

# stitching back the land

## Afuwa and Dion Kaszas

the map itself is a construction. You know the geography of the landscape; you know the natural formations that have come about through the history of that place.

But the demarcated lines showing us where those plantations were located is a construction of human beings — human beings who wanted power, who took it upon themselves to take over this place

five years ago, I found the map in a book called *Account of an Insurrection of the Negro Slaves in the Colony of Demerara, Which Broke Out on the 18<sup>th</sup> of August, 1823*, by Joshua Bryant

Demerara is one of original three counties comprising Guyana, the other two being Essequibo and Berbice. This stretch of land between the Orinoco and the Amazon is home to nine nations: the Warrau, Arawak, Carib, Akawaio, Macusi, Arecuna, Patamona, Wapisiana, and Wai-Wai. Our coast was colonized in turn by the Dutch, French, and British, who brought enslaved and indentured people from West Africa, China, India, and Madeira

I am born of the ones who survived the crossing

my mind just exploded at the concept of embodying this map you found, the journey of finding the map, then that pivotal question: what are these little stars?

the map shows the plantations that existed on the north coast of Guyana at the time, and was drawn just after the Demerara rebellion was put down. There are tiny stars where, for months after the uprising, they displayed the heads and bodies of the resistance fighters

and you look into the story of what those stars signify, and then bring that history forward. Not only bring it forward, but embody that history and share that history, courageously

a map showing Plantation Success, one of the largest and most productive plantations on the coast, which was owned by Sir John Gladstone, father of the British prime minister William Gladstone. Because enslaved people were considered property, one of the leaders of the rebellion also bore his surname; his name was Jack Gladstone

a map of the land that was to become Georgetown, the city where I was born, where my high school is, where my family is

a map of a corner of the Triangular Trade, which took its devastated cargo from the west coast of Africa and across the ocean to South America, the Caribbean, and the east coast of North America, returning to the industrialised ports of Europe with its bounty before starting the cycle again

since we're going to recreate this map, how can we Indigenise it?

how can we contest and deconstruct the reality that this map is trying to convey?  
To begin with an Indigenous method of tattooing and then to consider how that method would lend itself to the deconstruction of those lines

the grid of straight lines, with the stars

Case Number

2840134

Message

my friend Nahaan says that the skin stitch is also stitching us back together, and you have begun that process of stitching yourself back together; stitching over those frayed edges that the history of that map represents.

But I would challenge you to say that you are also stitching back the land that you carry in your body

and because of the way that we're doing this  
the ink goes deeper

and through the stitching together we are breaking those lines up

you begin to destroy the idea of its reality  
because between each stitch is a space.  
this is us taking power back, this is you taking power back from that history, so  
that you can tell it in your own way, in a way that speaks to you  
and to those generations that are coming

dkaszas via gmail.com  
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to art.afuwa

Indigenous tattooing is always honouring our ancestors  
Keone Nunes, the Hawai'ian cultural tattoo practitioner says,  
“through your hands, your ancestors are alive”  
not only speaking to the tattoo artist, but also to those who are being tattooed,  
who get the mark, also embody and help make their ancestors alive today

the story that you shared, about the Earth Lines and the circles that start  
with you, and expand to include everything, is itself a map — it's a different  
topography, it's a map of relations

you're not only taking on this mark in terms of a method but also  
honouring your ancestors by bringing that history to life today,  
and then the way that we have collaborated to bring this to life  
— the red being a pigment that will fade sooner  
you are absorbing that history

now it's a different history because of who you are. Because of who  
your people are. Because of the teachings that you're  
passing on simply by having that tattoo

on my back  
the back, where we wear burdens and bear lashes, where the past belongs

fractured,  
a displacement

to cross the sea a second third time without drowning  
everything I could bring is  
under my skin

change its meaning  
rewrite it in the way you want it to be read,  
as something other than what it was

to belong where you are even when it means that the ocean must be crossed  
again

in this process and the journey that we went on together

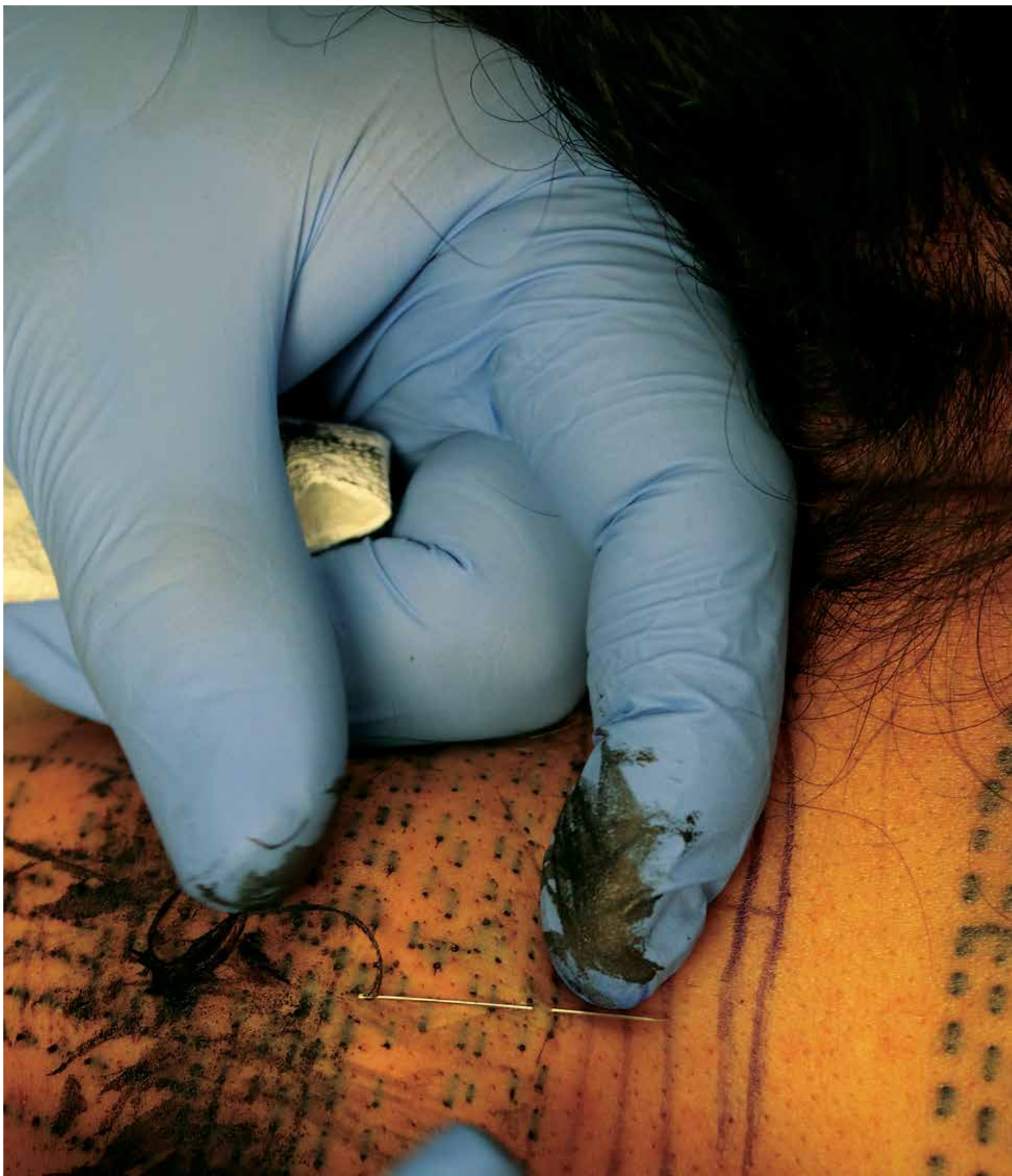
with each crossing, something imprinted: a brand, a tattoo

an inherited politics of demarcation    association    freedom    possibility



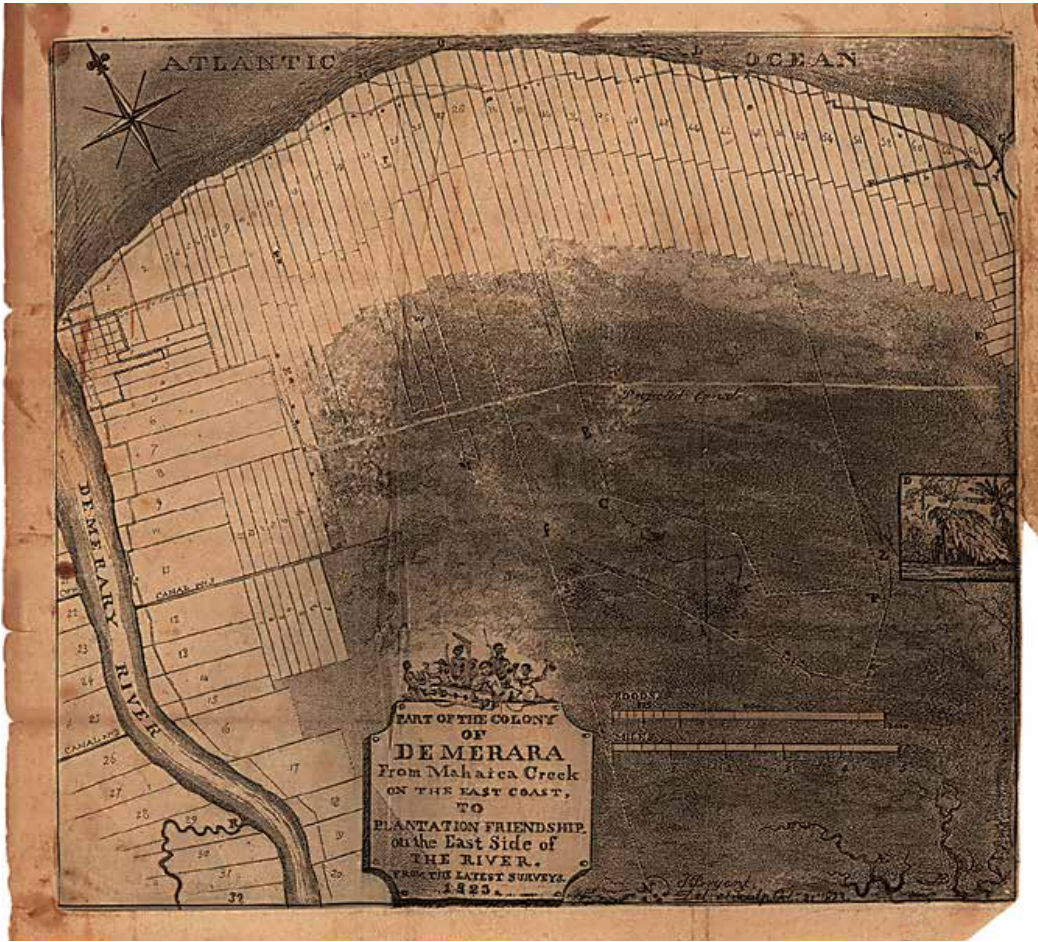
*re-drawing the map* (photo by Tia Taurere ClearSky)





The needle and ink-soaked thread are drawn through the skin (photo by Tia Taurere ClearSky)





Top: a grid of lines, with stars (courtesy Brown University Archives).

Bottom: *birthmark* (photo by Tia Taurere ClearSky)







*everything I could bring is under my skin* (photo by Aerlyn Weissman)





*Earth Lines/life lines* (photo by Aerlyn Weissman)