The Break, The Wake, The Hold, The Breath: A Curatorial Study of Subversive Transmissions in Contemporary African and Diasporic Art

By

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Abstract

The Break, The Wake, The Hold, The Breath explores the coded language of Black culture. Nigerian artist Abraham Oghobase, along with Canadian raised Trinidadian-Nigerian artist Jamilah Malika Abu-Bakare are in dialogue with archival records of Black subjectivity. Using photography, video, text and sound both artists use a fugitive language—verbal, visual and gestural—to express acts of refusal and exultation in relation to experiences of the Black diaspora to claim agency for the Black body. Their work highlights an inherent form of agency practiced within sites of control. The exhibition makes visible a lineage of refusal and a celebration of sovereignty over one's body within the colonial state. The artists manifest corporeal knowledge held in tensed muscle, the hum of the voice, and the resonant qualities of image making that have travelled through generations, across oceans and by land, which are deeply felt within African and diasporic peoples.

Acknowledgements

I acknowledge the ancestral and traditional territories of the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Haudenosaunee, the Anishinaabe and the Huron-Wendat, who are the original owners and custodians of the land on which we stand and create.

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Finally, I wish to extend my deepest gratitude to the artists who took part in my thesis exhibition and the formulation of my thesis. Without them, *The Break, The Wake, The Hold, The Breath* would not have been possible.

Dedication

I dedicate this to the ancestors who have led a path of resistance and power. I carry them in my thoughts, my actions, my blood, and in my bones.

Pepple Karibi Ikiriko (1944-2006)

Ibiwari Ikiriko (1954-2002)

Olabisi Silva (1962-2019)

Okwui Enwezor (1964-2019)

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INTRODUCTION

The Break, The Wake, The Hold, The Breath[1] is the culmination of years of personal and academic research, study, discourse, anxiety and finally, a letting go. As a graduate student studying criticism and curatorial practice, I have read, debated and questioned a myriad of theories and methodologies in an attempt to articulate why and how I curate.

[1] The thesis title draws upon, but also diverges from, Christina Sharpe's *In The Wake, On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2017), particularly in the ways she outlines the sites of Blackness as existing in the wake, the ship, the hold and the weather (16).

As a biracial Nigerian-Canadian born and raised by my white family in the 1980s on the Saskatchewan prairies, I experienced a profound sense of separation from Black culture. Yet the isolation did not deter me from finding ways to connect to Blackness. My exclusion from dominant culture—being rendered "invisible," as Ralph Ellison defined it (7)—meant my deeply felt connection to Blackness remained a coded secret that I shared with no one.[2] Experiences of systemic and overt racism incited personal questions of self worth and validation. My research practice began with fundamental questions of belonging and identity. I began to explore my relationship to my African lineage as one living in the diaspora.

How do I, a light-skinned, cisgender Black woman of African descent, living in Canada, survive a society focused on the denigration of my culture? How does Blackness function in Africa differently than in the diaspora? And how do I reconcile the sense of displacement with my rootedness in these adopted homelands? These questions fuel my interest in contemporary African and diasporic artistic production along with themes of migration, representation and cultural identity.

Doctrines of dominant culture that frame our world dictate that factual, theoretical, or intellectual knowledge trumps and/or discredits personal, embodied, or cultural stories and experiences. As political scientist James C. Scott identifies in *Domination and the Art of Resistance* (1990), embedded within the hegemonic public discourse of the subjugated are hidden transcripts that provide counter-narratives of refusal to subjugation. These hidden transcripts are ways for the subjugated to access agency (19). Addressing the unacknowledged intimacies or hidden transcripts shared within Black communities fuels my curatorial practice.

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[2] "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves or figments of their imagination, indeed, everything and anything except me." (Ellison, 7)

The subtle nod between two Black strangers on the street or the collective sweaty joy shared on a hot dance floor exemplify levels of care and communal support that I put at the forefront of my practice. My methodology prioritizes the creation and utilization of publicly accessible platforms for the marginalized to connect through contemporary art.

Reading a *Canadian Art* article (Winter 2019) by Queen's University Black and Gender studies scholar Katherine McKittrick helped solidify a process for thinking through Blackness I had, until now, been unable to express. McKittrick explains that Black creativity and Black theory are in conversation, with each holding its own valid weight. Black creative expressions (music, photography, painting, dance, performance, poetry) are formulated through generations of colonial domination which carry hidden subtexts often only understood by the marginalized. To be Black and to be moved by that sigh, that moan, that braid, that swagger, that crimson and ochre—and to know that these expressions link you to generations and formations of Blackness—crystallizes a radical and inherent embodied knowledge. Black folks connecting to Black creativity in the face of ongoing white supremacy is more than enjoyment: it is cultural survival**.** Black creative expressions are therefore lessons in surviving a world that has been built to eradicate us.

The culmination of my two years in graduate studies at OCAD University is reflected in the exhibition I have curated, *The Break, The Wake, The Hold, The Breath.* The exhibition reveals the creative, intuitive and often subconscious ways Black subjects enact refusal to a colonial capitalist patriarchy.[3] African and diasporic people are connected through their shared oppression, built and solidified over hundreds of years originating with the transatlantic slave

[3] I have selected to capitalize the "B" in "Black" as a cultural identifier that allows room to understand a range of lineages (known and unknown) which functions to unite people without limiting the definition of Blackness. With reference to Lori L. Tharps op-ed in The New York Times (Nov 2014).

trade. The impact of this event can be considered as the founding synthesis of a subversive language of Blackness. Through this shared language exhibiting artists Abraham Oghobase and Jamilah Malika Abu-Bakare present acts of embodied agency. Using photography, audio and video, the artists' work demonstrates the deep-rooted, dexterous and often undisclosed ways agency is asserted within oppressive conditions. The fugitive acts explored through public performance, poetry and self-portraiture take place in numerous locations globally, utilizing a subversive language connecting African and diasporic people.

In developing my curatorial practice, I have explored a range of theories and methodologies about identity and representation, from Indigenous and African decolonial studies and queer phenomenology, to cultural geographies, critical race studies, gender studies and Black feminist thought. My investigation has led me to read scholars, historians, and writers such as James C. Scott, Frantz Fanon, Tina M. Campt, Saidiya Hartman, bell hooks, Teju Cole, Katherine McKittrick, and Ariella Azoulay, among others, who explore anti-colonial creative practices through lens-based media and popular culture. I am informed by artists such as Arthur Jafa, Otobong Nkanga, Xaviera Simmons, Zina Saro-Wiwa, Michèle Pearson Clarke, Eve Tagny, Tania Willard, and curators such as Olabisi Silva, Koyo Kuoh, Julie Crooks, Anique Jordan, Geneviève Wallen, Noa Bronstein, Richard William Hill and BUSH Gallery. Along with research, I have conducted studio visits, attended numerous exhibitions, artist talks, visited conferences, participated in an artist residency and contributed to an off-campus Black study group.

The research conducted over the past two years has informed my curatorial work but the most impactful aspect has been engaging with the artists that contributed to *The Break, The Wake, The Hold, The Breath*. The artists and I have been in continued dialogue which has

informed my curatorial methodology. We are in relation to one another, pulling from our histories, sharing our understanding, which feeds our art practices and the way we live. This support paper expands on my research and methodological approach as a curator, along with providing literature and exhibition reviews that have assisted in developing my practice.

RESEARCH AND HISTORY

Photography has been a critical component of my practice. I received my Bachelor of Fine Art in photography and have been a photographer and photo editor for the past 15 years. Photography allows one the opportunity to be the creator of history, controlling a narrative, which for the marginalized has held the ability to be a tool of emancipation as well as subjection. My passion for lens-based media was stoked (while in my undergraduate studies) when I discovered the work of Roy DeCarava, Gordon Parks, Glenn Ligon and Ingrid Pollard. Though these artists responded to different time periods and geographies, they were using photography to challenge the confines of Black representations popular in the Western world. Their photography reveals double-consciousness as defined by W.E.B. Du Bois (1903), of being aware of oneself along with the awareness of seeing oneself through the white gaze. As Du Bois states: “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others…” (Du Bois, 10). These photographers created images that spoke critically to Blackness from within the culture, while pulling apart the ways in which whiteness had impacted self representation.

With much of photography’s history dominated by ruling class interests, African and diasporic people have been and continue to be grossly misrepresented or omitted from public photographic narratives. The effects of poor positive representation within public media supports damaging stereotypes that incite anti-Black violence. One need only open today’s newspaper to

find at least one act of racist violence perpetrated locally and/or internationally. Even at a time when positive depictions of Black culture (in and outside of the art world) are increasing, the systemic machinations of oppression that have warped our self-identity continue to function. The degree of power upholding global white supremacy's attack on Blackness ranges from the threat of death (Emmett Till, Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Ken Saro-Wiwa) and imprisonment (Mumia Abu-Jamal, Sandra Bland, Central Park Five), to more subtle tactics of self-doubt, separation and isolation.

With this historical context of Black photographic representation in mind, the questions I contend with are: what is communicated to Black viewers? What coded transmissions can be perceived from the Black captive subject? What do we learn of our own identity when being presented with images created by African and diasporic artists?

The purpose of my thesis research is to identify the numerous modes of agency Black bodies have exercised in the face of servitude over time. For the Black visitor, *The Break, The Wake, The Hold, The Breath* affirms the coded multi-sensorial vocabulary of defiance and expresses the Black subject's ability to maintain personal agency when contending with colonial domination.

In conceiving *The Break, The Wake, The Hold, The Breath*, I began with a commitment to support the artists in their vision and practice. My curatorial process is formed through building trust and a collaborative environment with Jamilah Malika Abu-Bakare and Abraham Oghobase. The goal is that the exhibition will reflect the level of care and attention that has been shared between us through this process.

Curator Helen Molesworth spoke candidly at OCAD University to a small group of students in the winter of 2018. When asked about her curatorial process leading up to Kerry

James Marshall's retrospective, she proudly stated that her years-long friendship with the artist meant she could tell him to give her free reign over his work and she would curate the best retrospective imaginable. My interest in curating runs counter to the above example. As a methodology, my interest relies on being in relation, and building mutual trust, with others, not in being in control of them. My curatorial goal is to develop a collaborative relationship with the artists so that the vision presented by the exhibition is not authoritative. The psychic and mental labour and level of care may not be physically identifiable within an exhibition but there is an ephemeral quality of relationality that contributes to the atmosphere of any exhibition, which I prioritize in my curatorial process.

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

The Ryerson Image Centre presented the exhibition *Collaboration: A Potential History of Photography* in 2018, which deeply impacted my understanding of lens-based media. Organized and curated by photography scholars Ariella Azoulay, Leigh Raiford and Laura Wexler, and practitioners Wendy Ewald and Susan Meiselas, the exhibition functioned as a methodological tool to interrogate the history of photography. Transforming the gallery space into an interactive research centre, *Collaboration* presented grids of historic photographs ranging from iconic celebrity portraits and conflict photojournalism, documentary narratives, early daguerrotypes and cartes de visite of freed slaves, to the proliferation of online social media selfies. Printed prompts presented questions to the visitors, asking them to reconsider their understanding of familiar images and ultimately to question their understanding of how power dynamics play out within photography. The premise, though exhaustive, led me to consider how to present work that challenges preconceived ideas. By including an archival photograph of Black subjectivity

alongside lens-based work by two contemporary African and diasporic artists, I am asking the visitor to see this as a proposition. Why include this work? What similarities or differences can be read through the relationships created between historic and contemporary photography of Black subjects?

African American artist Sam Vernon's exhibition *Rage Wave*, presented at Gallery 44 in 2018, was another show that helped me think through materiality, space and process. Her site-specific installation pulsated with a tangible energy, imparted as she pasted, scratched, and painted the walls with gestures fuelled by individual and collective experiences of Blackness. An impenetrable caterwaul of photocopies and abstracted marks covered the walls, made from a mix of India ink, sharpie and spray paint. Layers of patterned wheat-pasted arrows overlapped with African masks. Monochromatic black hands and immaterial figures vibrated on the walls. Rage is often viewed as a dangerous, violent emotion, but Vernon explored an alternative perception, one understood by other Black artists who have experienced generations of anti-Black racism. The warmth of Gallery 44's lighting and creaky wooden floors presented a gentle form to house the intentions of *Rage Wave*. Could this safe environment hinder the intensity of a fully enveloping experience or did it trick the viewer into receptivity with a sense of false security? Vernon's show rebuked anti-Black violence and lived traumas of being Black in America. Though parallel and divergent histories exist for African Canadians from those of Black Americans, several similarities were clearly pronounced within the exhibition. By decentering a patriarchal dominant perspective, Vernon's rancor was a resounding bell toll for those often unable to break from their bonds of subjection. As I moved through the gallery space, the volatile absolution confronting me solicited a gut response of contrition. Vernon's resourcefulness and

ability to impart tangible emotion within a traditional gallery setting helped me consider how to present the artists' work in *The Break, The Wake, The Hold, The Breath*.

Considering the materiality of the exhibition, I worked with Abraham Oghobase as we decided on wheat pasting his black and white images to chipped and weathered plywood panels leaning on the walls of the gallery. The 4'x 8' panels encroach on the visitor's space. Using scrap wood reinforced a theme of resourcefulness embedded in the imagery, which also alludes to a Black coded knowledge in the ability to make something out of whatever is readily available. This theme is carried throughout the exhibition as we were conscious of presenting work that appears to be temporarily existing in the gallery space, reinforcing the premise that as African and diasporic artists, our work is liminal, effusive and will continue to exist within and outside spaces that have been exclusionary to us.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Throughout my research and practice I gravitate towards process-driven collaborative and experiential approaches. This approach was initiated by Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: on Blackness and Being* (2016), a book that presents an open, critical and deeply felt study into Blackness as a state of being. As she references her personal life and losses alongside examples from contemporary film, poetry and photography, she makes evident how anti-Black politics, theory and systemic inequities directly affect Black lives as they are lived:

> Living as I have argued we do in the wake of slavery, in spaces where we were never meant to survive or have been punished for surviving and for daring to claim or make spaces of something like freedom, we yet reimagine and transform spaces for and practices of an ethics of care (as in repair, maintenance, attention), an ethics of seeing, and of being in the wake as consciousness… (131).

Sharpe consistently binds Black creative knowledge to a history of refusal, highlighting a lineage of Black communal care at the core of Black persistence. I have taken her ethics of care, the

necessity of wake work, to heart as I have shared the curatorial creative process with the artists in the development of this exhibition. The exhibition title clearly references Sharpe, when she writes, “To be in the wake is to recognize the categories I theorize in this text as the ongoing locations of Black being: the wake, the ship, the hold, and the weather” (16). Overlapping allusions to writing by Sharpe, Fred Moten, Katherine McKittrick and Tina M. Campt converge in *The Break, The Wake, The Hold, The Breath* as I draw attention to sound, music, the transatlantic slave trade, imprisonment, and the Black body.

My fascination with imagery of embodied actions captured mid-flight correlates to how these visual moments articulate a psychic state of Blackness, which is also the subject of Tina Campt's book, *Listening to Images* (2017). As Campt notes, “The tensions imaged in these portraits denote a state of being and becoming I describe with a a different vocabulary. I call it “stasis” (51). Here she clarifies that her definition of stasis is more haptic: a tense, imperceptible motion felt as vibration. Her close, careful perception of images of subjugated subjects identifies them as being in continued motion, never becoming static. Though more overt, seeing action mid-flight presents the viewer with a moment that is understood as fleeting, in which the before and after actions are known. We know that people cannot hover in mid-air without the pull of gravity drawing them to the ground, so stopping this dynamic force presents an image full of tension and untethered possibility.

Campt provides a personal example that beautifully exemplifies the difficulty of seeing photography as either a tool of agency or subjection, when it is often both simultaneously. She refers to being photographed by a white person who marvelled at her hairstyle as it was similar to the portraits included in the Ojeikere exhibition they were visiting. The white woman photographs the smiling author in front of the Ojeikere photographs of elaborate West African

hairstyles (66). The image feels as though it buzzes with nervous frisson, yet what is visually observable is a smiling Black woman in a gallery setting. The tense hum of refusing objectification sits slightly under the surface of this image of a smiling Black woman. *The Break, The Wake, The Hold, The Breath* addresses the tension, the affect and the agency that frames representations of Blackness. Drawing attention to the duality always present in Black subjectivity, as Campt relayed in her anecdote, a sense of communion can be found for the Black viewer. Her personal story dispels the isolation often experienced by Black folks when in situations where agency is claimed at the site of objectification.

The goal of the exhibition is to create a space to privilege Black experiences and to address the subversive transmissions of agency rarely given the chance to be openly expressed. To explore and celebrate our complex and profoundly challenging lives as agents, subjects and objects of representation supports connections to one another and to our ancestors.

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The Break, The Wake, The Hold, The Breath: A Curatorial Study of Subversive Transmissions in Contemporary African and Diasporic Art

"Like the concept of fugitivity, *practicing* refusal highlights the tense relations between acts of flight and escape, and creative *practices of refusal* - nimble and strategic practices that undermine the categories of the dominant."

— Tina M. Campt, *Listening to Images*

"You only are free when you realize you belong no place — you belong every place — no place at all. The price is high. The reward is great."

—- Maya Angelou

The Break, The Wake, The Hold, The Breath explores the coded language of Black culture expressed through the work of artists Jamilah Malika Abu-Bakare and Abraham Oghobase. Through photography, video and sound installations the artists use a fugitive language to claim agency over the colonized Black body. Alongside images of historical representations of Black subjects, Nigerian born, Toronto-based Oghobase and Nigerian-Trinidadian, Chicago-based, Abu-Bakare present works that address African and diasporic cultures sharing a coded language to explore liminality, empowerment and communal care. This combination of contemporary and archival material emphasizes a shared history of acts of personal sovereignty visually identifiable through interpretations of the subjects to the creation of the work. To understand the colonial tension carried within Black bodies, Abu-Bakare and Oghobase use visual and sonic installations as they present acts of refusal and exultation. Highlighting images of Black subjectivity from the archives, the exhibition makes visible a lineage of subversion that

show the numerous ways Black subjects have exerted agency within captive sites of control. Using self-portraiture, found footage and audio interviews to manifest knowledge held in taut muscle, the hum of voice, and the resonance of an image as an inherited knowledge travels through generations, across oceans, by land and through the Black body.

Historically, Black bodies have often been perceived by dominant culture through a lens of white supremacy, that is made evident through photography. The white gaze aims to quantify and clearly define the subjects of its empire. Though as cultural theorist Stuart Hall argues, the "play"' of history, culture, and power are discernible within identity as aspects that are often in flux (225). Therefore, cultural identity is not clearly definable because we are individually subject to multiple histories, geographies, temporalities, and perspectives. Yet, this fluctuation of identity runs counter to a contained and controllable definition that the master would have its subjects believe. A correlation can be made to photography (photographer, subject, and viewer) and its use by dominating powers to define and restrain subjugated people. A viewer rarely questions the authority of the photographer's gaze and their ability to influence a disempowered subject within the frame of the photograph. The ethnographic perspective prevalent in *National Geographic,* for example, is used to objectify the subjugated. This vision presented as an authoritative viewpoint disregards the subject's and viewers' positions. To recognize the fluctuating elements that undergird the play of power and interpretation within lens-based media means to acknowledge the possibility of multiple narratives of representation and agency existing in one image. One can read the public transcript of the *National Geographic* image through the view of the photographer, while another subversive text can be read through the clothing, hairstyle and gaze of the subject: gestures that reflect self-empowerment and the will of

the subject. The inclusion of an archival photograph of Black children at play on view in the exhibition asks the viewer to watch for the hidden cypher ingrained within the photograph.

Fugitivity is one way to conceive of the power that is accessed by subjugated people. In the *Wretched of the Earth* (1963), theorist Franz Fanon argues that, "The native's muscles are always tensed. You can't say that he is terrorized, or even apprehensive. He is in fact ready at a moment's notice to exchange the role of the quarry for that of the hunter" (53). Whether the hunted or the hunter, Fanon emphasizes a ready tension in the body of the Black subject that is the conceptual anchor of *The Break, The Wake, The Hold, The Breath*. This tension or agency exists at all times and within all sites of subjection for the Black diaspora. As Black feminist scholar Tina Campt illustrates in *Listening To Images* (2017), "the concept of fugitivity I am invoking is not an act of flight or escape or a strategy of resistance. It is defined first and foremost as a practice of refusing the terms of negation and disposession" (96). Campt identifies an underlying noncompliance in Black subjects that is innate within the history of attempted subjugation.

The exhibition considers issues of transnational movement along with cultural identity and the weight of oppression on the Black body. The artists embed acts of refusal and embodied sovereignty as inseparable expressions within their work. The exhibition also connects these two artists' works to images of Black subjectivity from within institutional archives, drawing attention to a lineage of defiance in photographic representation that bridges Africa and its diaspora. The connections between the artists' work and the archives re-contextualize history and affirm previously un-addressed agency for the Black subject. Revisiting and retelling histories powerfully changes the way the Black body is personally, socially, and politically understood within Africa and the diaspora. As important as it is to weave experiences of Blackness through

history and place, the exhibition also makes room for certain autonomy, to allow endless iterations of Black identity to be shared and embraced.

THE BREAK

Music has always been integral to Black culture. Sound holds more than can be expressed through language and has the ability to transmit subtle affective understandings of persecution. Both poet/scholar Fred Moten and writer/historian Tina Campt explore the relationship between sound and image and the hidden narratives within images of Black subjectivity. Moten writes in *In The Break* (2003): "I'm interested in the convergence of blackness and the irreducible sound of necessarily visual performance at the scene of objection" (1). In this passage, he proposes an audible sound perceivable by the viewer that exists within images of Black subjects at the moment they become perceived as non-beings. Moten identifies a tangible quality produced from performing Blackness within the cage of imperialism. An irreducible sound alludes to a trace of embodied fugitivity expressed by Black subjects that is caught within the frame of a picture.

Musically, the break is considered a point in a song that cuts the direction while holding the beat: a considered and active pause that progresses the song forward. *The Break, The Wake, The Hold, The Breath* makes space for the pause, allowing previously unquestioned perspectives of the governing viewer to be challenged. Presenting work that engages a multi-sensorial experience reminds the viewer of their participation in and relationship to the artists' work.

I first saw Nigerian photographer Abraham Oghobase's work in 2016. His *Untitled* series (2012) of inky black and white images brought to mind jazz pianist Thelonius Monk, famous for his discordant layering of harmony and rhythm. Oghobase depicts his body in mid-air against ads for house cleaning, laundry, and piano lessons graffitied on brick walls that are a signature of Nigeria's capital city of Lagos. Positioned within an African-American post-slavery

context, Moten's interest in the sonic qualities of performed Blackness make Oghobase's work a unique case study in observing the veiled imprint of oppression within a contemporary African context. Are the remnants of British colonizers apparent in the work of this West African photographer? Does Blackness perform in post-colonial African countries differently than it does in North America? Though global systemic oppression has affected and oppressed Africa and the diaspora, our locations and specific histories inform our experiences. The exhibition aims to disrupt any singular notion of Blackness. *The Break, The Wake, The Hold, The Breath* asks the viewer to consider multiple portrayals of Black culture that must remain unrestricted.

Oghobase's body depicted in mid-flight creates a schism, emitting a dissonant and elegant hum. Moving from an ecstatic jump to a curled fetal position while in mid-air, Oghobase performs dynamic feats within liminal sites along well-travelled roadways. Unmoored, his position suggests he belongs to no land yet is bound by the rules of a capitalist system that requires every public surface to be a site of commerce. Using self-portraiture, he directs attention to these industrial thoroughfares as sites of communication, visible to the underclass. Phone numbers spray painted on concrete become lessons in how to exercise agency with limited means. These resourceful acts of agency, once again, underline the skills and strategies of surviving a world that provides little support.

Oghobase learned a range of image-making processes while studying at Yaba College of Technology's School of Art, Design, and Printing in Lagos. He has experimented with printing traditional film, lithography, and digital negative creations. Using transparencies and newsprint duplications that are wheat pasted onto plywood panels, Oghobase uses the layered qualities of the photographic process to allude to underlying and imaginative counter-narratives that are always present within a singular image. Nearby, a black and white photograph printed on cloth

depicts Oghobase effortlessly floating above the ground in a nondescript European city centre. The effortlessness of the pose suggests this floating state as his natural site of existence. In the gallery, this image breezily hangs next to a cloth print of billowing cumulus clouds resting on a stack of bricks. The materiality of the photographs printed on fabric along with the inversion of sky meeting ground infers a repositioning of the familiar. Oghobase's images ask the visitor, "what is the story when commonplace imagery is flipped and made anew?" How can we see the familiar through an alternate perspective?

Trinidadian-Nigerian writer/artist Jamilah Malika Abu-Bakare uses voice, poetry, and performance to question current dominant Western perceptions of Black womanhood. Due to ongoing racial bias Black women have been perceived through a number of stereotypes, from the mammy house servant, the sexualized and physically fierce cop, to the angry and poor single mother.[4] Not only do these false public caricatures of Blackness influence dominant culture, they also are internalized and affect the Black psyche. Abu-Bakare's work is a salve for the wounds made by the dehumanizing damage of misrepresentation. Abu-Bakare works to dispel the limitations of what Blackness has been perceived to be. Through her practice she makes space to allow for countless, complex iterations of Blackness to be accepted and appreciated.

Though they use different techniques, both Abu-Bakare and Oghobase draw attention to Blackness as an identity which uses an effusive coded language that expresses complex strains of joy, anxiety, freedom, and suppression. Raised in Canada and currently a graduate student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Abu-Bakare challenges limiting definitions of Blackness while she devotes her practice to celebrating Black folks who lay claim to power.

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[4] Hattie McDaniel in *Gone With the Wind*, Pam Grier as *Foxy Brown*, Nell Harper in *Gimme A Break!* to name a few.

In *Listen to Black Womxn* (2018), Abu-Bakare edited five Black women's voices together into one sonic soundscape. She combines their personal insights on code-switching and the struggles of identifying as Black women within hostile territories, while emphasizing verbal gestures.[5] Breaths, "ahs," "ums," and sucked-teeth "tsks" repeat through her piece, revealing a hidden transcript while weaving the women's combined confidence along with their insecurities to create a whole and complex composition. The rhythm underscores the women's shared concerns and anxieties merging together to create a sonorous choir. Presented in the intimate setting of the audio gallery, the voices come together only when a viewer activates the physical space, tripping the audio to play simultaneously. The listener becomes a crucial component, allowing these voices to be heard. By entering the space, tripping the sensor, the viewer is asked to consider their role in relation to the work. Will they stay and be present with the voices? Will the listener self-consciously step away once they realize their responsibility? How will the women's voices influence and alter the gallery space?

THE WAKE

In her *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), Christina Sharpe describes what is at risk when societal anti-Black racism is maintained, as she writes: "At stake is not recognizing antiblackness as total climate. At stake, too, is not recognizing an insistent Black visualsonic resistance to that imposition of non/being. How might we stay in the wake with and as those whom the state positions to die ungrievable deaths and live lives meant to be unliveable?" (21-22). Sharpe's use of the wake as metaphor signifies in multiple directions simultaneously: it is

[5] Code switching provides a linguistic form of communication that subtly unites persons from certain social, racial, cultural or class structures. Media correspondent Touré identifies this in *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness?* when he writes: "The ability to maneuver within white society— and how high you can rise within white power structures— is often tied to your ability to modulate. Black success requires Black *multi-linguality*—the ability to know how and when to move among the different languages of Blackness. (11)

the act of mourning, of being with the dead, and the cut of water created by the path of a ship. As Sharpe asks how might Blackness stay in the wake of transatlantic slavery, the question becomes a way to visualize the liminal, temporal space Black bodies have had to and continue to inhabit globally. To deny this wake work would be to cede total and complete agency of ourselves, to reject Black personhood as systemic structures of our society consistently do. Consequently, to exhibit the work of Oghobase and Abu-Bakare is to underline the many and often under-acknowledged forms of survival expressed by and for African and diasporic people and to provide the space for it to flourish in the face of ongoing and rabid anti-Black sentiment.

The exhibition calls forth our ancestors and pays homage to them, reminding us to stay vigilant in this wake work. To honour the dead, acknowledging their battles (lost and won) against an anti-Black system, helps to create strategies for continuation. *The Break, The Wake, The Hold, The Breath* asks its visitors: How do we stay in the wake? How do we carry the traditions of refuting anti-Black sentiment and push against a global colonial system? And when do we rest?

THE HOLD

Similar to wake work, numerous scholars including Saidiya Hartman, Fred Moten, and artist Arthur Jafa have made note of the hold, referring to slave quarters in the belly of ships transporting Africans to America during the transatlantic slave trade. Jafa addresses the hold in considering the weight of slavery and imprisonment carried through generations of Black folks and its impact on current culture. Jafa, in conversation with feminist, activist and writer bell hooks, while drawing on the work of Hartman and Moten, speaks of the importance of this symbolic hold: “It’s precisely being in that space [of the hold] that produces these radical notions of what flight and freedom would look like” (Jafa, 2014). Jafa acknowledges that the site of

attempted erasure, the slave hold, is the same site in which Black culture was formed: a culture which imagined flight and freedom. *The Break, The Wake, The Hold, The Breath* draws attention to the radical and daily actions of joy that necessitate life and which act to refuse the dehumanizing dominant forces. Working through locations in which anti-Blackness persists communicates a path, a survival strategy for racialized people to navigate the hold.

Historically, art galleries have been adverse sites for Black folks to inhabit, engage with, and/or present work. My choice to occupy, to exhibit others, and to invite an audience to enter a place that has attempted to erase us is my way of facing the hold, recognizing its all-encompassing nature which includes space for resistant visual practices to thrive. The decision to present all works on movable surfaces within the exhibition space (as opposed to being embedded within the gallery) underlines the fact that expressions of Blackness will continue to exist within and outside spaces that have been contentious. I, along with the artists made a conscious decision to have all materials used within the space remain temporary, as though visiting this institutional site that holds histories of Black and African erasure. Abraham Oghobase and I chose to wheatpaste his prints onto 4'x8' plywood sheets as opposed to pasting them to the wall. Instead of embedding the work into the gallery, the sizeable plywood sheets create distinct portals bringing an essence of Lagos life into this white cube space. Jamilah Abu-Bakare and I were also in agreement that projecting her video onto the wall generated a more ephemeral experience as opposed to showing the work on a video monitor. Light travelling through space and being reflected on a gallery wall suggests that these visuals can exist anywhere, they are not beholden to the limitations of the gallery. The exhibition disrupts a colonial past, and forges space for Black creativity to live within a gallery setting, as it does in various forms elsewhere and everywhere.

THE BREATH

In *The Break, The Wake, The Hold, The Breath,* an image found in the photographic holdings of the Library of Congress from 1941 is exhibited in relation to Abu-Bakare's video *How High*. The image was taken by white photographer Edwin Rosskam for the Farm Security Administration in Chicago, Illinois, and shows a group of smartly-dressed Black children ranging in age from around five to ten years old. The children are skipping rope on the sidewalk on a clear sunny day and beaming with joy; one girl jumps in mid-air as some of her counterparts look directly at the photographer. Their apprehensive expressions ask, perhaps, "Why are you watching us? What do you see when you see us? What are you expecting?" Their questioning gaze emphasizes the separation between photographer and subjects, identifying a point of tension and a clear disruption from the joy being expressed by the girl skipping. Their expressions reveal their perception at this young age that they must already be cautiously prepared, as Fanon wrote, "at a moment's notice to trade the quarry for that of the hunter" (53). Though young, the children's gaze implies a guarded consciousness that reveals the hidden language of Blackness.

The archival image is the only element of the exhibition that depicts a white perspective focused on Black subjectivity. Presented in the dimly lit front section of the gallery, this black and white image glows in a lightbox presented adjacent to video footage of a gymnast's floor routine in Abu-Bakare's *How High* projected on the wall. The fleeting qualities of light dancing on walls and luminescent boxes aid in the creation of an intimate and inviting space. Including this image of youth in the front space of the gallery aims to identify and connect the early and intrinsic knowledge of double-consciousness[6] made visible through gesture, gaze and

[6] Defined by W.E.B. Du Bois (1903), double-consciousness describes being aware of oneself along with the awareness of seeing oneself through the white gaze.

composure, binding depictions of Black womanhood through the ages. Not only are phenomenal feats of agility visible in the actions of the children and the gymnast, but there is genuine joy displayed in their actions. Playful, jubilant use of one's body also present forms of resistance to subjection, proving that refusal does not require placards and protest marches. Claiming presence, ownership and love of one's body can be enough to battle the forces that refuse one's personhood and is a key component of the exhibition.

Campt describes the ability of photography to be at once a site of subjection and sovereignty in her reading of a series of portraits of indigenous South African women taken by missionaries from 1913: "The tense grammar of these photos reminds us that photography and the portrait in particular are neither wholly liberatory vehicles of agency, transcendence, or performativity nor unilateral instruments of objectification and abjection. They are always already both at once" (59). *The Break, The Wake, The Hold, The Breath* asks viewers to question their understanding of photography's role in the liberation, transcendence, or objectification of oppressed bodies. The work of Abu-Bakare and Oghobase asks the viewer to question photography's role as liberator or oppressor (or both at once). In so doing, the viewer is asked to contend with their own responsibility to the work. Is it possible to see the transcript of the subject? How has the photographer influenced or forced the frame of vision?

For the exhibition, Abu-Bakare has edited 1980s found footage of Black gymnast Dianne Durham (1983 Women's All-Around Champion) as she competes in an acrobatic floor routine. Edited to pause and hold on moments the gymnast makes contact with the floor, Abu-Bakare infers a contentious relationship with the ground. The silent projection becomes a continuous study of young Black girls' feats of dexterity and strength. Along with footage of Durham, the video mixes footage of Black female audience members speaking on the Phil Donahue show,

drawing connection between the gestural and verbal actions of Black women. The video confers what Abu-Bakare refers to as the "verbal acrobatics Black women perform in relation to whiteness." As Abu-Bakare states, "We all 'chalk up', we all throw ourselves towards unsure landings, we are all judged by judges that do not represent us whose scores make/break us whether or not we are 'able' in the traditional sense. We all do this because we have mouths, whether we speak or are silent." (Abu-Bakare, email). She addresses the maneuvers Black women must navigate within colonial patriarchal society; whether we actively resist or are tacitly complicit, we must face a world that tries to eradicate our existence. I am reminded of Black feminist writer Audre Lorde's words from *Sister Outsider* (2007): "Your silences will not protect you...What are the words you do not yet have? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence? We have been socialized to respect fear more than our own need for language" (41). Abu-Bakare addresses Black visibility and a basic human need to claim personhood in the face of a dominant culture intent on our erasure. Unrelenting discrimination means we might as well throw ourselves towards unsure landings as there is no fixed site of sanction. Abu-Bakare's focus on and for Black women functions to soften that landing and to acknowledge the phenomenal and skillful feats required for us to exist in this world. Whether playing games of double dutch or reaching radical physical and mental achievements, our Black presence, like breath, keeps us alive, yet, we live in worlds that teach us the opposite.

In dialogue with fugitive histories, Abu-Bakare and Oghobase's work highlight the coded hidden transcripts of Black cultural survival within a global system of subjugation. *The Break, The Wake, The Hold, The Breath* investigates and celebrates the embodied acts of Black artistic production. Subversive transmissions carried in dance moves, braided into kinky hair, sung in

low down deep moans work to bridge Africa to the diaspora which reinforces Black knowledge of inherent autonomy.

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©Jamilah Malika Abu-Bakare
How High
Video Projection
7:31 minutes
2019

a half and a half and a whole: a black hole
girl haunts as human

holds a thick pink creased certificate
filled out in blue reads benin city
girl bronze city girl does not remember
edo state does not remember qatar but
for dust leaping behind the bug always
in chase all ways running away from always
looking back (for what?) will never be found
now then is gone now see then still rushing
whirling eddies ascending spirals in pursuit
shaking fingers and disappearing watch
her face an open fire watchherfaceanopenfire

send for no one let her burn
in the open like a house
high on a hill reads

OBEAH TAUGHT HERE

ragged white tears across black
windows between bushes you see
me like i don't see myself i see
dumb me and dumb you ***sssshhh***

if you say nothing ___ isn't ___ can't be
___ won't ___ dies because you say nothing
___ stays a buried ghost like me muffled
by dirt dirty baring empty palms heavy
with lines held up held over pushed
off pushed past put down felt up gropes
the dark on the toilet seat or the top
of the stairs or the edge of the bed

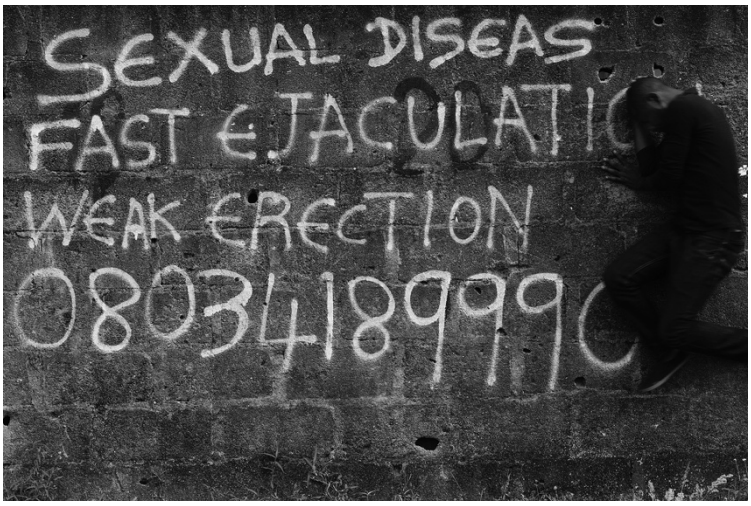
falling apart inside
midair all the time
her soft body called
hard.

o.b.a
poem printed on viscose
3'x6'
2018

Listen to Black Womxn
Audio composition
4:34 minutes, 2018

Edwin Rosskam
Untitled
Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration collection
LC-DIG-fsa-8a15766 (digital file from original neg.)
Chicago, 1941

©Abraham Oghobase
Kono Beach Revival
26”x17” CMYK transparency prints
2016



©Abraham Oghobase
Untitled series
36”x24” B&W photographs on newsprint
2012

©Abraham Oghobase
What if Austria Had Colonized Nigeria #5, Self Portrait #2
44”x25” Colour photograph on viscose
2017

©Abraham Oghobase
Layers of Time and Place
45” x 30” colour photograph
2017

©Abraham Oghobase
Space Between (in San Gimignano)
44”x30” B&W print on viscose
2010

©Abraham Oghobase
Space Between (Cloud | Salzburg)
44”x58” B&W print on viscose
2015

ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES

jamilah malika is an MFA candidate in Writing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. her written work recently appeared in the Broadly/VICE publication for Black Power Naps at PSNY. her interactive sound work was on view at the Art Gallery of Guelph with Critical Mass. she may employ video/sound installation to ask the same questions she might via performance or print; always as a black femme talking to black femmes about being black femmes. say black femme again. black femme.

Abraham Onoriode Oghobase (b.1979) was born in Lagos, Nigeria. He studied at the Yaba College of Technology's School of Art, Design and Printing in Lagos, with a major in photography. Oghobase explores identity in relation to socio- economic geographies. He uses self-portraiture in his performance-based photography to uncover interior worlds. Oghobase's photography has been exhibited widely, including at the Leopold Museum, Vienna (2017), Palais des Beaux Arts, Brussels (2016), Victoria and Albert Museum, London (2014), and KIASMA Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki (2011). He was a finalist in 2014 for the prestigious Prix Pictet global award in photography and sustainability. Recently moving from Lagos, Nigeria, Oghobase now is based in Toronto, Canada.

Liz Ikiriko (b.1977) is a biracial Nigerian Canadian independent curator and photo editor. She is currently an MFA candidate in Criticism and Curatorial Practice at OCAD University (2019). As an independent curator she has exhibited across Canada, worked with artists internationally, facilitated workshops with Ryerson University, the Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival

and has been published in Public Journal, MICE Magazine, Akimbo and The Ethnic Aisle, among others. Ikiriko's work is centred on addressing hidden histories and foregrounding platforms for underprivileged artists. She is committed to the creation of experiential, socially engaged art that is accessible to a wide public.