

The Break, The Wake, The Hold, The Breath

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Exhibition Essay

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. Camp

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 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 dispossession" (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 inhabitation. In the gallery, this image breezily hangs next to a cloth print of billowing cumulous 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 asks 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.¹ 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

¹ Hattie McDaniel in *Gone With the Wind*, Pam Grier as *Foxy Brown*, Nell Harper in *Gimme A Break!* to name a few.

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 integrates 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.

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.² 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 anti-blackness as total climate. At stake, too, is not recognizing an insistent Black visual sonic resistance to that imposition of non/being. How might we stay in the wake with and as those whom the state positions to die ungrivable 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 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

² 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)

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” (*Youtube*). 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 exhibition disrupts a colonial past, and forges space for Black creativity to exist within a gallery setting, as it exists 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 *Listen to Black Womxn*. 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.

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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