

# Artist Thread In Focus

Giana De Dier

Carnegie  
Museum of Art

# Panama Canal

# Introduction

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Throughout her work, Giana De Dier engages with the history of the Panama Canal, specifically the experience of the Afro-Caribbean migrants who risked (and lost) their lives to help construct it. This section invites you to learn more about the building of the canal, the history of segregation in what was called the “Canal Zone,” and examples of infrastructure in your own life.

## Terms

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**Afro-Caribbean Peoples** Caribbean people who have ancestors from Africa. Over 200,000 Afro-Caribbean immigrants moved to the Canal Zone from 1881 to 1914, seeking work on the canal project.

**Archive** A historical document or record, and the name for where these records can be stored. Archives can include photographs, letters, newspapers, and more.

**Canal Zone** A US unincorporated territory that extended approximately five miles on either side of the canal. It was created with the signing of the Hay–Bunau-Varilla Treaty in 1903, and existed until 1979, when it was incorporated back into Panama.

**Segregation** The systematic separation of people into racial or other ethnic groups. Life in the Canal Zone was deeply segregated, with different housing, restaurants, and salaries for white workers and workers of color.

# Terms

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**Panama Canal** A 51 mile-long waterway in Panama that connects the Atlantic Ocean with the Pacific Ocean and divides North and South America. It was constructed by the United States between 1904 and 1914. By controlling the canal, the US controlled trade between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and gained serious military power. The canal's construction contributed to the rise of the US as a dominating global force.

More than 40,000 laborers from dozens of countries, including Afro-Caribbean migrants, helped build the canal, and more than 10,000 people died in the process. The Canal also caused environmental devastation, as the world's largest dam had to be built in order to service it, and whole villages and forests were flooded in the process.

**Pittsburgh Steel** The steel industry in Pittsburgh played a major role in the construction of the canal. According to historian David McCullough, "some 50 different mills, foundries, machine shops, and specialty fabricators [in Pittsburgh] were involved in the canal, making rivets, bolts, nuts, steel girders, steel plates," and more.

**US Imperialism** Policies aimed at extending the political, economic, media, and cultural influence of the United States over areas

beyond its boundaries. The construction of the Panama Canal was an early act of US imperialism in that it expanded the power of the US beyond the country's own borders.

**US Unincorporated Territory** A territory that has its own government, and where portions of the US constitution (such as automatic American citizenship) may be suspended. Current US unincorporated territories include Puerto Rico, Guam, and the US Virgin Islands.

# Connect

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Giana De Dier, *What we choose to not see no. 4* (left), and *no. 3* (right) 2022, commissioned for the 58th Carnegie International, Courtesy of the artist and Carnegie Museum of Art; photo: Sean Eaton

# Connect

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Giana De Dier's collage series *What we choose to not see* references the Panama Canal and incorporates archival images of Canal workers.

- What do you notice about these images, including the colors, figures, background, and the way the images are constructed?
- What is happening in the pieces of newspaper that Giana De Dier incorporates, and why do you think she chose to incorporate these?
- What do you think these collages might be about?
- Why do you think Giana De Dier might have titled the work *What we choose to not see*?
- What questions might you have about this artwork?
- Research the Panama Canal and see what you can find out about it and its history.
- Why was it built?
- Who built it?
- Who was it for?
- Who controls it?
- What might be the relationship between the Panama Canal and power?
- How might your research inform or change the way you see these collages?

# Reimagining Infrastructure

# Create #1

Design or redesign an imaginary infrastructure project for your community, with empathy and equity at its heart.

## Goals for this Create

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- Understand the meaning of infrastructure
- Explore examples of infrastructure in your life
- Think about access to specific infrastructure, and who it does or doesn't serve
- Practice drawing

## Materials

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Plain paper, blueprint paper, pencils, erasers.

**Optional** rulers.

## Terms

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**Blueprint** A technical drawing or plan used by architects and engineers. Blueprints were originally created as cyanotypes—a special type of photography on blue paper.

**Engineering** The branch of science and technology concerned with the design, building, and use of engines, machines, and structures.

**Equity** In social contexts, the fair and just management of all institutions serving the public, and the commitment to promote fairness and justice.

**Infrastructure** The basic physical and organizational structures and facilities (for example, buildings, roads, power grids, or sewer systems) needed for the operation of a society.

**Proposal** A plan or suggestion, especially a formal or written one, put forward for consideration or discussion by others.

## Connect

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- What do you think of when you hear the term “infrastructure”?
- How might infrastructure affect those who interact with it?
- In your opinion, what makes infrastructure successful?
- The creation of the Panama Canal destroyed thousands of lives and damaged the local environment. How might infrastructure work to serve rather than harm those involved in creating and engaging with it?
- Think about examples of infrastructure in your region. These might include bridges, roads, parks, or transportation systems. Choose one specific example to focus on.
- How might you interact with this infrastructure on a regular basis?
- Who might this infrastructure serve?
- Who was involved in creating this infrastructure—including engineers, urban planners, or construction workers?

- Is this infrastructure equitably managed in your opinion—that is, does everyone have equal access to it, and is it taken care of? Why or why not?

## Create

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- 1 Imagine that you have been asked to design or redesign a piece of infrastructure in your region.** Brainstorm:
  - What would you design or redesign?
  - Where would the infrastructure be located?
  - Who would this infrastructure serve?
  - Who would be involved in building it? How might you ensure the safety and wellbeing of those involved in building it?
  - How might it contribute to equity and well-being in your community?
  - How might you design your infrastructure with consideration for the wellbeing of the natural environment?
- 2 Imagine you need to convince a planning committee to approve your infrastructure design.** Draft a “proposal” that includes the information above, including why you believe this infrastructure should be built.
  - Add bullet points that include the above information. For example:  
**What** A new bridge  
**Where** [Name neighborhood or and town or city]  
**Who** [Name who will work on the project and who it will be for]
- 3 Include an image of your proposed design.**
  - Sketch ideas for your design on plain paper.
  - If you like, include measurements with a scale, for example 1 inch = 10 feet.
  - Draw the final design on the blueprint paper.
- 4 Optional** If you are doing this project in a classroom setting, share your design with classmates, and offer feedback on each other's proposals.

# African Diaspora



# Introduction

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Giana De Dier's work focuses on peoples from the African Diaspora, specifically Afro-Caribbeans, from whom she is descended. Drawing attention to ways these people have been depicted within, or erased from, Western historical narratives, her collages actively celebrate the presence of Afro-Caribbean individuals in history as well as in the present. This section invites you to explore the concept of diaspora as it relates to Afro-Caribbeans, migration, and your own cultural heritage.

“State officials could be punitive and exclusionary, and these actions did affect the day-to-day experiences of individuals. But officials could not completely eliminate the knowledge about the world and community that migration and diasporic networking made possible.” —Historian Kaysha Corinealdi on the experience of Afro-Caribbean migrants in the Panama Canal Zone



Giana De Dier, *Untitled (Madagascar)*, 2020, mixed media collage, 33 x 27 cm, Courtesy of the artist

# Terms

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**Africa** The world's second-largest continent with the second largest population. There are currently 54 countries in Africa, and 1000 to 2000 languages are spoken.

**African Diaspora** The worldwide collection of communities descended from native Africans or people from Africa, predominantly in the Americas. Though the term can be used to describe several historical migrations, it commonly refers to the descendants of the West and Central Africans who were enslaved and taken to the Americas via the Trans-Atlantic slave trade between the 16th and 19th centuries, with their largest populations in the United States, Brazil, and Haiti. Even when these Africans spoke different languages or came from different countries, in forced proximity they developed new cultures that blended remembered traditions of their homelands with life in a new setting.

**Afro-Caribbean** Caribbean people who trace their full or partial ancestry to Africa. The majority of the modern African Caribbeans descend from Africans enslaved and taken to the Caribbean via the Trans-Atlantic slave trade.

**Caribbean** A region of the Americas that consists of the Caribbean Sea, its islands

(some surrounded by the Caribbean Sea and some bordering both the Caribbean Sea and the North Atlantic Ocean), and the surrounding coasts.

**Cultural Heritage** Aspects of a culture that are inherited from one's ancestors. Cultural heritage might include anything from architecture and fashion, to music, to language, to values such as generosity or respect for elders.

**Diaspora** A dispersion of a people (and their descendants) who were formerly concentrated in one place, and who share a common heritage and sense of homeland. The term originates from a Greek word for "scattering," and was first used in reference to the Jewish diaspora (the dispersion of Jews from Israel in the sixth century BC) before being applied to other groups.

**Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade** The abduction and enslavement of African peoples and their transportation to the Americas between the 16th and 19th centuries.

**Migration** The movement of people from one region or place in the world to another. The key difference between diaspora and migration is that in diaspora the people maintain a very strong connection to their roots, or homeland.

# Terms

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**Migrant** A person who moves from one place to another, especially to find work or better living conditions. Types of migrants include emigrants (who leave one country to move to another), immigrants (who move into a new country), seasonal migrants (who move in response to job opportunities or climate change), refugees (who flee from their home countries due to persecution or war), and internally displaced persons (who are forced to leave where they live but do not cross the border of their home country).

**Naturalization** In the United States, the process of applying for citizenship and becoming a legal citizen.

**Cultural Assimilation** The process in which a group of people from one culture (usually outside the “dominant” culture) comes to resemble another (usually dominant) culture by assuming its values, behaviors, and beliefs.

**US Citizenship** A status that entails specific rights, duties, and benefits. US citizenship is usually acquired by birth when a child is born in the United States or one of its territories, including the District of Columbia, Guam, Puerto Rico, the Northern Mariana Islands, and the US Virgin Islands. A US Citizen has the right to live and work

in the United States. There are two ways to become a US citizen: by birth or through naturalization.

**The Great Migration** One of the largest movements of people in United States history. Approximately six million Black people moved from the American South to Northern, Midwestern, and Western states between 1910 and 1970, to escape racial violence and oppression, and to pursue economic and educational opportunities. Many thousands settled in the Pittsburgh region, working in steel mills, starting businesses and newspapers, and performing jazz.

# Connect

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Giana De Dier, *The space in between*, 2021, mixed media collage on Fabriano watercolor paper, 33 x 26 cm, Courtesy of the artist

# Connect

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- Look at the collage titled *The space in between*. What do you notice about this image, including the colors, the figures, and the way the image is arranged?
- Why might Giana De Dier have chosen this title?
- What kinds of spaces do you see represented here?
- In what ways might De Dier’s use of collage relate to her subject matter?
- What might the term “diaspora” mean to you? Does it evoke any specific associations or feelings?
- In what ways might diaspora be a form of community?
- Why might people who find themselves far from home want to build community with one another?
- Afro-Caribbeans who worked on the Panama Canal faced “discrimination based on race, gender, ancestry, sexuality, language” and more. Why might people in such circumstances want to create community?
- The African Diaspora includes people from Africa and their descendants. Can you think of ways that African Diasporic culture is present all around us? Think about music, food, dance, and other forms of culture, for example the music of Rihanna.
- People migrate for all kinds of reasons, forced or voluntary or complex reasons in between—from fleeing war or unsafe conditions in their home countries, to looking for economic opportunity. Can you think of any examples of migration in recent times?
- Migration can occur within the borders of the same country, or across international borders. Immigration occurs when a person crosses an international border and becomes a permanent resident in another country. What are some examples of immigration or migration in the United States or in your region?
- What does the term “cultural assimilation” mean to you? In your opinion, what are some of the pros and cons of cultural assimilation?
- In what ways have immigrants contributed to the life and culture of the United States and your region?
- Immigrants or people in diaspora often navigate multiple cultures at once. For example, an Afro-Caribbean living in the United States might speak English, Spanish, and the Creole language Papiamentu, eat American food and Caribbean food, and practice American and Caribbean traditions. What might be the pros and cons of navigating multiple cultures?

# Identity as Liberation

# Create #1

Create a self-portrait collage that brings together different aspects of your identity.

“My work relies on images from archives that fetishize the Black body as exotic and obscure the female experience, divorcing the true narrative from the image itself.”

—Giana De Dier

## Goals for this Create

- Explore different aspects of your identity, including race, gender, religion, and more
- Explore ways others have tried to represent you or your cultures
- Practice self-expression
- Learn more about collage as a medium
- Practice thinking about composition in art

## Materials

Collage materials (including maps, old newspapers and magazines, photographs, handwritten lists or letters, and scraps of paper), scissors, glue, and paper to glue the collage onto.

## Terms

**Archive** A historical document or record, and the name for where these records can be stored. Archives can include photographs, letters, newspapers, and more.

**Cultural Identity** Identification with, or sense of belonging to, a particular group based on various categories, including nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, and religion.

**Colonialism** The practice of acquiring full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically. Between 1881 and 1914, in what was known as the Scramble for Africa, several European nations—including Britain, France, Germany, Portugal, Spain, and Italy—took control over the continent.

**Collage** A work of art in which pieces of paper, photographs, fabric, and other materials are arranged and glued onto a surface.

**Composition** The arrangement of elements within a work of art.

**Decolonization** The process by which colonies become independent of the colonizing country. In Africa, decolonization largely took place between the 1950s and 1975, through a series of wars and rebellions.

**Fetishize** To obsess over and project fantasy onto something, particularly in relation to the body.

**Male Gaze** A term coined in 1975 by film critic Laura Mulvey. It refers to the way women have been depicted in film, photography,

and throughout art history through the lenses of heterosexual, cisgendered, male viewers as objects for the pleasure of those viewers.

**White Gaze** A term popularized by the writer Toni Morrison, who described it as the idea that “[Black] lives have no meaning and no depth without the white gaze.” Morrison, who worked in book publishing, was describing the way book publishers assumed that readers were white, but the term might also be applied to the way white artists have depicted Black bodies.

**Resistance** The act of fighting against something that is attacking you, or refusing to accept something



Giana De Dier, *Recuperar y reconstruir la identidad como ejercicio de resistencia*, 2021, collage (paper and photo negative) on Fabriano watercolor paper, 30 x 30 cm, Courtesy of the artist

## Connect

### 1 Look at the collage above.

- What do you notice about this image?
- De Dier’s collages often focus on women. Why do you think this might be? What do you notice about the woman here?
- Why might this woman be holding a camera?
- The work is titled *Recuperar y reconstruir la identidad como ejercicio de resistencia*. Why might De Dier have titled the work in Spanish?
- The title translates in English to “Recover and rebuild identity as an exercise in resistance.” How might rebuilding identity be an exercise in resistance?

**2 In her collages, De Dier tries to reconstruct Afro-Caribbean histories from fragmented or incomplete archives.**

- Why might these archives be incomplete?
- Who do you think created these archives or the documents within them?
- How might De Dier’s use of the archives challenge existent power relations?
- What might be the relationship between archives and telling the truth?
- Archives can be sites of preserving information for the future, but they can also be sites of silencing or erasure, if the story they tell is one-sided or from the perspective of one dominant group. In what ways have you experienced silencing or erasure in your life?

**3 In many ways, each of us is a “collage” of identities.**

How might you self-identify?

- Consider race, ethnicity, nationality, ability, and gender.
- Consider religion, politics, education, work experience, appearance.
- Consider your interests, for example art, sports, math, or dance.
- Consider your familial and social roles, for example friend, sister, or cousin.

**4 In what ways might your various identities intersect?**

**5 In what ways might aspects of your identity be portrayed or experienced by others?**

**6 In what ways might aspects of your identity be expressed or experienced by you?**

## Create

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**1 Create a collage self-portrait that expresses your identity in some way.** You might include:

- Images of fashion, food, or music that you identify with
- Elements of history—such as images of where your ancestors or family came from (whether within the United States or beyond), old family photographs, or historic documents
- Images of people
- Elements of language
- Newspapers
- Blank spaces representing missing information or questions about your identity

**2 Combine the above elements, thinking about everything from color to composition, and how your collage might tell a story about who you are.**

**3 Title your collage.**

- Think about how the title might add layers of information to the collage, or help the viewer ask questions about it.
- De Dier also often titles her work in Spanish. If you identify with another language, feel free to use that in your title.

**4 Optional** Share your collage with classmates.

# Panama Canal

African  
Diaspora