



# Rioting in the Gallery: Onyeka Igwe's Diasporic Nigerian Feminist Installation Art

Ifeanyi Awachie, PhD

[ifeanyi.awachie@morehouse.edu](mailto:ifeanyi.awachie@morehouse.edu)

Visiting Assistant Professor

Department of Cinema, Television, and Emerging Media Studies

Morehouse College

## *Abstract*

This article expounds on the theme of *The Continuation of the Revolutionary African Woman* by illuminating how the revolutionary African woman filmmaker tells stories on her own terms through the medium of installation art. “Installation art” refers to the expansive display of films in gallery spaces. The article examines the work of Onyeka Igwe, whose artistic practice I identify as diasporic Nigerian feminist installation art. The article highlights how Igwe uses this medium toward diasporic Nigerian women’s liberation. Onyeka Igwe’s installation *A Repertoire of Protest (No Dance, No Palaver)* (2023) explores how a focus on dance, gesture, and movement offers an alternative way of engaging archives of African women’s histories. The installation draws attention to epistemologies that attempt to establish reductive perceptions of African women as definitive knowledge. In opposition to this, the

article argues that *A Repertoire of Protest* enacts a speculative history that delineates the expansive possibilities for African women's subjectivities. Through such interventions, the article elucidates how diasporic Nigerian women filmmakers make global African women's histories and contemporary experiences accessible to their communities.

### *Keywords*

Nigeria, diaspora, installation art, film, African feminism

Three aspects of Onyeka Igwe's mise-en-scene and its impact on my body strike me when I reflect on my visit to the filmmaker's video installation *A Repertoire of Protest (No Dance, No Palaver)* (2023) at New York City's MoMA PS1. As the dark gallery held me in its black box embrace, I noticed how the downward gaze of the African women performing traditional dances on screen contrasted with the frontality of the long shots used to capture them. I would later learn that these films had been made by the Colonial Film Unit (CFU), an organization that used cinema to control African populations and other subjects of the British Empire. A gaping maw, the camera lens carelessly consumed the women, but the transparency demanded by the straight-on, wide angle was jarred by the women's downward – inward – looking. As a diasporic Igbo woman spectator, I also noticed how the dances felt familiar to me and how the sequences ignited muscle memories from my own traditional dance classes in Atlanta. At the same time, I didn't know these steps – they belonged solely to the women in the footage. Finally, I noticed that Igwe's words, interwoven as intertitles and even superimposed onto these images, posed questions that explicitly interrogated why and how these images had been taken.

As other visitors came and went, I moved slowly and deliberately from screen to screen, pausing to watch each video in its entirety. While a stilted voiceover described the various dances broadly as "Africa," Igwe attended to the individual gestures, gazes, interiority, and agency of each dancer. I understood that the filmmaker was modeling a way of engaging with these images, a method for refusing the colonial camera's view as fact – she was staging a strategy for holding the "official" record in question.

This article illuminates how the revolutionary African woman tells her stories on her own terms through the medium of installation art. Igwe, along with filmmakers Sheila Chukwulozie, Zina Saro-Wiwa, and Okwui Okpokwasili, are among those whose artistic practices I identify as diasporic Nigerian women's installation art. This article will focus on Igwe's *A Repertoire of Protest* installation. The work reveals the capacity of diasporic Nigerian women's installation art to address epistemic violence and stage alternative readings of archival histories. It does this by enacting a speculative history that delineates the expansive possibilities for African women's subjectivities. Through approaches like Igwe's, diasporic Nigerian women filmmakers use the medium of installation art toward Nigerian women's liberation.

*A Repertoire of Protest* comprises three of Igwe's films: *Her Name in My Mouth* (2017), *Sitting on a Man* (2018), and *Specialised Technique* (2018). These works incorporate found footage from films produced during England's colonial occupation of Nigeria as well as original sequences mainly featuring dance and other movement. Like Okpokwasili's *Poor People's TV Room (SOLO) Installation* (2014/2021), *A Repertoire of Protest* draws inspiration from the 1929 Aba Women's War, a large-scale protest by Igbo women against British colonialism. Igwe's installation displays each film in a unique position and on a specific kind of screen or screens within the gallery space. This spatial display helps to advance the installation's distinct way of presenting and interrogating the visual archives of African women.

In *A Repertoire of Protest*, Igwe enacts a Black feminist speculative history by using a range of methods to critique the colonial archive. Speculation as a tool for addressing the narrow or nonexistent preservation of Black women's histories has played an important role in Black feminist filmmaking and in diasporic Nigerian women's installation art. Through their creative visions, Black women filmmakers fill in the gaps left by historical records that center those other than Black women. By creating speculative histories, Black feminist filmmakers have attested to Black queer experiences, confronted the mainstream film industry's dehumanizing use of Black women performers, and introduced into the collective consciousness images of Black women's pasts where previously none existed or survived.

In the same vein, Igwe's speculative methods include representing African women for whom records do not exist or are inaccessible; questioning the status of existing documentation as evidence; moving women in archival films to the center of the frame, thus resisting their formal marginalization; and considering the role of

power in shaping the archive. Through close analysis of Igwe's installation, this article explores how a focus on African women's dance and gesture in the archive can contest colonial history. Yet in Igwe's work, this potential contestation is less important than the primary function of the movement, which is for some purpose known by the women. It is the simultaneous presence and inaccessibility of the women's inner thoughts, feelings, and desires that Igwe brings into focus.

In questioning the archive, Igwe's installation art challenges stereotypical representations of African women. In this way, it parallels the methods of the early Nigerian and African women writers. As Carole Boyce Davies writes, West African women writers such as the Igbo authors Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta "express the African women's sense of self in relation to tradition and society" (Davies 5). Examinations of West African women's writing illustrate how they destabilize the tropes typically used to render African women in literature – for example, the glorified image of the mother. Davies highlights how African women writers "[demystify] this traditional romanticization of motherhood" and make room for more complex explorations of motherhood and African women's many experiences (Davies 6).

Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi's analysis of the role of the mother in Igbo cosmology and literature reveals how African women writers fill in the gaps in dominant narratives about women by delineating the fullness of women's experiences. As Ogunyemi explains, while the mother is revered in Igbo culture, women's roles as wives are often degraded. In Chinua Achebe's canonical novel *Things Fall Apart*, the character Ekwefi is unable to speak about the violence to which her husband Okonkwo subjects her. However, in her novel *Efuru*, Flora Nwapa depicts women who articulate the oppressions they face.<sup>1</sup> Thus, as Ogunyemi pithily states, "Nwapa's *Efuru* speaks for Achebe's Ekwefi" (Ogunyemi 44). Writers like Nwapa unravel masculinist depictions of African women to reveal the "disastrous consequences" of their disempowerment in various social roles or alternatively to demonstrate women's power (Ogunyemi 44). Similarly, Igwe's installation expands the representation of Nigerian and African women in the archive beyond that of the mute native and creates space to reconsider African women's relationships to the historical record, to their communities, and most importantly, to themselves.

---

<sup>1</sup> The 1966 novel is the first book published by a Nigerian woman author.

Given this, Igwe's work aligns with African feminisms. As Filomina Chioma Steady writes, African feminisms aim to "to produce a more inclusive brand of feminism through which women are viewed first and foremost as human, rather than sexual, beings" (Steady 4). Through her critical attention to African women in the archives, Igwe presents a perspective that centers African women's humanity. African feminisms emerge from the particularities of indigenous African cultures. Aspects of these cultures that inform African feminisms include communal ways of living, the desire to live in harmony with nature, and "institutionalized means of mutually sanctioning the behavior of members of the opposite sex" (Steady 6). The protestors in the Aba Women's War derived their strategies from Igbo women's traditional practice of "sitting on a man," which was a customary way of addressing harms committed by men in the community. Igwe highlights both the War and "sitting on a man," emphasizing the importance of defiant action as a historic resource for African women. She also adopts "sitting on a man" as an aesthetic strategy in the design of her installation.

In addition to these frameworks, I argue that the Black performativity of Igwe's installation enables her to enact a speculative history. As Thomas DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez write, "[P]erformativity marks identity through the habitus of repetitive enactments, reiterations of stylized norms, and inherited gestural conventions from the way we sit, stand, speak, dress, dance, play, eat, hold a pencil and more" (DeFrantz and Gonzalez viii). Black performativity, then, is the marking of Black identity through repeated performative motions and the re-emphasizing of norms of Black culture. Black performativity takes multiple forms in Igwe's work, including the cultural dances seen in the archival footage, the original choreography that Igwe's collaborators perform in her films, and gestures made by the women in the archive and by Igwe herself. I also recognize a kind of Black performativity in Igwe's visual language which makes the women in the archive central through techniques including animation and the manipulation of rhythm.

Nigerian notions of performativity also shape my reading of Igwe's work. An important context in which the Igbo perform is within spiritual rituals. As Mary-Blossom Chinelum Okafor writes, "...in many Nigerian societies, [there exists] a robust theatrical tradition. The primitive root of that tradition must be sought in the numerous religious rituals and festivals that exist in many communities" (Okafor 83). In the Nigerian context, performance in the theatrical sense is informed by the role

that performance plays in sacred rites. The purpose of performativity within these rituals is to aid in cultivating the individual's spiritual life. Igbo performance is "a training that takes into consideration the fact that all human beings are endowed with the physical, the mental and the spiritual attributes, and that particular attention needs to be paid to the development of all these aspects for life to be meaningful and thus, fulfilling" (Okafor 128). Given how Igbo performance engages the whole person, it is not confined to the theatrical or spiritual contexts. Okafor articulates the porousness of the boundaries between Igbo performance and everyday life when she writes that "...it is a holistic theatre in which the training of performers rigorously starts from very early in life [...] Igbo performance is life in action" (Okafor 128-129).

Igwe attests to the everydayness of performativity in Nigeria when she describes the movement of members of her family. As she says, "When I see my mum in Nigeria versus in the UK, I [notice] she moves in a different way [...] Gestures mean different things. I think there is a certain largeness of expression..." (Igwe). The change that Igwe observes in her mother's demeanor can be read as the result of the cultural affirmation that occurs when a diasporic subject returns home. This feeling of validation can manifest in the body and be expressed in different ways. For example, one's body language may become more self-assured. Gestures used in the host country may give way to forms of nonverbal communication used in the home country. For Igwe, her mother's everyday exchanges with fellow Nigerians when back home are characterized by a "largeness of expression." This performativity demonstrates the embeddedness of performance in Igbo culture.

### Framing the *Repertoire*:

#### Beyond Rationality, Visuality, and Colonialism

Performativity and movement provide potent lenses through which to engage the archival film. One reason for this is because movement lies outside of rational forms of knowledge that claim to make the other immediately and fully accessible. In his study of Black diaspora art practices, Kobena Mercer traces the claim to know the other through rationality back to the Enlightenment era. He explains how "the epistemological privilege of vision" above other senses helped to enable the justification of slavery (Mercer 242). As Mercer recounts, the visual arts at the time made "the world [appear] immediately accessible to rational knowledge through the

transparent ‘window’ to which pictorial representation aspired” (Mercer 242). This seeming transparency connects to the role of vision in facilitating enslavement. The privileging of vision meant that seeing subjective representations of the other was understood as objectively knowing the other. This in turn meant that representations of the other as inferior helped to entrench the idea of that inferiority as fact. This made racialized others vulnerable to domination by those depicted as superior. Given this history, Igwe’s choice to focus on movement can be read as a subtle critique of the idea that viewing those in the archive yields complete knowledge of them.

Igwe’s strategy is also apt given the history of dance. As Gabriele Klein writes in her study of choreography, “In the 20th century, dance, regardless of what kind, whether artistic dance, popular dance, religious ritual or therapeutic setting, represented a contrast to rationality...” (Klein 17). The original performances presented in Igwe’s installation as well as her formal maneuvers evoke dance as an alternative to rational ways of engaging the world. With its employment of dance and gesture, Igwe’s work demonstrates that African women’s histories exceed their representation in the archive. This is in line with how speculation allows for an understanding of history that expands beyond archival records.

A primary way in which movement contests history in Igwe’s installation is by destabilizing the archival films’ claims to establish an authoritative narrative. The CFU films establish a relation in which the CFU “looks” and Africans are “looked upon.” This creates a power dynamic in which England becomes a political subject while Africans remain political objects. The CFU films not only help to construct this relation but also make it appear natural. Thus, they legitimize England’s colonial power.

This dynamic is contested by Igwe’s “countervisuality” which here indicates a different conception of the films’ subjects. Visuality indicates power over what is seen. Countervisuality then concerns how those subjected to a certain power structure resist its control over the visible. Countervisuality involves a critical view of visibility. As Nicholas Mirzoeff writes, “The ‘realism’ of countervisuality is the means by which one tries to make sense of the unreality created by visibility’s authority” (Mirzoeff 5). Countervisuality requires the ability to hold a different view from the perception created by visibility. Igwe’s work illustrates resistance to visibility by demanding for the African women archival subjects “[t]he right to look [which]

claims [...] political subjectivity and collectivity” (Mirzoeff 1). Countervisuality has the consequence of affording political subjecthood. In *A Repertoire of Protest*, the distinct perspective that Igwe presents gives recognition to the personhood of the African women in the archive.

Igwe’s approach aligns with Black feminist methods. As Janell Hobson writes:

[bell] hooks suggests that black (and) feminist viewing combines visual pleasure with confrontation and interrogation. Such viewing practices resist the construction of what Mulvey describes as the scopophilic act of the audience, in which the viewers are relegated to the role of voyeur, looking at the screen with pleasure but rarely with any criticism. This look merely serves to objectify, whereas the “oppositional gaze” that hooks advocates confronts for subjectivity. (Hobson 54)

While Hobson writes about 1980s and 1990s Black American filmmaking, her insights are pertinent to this study of diasporic Nigerian women’s installation art. She explains how hooks identifies, in Black feminist spectatorship, a critical lens that aims to recognize possibilities for agency within Black representation on screen. Through this lens, Black viewers can mindfully derive pleasure even from dominant constructions of Blackness. In a similar way, Igwe grapples with how Nigerian and African women are portrayed in the colonial archive and “sees differently” in a way that suggests the presence of agency in the women’s engagement with the camera (Hobson 54). As Hobson writes, Black feminist filmmakers can further cultivate this way of looking through their creative practices. As a diasporic Nigerian feminist filmmaker, Igwe deploys her view through her formal approaches to the archive and presents a critical view of these representations through her installation.

To better understand the archive that Igwe engages, it is helpful to look more closely at the context and purpose of the CFU. The CFU was an organization created by the British government in 1939 and active until 1955. The organization was led by William Sellers, a colonial officer who made instructional films in the course of his work in public health in Nigeria. Sellers was originally charged with making propaganda films to stir up support for British involvement in World War II. Through the CFU, he “positioned film as an integral means of shaping, defining and controlling imperial citizens” (Rice). Distributed in educational institutions and

public venues, CFU films “presented British life to African audiences [...] [instructed] local African audiences in modern agricultural and building methods [...] promoted government welfare schemes [and] recorded constitutional developments” on the continent (Rice). Before dissolving, the CFU trained local people and set up film units across the British Empire, aiming to control “the theoretical and practical approaches to film production and exhibition within the colonies” (Rice). The CFU films seen in Igwe’s installation were part of England’s broader objective to maintain dominance over Africans through “the epistemological privilege of vision” (Mercer 242). With their mandate to “define” African subjects, the organization endeavored not only to capture individuals on film but also to extrapolate from this documentation truth claims about Africans in general.

By privileging movement in its engagement with the CFU archive, Igwe’s work exhibits an approach to looking at Africanness, particularly, African women’s experiences, in “another way” (Igwe, “Being Close to, With or Amongst” 45). Her installation considers African women’s histories through a focus on the embodied experiences of the CFU’s subjects rather than an acceptance of the CFU’s narratives. Hobson offers further insights into this approach. She writes, “It is because of [the challenges involved in Black women’s representation in film] that I find it imperative to analyze beyond the visual and consider all the elements within the cinematic frame—especially when the voice of the black female, disembodied as it may be, can be found outside the visible while maintaining significance to the film narrative” (Hobson 53). Hobson argues for locating Black women’s voices beyond the realm of the visible, even when considering constructions of Black women within the visual medium of film. Similarly, Igwe’s work points to how Nigerian and African women’s subjectivities can be considered through movement rather than solely through the visual when engaging with archival representation.

As I will detail through close readings of the three films and Igwe’s spatial decisions in the installation, *A Repertoire of Protest* harnesses the power of Black performativity to gesture toward and make central the matter of African women’s agency. In film, agency refers to a subject’s ability to determine their trajectory for themselves rather than have their narrative determined by others. I read in Igwe’s installation a contemplation of African women’s capacity for self-determination in the face of the archive’s attempt to fix reductive images of them. The Black

performativity of the installation frames African women as agential rather than as mere objects of an external view. The first film in the installation demonstrates how the filmmaker uses movement to represent a historic act of African women's collective will power.

### Choreography as Critique: *Sitting on a Man*



Figure 1. Still from Onyeka Igwe's *Sitting on a Man* (2018).  
Photo courtesy of Onyeka Igwe.

Upon entering the *A Repertoire of Protest* installation, viewers first encounter the film *Sitting on a Man*. In it, two diasporic Nigerian women perform original dances that imagine the kind of movement employed during the Aba Women's War and respond through dance to written colonial records. With this, the work enacts speculation to offer a different form of visibility to past African women and reconsider what the archive posits as evidence about its subjects. Through the film, Igwe endeavors to create an "embodied, visceral, and affective" record of the Aba Women's War (Igwe). She achieves this through her employment of forms of Black performativity. In contrast to the archive's rationality, the dancers represent the Aba women through expressive forms of movement. Igwe highlights how the archive's claims to tell the whole truth are challenged by the subjectivity of the narratives it presents.

Given this, her account of the Aba Women's War is not mere conjecture but a legitimate means of reflecting on African women's histories.

*Sitting on a Man* consists of four sequences that are interwoven through crosscutting. These sequences feature contemporary dancer Emmanuella Idris shot in color, dancer Amarnah Amuludun shot in black and white, CFU footage, and a shot of Igwe's hands. The film is displayed across three screens. Explaining how the content of the films and their arrangement in the gallery intersect, Igwe says, "The contemporary dancers and the archive material were intended to be in relationship to one another, forming a version of the dance circle in a three-standalone-screen installation" (Igwe 49). Through the use of multiple screens, Igwe casts the dancers in a joint choreography in which the women in the archival films form their third counterpart. The screens are arranged in a horizontal line so that one is on the left, one is in the middle, and one is on the right. Shots from each sequence play on the different screens at different times.

The screens are positioned high above eye level – a reference to the film's title. As Judith Lynne Hanna writes:

The women's dance-play as a boycott is sometimes called "sitting on a man" [...] The aggrieved gather at the compound of an offender and dance and sing to detail the problem. Movement presents a dynamic image emphasizing the argument as well as releasing and generating physical and psychological energy and tension. The accompanying song, with its potent ridicule and satire, serves as a vehicle for specific social criticism. (Hanna 26)

As the practice of "sitting on a man" demonstrates, dance has historically served as an important tool for Igbo women to vocalize grievances committed against them. Igbo women used dance to name and flesh out a richer sense of the conflict at hand and the harm caused. In addition, movement allowed for the expression of heightened emotion and for catharsis. Through both dance and song, "sitting on a man" communicated individual issues as well as broader problems in the community. This gendered Igbo performativity served as a means of addressing harm and subsequently restoring relationships and communal well-being. Igwe and her collaborators reprise this culturally important practice. With the elevated multi-screen display of the film, "the audience [becomes] the man in question" (Igwe 48). The dancers figuratively "sit" on the audience's head.

When the film begins, a close-up on the left and right screens reveals Igwe's hand as it sifts through layers of maroon, sky blue, and cream ankara. Meanwhile, the middle screen offers a close-up on Idris's feet. Idris begins her steps, heel-toeing back and forth and left and right. The left and right screens cut to black, which emphasizes the movement of her feet on the middle screen. Then, this screen cuts to black and the right screen shows Amuludun's hands folding another printed cloth which she lifts and wraps around her head in preparation. Another close-up on Idris shows her raising her legs as if to stretch her muscles. The film's reflexivity in showing the dancers' process of readying to perform references how past Igbo women might have prepared themselves physically and emotionally for "sitting on a man" or for the Aba Women's War.

Shot in black and white, with its connotations of a past time period, Amuludun's sequence, in particular, becomes associated with the narration that follows. From offscreen, a robotic, discernibly white, British voice is heard describing the perceived differences between the dancing of African women and men. With this, the work gives expression to colonial records that Igwe consulted in the course of her research for the film. At one point, the colonial voice compares African women to dogs. Here, Idris reappears on the middle screen. As she continues her dance, her movement expresses a lack of concern for the colonial narrative conveyed by the voiceover. Then Amuludun returns to the right screen and resumes readying herself by adjusting a number of metal rings on her fingers. Her self-adornment suggests that the protest she is about to invoke is not merely a reaction to external forces but primarily an act of personal and creative expression.

On the middle screen appears sepia-toned archival footage featuring bare-chested children smiling and dancing to polyrhythms played on drums. The first child engages the camera playfully. However, the second gestures with her arms in ways that can be read as issuing a warning or warding off a threat. On the left and right screens, the contemporary dancers reappear with both now fully engaged in movement. A new white British voice becomes audible, then the robotic voice is layered over this. The latter speaker describes the Africans' dancing in terms of "excess" and again highlights the characteristics of the women's dancing in particular. The middle and right screens cut to black, leaving Idris on the left screen. Here, the robotic voice makes a generalizing statement: "...dance forms such an integral part of the African's existence... for it is as much a constant accompaniment

of life as sun and rain, wind and heat... it defies all analysis. *It is, in some elusive way, Africa*” (*Sitting on a Man* 02:48-03:11, emphasis added). In these words, the attempt to construct a reductive representation of Africans as primitive is clear. By evoking the imagery of “sun and rain, wind and heat,” the voice of the colonial record implicitly classifies Africans as closer to nature than other human beings (*Sitting on a Man* 03:02-03:04). It describes Africans as people who are constantly dancing and subtly defines Africa as an irrational entity, one that “defies all analysis” (*Sitting on a Man* 03:07-03:08).

Following this, a sound akin to wind or breath is heard, and the contemporary dancers’ exertion grows more intense. Idris appears on the left and right screens, stepping forcefully. When she is next seen, her back is sweaty with the effort of her movements. With a cut to her face, Amuludun looks around slowly and intently as her image fills all three screens. The film’s final shot is of Amuludun’s hand. She reaches out, beckoning the viewer. With this gesture, she implicates the viewer in the confrontation that the installation stages between British colonialism and African women’s movement. Through the dancer’s direct address, the work reconsiders the authority of the colonial record.

The connection that Igwe makes between *Sitting on a Man* and the context in which it was produced helps to illuminate the work. As Igwe says, the film was inspired not only by the global anti-immigration sentiments of the 2010s but also by:

police killings, police murders at the time, and the rise of Black Lives Matter [which] had triggered a certain awareness or “re-awareness” in me around the circulation of images and how people had been imaged over time, and how that imaging had [...] produced knowledge about people that then led to violence. So it was around [...] the fact that early cinema and colonialism are entwined, that they produce each other. The evidence of cinema and photography justifies anthropology. So I think it was thinking back to those origins and seeing what it had brought to the present that was on my mind. (Igwe)

With an appreciation of these concerns of Igwe’s, the critique of archival images staged in *Sitting on a Man* coheres further. In her reflection on the work, Igwe reveals a diasporic consciousness of global Black resistance. She elucidates how highly visible police brutality cases with their attendant circulation of images of Black victims led

her to consider the role of visual representation in shaping external perceptions of people of African descent. This led her to consider the history of the medium of film and its crucial role in colonialism. She explains how, then as now, film technology and violent anti-Black logics mutually influenced each other. Given this, *Sitting on a Man* can be read as a search for alternate approaches to viewing images of African women – approaches that center African women’s autonomy and defiance.

### The Right to Look Away: *Specialised Technique*

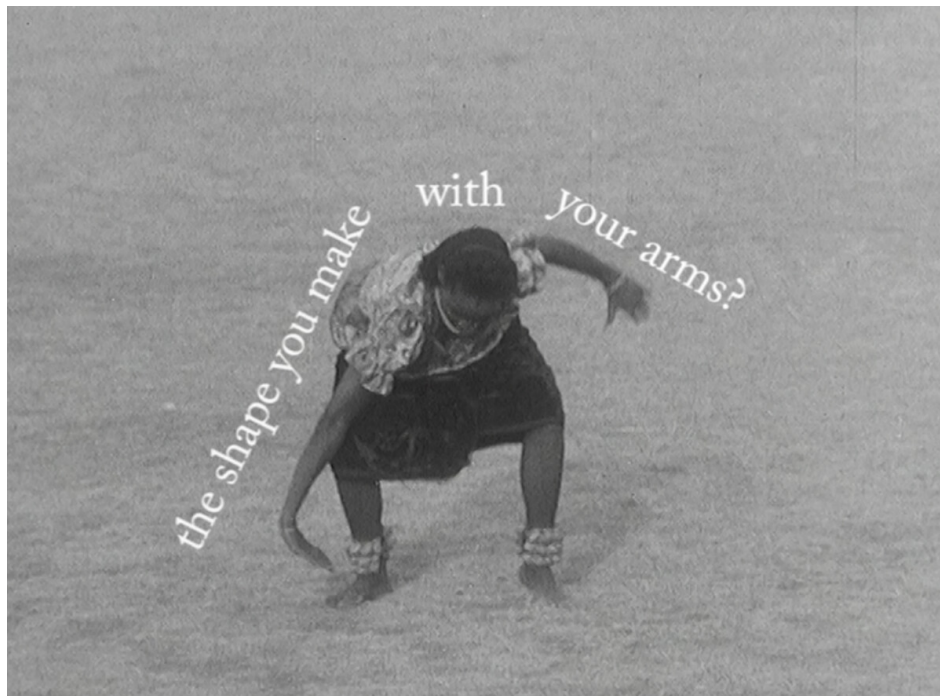


Figure 2. Still from Igwe’s *Specialised Technique* (2018).  
Photo courtesy of Onyeka Igwe.

Continuing through the installation, one would next encounter Igwe’s film *Specialised Technique*. In this work, Igwe visually and symbolically centers African women to counteract their marginality in the archive. A large projection onto the gallery wall, *Specialised Technique* intercuts archival footage of dancers in various African countries with animated illustrations of figures detailing the steps of particular dances. Through intertitles and subtitles, the film stages a reflexive dialogue between Igwe and the women dancers in which she surmises about their inner thoughts and feelings. The size and position of the projection squarely confront the viewer. The

dimensions of the screen amplify the quiet ways that the women refuse the camera's gaze. Through an approach that focalizes the women subjects, *Specialised Technique* stages an inquiry into the women's interiority.

The film opens on a black and white image of an African woman dancer wearing a printed blouse and black skirt. Captured during a visit by the British monarchy to Enugu, Nigeria, the image frames a woman who is likely Igbo. Situated in the middle of the frame, the woman stands with her head down. Her central position is the result of Igwe's intervention. The filmmaker "enlarged, slowed down and reformatted images of women who were sometimes hidden at the edge of the frame, in order for them to be more prominently seen" (Igwe 51). With this, "movement" in this work expands beyond dance to also signify how Igwe brings these women out of the periphery.

Following this, a series of black and white stills survey the members of diverse African ethnic groups, as indicated by their different hairstyles and other physical markers. The images highlight the women found among these individuals. Interwoven into this montage are images of hand drawn figures. The film flashes back and forth between the still images and the drawings. The fast-paced rhythm syncs to Igwe's repetition in voiceover of the sentence "Hold and pause." The work addresses this instruction to the subjects of the stills. Representing the filmmaker's subjective interference with the archive, the narration sets the scene for how speculative inquiry and reflexivity will become central in the sequences to follow.

Intertitles and text superimposed onto the still images pose questions to the archival subjects about their experience being filmed. The film cuts to a second woman dancer, a member of the Sudanese Habbaniya tribe. Adorned with ornate jewelry, she looks downward. An intertitle addresses her, asking, "What happened when you looked down the lens? Or did they tell you not to?" With this, the film ponders the woman's gaze away from the camera. Images of this woman are crosscut with those of the woman in the opening shot. This highlights the similarities in their body language. At the same time, the narration interrogates Igwe's creative decisions: "What do I want to focus on? What do I want in close-up?" Igwe as narrator also comments on the subjective decisions of the CFU while maintaining the Africans filmed as the subjects of her address: "You keep getting cut off." With an accompanying image in which part of one subject's body has been cropped out, the film communicates concern over the way that the CFU's frame sometimes

amputates the subjects' bodies, discarding limbs to the out-of-field. Together with the images, the observations in *Specialised Technique* probe the subjects' desires and question both Igwe's filmmaking and that of the CFU.

Later, Igwe asks, "Am I OK," alluding to the emotional weight of identifying with the subjects of the archive and witnessing the lack of care in their documentation. Her final question, "Should I move?" is answered by a shot of the filmmaker dancing. In this close-up, archival footage is projected onto Igwe's clothing. Similarly to Idris and Amuludun who form the dance circle in *Sitting on a Man*, Igwe joins in the movement of the performers in the projection. Emerging from behind the camera, Igwe places herself in the position of those captured by the archive. In doing so, the filmmaker moves toward the more vulnerable posture of the film subject.

Through the staging of a self-reflexive process, Igwe acknowledges the subjectivity of her intervention into the archive. Responding to her inquiries with movement, Igwe uses performativity to illustrate how she too is implicated in the archival encounter. Rather than maintaining a detached distance, she narrows the gap between herself and her subjects through emotional vulnerability and by turning the camera on herself. In doing so, she acknowledges rather than obscures how her feelings, her position as filmmaker, and other factors may shape how she engages the archive. With this, she also forgoes the possibility of extrapolating knowledge of the women from their images. She draws attention to how their gestures may hint at their frame of mind. However, she avoids claiming the ability to access or articulate knowledge of their mental state. Instead, she embraces dance as a method for responding to the archival subjects. This method does not yield definitive knowledge of the African women but rather points to the wide range of possible lived experiences that they may have had.

In the last frame, the film returns to the woman from the opening shot, who finally comes to life. She performs a brief but deliberate step before the film ends. By initially presenting the woman as a still image, Igwe draws attention to the details of her body language, which brings notice to her downward gaze. Progressing from the still image to a moving image of the woman, Igwe effectively animates her. Through this, she uses movement to emphasize the woman's presence.

Part of how *Specialised Technique* centers the women subjects is by highlighting their movements as practices of opacity. For Edouard Glissant, opacity is a notion of

irreducible selfhood. As he writes, “If we examine the process of ‘understanding’ people and ideas from the perspective of Western thought, we discover that its basis is this requirement for transparency. In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and perhaps judgments. I have to reduce” (Glissant 189-190). While Western frameworks for relating to the other hinge on narrow representations of them, Glissant argues for the right of the other to retain their complexity and substantiality. Opacity in film means withholding complete details in order to prevent the easy consumption of a narrative. In Igwe’s work, opacity signifies practices such as the downward gaze that signal yet conceal an elaborate array of emotions, desires, and thoughts that the camera is unable to capture. A reading of *Specialised Technique* as an illustration of opacity suggests that by claiming the right to opacity, the subjects prevent the camera from fully apprehending them.

By interrupting the camera’s claims to the power to “arrange the relations of the visible,” the film challenges the visibility of the CFU (Mirzoeff 1). In looking away from the camera, the women subtly change what is perceptible and by extension, how their image can be understood. By training the viewer’s eye on these moments, Igwe presents a countervisuality that points to possibilities beyond the CFU’s framing of the women. Emphasizing the downward look, the film calls attention to the women’s interiority. While the CFU represented African women as nameless, voiceless figures, blank canvases for their projections about Africa, Igwe foregrounds the richness of their inner lives through a focus on their subtle refusals.

Igwe further destabilizes the authority of the archive through the use of intertitles and subtitles. The text analyzes the techniques used in the CFU films and muses on the nature of the women’s participation. It also suggests Igwe’s struggle with her own positionality and power as a filmmaker, which implicitly calls into question that of the CFU. In these ways, the film models a regard for the women subjects that resists offering Igwe’s speculations as proxies for their voices, however much her commentary magnifies a sense of their agency. Withholding answers to the posed questions, *Specialised Technique* practices “[n]arrative restraint, the refusal to fill in the gaps and provide closure, [and respects] black noise [and] opacity” (Hartman 12). Where others listen for the “noises” made by archival subjects, Igwe’s work turns, instead, to quiet and what it holds. *Specialised Technique* portrays quiet not

as absence but as an opaque practice that troubles the camera's attempts at capture and control.

### The Historical Is Personal: *Her Name in My Mouth*

Shown on a small TV monitor placed on the floor, the position of *Her Name in My Mouth* foreshadows the way in which the film lingers with the women that the CFU films gloss over. In this film, Igwe employs her body to honor the women in the archive. Her actions to this end include the donning of a commemorative t-shirt as a way of memorializing the women shown yet essentially overlooked in the archival footage. The contemporaneity of the t-shirt undermines the authority that the archive claims by bringing women potentially lost to history into the present. *Her Name in My Mouth* also extends the installation's speculation by postulating about the place of Igwe's individual history in relation to Nigerian women's collective pasts. Through these practices and with Igwe's performance of gestures that communicate refusal, the film expresses an intimacy with and reverence for the African women subjects.



Figure 3. Still from Igwe's *Her Name in My Mouth* (2017).  
Photo courtesy of Onyeka Igwe.

An opening close-up on Igwe's hand caressing, sifting through, and folding layers of ankara cloth, introduces the practices of care and concern for African

women's histories that the filmmaker will model in the film. Next, archival sequences of African men and women engaged in everyday activities stutter and loop in unexpected ways. The film cuts to the filmmaker, who wears a commemorative t-shirt bearing a black and white image of a woman's face. Igwe holds open a purple and gold wrapper, then carefully ties it around her waist. Another cut shows Igwe's hands resting atop a weathered package. Opening this, she reveals a book with the title *Report of the Aba Commission of Inquiry*, another reference to the Aba Women's War. A series of close-ups offer quick glances at the charts, lists, and maps that lie within these pages. These serve as examples of colonial "regimes of knowledge – of measurement, indexing, [and] containment," in other words, the quantitative metrics through which Britain produced its empirical understanding of Nigeria (Bourland 134). As indicated by Igwe's engagement with the CFU films throughout the installation, the report accounts for only one way of knowing the country.

The film pauses on a map of Nigeria's Aba region, which calls to mind *Sitting on a Man* and its exploration of the Aba Women's War. Igwe's hands straighten a page that seems to have creased as it was haphazardly stuffed between others. This arouses a sense of thoughtful stewardship over the histories of the Aba women and African women archival subjects more generally. As Igwe consults a list of names, the film cuts to a close-up on the name "Igwi," which is possibly an Anglicized spelling of the filmmaker's surname. This shot suggests the presence of the filmmaker's direct ancestors in these archives. With this montage, the film conjectures that this collective history is also Igwe's personal history.

This potential familial connection makes the next sequences all the more meaningful. The film cuts back to the shot of Igwe in the t-shirt with the black and white image. She adjusts her wrapper with a deliberate gesture that secures it more tightly. Then, black and white footage of a collective dance begins. Raffia palm whirls in the foreground while women wearing gele pose in the background.<sup>2</sup> As the footage starts and stops, the film brings into focus a range of women. This includes a group of mothers carrying babies on their backs; an old woman tending to a number of pots; a striking woman with a piercing that she ejects from, then pulls back into, her bottom lip; and women cleaning clothes. The series of women is followed by a slow-motion tracking shot that homes in on a row of people giving a

---

<sup>2</sup> Gele are traditional headdresses.

recitation. At the end of this row stands a woman now recognizable as the figure emblazoned on Igwe's t-shirt.

Through the slowness of the shots, Igwe lingers with the women in the footage, especially the woman whose image she reproduces on her t-shirt. At this speed, the details of the woman's face, including the impressions of tribal markings, become prominent. That Igwe singles her out from the other women raises the question of whether she is a direct relation of Igwe's – perhaps the ancestor carelessly accounted for as "Igwi." Withholding any revelation of this, the film cuts from the woman's face to Igwe's t-shirt. In a final shot trained on the shirt, the filmmaker gestures by bringing her hands together then abruptly moving them apart. This movement has the sense of a command to stop or leave. The sound heard is the voice of Igwe's mother who sings songs that might have been intoned during the act of "sitting on a man." With her gesture, Igwe undertakes to echo the tone of the songs and, in her words, "what I imagined these protests to be" (Igwe).

With its focus on the woman on the t-shirt, *Her Name in My Mouth* continues the installation's speculation about African women's feelings regarding their participation in the archival films. The woman's striking face is part of what inspired Igwe to highlight her. In addition, the filmmaker says, "I felt drawn to her in a way because of a bit of sadness as well [...] I felt like, because they're all reciting English [...] I had a narrative for her and how she was [...] reacting to this process and what she had to do, and [...] something felt lost, or I felt lost in her image, in viewing her [...] I wanted to [...] celebrate and commemorate her" (Igwe). Igwe reveals that the people in the slow-motion tracking shot are performing in a colonial language rather than speaking their native tongue. Viewing this imposition of British culture over the woman's own culture caused Igwe to experience a sense of sadness and loss, which in turn, caused her to wonder about the woman's own feelings about the performance. The filmmaker's absorption in this compelling subject galvanized her to pay homage to the woman by printing her face on the t-shirt. Rather than projecting her own emotions onto the woman, Igwe highlights her as a way of visually posing her question about the woman's internal response to the activity she engages in.

By donning the commemorative t-shirt as a performance costume, Igwe brings a Nigerian woman subject out of the archive where she may have remained an unnoticed face among several others captured in the films. The filmmaker then

draws inspiration from Nigerian women's cultural practices to move in ways that communicate a sense of refusal. Through these actions and with the discovery of a potential family member in the archive, Igwe embodies Nigerian women's histories and claims them as her own.

## “Shaking Out the Stereotype” through Black Performativity and Speculation

This article has considered how *A Repertoire of Protest* emphasizes dance and gesture in its exploration of the archive. Additionally, Igwe incorporates a kind of performativity into her approach to the structure of the films. As she says, “In attempting to shake the stereotype out of the colonial footage, I tried in as many ways as possible to change how the audience saw various people on camera” (Igwe 51). Igwe's use of the verb “shake” here speaks to how movement forms a foundational part of her engagement with the archival films. Her techniques include reanimating the footage and changing the rhythm of certain sequences. As a result of these methods, in the installation, the archival images move in new ways that unveil the subjective and anti-Black lens through which the CFU films were produced. Yet Igwe resists inscribing her own interpretations onto the colonial films. Instead, she offers a view that maintains that aspects of African women's histories remain inaccessible.

In *Sitting on a Man*, Igwe makes the Aba women's mass protest visible in a particular way. Displayed above eye level, the film imaginatively represents the women's defiant dance and tacitly rebuts the explicit anti-Blackness of the archive. Drawing inspiration from the Aba women's resistance, the contemporary performers move alongside the archival subjects in a dance circle that Igwe orchestrates. In these ways, the film renders a distinct sense of the Aba Women's War. Moreover, *Sitting on a Man* challenges the archive's approach to conveying history.

The display of *Specialised Technique* enlarges the acts of refusal that Igwe highlights. The film moves the women subjects from the margins of the frame to the center by making them visually as well as thematically salient in the narrative. Through the intertitles and subtitles, Igwe considers the thoughts and feelings of the women filmed and reflects on her own creative process. Through this reflexivity, the filmmaker models a way of looking at archival images of African women that recognizes the interiority of these subjects. With this, *Specialised Technique* refuses

reductive framings of African women. The film positions these women as the protagonists of their own histories rather than mere objects of the colonial gaze.

In *Her Name in My Mouth*, Igwe honors the African women in the archive by uplifting their memories and the personal connection that she feels to them. The position of the screen references how the women have been marginalized, yet the film challenges the way that the archive obscures them. Igwe demonstrates care and enthusiasm for the women's histories by framing her hands as they gently browse archival texts and dressing herself in a t-shirt bearing the face of a woman from the archival films. The film's suggestion that Igwe's ancestors may be accounted for in the written documents she consults furthers the installation's use of speculation to engage the archive. *Her Name in My Mouth* changes the focus of the archival films by giving the women in the footage greater prominence. It achieves this by slowing down the pace of the original films, which amplifies the presence of the women. Igwe's final gesture emulates Igbo women's historical cultural practices. Alongside the film's formal techniques, her performance celebrates past African women.

Aligning with Black feminist speculative practices, *A Repertoire of Protest* looks differently at the official records of African women. The installation illuminates the affective dimensions of African women's histories and the interiority and complexity of the African women that the archive attempts to put on silent display. The work also presents a personal connection to the women and extols their memory. It achieves this through a focus on their movement. Movement in the installation encompasses a multitude of forms and meanings, from the dancing of the archival subjects to Igwe's kinetic formal strategies. Through these practices of Black performativity, *A Repertoire of Protest* renders a distinctive perspective on African women archival subjects. In response to the question "Should I move?" posed in *Specialised Technique*, Igwe's installation says, "Yes." The work proposes that a speculative, African feminist encounter with colonial film demands movement both literal and figurative – on the part of the filmmaker, within the frame, and through the gallery.

## References

- Bourland, Ian. "Zina Saro-Wiwa discusses her new show in London." *Artforum*, Oct. 20, 2018, <https://www.artforum.com/interviews/zina-saro-wiwa-discusses-her-new-show-in-london-76934> Accessed 30 August 2023.
- Davies, Carole Boyce. "Introduction: Feminist Consciousness and African Literary Criticism." *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature*, edited by Carole Boyce Davies and Anne Adams Graves. Africa World Press, 1986, pp. 1-23.
- DeFrantz, Thomas F. and Gonzalez, Anita. "From 'Negro Expression' to 'Black Performance.'" *Black Performance Theory*, edited by Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez. Duke University Press, 2014, pp. 1-16.
- Field, Allyson Nadia. "Editor's Introduction: Sites of Speculative Encounter." *Feminist Media Histories*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2022, pp. 1-13.
- Hanna, Judith Lynne. "Dance and the 'Women's War.'" *Dance Research Journal*, vol. 14, no. 1-2, 1981-82, pp. 25-28.
- Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe: A Journal of Criticism*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2008-06, pp. 1-14.
- Hobson, Janell. "Viewing in the Dark: Toward a Black Feminist Approach to Film." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 2002: 1 & 2, pp. 45-59.
- Igwe, Onyeka. "Being Close to, With or Amongst." *Feminist Review*, no. 125, 2020, pp. 44-53.
- Igwe, Onyeka, director. *Her Name in My Mouth*. 2017.
- Igwe, Onyeka, director. *Sitting on a Man*. 2018.
- Igwe, Onyeka, director. *Specialised Technique*. 2018.
- Igwe, Onyeka. Personal interview. 21 March 2025.

- Klein, Gabriele. *Emerging Bodies: The Performance of Worldmaking in Dance and Choreography*, edited by Gabriele Klein and Sandra Noeth. Transcript Verlag, 2011. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/nyulibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=5494380>.
- Mercer, Kobena. *Travel & See: Black Diaspora Art Practices since the 1980s*. Duke University Press, 2016.
- Mirzoeff, Nicholas. *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*. Duke University Press, 2011.
- Ogunyemi, Chikwenye Okonjo. *Africa Wo/man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women*. University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- Okafor, Mary-Blossom Chinyelum. *Theatre of Life: Rituals, Transition and Progression Among the Igbo*. 1998. University of Plymouth, PhD Dissertation.
- Rice, Tom. "Colonial Film Unit." *Colonial Film: Moving Images of the British Empire*, Aug. 2010, <http://www.colonialfilm.org.uk/production-company/colonial-film-unit>. Accessed 7 May 2024.
- Steady, Filomina Chioma. "African Feminism: A Worldwide Perspective." *Women in Africa and the African Diaspora: A Reader*. Black Classic Press, 1996, pp. 3-21.