

## **MIGRATION, MATERIAL CULTURE AND TRAGEDY**

In this paper I look at the way Caribbean migrants relate to their homes and internal possessions in four settings. The first examines how non-migrants in Trinidad decorate their living rooms and how this reflects the wider relationship between the home and core values within Trinidadian society. The home is by no means the entire grounding of family life, but works through a complex symbolic opposition to the street. The second focuses on a recent exhibition on the history of the West Indian living room in London by Michael MacMillan which reveals a syncretic tradition based as much on the changing meaning of home and possessions in London generally as on traditions brought by migrants from the Caribbean. The third considers the house as a life project in Jamaica and is based largely on the work of Heather Horst on migrants who have tried to return to Jamaica from London and find themselves branded as English within Jamaica. This work again reveals the centrality of the home to the cosmological interpretation of making life meaningful. Finally I turn to the contrast between two West Indian migrants in London, who formed part of a recent street based study on material culture and loss. One is a woman whose devotion to Caribbean ideals resulted in her failure to develop relationships within London. The other demonstrates a devotion to household building and provisioning of houses in Jamaica she cannot actually live in. Both these case studies demonstrate the failure of projects that might have expressed a desire to constitute oneself in terms of roots, or a legacy of having originated within the Caribbean. This approach leads to problems of settling both in London and in Jamaica. In my conclusion I want to reflect on material culture as evidence for tragedy by which I mean the ways in which the predicament of individuals comes to embody much larger contradiction and forces which are responsible for their individual failures. For this I also use the structure of this paper, in that the first three moments are typically anthropological in their forms of cultural generalisation while the final moment is exemplified by the quirky fate of two individuals.

My first encounter with Caribbean material culture came through a study in Chaguanas a town in central Trinidad, where I worked with four communities. Part of the evidence was ethnographic based on living there for a year, part questionnaires and interviews with forty households in each of these four areas and partly on around 800 photographs taken from 128 living rooms. In my book *Modernity: an ethnographic approach* published in 1994 I undertook an analysis of these living rooms and situated it within a larger cosmology of material culture as evidence for the dominant but also contradictory values of contemporary Trinidad. The population of Chaguanas consists largely of descendents of ex-African slaves, ex-indentured labourer South Asians and a considerable mixed population also.

The remarkable quality to these living rooms was their homogeneity. The furnishing within them, often sofa and armchairs tends to be upholstered either in maroon or in brown, and these colours are picked up by many of the other associated objects such as curtain, carpets and possessions. Of the fifty four were the photographs allowed for detailed post-fieldwork analysis only three of these living rooms failed to conform to this dominant form. In addition

most had very similar items such as the space saver a set of open shelves, filled with ornaments, that does more or less the opposite of what its name implies, a buffet, homily's often with religious ideals, artificial plastic flowers and stuffed animals or dolls, often still in their now dusty plastic bags or boxes. The subjects of decoration are most commonly swans or fake tapestries of coniferous woodlands of the kind that would never grow in Trinidad. Though religious themes such as the Last Supper were also common. Also common are items that pertain to mothers or mother's day, and equally of weddings. An item I have never quite worked out are either Portuguese Dutch style merchants holding or swigging tankards of beer, but then I am not entirely certain why the single most common animal figure is the swan, though I do suggest some possible origins in the book. Overall this characterisation was regardless of income level or the residential area. So for example both wealthy and impoverished Trinidadians collect quantities of cheap ceramic ornaments. Though there was a slight tendency for maroon to be preferred by Indo-Trinidadians and brown by Afro-Trinidadians.

In my book I analyse certain themes in these interiors, the preference for artificial things, , for filling up spaces, as well as content that is orientated to family, religion and education. For example an analysis of the general tendency for covering things over brings together all sorts of disparate elements, such as the type of toilet roll cover found in the bathroom along with the throws that is pieces of cloth that cover seats so that you don't actually see the seats themselves for long periods of time, and again these plastic bags for stuffed toys, or the fake lace that covers a variety of different surfaces. But also be related to such things as incredibly elaborated cake decoration and the fact that the ceremony of sticking the cake with a knife is about the only occasion when it is acceptable to kiss in public.

This characterisation of living rooms and possessions is then situated comparatively in order to make it meaningful. The values that it enshrines in this space are associated with what I call transcendence, that is a relation to the long term, to family, the past and the accumulation of solidity and respectability. The contrast is with the values of the street which I call transience and which embody a project of freedom. I show how the living room is closely related to the celebration of Christmas which consists in large measure of buying things for the living room, emptying it, tidying it, and ending Christmas Eve with the ceremonial rehangng of the curtains that constitute it as a given space. I contrast Christmas with Carnival which is a celebration of the street and the values of transience. Elsewhere in the book I show how this fits with the analysis of other material forms. For example the car whose exterior echoes the values of the street, but whose interior with its plush carpets, cushions and other accessories comes to look a bit like a living room on wheels.

In a way none of this should occasion any particular surprise. Its pretty typical of what you might expect of a material culture analysis in a given site, which influenced by anthropological traditions bequeathed us by Bourdieu and others looks for the structural order consisting of both homology and contrast that implies that we have a material expression of an order or set of values,

what Bourdieu called habitus that is characteristic of that population. Certainly despite all those recent anthropologists who dislike such analytical order and feel it fails to conjure the creative differences and heterogeneity of actual populations, my findings suggest to my mind quite clearly that the vast majority of Trinidadians in festivals such as Christmas and in sites such as the living room are actually striving towards a consistent and homogenising expression precisely of being Trinidadian.

My second moment in this sequence is taken from a recent exhibition at the Geffrye Museum in London of the West Indian 'front room' that was designed and created by the playwright Michael McMillan. The intention was to evoke a certain kind of syncretic material culture that made the archetypal example of such a room from the 50s to 70s, so evocative to those who came as visitors to the exhibition. This is a population that came within a relatively short period in the 50s to 60's (Chamberlain, Foner etc refs) As such the sense of homogeneity of content is similar to that I have just described for Trinidad. Some things remain such as the plastic covered upholstery, the lace crochet and the Last Supper on the wall, many, however, are different. The Venetian glass fish with iridescent colours inside, the souvenirs here from the English seaside, and also now often a souvenir of the home island, often a map of the island itself on a black velvet scroll hung on the wall.

McMillan evokes the soundscape associated with the ubiquitous Blue-stoke gramophone. Even if the youngsters of the family were allowed reggae this would be banished on Sunday by the likes of Jim Reeves and Pat Boone. I gave a talk at a workshop associated with exhibition which was an occasion for much reminiscing of the period. What was most striking though was the memories that people had of the exclusionary status of the front room. That it had such a shrine like quality which meant that most of the time young people were banned from it altogether, and often no-one used it except on Sundays. Unlike Chaguanas, the ornaments here were relatively expensive and they stood for a different kind of respectability, one that related to the initial exclusion of this immigrant population from property itself, when they first came to London. The front room was something people had fought for and represented a major accomplishment in itself.

But the respectability that is enshrined in these front rooms is not actually the same as that which came with the migrants, notwithstanding the colonial influence of Englishness. Although there are many superficial similarities between this front room and those I studied in Chaguanas, when analysed more deeply it is the contrasts that are more striking. Because this main memory of the front room as a special almost sacred space that was largely unused, has no correspondence with Trinidadian usage of this space. It is almost entirely continuous with the traditional British idea of the parlour, or front room that comes from working class traditions, as recorded in books such as the *Classic Slum* by Robert Roberts, where people went into their houses from the back door, and the front room may only have been used at Christmas and certain other special occasions. So the West Indians who colonised the front room that McMillan was exhibiting were not re-constructing a room they had left in the Caribbean, but were expressing the same form of

respectability that they had been excluded from and now aspired to from this new London context. What these young people thought of as essentially a West Indian experience of the front room, was actually nothing of the kind. McMillan thinks this is a syncretism of Caribbean respectability and the middle-class. I think he is wrong, it shows much more continuity with a specifically English working-class history of aspiration (see Seabroke\_

McMillan makes extensive use of Stuart Hall's writings which analyse the ambiguities of this struggle for respectability and its expression more generally in popular culture (Hall 199..). He also extends Hall's initial notes on the gendered nature of these changes. There is a particular transformation through women's desire to transfer the aspiration for respectability that was well established in the West Indies to an appropriate form, here the decoration of the Front Room. A sense of that initial respectability that is most fully captured in the image of the female school teacher is beautifully portrayed by the character of Hortense in Andrea Levy's recent novel *Small Island*. Something about the hats and the gloves.

The third moment I want to investigate is taken entirely from a summary of a recent PhD thesis by Heather Horst I supervised on the topic of Jamaican migrants returning to their homeland. If her work were to be published with a frontispiece it would have to be one of the graves she showed me in rural central Jamaica. The grave in question took the form of a miniature concrete house complete with doors, windows and gables. It looked more like something to put dolls inside than to signify a corpse beneath. Some of these graves are surrounded by the style of ironwork identical to that which surrounds actual houses. She interprets these graves as marking the end of a long journey (Horst 2004).

For most Jamaicans the project of building a house is not a one-off single act. Traditionally most people could only afford to build their own house in stages. As money accumulates one might lay a foundation for a new room, or complete the tiling of another. Building the home of one's aspirations is often a life's work. The house was always the primary mode by which life itself was marked as a progression. Despite all the pressure from the church it wasn't having children that led people to marry, it was the ability to have some sort of house of one's own.

This sense of the home as a project was particularly clear in the suburb of Kingston called Portmore, which is where Heather and I later on in 2004 lived with the family of a taxi driver, as part of our study of the impact of mobile phones on low income Jamaicans which was recently published by Berg under the title of *The Cell Phone: an anthropology of communication* (Horst and Miller 2006). Portmore is probably the biggest urban development project in the Caribbean with over 200,000 already settled there. It was created as a project by a combination of the socialist government of Michael Manley and an entrepreneurial Jewish Jamaican family called the Matelons. Together they found a means to build houses which would cost no more for a mortgage than the rent in the notorious Yards of downtown Kingston, romanticised by Bob

Marley but generally associated with the worst poverty and violence in Jamaica.

These houses built in the same way as car parts, basically four walls a roof and no foundation, in groups of four so you can supply all four with one water supply to the centre, are set in a plot of land. The idea being that you start with this basic unit and over time, if you have the means you can expand. Portmore is therefore fascinating since today if you look at the earliest settlements you can still see the original quad building but in some cases this is now the base for a two story mansion with Greek columns, balustrades and balconies, which in other cases it has hardly expanded from the original quad building.

This close association between life and building a home is obviously complicated when a Jamaican migrates to London. The move creates an ambiguous relationship between home and homeland. Most migrants intended to return to Jamaica at least in retirement. An intention often reinforced when they experienced a rejection of their initial assumption that they would be fully accepted as British. But if they do return to Jamaica they face an second even more unexpected rejection that Heather had documented in her thesis, whose topic of study were precisely these returned migrants who had stayed for much of their lives in England.

In many cases when it finally comes time to retire from work they do indeed decide to return to Jamaica. Well over twenty thousand have made this trip. In general though as Horst (2005) shows they tend to migrate not back to their original district of origin, but to an upland relatively cool area of central Jamaica that seems somehow more English. Furthermore returned migrants have grown an affection for certain elements of English life such as an English style garden and forms of behaviour that keep them ambivalent about who they are. This is in turn reflection in the reception they receive from those who remained in Jamaican. They too see these returned migrants principally as 'English' and may worry that with their greater wealth they will lay claim to land and authority at their expense.. As such they may feel they are no more at home in Jamaica than they were in London.

These two paths come together as returned migrants attempt to create their sense of homeland though building their dream retirement home. One of the principal incentives behind the initial migration to London was that it would become a means to afford the kind of home they aspired to but could not expect to construct on local incomes. The primary form of re-location in Jamaica is through building and furnishing. This area of upland central Jamaican is now full of houses which any Jamaican recognises from both scale and style as a returnee house. So in the first instance the project of returning to the identity of Jamaican through re-settlement is inevitably a failure. Heather found in her study found that many of these returned migrants increasingly spend their time going to, or being involved in the organisation of what become highly elaborate funerals. Because it is only in death, interred beneath these miniature models of the perfect house, and interred in the earth

itself that the final return to Jamaica is successfully completed. A return blessed by deep religious faith in another final return to the place.

A recent edited collection (Potter, Conway and Phillips Eds 2005) about returned migration to the Caribbean along with the evidence from Bauer and Thompson's (2006: 86) new book *Jamaican hands across the Atlantic* all add to Horst's point about the considerably difficulties of making this return, such that many of these returnees actual give up this dream and return once more to the diaspora. If anything the more successful have been the families discussed by Chamberlain (2001: 41) who see themselves as transnational to the core and use cheap transport and media to keep themselves as part of family relationship in two or even several countries at once. Also interesting in this regard is the difference between migration to the UK and the US. Foner (1998) earlier on noted the relatively lack of integration of Caribbean migrants into the dominant white society in the US and Bauer and Thompson more recently show a marked distinction where those who went to the US emphatically reject the idea that they have become American, or even Jamaican-American and there is much less syncretism and emulation than we find in the UK case, they do not become the equivalent of English. This may mean that the subsequent ambivalence for returned migrants is weaker but at present we don't have enough evidence to be secure as to this consequence is much weaker.

Finally I want to turn to my current study. I am presently writing up seventeen months worth of fieldwork that was carried out jointly with a PhD student Fiona Parrott. The topic of the project was a concern with how people used their attachments to possessions and material culture as supportive when they had to deal with episodes of loss such as bereavement, divorce or the ending of relationships. Although we finished the fieldwork a year ago, this analysis is only now about to begin. In order to preserve the autonomy of the student we first did separate projects. She is writing her PhD on the topic of memory, and I have just completed a manuscript intended for a more popular audience on what I call the aesthetic of order in these households. Later we will combine on this topic of Loss. The fieldwork was highly successful as a London ethnography. We worked with one hundred households or individuals and eventually had only eight clear refusals, so this work seems pretty representative of contemporary London. In my book on aesthetics I work with thirty of these participants, of which two are from the Caribbean, and I want now to reflect on what we can learn from these two, as the final of my four 'moments' in this sequence.

Mrs Stone<sup>i</sup> first came to settle in London in 1956, and to this house in Stuart Street in 1958. The house has the feel of one long inhabited by a family. It has lost any pretension to an architectural or decorative style, rather it echoes back the intense network of family relationships of which Mrs Stone is now the apex, having twenty-three grandchildren and, while we were visiting her, her first great grandchild. The house is occupied by two main classes of material. Either those such as books, music and pictures that relate to her Christian faith, and the other an abundance of photographs and cards that represent her extended family. Mostly, while Mrs Stone talks to us at length about

weddings, and holidays and trips to Jamaica and the doings of her grandchildren, her second husband sits in the corner. Having suffered a stroke he is severely limited in his ability to communicate. But although he cannot talk he can certainly understand, and there is a breadth to his smile, an enthusiasm to his supportive nods that has become an integral part of the warmth of this friendly living room.

For the birth of her first two children Mrs Stone returned to Jamaica where her own mother supervised the arrangements. Then she did not return for over a decade and her next four children were born in London. After which she started to visit Jamaica on at least an annual basis and has now made some thirty return trips. In 1987 she decided to return permanently to Jamaica, to a house she had built in Christiana, one of the coolest and highest sites on the island. She was not alone, many of the original migrants from the island, some of whom settled in Stuart Street, had also returned around that time. But Mrs Stone was also not alone in her experience of the failure of this enterprise. In her case it was a result primarily of the difficult relationships she experienced between her first husband and his relatives in Jamaica. Eventually in 1991 she felt she had had enough, and with a single suitcase and a few clothes she left her husband and returned to the house which fortunately they had not yet sold in Stuart Street.

One might think that that would be enough, and the project of making a home in Jamaica would have ended with this failure. But Mrs Stone could not abandon this ambition for a home in Jamaica. Since 1991 she had been to court in dispute with her husband over both the house in Jamaica and that in Stuart Street. In 2005, when this was finally resolved, the first thing she did with the money she received was to build another house back in Jamaica. Almost everything about this project spelled out the word contradiction. One of the foundations for this relationship Jamaicans feel between home and homeland lies in the tradition of family land as opposed to personal or private ownership. That is, land was always jointly owned by the extended family, all of whom retained rights to that land which could therefore not be sold. Yet the money for building this new property came from what is now a very common practice in Jamaica of splitting up family land into individual ownership and, in her case, selling all but the three lots she retained for building her own house and potentially others for her children. In this manner the long tradition of family land is finally coming to an end.

Mrs Stone had recently been to the Ideal Home exhibition where she had fallen in love with some expensive Italian furniture which she purchased for her new house in Jamaica. Yet her house in Stuart Street is entirely furnished with very modest materials that nowhere match the standard she expects for this Jamaican home. This division between the place people expect to make a living and the place they expect to spend it goes back to earlier generations. Her own father had worked in the US before the war and with that money created a middle class lifestyle in Jamaica with a farm and enough cattle that Mrs Stone claims one could 'bathe in milk'. She fondly recalls that, even when going around the farm, he would sport a massive diamond tie pin and his

velvet hat. So she in turn, having made her living in London, can only imagine a fine house as something belonging to Jamaica.

Mrs Stone describes the house she has just been building:- 'the two lounges, one is upstairs and one is downstairs and three en-suite. You just go into your bedroom and that's it, everything is in there, your bathroom and stuff. The ground floor has the master bedroom and the en-suite and the powder room. It's got space. You can put what you want where you want. Then there's a garage as you can see, there's a door that takes you right in front of the garage into the house there. Then you get a kitchen, a long kitchen there and one upstairs.' This is the house for her new Italian furniture, just as her father had a glass topped table and a fine roll-top sofa they would put out under the mango tree for him to relax on. Her main memory as a child is the endless polishing of the fine silverware. By contrast, the ornaments in her house in Stuart Street are generally inexpensive and functional.

Yet there is another contradiction. Because Mrs Stone cannot match this continuity of commitment to the house itself with any personal commitment to actually living there. For one thing given her husband's circumstance, she is well aware of the advantages of the National Health Service, as she says 'you can't get it nowhere, you can't get it in America. Here is best.' But there is also her own personal affection for England, notwithstanding the prejudices she suffered from during her early years. She knows full well 'I can't give up England.... I think it's because I spent all my other years in England so it's not so easy. ...I'll have to come back here. So everything is just going to be running back to Britain, running back to my home, to my mother country, that's what it is you know. Yes, run back to my mother country!'

As a result she has now built a house but is quite unclear what to do with it. She says 'Oh yes, I've got to be buying stuff to get. When I was up there, because we went up there, the person who was looking after the house told me that the house is sort of nearly finished and everything and what do I want to do with it because it has to be occupied. Because people might just, you know. So he said what do I want to do with it. If I wanted to rent it. And I said "no, I don't want to rent it" I want to go in my house. So I'll have to take care of that.' In the end Mrs Stone decided that her brother could live in it. So, for now, she is in the slightly bizarre position of paying the electricity and the taxes on the house but with no particular prospect of actually living there.

There is not a single object in this house in Stuart Street that I can recognise as having come directly from Jamaica. Mrs Stone explains that it would be pointless having souvenirs given how often she is there. Furniture only ever travels in the other direction. Mainly what she brings back and distributes amongst her family is Jamaican food. Items such as tamarind balls which, even if you find them in London, are really not the same as the homemade ones from Jamaica. Food seems a more personal and appropriate mode of remaining Jamaican. For her son's wedding she is arranging a special Jamaican caterer in London. Even the wedding cake itself is being split between an English style tier and two Jamaican style tiers. The only material objects she misses are the certificates of all her previous qualifications: school

exams, naturalisation papers and secretarial courses. Her husband never returned these to her from that first house in Jamaica. Such certificates tend to be seen as hugely important, whether people from the Caribbean are living there or here. In parallel with the house itself they are the material evidence for one's life, its achievements and the sense that gradually over the years one has become a more substantial person, a person of substance.

So Mrs Stone is living in one home, but feels strongly the pull of two other ideal homes, that in Jamaica and that in heaven. She is always aware that beyond the everyday secular life there is another place where one's heart and soul must dwell. Although this living room has plenty of books and music, not one of these is secular. Similarly all the decorations on the wall that are not family photographs are religious images. Mrs Stone plays the organ at her local church and many of her family attend church every Sunday. When the new house was finished in Jamaica the most important task was to organise for its blessing. This was arranged in Jamaica through the local church and returnee residence association. She played the organ and fed around forty guests for a ceremony which inaugurated the house as a proper, that is blessed house. So to conclude by regarding her in terms of Heather Horst's thesis we can make some sort of sense of this if the the first ideal home in Jamaican is actually seen as a stage towards the final ideal home in heaven.

My contrasting portrait is Marcia, living on this very same Stuart Street. There must be dozens of ornaments and figures on the central table of Marcia's living room. In addition the dresser, other side tables and every raised surface has its own share of figures. And while there are a few common souvenir genres such as mini bottles and ashtrays, it is figures that dominate. Black musicians that as Marcia would put it 'bright up' the place, jostle the Santas, the religious icons, and the toys. In Marcia's room Jesus looks out from the midst of the last supper and his eyes fall on Humpty Dumpty, in turn overawed by a three foot Matador whose arms are now laden with a bunch of pink plastic roses. A litter of six china kitten play at the feet of a Japanese lady. A red Indian joins a beach party of almost naked figures, including one well endowed sunbather whose modesty is barely saved by a carefully positioned bottle of sun lotion. There must be a dozen saxophonists strategically placed around the room to serenade a picture of Marcia at her wedding that nestles respectfully below another portrait of Jesus holding his own sacred heart. Fairies nibble on tropical fruit three times their size. Pixies play with peasants. Goats look amazed at basketball champions, while plastic lilies protect puritans reading epistles to pigeons. Marcia has brought tolerance, though not exactly harmony, to not just one world, but many.

So the room is not just unbelievably crowded it is indeed populated, and Marcia herself hardly needs to tell us about the overwhelming cause of suffering that afflicts her now and has afflicted her for so many years - her loneliness. One of the more poignant themes in the room is ornamental telephones, china copies of old fashioned phones that had discs to be dialled. Phones that can never actually ring. Marcia has one thing in common with Mrs Stone but also one stark contrast. As with Mrs Stone there is not a single object from the Caribbean that I can identify in the entire room. But what is far

more surprising is that while Mrs Stone's living room is covered in signs of her family either photographs of them or cards such as birthday and Christmas cards sent by them, there is almost nothing similar in Marcia's room. She has a single wedding photo but otherwise you would have no evidence from the room itself that she has a son or several grandchildren. This is almost incomprehensible.

To understand why this might be one has to follow Marcia's own trajectory. Her mother had been a school teacher, probably not very different from the figure of Hortense in Andrea Levy's novel *Small Island*. respectable, working incredibly hard, never taking holidays, and bringing up her children with a strict disciplinarian, regime. They were not well off, and Marcia was often hungry since although there were fruit trees sometimes she couldn't count on the basic staples. Nevertheless this particular kind of West Indian figure often achieves some sense of fulfilment when they become a sort of family matriarch overseeing the development of grandchildren and others who treat them with consummate respect.

The problem was that all these characteristics which have a particular position within a Caribbean context, betrayed Marcia within the very different condition of London. In London she too worked hard, never took holidays. She cultivated a polite but never too close relationship to neighbours or through the church. But London is not the Caribbean, and this respectable distancing actually left her far more cut off and lonely than the same behaviour would have done in the Caribbean setting. Given also the greater autonomy of family, she found that when the few core relationships went badly there was nothing else by way of alternative society. As it happens her relationship with her husband and in particular his sister, went very badly, and when she tried to treat her grandchildren with the kind of discipline she assumed was appropriate they simply chose distance as a response. Without realising it she found that she had lost her possibility of most close supportive relationships, largely by remaining true to the values she thought she was supposed to represent.

She retains some links with her homeland but now sees these only as people who want to fleece her of the money she has earned and to sign away her rights to land, people who never thanked her for the gifts she sent home. In the end having never taken a holiday, she retired and saw no one who she now wanted to benefit from her savings and thrift and hard work. So belatedly she started joining her church organised holidays, and in the last few years has actually visited many parts of the world. It is the souvenirs from these church trips that now populate her living room and the memories of these trips that keep her company in her loneliness.

## **DISCUSSION**

The four 'moments' that have been described here hopefully demonstrate the contribution of a detailed analysis of material culture to acknowledging and understanding the continuities and the contradictions of cultural projects. But they also raise certain questions as to the nature of those projects. There is a clear contrast between the first three and the final moment in terms of the way

they have been presented. The first three correspond to the anthropological normative, that is they are pretty typical of the kinds of generalisations through which anthropologists present their findings. I believe this is entirely warranted because actually as is particularly clear in the semi-quantitative analysis applied in the first case, there is considerable homogeneity and repetition in each case. On the other hand the final moment consists of two individuals and at this level we can see all sorts of fortuitous and particular effects and trajectories that we might not ever have predicted from these general representations.

In certain respects discussion at the level of the individual brings a more literary quality to the discussion. In some ways Mrs Stone who seems driven to build a house she can't actually live in has a quality of tragi-comedy to her. This is quite reminiscent of the bathos found in Naipaul's novel *A house for Mr Biswas* where the principle theme is remarkably similar, in that Biswas is also principally driven by this same life project of building his house, and yet somehow this house is never going to be the substantial structure he envisages in his head. The novel is set in the same town of Chaguanas as my original research and an analysis of Naipaul's themes played a major role in that analysis (Miller 1994: 164-168). With Marcia we come across something closer to genuine tragedy. What I imply by the use of this term is that we see individuals who are not merely suffering as a result of their own intentionality of actions, but rather because there are larger forces, something closer to what we might call destiny which seem to be working themselves out through the medium of the individual, a common theme to plays and novels through the ages.

I would suggest that this theme of tragedy is partly a product of such a juxtaposition of anthropology and the individual. Imagine a standard model of anthropological representations of cultural order such as the previously noted concept of habitus as used by Bourdieu. This implies that any particular trait, value or expectation is closely networked and structured by its structural position and homology with similar structures in the everyday world of practice but also in systems of belief or of kinship. Although this does not imply a kind of adaptive position as found in anthropological functionalism, it does imply that each element is appropriate because of its relation to the rest. Applied to this material, it could correspond to the sense that Marcia's values and behaviour, for example her distance from neighbours and her ideals of discipline derive from a specific Caribbean 'habitus' which make them appropriate in that context, but could easily become singularly inappropriate in the radically different setting of London. The implication is one of tragedy in that merely by being true to her own traditions she thereby sets herself up for failure as a migrant.

This is clearly very different from the common use of the concept of 'roots' which since the time of Alex Hayley's original book has often been seen as a kind of unqualified positive aspect of diaspora identity, giving one continuity and grounding in some new setting. Although this may often be the case, the very logic of anthropological analysis would suggest that 'social reproduction' or 'cultural continuity' as terms commonly used in the discipline, could be

expected to commonly have a downside in the context of migration. With respect to Caribbean migration in London there have been convincing celebrations of the cosmopolitan creative and dynamic aspects of syncretic cultural forms for example in music and the arts eloquently presented by theorists such as Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy. I suspect, however, that often this is the result of second generation migrants, often in part repudiation of their parents. The initial migrants certainly developed syncretic forms as is evident in Michael McMillan's exhibition of the front room, but these seem more conservative and normative, and in a sense prior to the kinds of effusive creativity described by Hall and Gilroy.

This then begs the question of whether such instances of the tragic are necessarily a result of migration or whether they can be found within more stable cultural conditions. If we take the case of the returned migrants. Clearly at one level they represent the problems of migration itself. Not only do they have the struggle of finding their feet within the new UK setting, but the very success of syncretism and integration becomes part of their downfall when they are rejected as 'English' on their return to Jamaica. The irony is that Jamaicans who go to the US and feel they are relatively speaking rejected by US society, for that very reason, find it easier to retain a constancy of linkage with Jamaica and very likely are more successful as returned migrants (Bauer and Thompson, Horst forthcoming). I also don't want to suggest this return is commonly successful. Many returnees find that the amount of money they earn abroad represents a very substantial amount when they return. The Trinidadian who built a house in Trinidad with 16 bedrooms to represent the 16 shops he owned in the US may well feel entirely comfortable with the house largely as a monument to a highly successful life by the standards he chooses to judge himself by.

Furthermore A House for Mr Biswas demonstrates that one doesn't have to be a migrant to feel this sense of bathos or the tragedy. Given the general propensity to holism, building on functionalism and structuralism, there is perhaps less inclination to see cultural orders in terms of failure in anthropology, though Sahlins certainly implicated idea of structural contradiction and failures in social reproduction. Though most commonly these are ascribed to external forces such as colonialism, or as in this case more often racism. However, one could surely argue that religion could well thrive on the establishment of a cosmology that implies that all earthly trajectories are doomed to failure because the only true completion to life comes in the hereafter. So the 'failure' of a Jamaican life project as objectified in the house, but finally realised in the grave, could be more evident in the case of returned migrants, but to some degree also be implicit in Jamaican Christianity, as a product of the emphasis upon the superiority of the transcendent over the earthly, or what I have recently discussed as the greater reality of heaven over the merely apparent materiality of our world (Miller 2005: 1-50).

While bearing this in mind, however, the material presented here is specifically concerned with the problems of migration, and the contradictions where a project to construct a house doesn't always end up as the completion

of a home. In some cases merely the construction of a house back in Jamaica may fulfill the desire to re-establish one's connection and be sufficient as a transient home until the true coming back to the land occurs through death and burial in Jamaica. On the other hand with Mrs Stone, I do not feel this is the way she experiences this trajectory. I believe that there is genuine contradiction here, which is evident in the quotes from her conversation. In the case of Marcia, however much she crams her house full of objects, and populates her home, there is that sense of emptiness and the futility of her attempts to stem the tide of loneliness that besets her.

Finally these juxtapositions are perhaps instructive in thinking about the place of material culture here. Clearly there is no simple representation of social beings or social processes. The house itself becomes such a powerful objectification of life, that it can be both the means by which Christianity asserts its superiority to merely material life, but also as in the degree to which Jamaicans only marry when they can afford a house, after they have children, it can represent a refusal of some basic tenets of that religion despite its general espousal. Similarly at the level of mundane possessions, they can assert a projected identity, such that Mrs Stone lives with much lesser furnishing than that which furnishes the place she cannot live in, and Marcia's abundant possessions signify most of all what they cannot be, testimony to another life than that she actually lives. It is the centrality of material culture to these projects and their failures that in turn makes them speak to the analytical possibility of uncovering cultural imperatives but also contradiction and failure, and discontinuities between the general and the individual that perhaps justifies the appeal to a concept such as tragedy in this paper.

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<sup>i</sup> Mrs Stone and Marcia appear as portraits in 'The Comfort of Things, forthcoming, Marcia also is discussed in much detail but with respect to a quite different issues in forthcoming volume on Kitsch in Home Cultures...