



FIGURE 1. Establishing the chorus. Okwui Okpokwasili and Peter Born, *Sitting On a Man's Head*, Danspace Project, 2020. Photo: Ian Douglas.

Within the Whirlwind of the Encounter

An Interview with Okwui Okpokwasili

KRISTIN JUAREZ

Okwui Okpokwasili is a Brooklyn-based writer, performer, and choreographer who creates multidisciplinary performance pieces that seek to shape and amplify the shared psychic space the audience and performer inhabit and, through centering the African / African American feminine, to illuminate universal human conditions. She was the co-curator of *Platform 2020: Utterances from the Chorus* at Danspace Project in New York City.¹ Intending an exhibition that unfolded over time, Okpokwasili and Judy Hussie-Taylor developed a month-long program that included multiple voices, artistic collaborations, and interdisciplinary juxtapositions. Okpokwasili's ongoing collaborative practice *Sitting on a Man's Head* anchored the exhibition and was slated to be installed every Friday from February 22 to March 21, 2020. While live programs came to an abrupt halt on March 13, virtual programs continued to speak to the Platform as artists responded to the ongoing public health and social justice crises.

What follows weaves together some of the concerns and research questions that spurred this project, Kristin Juarez's own involvement within it, and a conversation with Okpokwasili.

I interviewed the artist shortly after the murder of George Floyd and days following the march of Brooklyn Liberation: An Action for Black Trans Lives on June 14, 2020, which she could hear from her apartment. In our conversation Okpokwasili constructs an ongoing nonlinear lineage of embodied protest

practices in which she considers an ethical alignment between *Sitting On a Man's Head's* reference to the pre-colonial Igbo women's protest tradition of "sitting on a man" and the groundswell of the past in collective social movements and embodied forms of protest. For her these lineages parallel and intersect, exchange and weave together to find new praxes of resistance. As she moves seamlessly between social justice, the goals of her artistic practice, and the work of the other artists in the Platform, Okpokwasili demonstrates what we explore here as the potential of trembling, as a sound, a movement, and a way of being together (audio 1). Her use of trembling in this interview recalls what Edouard Glissant develops as the need for "trembling thinking." He explains in an interview:

We must think with trembling thoughts. We mustn't think thoughts of certainty, fixity, doctrine. Trembling thought does not mean a thought of fear, of dread, of hesitation/lack of resolve. The world trembles physiologically; it trembles in its becoming (its future), it trembles in its suffering, in its pains, in its positions, in its massacres, in its genocides, in its happiness (plural). Our thought (thinking) must harmonize with this trembling. We should not impose to the world (thought) systems that are completely mechanical but try to follow this trembling of the world. And perhaps there we will find more, say, *truth* than we find today.²

Trembling thinking is a way of being in the world that is responsive and shifting, that finds a way of becoming through non-closure. Trembling, he writes

WE MUST THINK WITH TREMBLING THOUGHTS

with his wife, Sylvie Semavoine Glissant, unites us in the "whirlwind of the encounter."³ For Okpokwasili trembling becomes a way of attending to micro-perceptions and imagining an intimate and infinite sociality.

I began to work with Okpokwasili and Hussie-Taylor as a curatorial fellow and was asked to produce a research dossier to support their inquiry. Through this engagement I developed the framework of the "trembling archive" as a responsive methodology to acknowledge the intricate collective lineage being woven through the ongoing exchanges taking place over the course of the exhibition.⁴ The trembling archive forms within the whirlwind of the encounter—attending to the ways gestures form on the body and between bodies, creating intertextual formal, social, and familial lineages. As Okpokwasili's own multimedia practice demonstrates, the trembling archive reflects a way of working between mediums, exploring vocabularies of movements in different forms. The trembling archive attends to practices that engage aesthetic forms and forms of sociality. In the interview Okpokwasili says that she resists the archival impulse's fixing of the past. Instead, she offers an alternative that echoes André Lepecki: "For if the archive knows something, it is that an archive does not store: it acts."⁵ As she reflects on the trembling



FIGURE 2. Okwui Okpokwasili and Peter Born, *Sitting On a Man's Head*, Danspace Project, 2020. Photo: Ian Douglas.

archive, Okpokwasili suggests that the past is multi-directional: the chorus referenced in the exhibition's title and re-created in *Sitting on a Man's Head* generates an archive in which memories cannot be disentangled from imagination (fig. 2).

"The Chorus Opens the Way" —Saidiya Hartman

The name of the exhibition, *Utterances from the Chorus*, makes reference to the shifting negotiations that occur in Saidiya Hartman's aesthetic investigation of social order in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*.⁶ Hartman

evokes the history of the chorus in order to construct an album that "offers an intimate chronicle of black radicalism, an aesthetic and riotous history of colored girls and their experiments with freedom—a revolution before Gatsby."⁷ Her use of the term *album* hinges the sonic and photographic to offer alternative aural records made at the limits of the archival object. As Hartman studies the intimate, experimental, and ordinary ways in which Black women inhabited, moved, and sought escapes, she focuses on the fragments in archival records, revealing the impossibility of these archival traces to index their lives. Rather the archive only leaves records of their criminality or so-

cial disorder. In response Hartman holds the gaps in the record open, filling them with voices, affects, and movement as an album of encounters. For her the chorus offers ways to be part of the multitude within the ensemble. It is a practice of freedom felt by “getting lost in the crowd, in being carried away by the rush of black, brown, and tan bodies, in being one among the chorus.”⁸ Here, the chorus expresses the multiplicity of blackness. Movements of collective individuation—trudging, strutting, spouting, luring—maintain multidirectional trajectories, loosely bound in their blackness and temporary coalescence like the crowd moving down the avenues.⁹

Hartman also explores experiments in freedom as movements within the encounter, as both social and aesthetic forms. In the cabaret, the stage, the private parties, and the “buffet-flats,” she writes, “each space had its own script and set of requirements, dictated the terms of possibility, decided the arrangement and comportment of the figure. The challenge was to improvise within the space of constraint, bending and breaking the rules without breaking the form.”¹⁰ Here the enabling constraints of form not only push on the limits of choreography but also demonstrate the impossibility of ignoring its social arrangements. From the chorus line to intimate partner dances, for Hartman the chorus is both a social and aesthetic form that expands on performance by attending to the site and sight of the encounter. Possibilities for the safety of blackness and queerness unfold in the chorus—the dance within the enclosure—spaces where there are no observers.¹¹ The chorus provides a framework that

understands collective movement as poly-centered, positions the choreographic as social and aesthetic experiments of freedom on the dance floor, and imagines social arrangements that can withstand the violence of anti-blackness.¹²

Deeply informed by Hartman, Okpokwasili also draws from her experience in the physical arrangements with the vocal chorus and experiments in which voices are woven together. In conversation with the curator Lydia Bell, Okpokwasili discusses her interest in sound “as a kind of archive, a cultural archive in the body. And all the things that are a part of that sound; the groan, the cry, the laugh, . . . the whisper, the breath, the kind of sound in the breath.” Between affect and breath, the voice registers traceless memories within the body. It moves between us without touch. In response Bell reflects, “What if we thought of a tremble as an indicator of vulnerability, a reaching out across the border of self?”¹³ Trembling here offers vulnerable mode of sociality at the nexus of movement and sound. The chorus thinks with trembling thoughts.

Out of this interest in the voice Okpokwasili and Hussie-Taylor developed these lines of curatorial inquiry for the Platform:

How do we weave a collective song?

How can the voice and body be sites of resistance and transformation?

How can we share artistic practices—between artists and between artists and audiences?

*What is possible when we hum, utter, and gesture together?*¹⁴

THE CHORUS OFFERS WAYS TO BE PART OF THE MULTITUDE WITHIN THE ENSEMBLE

The persistent “how” in these questions emphasizes Okpokwasili’s rigorous commitment to process—as iterative, collaborative, and ephemeral—that does not privilege an individual sound, moment, or movement. Okpokwasili’s questions generate movement-based experiments that do not make distinctions between the formal and the conceptual. They are not questions of representation or visual translation. Rather they produce somatic investigations in which participants collectively embody the porous movements of becoming. Within *Sitting On a Man’s Head*, these experiments feel practical, in that your participation does not require physical virtuosity. Yet in their formal tasks of slowness and attention, physical and vocal shifts require a somatic retraining of one’s sensorium so that the conceptual elaboration of collectivity, resistance, and transformation is intimately experienced. Even describing the work is a process that closely reflects the research questions.

The artist has practiced *Sitting On a Man’s Head* in different iterations internationally, but there are particular specificities of its occurrence in St. Mark’s Church-in-the-Bowery—the site where Danspace

Project is housed. As the oldest site of continuous religious practice in New York, it is not a neutral structure. Its walls speak of New York’s founding and, with it, its histories of colonialism, indigenous expulsion, and slavery in Manhattan. It is also an active church committed to social justice and has served communities of experimental dance and poetry for the past forty-five years.¹⁵ As conceived, the practice included “activators” who, in New York, were made up of Okpokwasili’s friends and longtime collaborators. Together the architecture, histories, and people act as the scaffolding for the practice—a frame that supports and shapes what is possible. Echoing the conceptual and formal slippage in the artist’s work, scaffolding becomes a recurring element in the interview below: it appears in her collaborations with Asiya Wadud and Ralph Lemon (figs. 3 and 4), and it informs the vocabulary that describes *Sitting On a Man’s Head*’s temporary installation and the role of activators within it. The reappearance of this term both reflects and maintains the relays among artists and between forms of movement and language.

As Okpokwasili emphasizes in the interview, *Sitting On a Man’s Head* is not a performance. It is a practice. Again, this distinction is at once practical and disruptive. In the practical re-designation, it signals that nothing about this work is fixed, predetermined, or reproducible. Instead of viewers or even participants, Okpokwasili designates guests and activators. Activators provide scaffolding, guiding guests through movement and sound within the structure. And while it is not a performance, it is choreographic.

Jenn Joy writes, “To engage choreographically is to position oneself in relation to another, to participate in a scene of address that anticipates and requires a particular mode of attention, even at times against our will.”¹⁶ As a choreographic practice, the chorus is the formalizing principle of relational disruption. As an arrangement of movement, space, and time, the slowness of the chorus determines a choreographic mode of attention in which the vulnerability of intimacy with strangers becomes palpable.

For Tina Campt, Okpokwasili’s practice generates what she describes as *hapticity*, or the relational space of intimacy. She writes, “Feeling across a shared spatiality requires communication and collaboration, a different relationship to space and time. Bodies must feel out one another, feel with, across, and through one another to create a sense of navigation.”¹⁷ Through slowness, Campt describes the somatic experience of new social contracts in formation. She describes her own experience within the enclosure of the encounter in which hums, gestures, and utterances become perceptible as such. Reflecting on her experience with a Black male activator, she continues, “*hapticity* is not empathy. It is labor. . . . It is a gamble that will likely end in failure.”¹⁸ By describing the relational as labor, Campt echoes what Lepecki describes as the paradox of performance: while it can suggest experimentation, it can also express the socioeconomic investment in performance as productivity and the performativity of reified social relations.¹⁹ Here the failure of this labor once again speaks to the disruptive designation of *Sitting On a Man’s Head* as

a choreographic practice, which attends to the formal process of social formations. Campt continues, “As I shared with Okpokwasili later that day, I felt him moving my air.”²⁰ The sensation of slowness becomes an enabling constraint that deprivileges sight and results in a perception of micro shifts initiated by bodies that have been historically devalued. For Campt the risk of failure is worth taking.²¹

By sustaining a practice of incomplete actions, all means without ends²²—hums, gestures, and utterances—hold open a space for the multitude of the chorus. Practice reframes transformation as the perception of the incremental or what the artist refers to in the interview as a “sustained in-betweenness.” In an excerpt of this conversation that appears in volume 2 of the exhibition catalog, Okpokwasili explains, “Instead of being on the outside and seeing it, we’re on the inside, in this constant movement to shape a particular structure. And on the inside, we’re bouncing off of each other, and the nucleus is shifting and shifting.”²³ Within the whirlwind of the encounter, Okpokwasili and activators initiate a tremble, weaving fragments of the past into a shifting and untraceable archive.

“When and Where I Enter” —Paula Giddings after Anna Julia Cooper

Sitting On a Man’s Head echoes in form Hartman’s assembly of the chorus, figuring intimacies within the enclosure that supports the multitude of those who find safety within it. The enclosure activates the notion set forward by Paula Giddings’s text *When and*

⊕ a fibonacci builds in a chorus, as filament
all the numbers building in accordance
every single smaller number
requisite scaffolding

a fibonacci builds in a chorus, as filament — all the congregants fervent in the
thickets — all the congregants fervent; we see them

dust clouds each among us — who has never seen this?
what brews inside the structure? who has never asked them?
what brews inside the structure? who has never heard the noise?
shrouded later in what it contains — dust clouds among us

day pulls down the sky [⊕] It is not that I have no past / Rather it continually fragments on the / Terrible
and vivid ephemera of now / I am / I am the face beneath the sand / Still breathing / While day pulls down
the sky. / While the day pulls down the sky.

FIGURE 3. The image of
Asiya Wadud's poem.
Okwui Okpokwasili and
Asiya Wadud, *days pull
down the sky / a filament
in gold leaf*, Danspace
Project, 2019. Courtesy of
Okwui Okpokwasili and
Asiya Wadud.



FIGURE 4. Ralph
Lemon, *Untitled*.
© Ralph Lemon.
Courtesy of
Ralph Lemon.

BETWEEN AFFECT AND BREATH, THE VOICE REGISTERS TRACELESS MEMORIES WITHIN THE BODY

Where I Enter, which imagines a Black lineage as a space for social disruption.²⁴ The title for Giddings's text draws from the educator and activist Anna Julia Cooper, who in her 1886 speech and essay "Womanhood: A Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of a Race" said, "Only the black woman can say 'when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me.'"²⁵ For Cooper, the possibility for Black social arrangements free from violence is hinged on an embodied practice of black womanhood. The enclosure reflects a Black gendered lineage of embodiment that is contingent and disruptive, documented by speech and held in silence.

Echoing the provisional nature of enclosure, *Sitting On a Man's Head* is distinct from architecture. Within St. Mark's Church, Peter Born—Okpokwasili's husband and collaborator—constructed a canopy structure that was anchored from above and completely filled the nave of the church (fig. 5). The entry

into the structure was not immediately visible. Rigged from the church's balcony, the canopy was physically moved back and forth, allowing it to catch wind as it enveloped the activators and participating guests. Its opacity permitted viewers to only imagine what was happening inside. On occasion, the fabric would make contact with the chorus, making temporary imprints of a mass of shoulders and the tops of heads. In the resistance to being seen, the structure created a protective space for those inside and effaced distinctions between activators and guests. To enter the structure, guests were invited into an exchange with activators. Activators were primarily Black women and women of color. Notebooks were placed on the church risers, and guests were asked to write their response to the question "What do you carry that also carries you?" Their answers became the basis of discussions with the activators and phrases that activators brought to the group once inside (fig. 6). As a collectively woven song, these phrases became a growing intangible archive of entangled memories, lineages, and openings toward the future. In the interview Okpokwasili resists the archival impulse as a sedimentation of the past, favoring an engagement with the past that remains tremulous. As a result *Sitting On a Man's Head* aims at achieving what Domietta Torlasco defines as archiving otherwise. She writes, "'To archive *otherwise*' is to archive to a logic that defies logic of conscious thinking . . . that will always require attentive and imaginative interpretation."²⁶ The notebooks act as objects to gather around; they are sites for exchange rather than record keeping. They be-

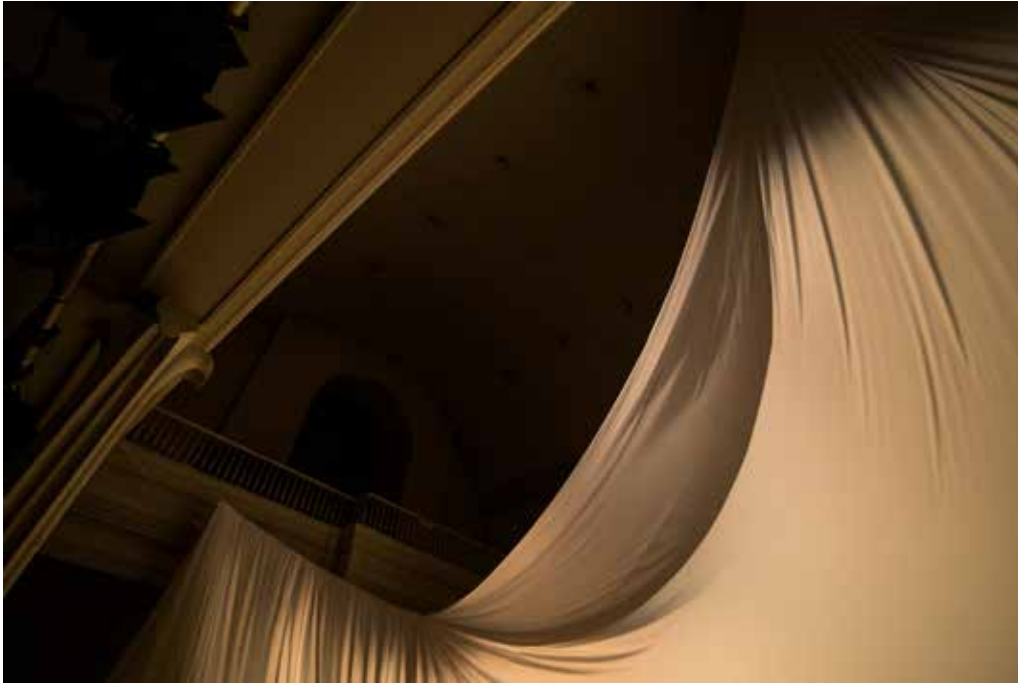


FIGURE 5. The enclosure. Okwui Okpokwasili and Peter Born, *Sitting On a Man's Head*, Danspace Project, 2020. Photo: Ian Douglas.

come the basis of a practice that creates the relays and new openings for guests and activators to re-sound the language of others.

Guests are prepared to enter the structure with the instructions to join the group and move as slowly as possible. Slowness takes on a disorienting quality within the chorus: you move and are moved, and you lose track of the origins of a refrain, where you are in the church, how much time has passed. Voices crest together first as sounds, a tangle of groans, laugh-

ter, and shrieks producing and responding in a poly-centered relay, sounding of undecipherable affects. Yet, as Okpokwasili describes, the trembling and vibrations of the chorus keep you tethered.

Alongside the exhibition, Okpokwasili and Danspace Project produced a recording of songs pressed on vinyl, a book of poetry with Asiya Wadud, two publications that bookend the Platform, and an online journal. There were also interdisciplinary research groups dedicated to the practices concerned with



FIGURE 6. The notebook. Okwui Okpokwasili and Peter Born, *Sitting On a Man's Head*, Danspace Project, 2020. Photo: Ian Douglas.

“voice and body” as well as “kin and care,” which fostered collaborative inquiry that led to workshops, presentations, and writing. This proliferation of paratext emphasizes her commitment to collaboration and its ability to yield new forms.



This conversation with Okpokwasili took place over Zoom on June 16, 2020. It has been edited for length and clarity.²⁷ We began the interview reflecting on the current moment—following the killing of George Floyd, the realities of COVID-19, and the march of Brooklyn Liberation: An Action for Black Trans Lives—and the mounting public health and social justice cri-

ses that span American history. As she situated *Sitting On a Man's Head* as a practice and an ethos of sociability, she suggested that blackness also has the ability to anticipate and respond to these unprecedented circumstances.

Okwui Okpokwasili: I've been thinking about the end of all the activities that we were doing. It's like this abrupt rupture from the commons, for lack of a better word. There was some internal upheaval for me personally that I'm still navigating. But I look out at people, I look out at the sea of folks coming together in solidarity [for Black Trans lives] to demand that the system that we all live under, that the governing ethos around this country change in fundamental ways. To be anti-racist, to be anti-homophobic, to really start to think about how each and every one of us is necessary, and to start to address the systemic and ongoing plagues, or as some people would say, the other comorbidities that have been with us since the founding of this country: it's been amazing to see this kind of multigenerational, multi-racial global movement.

But I still think that we continue to have problems addressing this epidemic of violence against Black folk, against transgender folk, against women, globally. Look at the killing of Tony McDade. All these transgender folks have been killed whose names have been out there, but not as much—or maybe because we don't have the video. The George Floyd video, that is some kind of stark—not just an indictment, but a kind of microscope. Or it's like a perfect snapshot

of the problem. So I feel both really excited, but also nervous and scared, and I feel such gratitude for everybody, for all of the people lifting their voices in the chorus, you know, and putting their bodies out there.

Kristin Juarez: This has all been happening while I was preparing for this interview with you. I've been reading your catalog and weeping. And to echo Judy [Hussie-Taylor] in her introduction to your catalog, here we are in gratitude and grief.²⁸ I was watching some footage [from *Sitting On a Man's Head*] that Lily [Cohen] sent me, and I was just weeping, and it felt like this moment that you created for us to share in was a practice for a way of living. It was something that I keep rethinking and reliving, and it just was a boon. So I can imagine how the abrupt end to this must feel.

OO: Yeah, that's it. It felt like a boon. I don't feel like I'm a social-justice activist. I feel like we can see how effective social justice is—I mean, that's a practice. That requires an investment and a rigor, and we are seeing the incredible results of that practice, which, yes, we can bring back to the formation of Black Lives Matter in 2013, right? We can bring it back to before then, the AIDS crisis, ACT UP, or Occupy Wall Street. You can go beyond that, to the fights for climate change and earth justice, and then back to the civil rights movement of the '50s and '60s. I've been looking at Ida B. Wells and her Red Record as this intrepid and fearless record. I think she was in her twenties when she is making a press and listing the names of Black people, men, women, and children, who have

been lynched and brutalized and terrorized. And she herself was terrorized when they burned down her press.

[I am thinking about] the Reconstruction, and the efforts of the Black folks to be full participants in a democracy. The abolitionists. I'm skipping what happened at Standing Rock, and the fights for Indigenous folks, the farmworkers in the Southwest. And we can say, "Wow, why hasn't anything changed?" And it's true, but these things have been carried and planted and seeded, and they are blossoming, right? These are things that are carried within folks in social-justice movements. They do their research. They're collecting information and finding more and more ways to be effective, especially in the emergence of technology that allows us to connect more and more with each other.

So, I feel like *Sitting On a Man's Head*, too, was about trying to tap into what is carried and how that carries us and shifts us and changes us. I think that what we're seeing now is a groundswell of all of those movements that have preceded this moment. With Black Lives Matter, everyone gets so fixated on the term "Black." I love it. I'm like, yes, hold on to the Black. Because Black Lives Matter is fundamentally intergenerational; it is diverse. It is asking for justice for so many folks. It feels like Blackness has this capacity to hold everyone, right? So as it tries to draw attention to the fundamental sickness of anti-blackness, it also manages to be incredibly generous.

KJ: And expansive.

IT FEELS LIKE BLACKNESS HAS THIS CAPACITY TO HOLD EVERYONE. AS IT TRIES TO DRAW ATTENTION TO THE FUNDAMENTAL SICKNESS OF ANTI-BLACKNESS, IT ALSO MANAGES TO BE INCREDIBLY GENEROUS.

OO: And expansive in its formation. It's about Black life but it's about all life. It's about all of our lives in concert. So anyway, I can't do [activism]. I can only be a champion of it, or in some way a part of it, but tangentially. To me, *Sitting On a Man's Head* is asking people to come into the space of this practice and think about what seeds are in them, and how they can utter or tremble with those seeds, in collaboration and in concert with strangers. What does that do? What are the tiny molecular shifts inside of you that happen when you enter into a space like that? Maybe it can't even be articulated. But the people who come in and stay have these conversations about what they carry and what carries them, and then they go into the space of the practice, the sonic practice of utterance, and it comes back to them in multiple iterations and forms and shifts (fig. 7). We are not concerned about what your voice is like. The last concern is the end result, the product.

That's why we shaped it in a way where we try to control who could be seen. You can enter into this space if you're going to be a part of the practice, because it's a space for no audience. If you don't want

to participate, you can stay out and hear and listen, but we try to make a protective space so that people could come in and utter, without concern or fear of being good . . . Can we walk together too? Can we be together? I think there's something that's in your dossier. Suk-Jun Kim writes that this sense of listening hungrily is also a listening with generosity, right?²⁹ Sometimes it's a riot of sound. What is it to have a choir with no leader, or a church with no pastor? It's not anarchy (or maybe it is anarchy, which isn't the disorder we imagine but a constantly shifting reordering—a trembling order), but it is saying that we all have a part to play in holding this fabric together.

You never know who's going to lead it. There's this incredible relay, because you're listening hungrily, and breathing in breath, holding that breath together. I love the trembling archive, because we're doing this slow walk in this space (fig. 7). If you can stay for however long you can stay and hold it, you will inevitably begin to tremble, tremble with the exertion of the slow walk over a long period of time, tremble with the feeling of others who may fall into you, bump into you, touch you, lean into you. Your vocal cords, your folds

are trembling, your body is trembling, and there may be these paroxysms. It's just holding space for that, and for the generosity with which the artist activators, the people who are our collaborators in the practice, who were tasked with holding down kind of a loose scaffold for this ongoing, trembling, sonic practice. Their generosity; their ability to be open; and to shout when a shout was needed, and scream when screams were needed. We thought about how we could also make space for that, to be in between, to never be finished. To be in this constant process with each other of making space and making room. Colliding sometimes, or just being right next to each other. So, it's an ethos. It's the thing that I hope for in the world.

KJ: Being in that space felt transformative to how we understand our relationship with others. It is also a living theory, and theory about living, in the most bell hooks liberating way, right?³⁰ On the back of your book of poetry with Asiya Wadud, there's a quote from you that says, "What if our strength lies in our instinct to wind together and swell into a chorus, each of us a tone in a chord vibrating with the past and as yet imagined futures?"³¹ I want to reflect on what this sentiment could help us think about in terms of how we remember, how we think about documentation as not singular or linear. It's not solely focused on the past. It is speculative and imaginative and freeing. So I want to move between these ideas: How do you even consider an archival impulse in your practice? How might you resist that? And also, are there intentional gaps in what can be recorded?



FIGURE 7. Small chorus of people. Okwui Okpokwasili and Peter Born, *Sitting on a Man's Head*, Danspace Project, 2020. Photo: Ian Douglas.

OO: Yes, I mean, and I have to say I do resist the archive, and especially when it comes to something like *Sitting on a Man's Head*, that practice, right? Or maybe I've had to expand my idea of an archive, because I think in a performance-practice zone, in the dance space, in a space where you're doing performance and documenting things, often those documents are not only serving as records of what happened, but they're also kind of means to continue to work, and so sometimes there's an attempt to place value on it as a product. So I become conflicted. I've been much more attracted to the archive of the imagination, to the memories of the people that may have been at an event, to their fractured and complicated memories around a moment and an event.

To me, those archives are especially interesting,

and I feel like when Ralph Lemon and I work together that exploration happens. There was a project called *Scaffold Room* (2014) that we were doing with the Walker Art Center. Instead of selling an object, costumes, photos, or some material trace of the performance to the museum, he had proposed to sell the memory of the event. The way he would do it, or at least what I remember of it, was that people would come and they would see the actual performance in the gallery space, and then some time would pass and they would go back and record their recollection of it, and then maybe six months would pass and they would record their recollection, and then maybe a year, and so on. This idea—that what's actually held is not the thing that remains. [What remains] is just simply a container for the shifting memory. So then the piece actually stays alive. It continues to shift and change and actually starts, in a way, to facilitate an ongoing collaboration with the folks who have seen it—and their memories actually create new pieces. I always thought that was so profound, and I don't know what happened with that, but Ralph has always been a beacon to me, a light. I love him dearly for the ways in which I feel like he taught me about generosity; he can ask you for something impossible, confound you with his imagination, always asking you to do too much before you truly understand what's been asked, but he always asks generously.

And so this is also critical. Are there models of artistic practice that don't need to result in a product that can be owned, exploited, sold? This is an interesting possibility to me, which I think reflects very

much on this time when we have to rethink how our economic system in this country works. Now you have the government working in tandem with insurance companies to forgive expenses related to Covid-19. And in a matter of months, you also managed to provide for people who were now jobless—suspending evictions. There's so much that can happen, and you've shown us. We've seen that it can happen; we can do this. So now, no bullshit, right?

For me that reflects the ethos, the possible ethos, of what I hope. What would it be to try to create a practice or a piece where the author is invisible, or the authorship is shared? I've always been interested in that, like what could happen and where are the spaces where it can happen. And then the indefatigable Judy Hussie-Taylor and her team, they push, too, and they say, "Well, what if?" They're in league, they're advocates, allies, coconspirators in saying, "Yes, that's possible. And would this be possible? And would this be possible?" You know, like really pushing what I think are these seeds, again, to growth. From Seta Morton bringing in Spiral Theory Test Kitchen and their incredible food collective. Their incredible edible sculpture and that sense of all of us eating together, all of us taking with our hands (fig. 8).

KJ: Which feels like it will never happen again.

OO: Will never happen. Right? But it was amazing. Cecilia Vicuña, the artist, who came in and was, like, asking us to hum together, sing together. From devynn emory, their practice of care and around the most profound thing, which is the passing, the leav-



FIGURE 8. Spiral Theory Test Kitchen. Danspace Project, PLATFORM 2020, “#1: Platform as Practice—Collaborative Organizing,” February 22, 2020. Photo: Ian Douglas.

ing of this life.³² Their practice is in some way trying to archive that singular event and to do what our medical system in the United States doesn't do, which is to absolutely recognize the single person, the specificity of each person's life, the value. How do we also imbue value into these lives? Obviously, our system is so taxed, and in the talk that they gave, there were other nurses who were there who spoke to the fact that they're up against time limits. There's no time, right? How do we slow down so we take the time to see each other? In trying to be with these people who are passing in these moments, devynn's work tries to make an archive of their memory of what makes each person singular to them.

Then to share that, and to think about or to be thinking about how that is in line with their choreographic and artistic practice, writing practice. How to wildly imagine the world that we want to live in and find these ways to manifest it is—yes. So I feel like I'm seeing various archival practices that might be—that can be—in line, or I can shape the nature of the archive. Because I'm always interested also in the archive of the body, what we're carrying, the trembling. What is the nature of shaping an archive that can contain that fundamental sort of—I don't know if I'd call it unsteadiness, but that vibration? It's also like something Saidiya [Hartman] said. I think you also pointed this out [in the research dossier], and I really love this: "How does one listen for the groans and cries, the undecipherable songs, the crackle of fire in the cane fields, the laments for the dead, and the shouts of victory, and then assign words to all of it? Is

it possible to construct a story from 'the locus of impossible speech' or resurrect lives from the hums?³³ Can beauty provide an antidote to dishonor, and love a way to 'exhume buried cries' and 'reanimate the dead'?"³⁴ So to me that would be the hope of the archive. To always contend with, in some ways, the impossibility of some kind of simulacra of the past, of some kind of direct representation of the past, because it is never that and it can't be. How do we make sure our relationship with the archive stays a dynamic one, and one where we respect that whatever we're looking at was tremulous? And how do we get into that tremor? And yes, can the archive be held in that way?

KJ: On this note I also want to remark that *Sitting on a Man's Head* is iterative. You've performed—but it's not even a performance . . .

OO: The practice. I know, the practice.

KJ: The practice.

OO: I know, it's hard, right? Because to do this kind of thing, and this is why I have to shout-out Judy and the Platform series, to give shape to it, to basically make space and find money to support the enactment of a process. Not even enactment—to support a practice. It's just, like, how do you sell tickets to something that isn't finished? How do you sell tickets to something that isn't a performance? How do you sell tickets to something that says, "You may not see all of it." You know what I mean? You determine how much you will see. We're going to set up particular guidelines to

protect that practice. So you actually might buy tickets and never actually see. It's hard to say, because even that idea of seeing—I think people were so like, “I want to see, I want to go inside, I want to see,” and I'm like, “Well, there's nothing to see.” I know there was a mystery to it. But you either get in there, you do it . . . (fig. 9).

Shout out to Peter Born, my incredible collaborator and partner, who is so much a part of this working through, working out of things. We work together to figure out and refine these structures. He makes these beautiful containers, and I think that canopy, that material, the scale of it, and the people who are moving it with us, who are moving it, that was amazing, right? In and of itself, that's something to see. But inside, there's not really.

We have done multiple iterations and keep learning from them. We've been practicing it, doing workshops at different schools. I really do believe that you make something when you enter into a creative and generative practice with somebody. When you try to make something with somebody, something changes in the relationship between you and that person, and I see it with children. You know what I mean? They get together; they're making stuff. Maybe they're making plays or they're making artwork and they're showing it to each other. It seems like, “Oh, right! These are the building blocks of relationships.” We come together to cooperate, to build things, to start to shape the world and come into agreement and disagreement.

To me, the choral act is so profound, when everybody is singing together. There's a point where the



FIGURE 9. Big chorus of people. Okwui Okpokwasili and Peter Born, *Sitting on a Man's Head*, Danspace Project, 2020. Photo: Ian Douglas.

different sections, the altos, the sopranos, the bass, the tenors, they all go off and they learn their parts, and then they come back into a room together and they sing together, and I always felt, in those moments, this incredible rush. It's like being carried aloft. What was really wonderful about one of my choir directors is that you would learn your part with your vocal group, but for the performance, you would all be spread around each other. So you would hold onto your part, even though somebody's singing something different. But you understood where the weaving was, where the interconnections were. Maybe you'd go into sharp, or minor keys, and maybe it would be like, “Is that right? That can't be

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right.” But it is right, even in its dissonance. That is purposeful, and to do that together . . . it thrills me, it thrills me. And so I was thinking, what if we could do something where we make space for disagreement, for dissonance, but also for yells and cries and screams?

Then there are also times for incredible moments of agreement and song, complicated song, and it does come from a practice, which was called “sitting on a man,” among Igbo women. It’s a pre-colonial practice, because Igbo women, particularly before missionaries and colonialism, did exercise agency and power within Igbo society, and it was quite a cooperative society. It was a collective; it was a collaborative, and everyone, particularly in times of stress, would come together. Yes, the elders might speak first, and maybe the young folks might not speak, because the idea was that you only speak if you have something that is necessary to the conversation that has to be said. But that could be anyone, right? Women. Children. And there was a care and a generosity in a kind of listening. So “sitting on a man” would happen when women felt that a particular man in power did something so egregious and horrible. They would go to their private space and just stay there and sing to that person—naming that man’s egregious acts, demanding that he make amends, and they would not leave until the man said, “Okay, I’m going to do it.” And this could be a powerful man, but nobody from the village, no other powerful man, is going to come in and stop what the women are doing. It was recognized in Igbo culture that the women must speak,

and we can't get in between them and the person that they are seeking redress from. So that was called "sitting on a man," and when those women came together they shared a language. They shared a clear objective. They knew what they wanted to do, what they wanted to accomplish, and they could come in there and build a song and a performance that would hopefully achieve their desired end.

When it came to light that the Trump administration was ripping children out of the arms of their parents or families, after how many thousands of miles of a treacherous journey that they had endured, it was just unspeakable. There was a moment when people set up loudspeakers at the house of Kirstjen Nielsen, who was then the secretary of homeland security. And the speaker was just projecting the crying children, and I thought, wow, that's like "sitting on a man," in a way, and so I thought, people are doing that and have historically been doing that.

While I don't think I can do that, what I am interested in is when people don't share a language. When they don't share a common desire, what is it to make a space for people? What if the only aim is to make a space for people to start to continue to build or tap into their own capacity to listen and be generous, and be forgiving, and move into the unknown with strangers? What is the space of practice of starting to find a language or multiple languages? It's almost like the pre or proto "sitting on a man." It's not the moment when everybody knows what they want to say and know who they have to say it to. But it's the moment before, where they're starting to build some

sense of a community, some sense of how to engage in a collective effort in a way, that's simply about generating. It's a sonic practice. It's a wild chorus. It's a riotous chorus.

KJ: I want to point specifically to one of your research questions, which is, "How do we hum, utter, and gesture together?" That seems to be part of the answer to that question. It's the fragments; it's these moments of vulnerability. It's these moments of seeing a person, hearing a person, moving with a person, without a specific goal to complete.

OO: Right, and without a known objective or destination. In a way it's about time suspension, because the opportunities to do this are not vast.

KJ: Yes, and that brings me to your collaboration with Asiya Wadud. In this writing she was responding to you and she's also responding to Simone Leigh's "Loophole of Retreat," and the ongoing conversation that you are in with Simone and Saidiya Hartman.³⁵

OO: They are my teachers. Simone Leigh also has the chorus.³⁶ She built that chorus.

KJ: In Asiya's poem she writes on slowness that "for 1:00 pm to become itself, first we have to pass through 12:59. We do. Inside of it, 60 / seconds accrue. Small acts pass inside the seconds. The acts cluster. Second-long acts / become ten-second acts, and in accordance, the entire minute builds."³⁷ This is the feeling of being inside of *Sitting on a Man's Head*. She describes it as a feeling, an accumulation of

micro movements and moments. It's also a feeling of suspension.

OO: Yes. Yes. Did you see also the Tina Campt essay on slowness that she wrote? She quotes André Lepecki, who writes, "Not only a question of kinetics, but also of intensities, of generating an intensive field of microperceptions," and Tina continues, "For Lepecki, slowness is more than movement. It is a mode of amplification."³⁸ So I feel like that's that piece that you read of Asiya, right? It amplifies sensations—and attunes us to the intensities of what he calls micro-perception. Slowness is an opening to linger durationally in the small, in details, in reflection. Rather than delayed or diminished development, it actually intensifies our perception of any outcome. Rather than a reduction in exertion, slowness extends and multiplies the energy we must use to engage in a particular activity. For Lepecki slowness is also an alternative form of ethics. It is an ethics he describes as "a radical mode of composing the infinite velocities and slowness of being."³⁹

KJ: The last question that I have for you is actually a practical one about whether or not you want to share the video from inside the structure.

OO: So the video that I sent you is what Peter and I culled out of a two-hour practice.⁴⁰ We are going to send it to Judy and Danspace, and it will be a part of their archive, because Seta felt very strongly that the things that we were doing for the Platform resonated with this moment, and she wanted to share it. So

we're just working on a shape that we feel can speak to what was happening there, but also that you can consume a little bit.

It's a big challenge for us to figure out how to bring the ethos of how we work and what we're working on into the virtual space, for now. It's been deeply challenging for me. This idea of production and how is that production shaped? Who controls it? Who determines it? What body initiates the shape of it? That's an artist's job, I guess. They're supposed to do that. So I do that sometimes, but I get into a rehearsal room and I want people to mess it up. My collaboration with my husband is about messing that up. ■

The activators in *Sitting On a Man's Head* were Martita Abril, Peter Born, Jennifer Brogle, mayfield brooks, Leslie Cuyjet, André Daughtry, Eisa Davis, Brittany Engel-Adams, Lily Gold, Naja Gordon, Melanie Greene, Audrey Hales, Remi Harris, Jasmine Hearn, Justin Hicks, Shayla-Vie Jenkins, Chaesong Kim, Tendayi Kuumba, Breyanna Maples, Priscilla Marrero, Anais Maviel, Okwui Okpokwasili, Maya Orchin, Kay Ottinger, jess pretty, Greg Purnell, Hans Rasch, Katrina Reid, Jean Carla Rodea, Lily Bo Shapiro, Samita Sinha, Eleanor Smith, Tatyana Tenenbaum, David Thomson, Pyeng Threadgill, Asiya Wadud, Charmaine Warren, AJ Wilmore, Anna Witenberg, and Nehemoyia Young.

Utterances from the Chorus was curated by Okwui Okpokwasili and Judy Hussie-Taylor with contributions by Danspace Project curators Lydia Bell and Seta Morton.

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OKWUI OKPOKWASILI is a Brooklyn-based performance maker. Her work includes two Bessie Award-winning productions: *Pent-Up: a revenge dance* and *Bronx Gothic*. Okpokwasili recently co-curated the Danspace Project Platform *Utterances from the Chorus*. An installation work was included in the New Museum show "Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America." Her latest works—"on the way undone," an homage to *Brick House* on the NYC High Line, and a slow walk with sonic improvisation in the processional series commissioned by the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council—continue to explore modes of sociality and slowness. Her commissions, residencies, and awards include the tenth annual Berlin Biennale Commission, the 2018 Doris Duke Artist Award in Contemporary Dance, the 2018 USA Artist Fellowship, the 2018 Princeton Hodder Fellowship, the 2018 Herb Alpert Award in Dance, LMCC's Extended Life Program (2013–2016, 2019), the Foundation for Contemporary Arts' Artist Grant in Dance (2014), and residencies at MOMA, the Young Vic, the Tate Modern, the OnassisUSA Foundation, and CapUCLA. Okpokwasili is a 2018 MacArthur Fellow.

Notes

This article includes audio content that may be accessed at doi.org/10.1215/26923874-9272812.

- 1 Morton, "Platform 2020."
- 2 Glissant, "Tremblement."
- 3 Glissant and Glissant, "La pensée du tremblement," 526.
- 4 Juarez, "trembling archive."
- 5 Lepecki, "Body as Archive," 38.
- 6 "The Chorus Opens the Way" is the title of Hartman's final chapter in *Wayward Lives*.
- 7 Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, xv.
- 8 Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 301.
- 9 Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 301.
- 10 Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 303.
- 11 Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 303.
- 12 Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 306.
- 13 Bell, "Ways of Gathering," 32.
- 14 Bell, "Ways of Gathering," 32.
- 15 The complexity of these histories was explored in the previous Platform curated by Reggie Wilson and laid the groundwork for an ongoing revision to Danspace Project's land acknowledgment created by Ishmael Houston Jones and elaborated once more by devynn emory and Angie Pittman.
- 16 Joy, *Choreographic*, 1.
- 17 Campt, "Slow Walking," 55.
- 18 Campt, "Slow Walking," 56.
- 19 Lepecki, *Singularities*, 8.
- 20 Campt, "Slow Walking," 56.

- 21 Camp, "Slow Walking," 56.
- 22 Agamben, *Means without Ends*.
- 23 Juarez and Okpokwasili, "Housing Breath."
- 24 Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*.
- 25 Anna Julia Cooper, "Womanhood," 31.
- 26 Torlasco, *Heretical Archive*, 51.
- 27 The continuation of this conversation can be found in the Danspace Project catalog *Utterances from the Chorus, Vol II*.
- 28 Hussie-Taylor, "Grief and Gratitude."
- 29 Kim, *Humming*.
- 30 hooks, "Theory as Liberatory Practice."
- 31 Okpokwasili and Wadud, *day pulls down the sky*.
- 32 emory, "mmm."
- 33 Sic. The original language is "ruins," but *hums* remains a productive slip.
- 34 Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 3.
- 35 See Camp, "Loophole of Retreat."
- 36 "Simone Leigh: The Chorus."
- 37 Wadud, "STRAIGHT LINES," 49.
- 38 Okpokwasili, Camp, Hartman, and Leigh, "Slowness." Tina Camp quotes André Lepecki's text from *Exhausting Dance* in virtual conversation with Okpokwasili, Saidiya Hartman, and Simone Leigh following the abrupt halt of *Utterances from the Chorus*.
- 39 Okpokwasili, Camp, Hartman, and Leigh, "Slowness."
- 40 Okpokwasili and Born, "Sitting On a Man's Head."

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