

(Inter)(in)animating the Archive

How might artists and scholars respond, with care, to the type of call Fatimah Tobing Rony, in her recent book *How Do We Look? Resisting Visual Biopolitics*, imagines hearing from a person she describes as “the dead girl at the center of [*Aita tamari vahine Judith te parari*, by Gauguin],” known as Annah la Javanaise: “Do not leave me in the archive”?¹ How, Rony asks, can those who have been visualized “as subhuman or nonhuman” “challenge the biopolitical tendency in visual culture and politics”?² Introducing these feminist questions into the realm of (inter)(in)animation and war brings further questions into view: How can artists and scholars respond to the archive without ventriloquizing or making puppets of the people whose images and movements have been fixed, pinned, collected, and analyzed as part of colonial warfare? What even counts as war? British-Nigerian artist Onyeka Igwe takes up such questions in her 2023 installation at MoMA PS1 entitled *A Repertoire of Protest (No Dance, No Palaver)*.³

The audiovisual installation, curated by Kari Rittenbach, travels, in various combinations, but often in triple-screen formations, across five different screens: three screens suspended from the gallery ceiling, an outdated box television set that introduces the specter of remembered domesticity and family into the scene, and a larger cinematic screen on the gallery wall. The installation involves three short films projected sequentially under the umbrella title of *A Repertoire of Protest (No Dance, No Palaver): Her Name in My Mouth* (2017, 6:24), *Sitting on a Man* (2018, 06:56), and *Specialised Technique* (2018, 06:57), each of which combines contemporary dance, material culture, spoken and written text, music, and frame-by-frame treatments of images from colonial films, punctuated by scanned chalk-drawn and digitally drawn chalk stick figures of West African dance notations

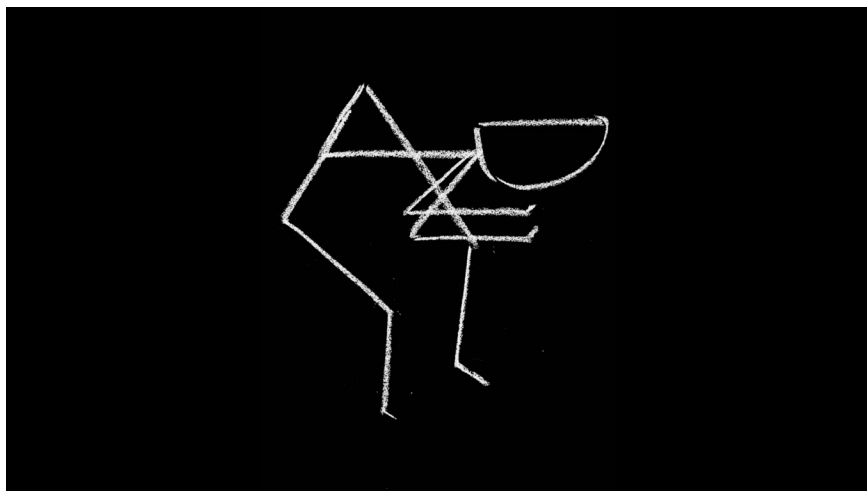


FIGURE 4. A stick figure from West African dance notation, in Onyeke Igwe's *Notes on Dancing with the Archive*, 2023.

(figure 4). The seriality of the figures might suggest the pages of a flip-book, the frames of an animated filmstrip, or the implied progressive movement of a cartoon strip, as if the stick figures were dancing across the screens; but the identical nature of these images suspends or resists that imagined motion, recalling effects Daisy Yan Du describes as “suspended animation,” “deep hibernation,” and dormancy.⁴ This tension between stillness and movement, this quality of (inter)(in)animation, pervades Igwe’s engagement of colonial archives, but to what effect? As a feminist media theorist who is neither an Africanist nor a dance scholar, the questions I am able to ask and answer are limited, and my discussion of the historical events referenced by this work depends upon the scholarship of others, including of Igwe herself.

I argue that by employing (inter)(in)animating tactics, Igwe centers uncertainty, care, relationality, and multimodal forms of memory and expression, including dance, gesture, fabric design, sound design, and drawing, as part of an anticolonial feminist strategy that seeks to resist repetitions of violence while responding to the traces of it left in colonial film and paper archives. The artist’s Black feminist-informed response to colonial archives involves aesthetically reimagining the moving-image apparatus to prise open alternate cinematic interactions with Black female embodiment. This work recalls and highlights the limitations of earlier feminist expanded-cinema experiments that foreground the (white) female body’s relation to the apparatus, such as Valie Export’s *Tap and Touch Cinema* (1968/1989), while simultaneously building on the antiracist and anticolonial archive-based work of speculative filmmakers such as Cheryl

Dunye and Fatimah Tobing Rony.⁵ Central to Igwe's intervention into existing configurations of the relationship between feminism, animation, and war is her intellectual and aesthetic engagement, through dance, with the powerful Igbo women's collective practice of expressing gendered and communal dissent known as "Sitting on a Man," a tradition also known as "making war."

Writing about the meaning of *repertoire* within the context of postsocialist Guinea, Adrienne J. Cohen suggests that the word connotes "embodied practice that plays a role in generating and activating history and memory," revealing "attachments to the past and possibilities for the future," enacting "social continuity across radically different political-economic eras," and signaling the "dynamism" of the relationship between place and dance.⁶ But what places, histories, memories, attachments, and social continuities does Igwe's repertoire (inter)(in)animate, and what do these interventions contribute to feminist thinking about the relationship between war, animation, and the archive?

Across the three films that make up the installation, Igwe responds to and speculates about her own filmmaking process, the production circumstances of particular colonial films, and the Aba Women's War of 1929, a major, woman-led anticolonial uprising in Nigeria that is not always recognized as a war. The installation aims less to inform audiences about the "facts" of this war than to aesthetically experiment with, and thereby transmit something about, the purposes and possibilities of modes of "war making" expressed through the moving body, song, ornament, gesture, and female collectivity. Before turning to the installation, I want briefly to describe the series of events named by this war, the history of how Igwe became interested in it, and the feminist scholarly debates that brought transnational academic attention to it and to the historiographic and political issues it raised.

Igwe's brilliant dissertation, entitled "Unbought and Unbossed: How Can Critical Proximity Transfigure British Colonial Moving Images?," lays out the theoretical conversations informing her creative work and the contributions her creative work makes to those discussions.⁷ "Unbought and Unbossed" includes an analysis of the role of *A Repertoire of Protest (No Dance, No Palaver)* in Igwe's research as well as her reflections on postscreening discussions with audiences. I cite this document occasionally, particularly those parts relating to either animation or the feminist politics of the archive. But in order to distinguish my engagement of the installation from Igwe's own scholarly work on it, I draw here primarily on an interview I conducted with Igwe on May 11, 2023, as well as on my analysis of this work through the triple lens of feminism, animation, and war.⁸

The artist first learned of the Aba Women's War when her great-uncle gave her a copy of his autobiography. In it, he tries to date his birth by saying that "it was around the Aba Women's War," itself an act of historiographic resistance in its rooting of a life's timeline in an anticolonial women's protest. Igwe, however, had never heard of this event, even though it took place in the area where her uncle is from, where her mum grew up, and where some family members still live. Her

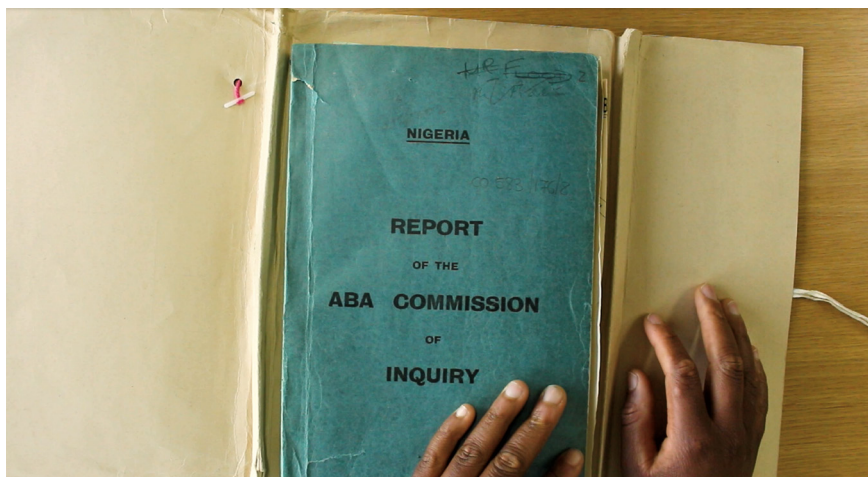


FIGURE 5. *Report of the Aba Commission of Inquiry*, from Onyeka Igwe's *Her Name in My Mouth*, 2017.

interest led her first to the National Archives in Kew (UK), where she discovered and read the *Report of the Aba Commission of Inquiry* (1930), which plays a central role in the first film, *Her Name in My Mouth*, and then to other colonial film archives (figure 5).⁹ Most striking to her in the colonial report was the way this “really dead, written report” erased “all the life and embodiment” from the performative protests that used dress, dance, singing, and bodily gesture as collective tools for political expression and resistance.¹⁰ Igwe found no footage of the Aba Women’s War, opening up complex questions about her decision to disregard the taxonomical organization of these collections in favor of something that is more gestural or disorganizing in approach. The installation also makes no claim to represent documentation of Aba women or the Women’s War, although it constitutes a response to them both. It does, however, make extensive use of Colonial Film Unit footage as well as footage from the Mill Hill Missionaries archives. This material was shot between 1930 and 1956, not just in Nigeria but also in Sudan and Tanzania, showing people involved in activities such as dancing, cooking, working, and talking. While Igwe’s dissertation at times identifies and gives background information about the people in these films, the installation withholds this information, underscoring how racialization happens through image making and archiving. As Rony writes of Félix-Louis Regnault’s ethnographic films, such films “deny the voice and individuality of the indigenous subject. . . . Their names and history are not given. . . . Emptied of history, their bodies are *racialized*.”¹¹ Thus Igwe’s films activate questions in viewers about what they know, don’t know, think they know, or desire to know about the people on screen, as well as about what types of events get recorded or not, and what demands these images make on twenty-first-century viewers.

Half a century ago, in 1975, the Africanist and political scientist Judith Van Allen, a white feminist scholar, published “Aba Riots or the Igbo Women’s War? Ideology, Stratification and the Invisibility of Women,” in *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies*. This publication is significant, both as a backdrop to Igwe’s installation and for some of the methodological questions central to *Undead*. Van Allen highlights the terminological disparities she found in the written record when researching her article, including references to both the “Aba Riots” and the “Igbo Women’s War.” She argues that this disparity is not simply a question of how dominant and subordinate groups name conflicts; rather, it reflects specific problems that must be thought in the contexts of gender and colonialism. Drawing on a conference paper by the Nigerian feminist sociologist Kamene Okonjo, Van Allen explores what she calls “the sexist bias of Western scholars” who demonstrate an “inability to ‘see’ what is before one’s own eyes” because of their incapacity to conceptualize group solidarity, structured female political empowerment within a community, or ways of settling grievances or expressing political opposition without armed violence.¹² Van Allen argues that those who use the phrase “Aba Riots” erase the central role of women and fail to understand that in this context, “making war” refers to the Igbo women’s collective practice of voicing dissent through the practice also known as “Sitting on a Man.”

In response to a series of structural acts of colonial violence, including the 1925 imposition of direct taxation, the exclusion of women from the recently formed “Native Courts,” and, simply, the presence of white men, who the protesting women demanded “should go to their *own* country,” thousands of women from the Ngwa clan towns in Aba and Owerri gathered to “make war” by “Sitting on a Man.”¹³ Van Allen writes, “Their faces smeared with charcoal or ashes and their heads bound with young ferns, the women had all worn short loincloths and carried in their hands sticks wreathed with young palms—the dress and adornment signifying ‘war’ and the sticks being those used to invoke the power of the female ancestors.”¹⁴ Unable or unwilling to process what Okonjo calls the “traditional ‘bisexual’ system” of power, British soldiers described the women who used collectively organized gestures and dance to protest colonial administrative decisions and express their demands, in terms of “frenzied mobs” and “savage passions.”¹⁵ While the written record describes the British as baffled by the events, their execution of fifty women and injury of another fifty testifies to the fact that the British understood that the women’s movements threatened their presence, denied their authority, and rejected their right to be there.¹⁶

More than forty years after the 1975 publication of “Sitting on a Man,” Van Allen reflects on the relation between the historical and political context of her writing of this essay and the Aba Women’s War. These reflections underscore the impossibility of thinking war in isolation. “I wrote ‘Sitting on a Man’ because I was angry,” Van Allen begins, describing the political context of the war in Vietnam, the “secret” war on Cambodia, Nixon and Kissinger’s support of apartheid and of

Portuguese colonial wars, the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy, the factionalization of Students for a Democratic Society, the murder of Fred Hampton, the defeat of Biafra, and women's rebellion against male domination in the civil rights movement and the New Left. Eventually, in a section entitled "Women's War and Women's Liberation," she acknowledges, "Once I started pursuing the origins of the Women's War and learning about the strong women's institutions and practices that made it possible, my first reaction was envy. . . . Oh, how I wished that the women in my small group could sit on certain men!"¹⁷ This intellectual history not only provides some historical and historiographic transnational and intersectional feminist context for the event at the heart of Igwe's installation; it also recognizes the complex catalysts, including envy and desire, for interdisciplinary feminist work.

HER NAME IN MY MOUTH

Igwe describes *Her Name in My Mouth* as invoking "a lineage of female ancestors" through embodiment, gesture, and the archive.¹⁸ She began with an interest in how to "transform" the deadened archival material back into some kind of "embodied" and "communal" knowledge, cognizant of the ways colonial infrastructures had blocked, and continue to block, the transmission of collective memories of anti-colonial protests, in part by the British government's recordkeeping practices and its outlawing of the community gatherings—"palavers"—at the heart of the Aba Women's War.

When I ask how Igwe understands the word *palaver*, she observes, "It seems like a very Victorian, very British word," and explains that she took the installation's title from a colonial bureaucrat's letter reporting on the state of things in Aba: "No Dance, No Palaver." The term *palaver* is saturated in colonialism's hierarchical organization of speaking and listening, with the *Collins English Dictionary* definition in June 2023 reproducing colonial rankings of being: "a long parley, esp. one between primitive natives and European traders, explorers, colonial officials, etc.," "profuse and idle talk, chatter," "tedious or time-consuming business," "loud and confused talk," and then, for the "British English" definitions, under the sub-heading "West Africa," "an argument" or "trouble arising from an argument."¹⁹ Francis Anekwe Oborji, a Nigerian theologian and diocesan priest, offers a deeper history of a term with layered meanings and usages. For Oborji, *palaver* suggests the communitarian "art and discipline of public discourse within a participative assembly in public space: in an open courtyard or under a tree" as a response to social conflict and violence, a definition that invites us to consider Abderrahmane Sissako's *Bamako* (2006) as a palaver film. For Oborji, it is also "a technical term" that may have derived from "the Portuguese *wotpa/apra*, a talk between tribal people and traders, or from the French word *palbre*, which connotes a lively debate or the process of a tribunal in a village."²⁰

Each work in the installation offers a contemporary response to a war in which adorned women's dancing bodies expressed what Okonjo summarizes as protesters' "dissatisfaction with the native administration, the colonial system, and the exclusion of women from politics."²¹ Igwe's installation demonstrates an interest in, and (possibly failed) attempts at, being close to the historical women who performed a collective refusal of the system of life the British left behind. This was a system of individual achievement in which, Van Allen explains, "there was no place for group solidarity, no possibility of shared political authority or power of enforcement, and thus very little place for women."²² If "no dance" = "no palaver," Igwe's activation of contemporary dance in a space shared by projected colonial images of dancing people from across the African continent under this title invites viewers to receive this work as an act of defiance, as a nonviolent expression of feminist refusal, dissatisfaction, and power that might paradoxically be understood as a feminist act of both war and un-war making.

Although Igwe is not a dancer, she is inspired by Rizvana Bradley's notion of "gesture as a migratory language of black sociality" and describes wanting both the audience and the contemporary dancers with whom she collaborated "to make a connection to this event [the Aba Women's War], to these women, to the people in the archive, through the language of dance as opposed to the kind of colonial language of this written report."²³ *Her Name in My Mouth* opens with contemporary color footage of hands touching, scrunching, opening, turning (like the pages of a book), and refolding two different pieces of Golden Realm Tex African fabric. In our conversation, Igwe notes that her mother's village in Nigeria, located not far from the site of the Aba Women's War, has a uniform that "has certain kinds of animals and symbols on it that depict the way the village wants to understand itself and communicate to other people."²⁴ She thinks of fabric and textile, like dance, as "a way of archiving, telling stories"; fabric, Igwe suggests, can "expand what an archive can be," and in this work she explores how "body and archive can communicate."²⁵ This statement alone has implications for feminist thinking about what it might mean to "animate" the archive. It rejects "the archive" as something singular, solely created by and belonging to those in power; it asserts alternative registrations and ways of interacting with West African feminist memories and histories; and it employs dance and animation to create modes of interaction with alternative archives that are not necessarily legible or transparent to the work's viewers. Within Igwe's work, the possibilities and modes of memory, adornment, and embodiment multiply and interweave. If textiles and dance can each serve archival functions, and if the body can "wear" both, how do these entities—body, dance, textile, and colonial archive—affect and shape each other? I argue that they open new ways for organizing, experiencing, mediating, and mobilizing history that involve attending to the entangled histories of different types of war making, colonial and anticolonial. They also use embodied movement in partnership with audiovisual technology to develop and share modes of exercising anticolonial

agency outside of colonial frameworks. This affects what those looking, but not dancing, are permitted to see and suggests that *A Repertoire for Protest* might be regarded as sitting on not just the archive but also the viewer.

Inspired by bell hooks's *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, Igwe further blurs the line between archive and fabric by printing on a white T-shirt a still of the face of a woman who makes a marginal appearance in one of the archival films. "I had the intention of bringing the women who were in the background or in the corner somehow a little bit more into the center," Igwe recalls.²⁶ The artist intercuts shots of herself wrapped from the waist down in the two pieces of cloth—(the archive)—shown in the film's opening while wearing the T-shirt that bears this colonial archival image. Igwe's reproduction of the woman's face in this way was inspired by her experience of a broader Nigerian culture's commemoration traditions. She notes: "If you're celebrating someone, if it's their birthday, if it's a wedding or graduation, you'll make all this kind of ephemera around them. You'll make a T-shirt, a pen, a calendar, and it'll have their face on it. So I wanted to do something like that for one of the women in the film."²⁷ And in her article, Igwe explains that she designed this first film "as a memorial to the women of the Aba Women's War."²⁸

This centering of a woman simultaneously fixed and marginalized in the colonial archive by a double cinematic violence might be read as a form of mediated choreography that shapes how contemporary people encounter the archive. There is a tension within the work that never abates between an imagined community of women protesting together, through movement, across time and space, against past and perpetuated colonial violences, on the one hand, and, on the other, the concern that this act of imagination might, by recirculating the archive or imagining solidarity in this way, be implicated in the archive's violence, treating people as movable objects. The films run the risk that they might end up "sitting on" themselves as well as on those who view them.

Igwe resists conflating "dancing with" the archive and "animating" the historical people whose images she finds by drawing attention to the materiality of these images *as images*, and through the silence that greets the questions she poses to the people in them. The work uses the archive's contents while reminding viewers of the violent context in which it is produced and stored by refusing the codes of behavior the archive imposes on its visitors, such as silence and prohibitions on reproduction, touch, and defacement. Across these films, Igwe presents archival images as objects that can be cut up, drawn over, relocated, pondered, and refused, recalling Gil Z. Hochberg's claim, in *Becoming Palestine: Toward an Archival Imagination of the Future*, that digitization—and to this I would add the discombobulating practice of (inter)(in)animation—alters how such images "are shared, circulated, and manipulated."²⁹

Here it is not an archival box but Igwe's chest, the container of her heart, that functions as the living place of reception, exhibition, and mobilization of this

colonial image. The T-shirt, combined with filmed performance, transforms the question of how to engage colonial archives from an abstract problem into an embodied, proximate, material, interpersonal, and unfolding reality. Igwe's body offers an animated and embodied displacement of the white screen, gesturing more to a holding than to a projection of the image, even as images of Igwe's own performance are then projected, offering a contrast to the direct projection of the colonial footage, which the work also includes. Igwe's physical (inter)(in)animation of a single, stilled archival frame by dancing with it, drawing on contemporary Nigerian commemorative practices, never allows the viewer to feel that the woman depicted on the T-shirt has magically been brought back to life.

Igwe fundamentally disrupts or even short-circuits conventional configurations of the moving-image apparatus. Using an (inter)(in)animating configuration within the space of the moving image, Igwe replaces the screen with a performer-receiver, but this person is also simultaneously a type of spectator of the image in question. This spectator-screen performer now cannot look at the archival image without looking at herself and also being on display herself for others, making the process of looking at and sharing the archive an inescapably relational and self-implicating act. In addition to foregrounding the appropriated liveliness and embodiment of the depicted woman, Igwe simultaneously, through a mise-en-abyme structure, provokes viewers to consider their relation to Igwe's own recorded image and embodied gestures. These gestures frame the image in relation to Igwe's own living body before the camera, folding and distorting the image, preventing rather than enabling full access to it. This experience of blocked or incomplete access is underscored when Igwe looks away from the camera or when she faces the camera but with closed eyes, resonating with an image of a different woman with closed eyes from the colonial archive that appears in the third film, *Specialised Technique*, accompanied by Igwe's typed and unanswered questions to the woman, which include, "Is that why you never open your eyes?"

"I was trying to dance with the people in the archive," Igwe states. "I was trying to see what that would amount to. And I think wearing a shirt, and me performing certain gestures, was a way of dancing with them."³⁰ This "dancing with," this physical, embodied animation of a single still image, involves the relocation and reproduction of the filmed woman's image as a mnemonic act of celebration. Bradley, building on Joseph Roach, calls such gestures "surrogation." "Dancing with" also involves the stilling of the archival film's captured and mechanically replayable movements.³¹ In this surrogated performance, the photographed face reproduced on Igwe's T-shirt cannot change its expression or speak, reminding viewers of the gap between the archive's petrified bodies or "replicas" and the historical, living people caught on, intruded upon by, film. This work suggests that while acts of reparation cannot undo past atrocities, they do have the potential to allow prohibited protests from the past to find pathways into the present, thereby animating, by which I mean acting on and in, the present and future. The archival photograph

of the woman is here recontextualized through inter(in)animation in at least three ways. First, Igwe's stilling and moving of colonial images refuses the archive's desire to offer permanent access to recordings of the life forms it simultaneously destroys. Second, the woman's face is relocated from the filmstrip, the archive, and the archive's projector screen onto the embodied heart-space of a British-Nigerian artist, who wraps her body within a fabric archive whose meaning is not necessarily available to the viewer. These textile archives are, like the T-shirt, physically animated by Igwe's living, moving, gesturing body. And third, the soundtrack lives, somewhat dissonantly, and also breaks into silence, alongside the images.

Igwe films her hands untying a white bow that keeps closed the archival book box that encases the *Report of the Aba Commission of Inquiry* (1930), underscoring striking disparities between the British treatment of their colonial documents and the British (self-documented) murder of the warring women of Aba. Igwe's finger runs down the table of contents until it locates "Owerri Province" on page 35; her hand opens maps of Aba and Opobo, turning pages as the camera lingers briefly on dates ("Certain Incidents" from December 1929), names (Enyidie, Nwannedie, Onueluka, and also "Igwi," which comes close to the artist's own name), and descriptions of events ("They made palaver that day"). But the camera never lingers long enough for the narrative content or point of view of these violent pages to be properly read, fully remediated, or understood. In this way, as well as through a blurring of focus and sound that works contrapuntally against the image's legibility, Igwe communicates her own ambivalent relationship to recirculating or reanimating this material in her work.

The film's soundtrack is composed by C-Scraaatch and features drumming, electronic sound, and cowrie shells, as well as the voice of Igwe's mother, Calista Feltham. Noticing the absence of women in the *Report of the Aba Commission of Inquiry*, Igwe "borrows" her mother's voice to read aloud the names of the women identified in the colonial report, vocally marking both the being and the absence of the women named.³² After reading the report's description of the women singing "scurrilous songs," Igwe, in her dissertation, describes turning for the soundtrack to her mother and her mother's "network of Igbo women in the UK and Nigeria" and their shared recollection of songs. She states:

I thought a lot about who this film was for, who the intended audience was. The answer to this resided in the ideas of relationality and accountability that come with seeking proximity. This film was expressly for the women of the Aba Women's War, the women in the archive films that I had selected and those who descended from them. So, none of the Igbo words are translated and some people are in the know and others aren't. This goes a way to reinforcing gesture, another way of knowing, as the central mode of communication in the film.³³

The soundtrack also features what Igwe describes as a "residue" from the images. At one point, for example, after male dancers wearing cowrie shells are shown in

some of the images, cowrie shells are used in the soundtrack, but the absence of synchronization prevents the audience from being lulled into an illusion of direct access to a reanimated or completed past. Igwe describes a wide range of feelings when watching the archival footage of African dancing. She acknowledges the films' paternalism, how stereotypes of black women dancing are used in colonial films, and describes her frustration with not being able to establish the "level of engagement or agency from the people that were being filmed."³⁴ And yet, she adds, "I got a lot of pleasure from watching these people dance, and I felt . . . a strong connection to their dancing. And that was something that I didn't want to lose, or that I wanted also to foreground. And the dancing was a mode of communication. It was a mode of protest."³⁵ Wanting both to move away from and draw attention to colonial worldviews, Igwe encouraged C-Scraaatch to build "breaks" in the composition, and she notes with satisfaction that sometimes during the screenings, "people look around because they think it [the sound] is broken."³⁶

In the final two minutes of the first film, Igwe cuts to black-and-white archival footage of the African women's faces, the smooth consumption of which she interrupts by freezing and slowing the frames and jerkily editing clips together. Around 5:24, we see footage of the woman whose face had earlier been singled out on Igwe's T-shirt, but at this later point she reappears within the context of community. The women are singing, but installation audiences do not have access to the sound the women make or to the meaning of that sound. As the colonial camera seems to collect the women with its sweeping pan from right to left, the sequence cuts to a closeup of the same woman's face, shot from a different angle, and soon cuts again to a similar close-up image that has been stilled. A shadow falls across the surface of this iteration, giving the image a different material quality. As an uncanny quality of movement appears in the face, it soon becomes clear that Igwe's camera here is filming the face as it is re-mediated on Igwe's T-shirt. The movement of the face, accompanied by the sound of C-Scraaatch's soundtrack and Igwe's mother's voice, is caused by Igwe's performance of a series of slow-moving and deliberate arm gestures that the camera gradually reveals as it zooms out, gestures that indirectly move the T-shirt and the still image printed on it. Igwe crosses her hands over each other in front of the picture of the woman's face, blocking the camera's and the gallery viewer's direct access to the image. As Igwe's hands, facing toward the camera and across the body, switch places with each other, they seem to push the camera and the viewer away—away from the reproduced picture of the woman's face and perhaps also from Igwe's own performing body. Punctuating this gesture is another one in which Igwe's hands and arms move swiftly apart from each other, gestures that in an Anglo-European context might signal "Enough!" or "Cut!" But just as the Igbo words spoken are not translated for non-Igbo audiences, so these gestures are not explained. After this sequence is repeated a couple of times, Igwe reframes the scene, cropping the image to show first just her own left arm and hand, held out to the left side of her body, then her right, before

closing on a profile shot of part of her face and torso. Having brought the archived woman's face from the margins of the archive to the center of both Igwe's body and this animating gestural performance, the film resituates the woman in a different kind of archive that begins with the textile wrapping. This new archive withdraws the viewer's access to the woman's image. While this cannot alter the colonial violence that has been inflicted on the woman in the past by camera, archive, viewers, and scholars, this work suggests the tentative possibility of another archive, perhaps one that has to be embodied and lived, that seeks to prevent further acts of violence being carried out on and through such images via acts of remembrance.

SITTING ON A MAN

Suggesting that the entanglements of histories require an ensemblic, proximate, and collaborative methodology rather than the heroic intervention of an individual artist or scholar, in the second of the films in *No Dance, No Palaver, Sitting on a Man*, Igwe works with contemporary dancers Emmanuella Idris (on behalf of Uchenna Dance) and Amarnah Amuludun, as well as "with" a girls' dance group featured in the colonial archive, credited pointedly by Igwe as "Unnamed girls' dance group."³⁷ Igwe states that "the expressed goal of this film was to visually show what it might look like to be 'sat on.' The camera, and so the audience, became the man in question and the dancers could conceive of this protest in any way they desired."³⁸ This film also includes the voices of Beatrice Loft Schulz and Nikki D., who read excerpts from the anthropological reports of Sylvia Leith-Ross, *African Women: A Study of the Ibo of Nigeria* (AMS Press, 1978), and Margaret Mackeson Green, *Ibo Village Affairs* (Sidgwick and Jackson, 1947), in "Queen's English."³⁹

Anticolonial feminist scholarship has highlighted the fraught nature of scholarly efforts to "animate" the traces left by harmed subjects and communities in colonial archives. Yet in spite of or, perhaps better, in response to this, *No Dance, No Palaver* experiments with how Igwe might ethically keep, not proximity to, but remoteness from, the archive's content at bay. Igwe describes the installation as "an attempt to use critical proximity, being close to, with or amongst, the visual trauma of the colonial archive to transform the way in which we know the people it contains."⁴⁰ Recognizing that she cannot fix harms, Igwe seeks to consciously to avoid the forms of violence she perceives in past images in the way she films the living dancers she works with in the present, developing a dialogic process in which filmmaker and dancers work together to decide what types of images they will cocreate. This cocreation across the realms of dance and film occurs in dialogue with a history where West African women dancing and a life-continuing, anger-affirming form of "making war" are intertwined. Igwe explains, "I wanted the dancers [I worked with] to have agency; I wanted it to feel more like a collaboration so that they would be in some way involved in how they were being filmed. So I shared with them the archival material and the story of

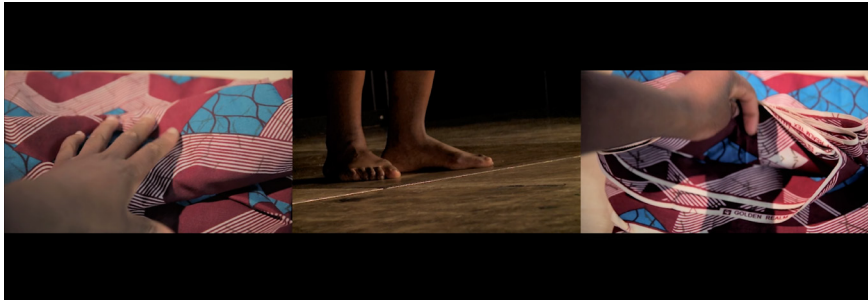


FIGURE 6. Onyeka Igwe, *Sitting on a Man*, 2018.

the *Aba Women's War* and my intentions. And then I was asking them questions about how they wanted to be filmed, what angles, what they wanted to wear while I was filming them.”⁴¹

Sitting on a Man involves three horizontally adjoining screens. A hand touching one of the same pieces of fabric-archive that appears in the first film emerges on the first and third screen while the second screen shows Idris's two bare feet (figure 6). Idris expressed a desire to dance barefoot after having seen the archival films with which Igwe was working in order to experience something of the sound of feet moving that is missing from the colonial films of West Africans dancing.⁴² Though audience members see bare feet dancing in this opening shot, however, we hear no sound. This doubly silent dancing seems to recognize the impulse to animate those lives caught in the archive through supplemental sounds and reenacted movements, to experiment with the possibilities of “dancing with” or “dancing alongside” the archive, while withholding whatever sounds were generated by Idris's barefoot movements from the museum visitor in acknowledgment of the impossibility of enlivening the dead. As the screens on the left and in the center cut to black, the third screen shows black-and-white footage of Amuludun folding another piece of African cloth into a headscarf, which she puts on. Fragments of white female anthropologists' reports are read aloud on the soundtrack by a posh English voice that connotes whiteness and elite education. A low-lit color image of Idris dancing appears in the middle screen while black-and-white footage on the third screen shows Amuludun's two hands, wearing a variety of rings, in closeup. Igwe notes that the use of both color and black and white reflects the preferences expressed by each dancer, and these differences register something of Igwe's aspiration to explore ways of filming black women dancing that give maximal agency to the contemporary dancers with whom she works. This shift from imposed technique to collaborative creative process has (inter)(in)animating aspirations. As Igwe explains in a description of the third film, *Specialised Technique*: “William Sellers and the Colonial Film Unit developed a framework for colonial cinema, this included slow edits, no camera tricks and minimal camera movement. Hundreds of films were created in accordance with this rule set. In an effort to

recuperate black dance from this colonial project, *Specialised Technique* attempts to transform this material from studied spectacle to livingness.”⁴³

After all three screens go black, the left and right screens briefly show two shots from different angles of the same necks and necklaces, as if to disrupt viewers’ access to bodily wholes, before the title of this second film, “SITTING ON A MAN,” appears in white capital letters in the middle screen. Colonial sepia footage of a young African girl dancing appears as drumming and electronic sounds appear on the soundtrack. A few seconds later, color shots of Idris appear on the left screen, her back turned to the camera in striking contrast to the colonial camera’s frontal framing of the girl. Idris slowly and decisively turns to look at the camera in a performance of agency, and there seems to be a reciprocity between the arm gestures of Idris and those of the girl depicted in the middle screen, even as the gap between the screens suggests an unbridgeable divide. As Amuludun appears in black and white on the right-hand screen, more brightly lit and now closer to the camera than Idris is, the middle screen goes black. More sepia archival footage, this time of a group of African people dancing, appears on the middle screen, with Idris and Amuludun’s dancing on the other two screens while two overlapping and mutually distorting women’s voices on the soundtrack read anthropological descriptions of “the distinctively women’s gesture,” the “elusive” nature of African dance, and the spectacle of African girls dancing as a chance to see “Africa itself.”⁴⁴ The mismatching of the two voices, which read the same text but are not synchronized with each other, along with the additional sounds added to their speech, troubles the transmission of colonial interpretive frameworks. Subsequent images show one of the dancers’ bare feet dancing on the screen to the right of the colonial footage of group dancing. Again, while the audience hears sounds of breath, feet, and drumming, these sounds are not synchronized to the images, in recognition that the pieces cannot be stitched together, even as the desire to do so is recognized. Amuludun appears in black and white on the right-hand screen, back turned to the camera. Idris then appears in color, back also facing the camera, on the center screen. Both move and make arm gestures, but apparently not for the museum viewer.

Toward the end of the film, a head-and-shoulder shot of Amuludun in black and white appears on the right-hand screen, and she turns her head slowly from right to left without engaging the camera, as if watching the dance that Idris performs in color and low light at some distance from the camera on the center screen. Three different black-and-white head-and-shoulder shots of Amuludun then appear across the screens as the dancer performs a series of gestures involving hands, face, eyes, and mouth. These gestures alternately seem to shush the view, beckon the viewer deeper into screen space, shut out the viewer with closed lids, or simply stare back at the viewer (figure 7). As the images shift from one screen to another, the triple screen visualizes dancers across time, space, and screen-breaks, dancing and looking. Their proximity to each other as well as to the gaps that separate



FIGURE 7. Onyeka Igwe, *Sitting on a Man*, 2018.

them provokes audiences to consider what kinds of reciprocity and responsiveness are im/possible and un/ethical. Meanwhile, the soundtrack includes syncopated rhythmic breaths, recalling Ross Gay's articulation of a less violent mode of looking that does not "fix anyone": "this looking makes me breathe, / this looking holds / my breathing."⁴⁵

SPECIALISED TECHNIQUE

Is it possible to activate such a mode of looking, one that does not "fix" anyone, when the recirculation of violent colonial archival images is involved? Igwe engages this question directly in the concluding pages of her dissertation, where she reflects on some of the responses she has received to her work, noting that the most challenging responses came from diasporic audiences "who came from similar experiences and backgrounds to my own."⁴⁶ Drawing on Raymond Bellour's theorization of "the pensive spectator," as well as on animation's frame-by-frame process, Igwe writes,

In attempting to shake the stereotype out of the colonial footage, I tried in as many ways as possible to change the way in which the audience saw the various people on camera. Converting the film to individual frames and then reanimating them or digitally drawing on them, slowing them down or tripling them and reprojecting were all techniques utilised in order to create a pensive spectator, '... uprooting us in the film's unfolding [to] situate us in relation to it. . . .'⁴⁷

She also notes her growing unease with archivally based artistic projects in which "whiteness remained absent and under interrogated," an observation that foregrounds the need to make whiteness present and a topic for examination in histories of war.⁴⁸ Igwe signals the importance of rendering the whiteness of the archive visible in the opening seconds of *Her Name in My Mouth*. Black-and-white footage shows a pile of leather briefcases being carried on someone's head down a corridor by an undisclosed person who walks past a wall of portraits of white, militarized men sporting beards and moustaches on the way to the colonial archive. This scene then cuts to archival footage of white scholars, presumably

anthropologists, sitting around a table in the colonial archive surrounded by documents and ethnographic images.

As if talking back to this classroom, *Specialised Technique*'s title appears on a black chalkboard with some white chalk markings on it, announcing this work's emphasis on the transmission of different types of knowledge. The soundtrack begins abruptly as drums alternate with a voice that repeats the word *pulse* while the image shifts between still fragments taken from archival footage of an African woman dancing with digitally drawn white stick figure notations on a black background that try to document each of the dancer's moves.⁴⁹ The stick figures are derived and adapted from a notation system developed by Felix A. Akinsipe, a choreographer and professor of performing arts at the University of Ilorin. Igwe came across Akinsipe's system of notation when looking for African alternative methods to those she found in the colonial film archive for sharing and documenting the techniques of African dance, and she describes wanting "to explore in as many ways as possible how to write dance, or dance as some kind of language."⁵⁰ Such figural systems risk codifying dances in ways that echo the anthropologist's desire to know, document, and reproduce the movements of an other; yet they also make possible the transmission of movements, including protest movements, across generations using systems that seek alternatives to or revisions of colonial and externally imposed grammars. In taking graphic rather than embodied form, they do so without reproducing the dance itself. And as dance proliferates new possible meanings in an embodied, nontextual way, the introduction of the notation system visualizes dance's complex relationship between past and present while leaving the dance itself unfixed.

Igwe's filmed drawings appear not in isolation from but alternating with live-action images, preventing either form of image from being uninterruptedly available to the viewer. These juxtapositions invite relational questions about bodies and power, about animation's preoccupation with labor, worldmaking, and the capture and control of movement.⁵¹ By making the artist's hand—along with the artist's voice, and the difference between the work's modern dancers and the dancers filmed by colonial filmmakers—explicitly present in *Specialized Technique*, Igwe visually acknowledges and aesthetically negotiates the dangers for the artist in the archive of puppeting, ventriloquizing, reanimating, or, to use dance scholar Rachmi Diyah Larasati's term, "replicating" figures from the past. Larasati writes, "Thus, I trace the history of the female dancing body that vanishes and is then 'replaced,' its experience and the fact of disappearance erased from view by new, highly indoctrinated, strictly trained female bodies."⁵²

The installation's three films are connected to each other by the 1929 *Aba Women's War*, by a variety of formal techniques, and, in the 2023 MoMA PS1 installation, by the punctuating appearance of dance notation stick figures like those used in *Specialised Technique*.⁵³ While the figures that appear within the third film are digitally drawn, Igwe drew the figures that (inter)(in)animate the installation's three films on chalk and paper. She then scanned them into a digital format for

incorporation into the films, as if “translating the many different dances within all the films” into this chalky format.⁵⁴ The filmed dusty marks on paper might well evoke William Kentridge’s “drawings for projection,” which also “edge” animation as they combine filmed drawing and erasure, primarily using the ephemeral media of charcoal, pastel, and chalk, to engage layers of colonial history.⁵⁵ Kentridge, a white South African artist of Lithuanian and German-Jewish descent, has frequently used this provisional form of image making to engage the instabilities and uncertainties of history and memory, especially with reference to the legacies of the apartheid regime. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev convincingly argues that Kentridge employs a time-based, nondefinitive form of drawing to visualize “openness to change,” a “refusal of all authoritarian and authoritative forms of communication embedded in most usages,” and a “new, flexible model of parallel thinking” that makes space for the inevitability of epistemic uncertainty.⁵⁶

Igwe’s use of animated chalk drawings in the interstitial spaces between the films across the installation’s screens similarly underscores the entanglement of colonialism with educational institutions, while also resisting, through chalk’s ephemerality, the stance of the heroic, knowing artist. On numerous occasions, the artist makes explicit her own uncertainty about her emplacement in the images as well as in the histories of violence and collective feminist resistance that they invoke.⁵⁷ These expressed uncertainties exist in a continuum with Rose’s psychoanalytic feminist exploration of “absolute or total knowledge” as “one cause—if not *the* cause—of war.”⁵⁸ Igwe foregrounds her concerns regarding her own proximity to these violent archival images, and this opens a different, and relational, set of possibilities for thinking about colonial archival films via remediating gestures. “Is that ok?,” asks one of the titles in *Specialized Technique*. Another set of titles asks first, “Did you want your whole body in shot?” and then “I don’t know if I am being a prude by asking that.” Some titles reflect on the artist’s own implicatedness, as when Igwe asks: “Is that why I look down? Or away?” or “Do you not want me to see your face?” These texts express interest in what the original conditions of shooting were like, reminding viewers of the colonial context under which these dance performances are recorded, without being too sure that the dancers involved were stripped of all agency. This not-knowing activates an ethical space: “What happened when you looked down the lens? Or did they tell you not to?” The absence of responses from the dancers caught on film and stored in archives visualizes not just the impossibility of restoring agency to these dancers through conversation with them but also Igwe’s and the gallery visitor’s desire for just such a conversation, acknowledging that this desire is entangled with the colonial drive to know and understand an other. The relational and dialogic approach Igwe adopts in her visual work repeats in her scholarly work, as when she responds openly and self-reflectively to the question posed by Marius Kothor (then a PhD student at Yale, now a professor of women, gender, and sexuality at Harvard) to Igwe: “Why do we still bother with archives?”⁵⁹



FIGURE 8. Defacement of colonial image, from Onyeka Igwe's *Specialised Technique*, 2018.

It is in this third film that Igwe most extensively uses frame-by-frame interventions into the filmed image that stop, start, slow, and begin to graphically overwrite the colonial archival project. This brings attention and a slower, or more varied, pace of thought to the question of not just *why* contemporary artists and scholars bother with such archives but *how* we might bother with them, or simply bother them. Having stilled completely many of the archive's moving images in the first minute and a half of *Specialized Technique*, Igwe shifts her technique (around 1:29) to single- and variable-frame animation. Dancers from the colonial footage begin to move jerkily rather than fluidly. This pixilation denaturalizes the scene, inanimating colonial attempts to render reproducible the performed movements. Underscoring the film's status as a material strip of still images, Igwe digitally draws on the surface of the individual [digitized] frames (from about 1:33) with what looks like a thick black marker. This might read as an act of vandalism that helps to disrupt any conflation of the dancers themselves and these images of them (figure 8). These marks shift the viewer's attention from the people arrested on the strip to the makers, collectors, and curators of these images that have both a material and digital presence, asking how to look at, think with, and act in response to *their* existence.

Several types of marks and lines appear across these jerky scenes. Layered black circles evoke the deterioration of film over time; they visually echo the round beads worn by some of the dancers, as if the material adornments of the women were invading the colonial images with a life of their own. Different circles seem to move in a line as if to take over or blot out the image. Around 1:30, an arc, a string of large black circles, appears around the upper-left quadrant of the image, the part of the image in which the women wearing necklaces appear. As the film shuttles between the languages of dance, film, adornment, and drawn animation, it gradually seems as if these large graphic shapes are beginning to encircle, protect, or block visual access to the women on screen, as if abstract animation has become a new component or character in this dance-film. Some marks briefly blot out the faces of the women, recalling the blocking gestures Igwe performs in *Her Name in My Mouth*. As the pixilated braids trace jerky arcs across the upper third of the

screen, they seem to catalyze or prefigure a series of parallel wavy drawn black lines. They appear first horizontally in the top right-hand corner of the screen and then elsewhere, pulling the viewer's eye away from the dancers, perhaps interacting with the dancers using a drawn or graphic language of dance that better registers the impossibility of this scene. Two thin, almost-parallel, black undulating lines appear horizontally across the image. The upper line traces the outline of the tops of the heads of the women in the dancing group while the lower runs across the hands of the women. Does this emphasize the women's collectivity, a history of entrapment and constraint, and/or the entanglement between these histories? Do these lines refuse the isolating framing of the colonial camera that pans across the line, then closes in on one woman at a time? Maybe.

At 1:36, four curving vertical lines made up of a series of black circles, again evoking a string of beads, drop down from the top of the frame to touch some of the women's bodies. Two lines touch women at the juncture of the neck and the shoulder; two others meet the fingertips and back of another woman. While the verticality of the lines resonates to some extent with the vertical lines ephemerally traced by the women's braids in motion, the artificiality of these drawn lines over the images seems more disruptive than resonant. One reading might view these drawn lines as puppet strings, as if to highlight through visualization the animating desires and fantasies involved with both colonial image-making practices and later artistic and academic archival interventions. Perhaps these lines trace an Afro-futurist and speculative technological connection between past and present; mark the difficulty of locating such a "cable" with just the drawn artificiality of the line; disrupt the givenness of these images; and question what the various audiences for these colonial images want from them and why. (Here, it is useful to recall Episode 5, "This One Went to Market," of the Nairobi-based Nest Collective's satirical series *We Need Prayers*, in which a Kenyan photographic model prepares herself for a photo shoot for a gallery project geared at a white Western art market. As the model, wearing black makeup on her face, places a series of electric cables over her head and braids, the woman taking the photograph asks, "What have you put on your face?" The model replies, "I want to try this thing. Have you heard of 'Afrofuturism'? It's this thing. . . . It's everywhere right now. . . . And white people really like it for some reason" [figure 9]. Just as Racquel J. Gates describes the African American performer Bert Williams as finding that the makeup of blackface "created a separation between his performative and real selves," so here the Nest Collective's use of makeup seems similarly to distance itself from and make comedy of the "African" images that the art market desires in the service of different image-making practices and audiences.⁶⁰ If the vertical line suggests puppet strings or electrical cords capable of animating these archived images in a way that is disconnected from the liveliness of the women caught in these images, it also abstractly, formally, evokes the violence of lynching, especially because these lines occur in the upper third of the image, which is often filled with trees and branches. These visual disruptions, refusals, and ambiguities firmly locate viewers in the present



FIGURE 9. Jim Chuchu, “Afrofuturism,” from the Nest Collective’s *We Need Prayers*—Episode 5: “This One Went to Market,” 2017.

while looking across time, across and through histories, mediations, and living perpetuations of violence. They are reinforced by the shifts in the soundtrack, which move from drumming to experimental electronic sounds. Throughout the work, Igwe alternates showing fragments of colonial footage in pixilated, overlapping, drawn-on, and stilled images with black screens and clips shown without disruption, as if the work is training contemporary viewers, albeit provisionally and with self-questioning, to unlearn learned habits of colonial looking.

Four minutes into this last film, the screen fills with an abstract image of black leather reflecting light, and it almost instantly becomes clear that the reflected light comes from a projector. Further colonial footage of Africans dancing flickers unclearly on the surface of this black leather screen, whose materiality is itself a reminder of the cinematic apparatus’s implicatedness in the logics of animal extraction.⁶¹ A complex soundtrack, designed by Kiera Coward-Deyell, includes an alarm-like bell ringing continuously, signaling urgency, while a reframing reveals the screen to be Igwe’s leather skirt. The images appear on the center panel of the skirt as Igwe’s hips, moving side to side and back and forth, animate, make “dance,” or set into motion, not individual frames, but rather the screen itself. If this is the most literal iteration of the artist’s desire to dance with or animate the archive, it also takes the form of the artist physically shaking, animating, and/or embodying the cinematic apparatus itself. Igwe’s body at first moves rhythmically with the music without creasing the skirt or distorting the projected image, but then this mobile screen starts to fold in on itself, making the projected, archived, dancing bodies harder to see and recalling Igwe’s earlier use of an image reproduced on a T-shirt to reframe, commemorate, and withhold. This difficulty of access makes viewers more aware than they were of their visual desire to grasp these colonial images. Viewers also only gradually realize that they are staring at Igwe’s hips,

raising a different set of questions about how the viewer views Igwe as she takes on the role of an animated and embodied screen that re-presents, enfolds, and jostles projected colonial images. A black screen interrupts these scenes of (inter) (in)animation as printed text asks: "Should I move?" and "Further back?" reflecting once again Igwe's attitude of uncertainty about the film's experimental gestures. Igwe then overlays stilled archival images with still more questions and suggestions: "To the side?" "In the middle?" "I could circle around you." "I want to make the camera move too." "Am I ok?" wonders a title on a black screen, before the film ends with a brief clip of the woman shown in the opening sequences dancing again. These proliferating questions perform a certain stubborn disavowal of the impossibility of animating the archive, as if refusing to give up the possibility of dialoguing and dancing with, or better put, in relation to, the dead; but for Igwe it also has to do with "other ways of knowing" that are "outside of the bounds of which I have been taught to know."⁶² This (inter)(in)animation, this collaborative slowing or stopping that intervenes into drilled ways of knowing, is part of the process Igwe audiovisualizes for opening up spatial and temporal paradigms. The paradigms allow us to develop new moves for choreographing collective protests under the restrictions of our own moment, and to forge different ways of being and learning together, and of understanding ourselves, the past, and our relation to each other and the living world as we attempt to make sense of our shared present and, I hope, shared futures.

Igwe's scholarly and artistic work explores the artist's evolving relationship with colonial archives and the images and narratives contained within them through the interlocking processes of doing research, nationally and transnationally; making, sharing, looking at, and discussing artwork; and discussing research, theory, and practice also with family, friends, and community who exist beyond university walls. In doing so, Igwe generously shares her commitments, questions, uncertainties, and archival desires—even when she knows or suspects, or perhaps *because* she knows and suspects, that some of these elements might be at odds with what she wants to achieve in her work. But in addition, she presents a powerful model of multimodal research and shows the potential of research that explores questions in more than one way for broadening the circle of participants (inter)(in)animating the practice of feminist film and media history and theory.