obsession with
hygiene and respectability that the furnishings and uses of the front room also demonstrated? The answer to this question came through an intuitive connection made between my own experiences of the iconic West Indian immigrant front room and my research into black Caribbean women’s cultures of freedom and independence. Part of this research involved the comparison of the previously mentioned Beveridge Report and the Moyne Report, also known as The Report of the West India Royal Commission, 1945 (Great Britain Colonial Office 1945). The Moyne Report was commissioned in 1938 following labor unrests across the whole of the British Caribbean in the 1930s, protesting against the poor economic and social conditions of the region which at that time was still under British colonial rule. In response, the British Colonial Office established the West India Royal Commission, to survey conditions in the region and recommend actions. The Moyne Report, named after its Chairman, Walter Edward Guinness, Baron Moyne of Bury St Edmunds, was the most important report on the West Indies in the post-war period and shaped colonial policy in the Caribbean through the 1940s and the granting of independence to the first Caribbean territories in 1962.

The Moyne Report “exposed the deplorable conditions under which the people of the West Indies lived and worked: illiteracy, malnutrition, unsanitary environment, poor housing, exposure to contagious diseases and unsatisfactory maternal and childcare” (Hewitt 2002, 9). Perversely, the Moyne Commission did not blame the poverty and high infant mortality rate in the Caribbean on the poverty and poor living conditions caused by the colonial state’s failure to provide a basic social infrastructure of health care and affordable decent housing, nor on the inherently exploitative economic system of colonialism. Instead, the Commission blamed them on Caribbean women’s “incapacity for family life” and the alleged inadequacies of black parents, due to what the report claimed was “the absence of strong opposing public opinion among a people whose immature minds are ruled by their adult bodies” (GB Colonial Office 1945, 221, italics added). In response, the Commission recommended a wide ranging program of social welfare and employment reforms (French 1988, 39). In relation to social welfare, women were to be the primary target in the colonial state’s drive to improve the status of women, address the apparent “lack of family life” and to reorganize labor. The “lack of family life” refers to the perception of the committee that the high rates of illegitimacy and infant mortality in the Caribbean were evidence of loose morality, irresponsible men and inadequate mothers who lacked the knowledge of hygiene and child care needed to be competent mothers. It is this perception of Caribbean men and women’s “incapacity for family life” that was reproduced unaltered in British stereotypes of Caribbean families following their arrival to the UK, and which women’s investment in their homes and the displaying of the front room was in part rejecting as well as resisting. But we still have not accounted for the extraordinary and widespread skill in crocheting or my mother’s stark dis-identification with it?

In thinking about this question I found myself recalling that one result of the Moyne Report had been the implementation of an extensive program of social welfare and educational provisions to address the dire conditions of the population. These included health and education programs to improve lower class motherhood, the opening up of social welfare and teaching to colonized women to enable them to be key agents in the moral uplift of their poorer sisters, and extensive reorganization of education and work tied to a policy of domestification of women’s paid work outside her own home. This took the form of the expansion of education provision and the teaching of domestic science to prepare women both to be better wives and mothers, but also to be skilled in trades that were now to be defined as “women’s domestic work,” even if carried out outside the women’s home in the form of paid employment, such as in domestic service (Reddock 1994).

Thinking of how my mother and her sisters would have been located in relation to these social changes, I found myself recalling visiting the homes of my mother’s sisters in Jamaica and in the USA. On visiting Jamaica for the first time at the age of 13, I was impressed to find that all of my mother’s sisters and brothers employed what is euphemistically referred to as “helpers” but who were in effect often live-in or live-out domestic servants. At the time this helped me understand why neither my mother nor her sister, both of whom had migrated to the UK to train as nurses, were so undomesticated and disinvested
in most of the exuberances of the typical Caribbean immigrant front room. Later in my early twenties as I visited aunts in the USA, I discovered they too were disinvested in the hyper-domesticity and preoccupation with housework and its enforcement amongst children that I had encountered amongst other Caribbean parents. So although my sister and I had chores to do, it was always made clear that the priority was on schoolwork not housework. My research enabled me to understand better the classed and gendered inflections of Caribbean immigration and my mother’s disdain for “trinkets on the shelf” and dis-identification with the art of crochet (although she was an excellent dressmaker). For middle-class Jamaicans, crocheting was associated with the teaching of Domestic Science as a means of preparing lower-class black women for domestic work in the homes of middle and upper-class homes. On the other hand, dressmaking was embraced by the rising middle-class Jamaican woman as a useful practical skill at a time when mass-produced clothes were still not the norm. I can also see now how for my mother, once in England, dressmaking for herself and her children facilitated her ability to mark her sophisticated good-taste and her class distinction as well as the African love of style and Caribbean investment self-presentation and “not showing poor.” Caribbean women of all classes could use skills learned back home for new uses, in contradistinction to their representation within mainstream British consciousness as flawed wives and mothers, because they were Caribbean women and because of the amount of time they spent outside of the home as paid workers.

However, it is important not to present black women’s domestic craft skills and investments in the front room as unique to the British or even Caribbean experience. The role of social welfare reforms after the war in advancing not only women’s domestication and materialism was occurring at a global scale in the mid-twentieth century. “For the Caribbean shift did not happen in isolation. It depended on extra-regional circuits of travel and expertise, imagery and discourse. Nor was it unique: similar shifts happened elsewhere, within the British Empire and beyond” (Putnam 2014, 492).

It is important to situate Caribbean men and women’s investment in respectability and domesticity within an imperial circulation of ideas about welfare and citizenship which framed not only domestic social policy but also British colonial welfare policy and state-decolonizing strategies across its empire (Seekings 2005, 52). Mid-twentieth century Western liberalism was advancing a reformed view of itself as domestic and decolonial, that is, not imperial. However, the social effects of first the Great Depression and later World War II on poverty had fermented both class-based and raced-based anti-colonial struggles within Western nations, such as Britain and the USA and the colonized world. The Beveridge Report of 1942 represents a social policy bridge uniting concerns over the effects of the Depression and growing fears over the potential fall-out from the Second Great War such that “there emerged a transatlantic wave of interest in linking domestic social welfare provisions (that is, individual security), to wider war and peace aims (national and international security). In post-war social welfare reforms in the West and its empires, we find the family, the home and domesticity figuring as central targets of reform and state support to address the material conditions of the poor and advance “national security.” The fusing of individual and family security through welfare to international relations is further intensified after the war by the Cold War. In elevating the patriarchal family as a symbol of national character, post-war social welfare policies across the West and its empires become tied to domestification and post-war national economic reconstruction, through the promotion of virtuous domestic consumerism (May 2008).

Increasingly, the white European patriarchal civic family as symbolized by the well-furnished, orderly, and hygienic family home, is deployed to demonstrate not only the feminine domestic skills of the respectable housewife and the economic success of the male breadwinner, but also the superiority of Western democracy and capitalism in advancing individual liberties and raising living standards compared with the USSR (May 2008, 156). Nationalist discourses of bourgeois moral respectability, tied to responsible consumerism, as the sign of democratic civic virtue become signifiers of both national identity and the superiority of Western democracy and capitalism over Communism. What is less acknowledged in these accounts of the promotion of civic consumerism as part of the ideological “soft” war against Communism, is how race and
empire were also implicated. The Beveridge Report was central to an imperial circulation of ideas about welfare and citizenship that framed not only domestic social policy, but also colonial welfare policies and state-decolonizing strategies across the European empire (Seekings 2005, 52).

The nineteenth-century expansion of the social state in the West saw the state gradually assume more responsibility for regulating and governing the social care of their populations through public health, housing, and hygiene policies. In the mid-twentieth century, this was intensified in the Western centers of empire, and expanded overseas to include the colonies. In this way a unified yet unevenly distributed post-war logic of Western liberal capitalism was advanced, in which “respectable” consumerism, state welfare, and social democratization were fused as key mechanisms for disciplining unruly or potentially unruly populations, into docile self-disciplining subjects (Nadesan 2008, 65).

For Caribbean immigrants to Britain, the iconic West Indian immigrant front room, as a liminal site where public and private, colony, and metropole met, was both a personal form of self and family representation, and a collective Caribbean immigrant one. However, it also participated unwittingly in a broader post-war colonial and Western strategy of containment through domesticity, respectability, and consumption as soft-power weapons for the management of overlapping political crises at the levels of domestic, colonial, and international relations. It is this aspect of domestic civic consumption that rendered it such a useful and flexible tool, not only for states but also for those being disciplined into respectable domesticated citizens. Although soft power was intended as a form of propaganda and “psychological warfare” wielded by the powerful, as a source of personal and domesticated power it was also “dispersed and malleable,” and amenable “for alterative requisition and reuse” by its targets in advancing their own interests (Castillo 2010, xii).

In the Front Room we see how immigrant Caribbean communities were able to use this domestic space to express their aspirations as immigrants and their colonial historical and cultural affinities to Britishness. This occurred in the face of British racism’s disavowal of Caribbean cultural resources or full and equal belonging within the nation. There Caribbeanness was demonstrated not only in the aesthetics of color in the Front Room, but also in the ways that it was morally encoded with colonial British ideals that defied the class assumptions of British metropolitan social order. Caribbean immigrants’ ideal of the Victorian parlour was a bourgeois one, not a working-class one, and it was shot through with colonial Caribbean preoccupations with hygiene and social status linked to gendered racial respectability. This racial respectability denied many lower-class Caribbean women in the Caribbean to be reconfigured in the context of the UK to reassert the respectability of Caribbean working-class women and the Caribbean family as a whole.

Conclusion
Re-memorying as narrative and embodied history-making deploys interpretive strategies that in being framed by the subjective imagination and sensibilities of the person doing the remembering, structures what is remembered, what is accorded significance and therefore meaning. This article as an imaginative re-reading of the crochet doilies in McMillan’s Front Room has related my own practices of subjective and scholarly re-memoring in order to demonstrate how memory and re-memorying through objects are and can be used as part of the scholar’s research practice. These practices facilitate the creative process through the forgotten connections and deeply interred conjunctures of power relations and heterogeneous temporalities that link the crochet doilies of Caribbean post-war immigrant front rooms, the history of British colonialism in the Caribbean and the intersections of race, gender, and domesticity in contested discourses of citizenship, belonging and respectability in post-war Britain. This article has also highlighted how re-memorying as a practice of reclaiming history in the present, requires, as Hall asserted in Reconstruction Work, “a delicate excavation, an archaeology, a tracing of the contradictory imprints which previous discourses have stamped, through those old images, on the iconography of popular memory” (Hall 1984, 261).

As a practice of collective re-memorying through objects, McMillan’s installation and its effects on my personal remembering attests to Richard Iton’s claim that in black vernacular cultures “there is an autodiasporic dimension to all cultural expressions, given their resistance to simply reproducing national frames” (Iton 2008, 259).
Although the cultural meanings or political import of these diasporic transgressions cannot be assumed, nevertheless they are important practices through which black diasporic counter-histories can emerge. As Toni Morrison makes clear “this is critical for any person who is Black, or who belongs to any marginalized category, for, historically, we are seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we are its topic” (Morrison 1987, 91).

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References


