Good Hair: Akosua Adoma Owusu at the CAC, New Orleans

Kristina Kay Robinson - Dec 11, 2019 **in** Art Review, Feature

Akosua Adoma Owusu, *Split Ends, I Feel Wonderful* (video still), 2012; 16 mm film transferred to video, 4 minutes.

In 1927, W.E.B. DuBois wrote a letter to the U.S. ambassador to Brazil inquiring about the attitudes of the Brazilian government toward Black Americans, remarking upon the difficulty he and other Black Americans were having getting their visas approved to enter the country. Just shy of seven decades after DuBois's letter, the historic district of Pelourinho in Salvador, Bahia, would become the site of a music video by the

world's most famous pop star, Michael Jackson, for his 1996 song "They Don't Really Care About Us." It is worth noting that Jackson also faced opposition from the Brazilian government, which tried to ban him from shooting in Pelourinho and the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. Officials worried that Jackson's footage would sully the image of Brazil to the international community and discourage tourism. Today, the city which served as the first capital of colonial Brazil and the location of the first slave markets on the continent is filled with impersonators of the late Black American icon. The places Jackson filmed are ironically popular tourist attractions. The Pelourinho district itself is named for the whipping post that once stood in its central plaza. Under Portuguese rule, *pelourinhos*—singular pillars or poles—were placed in front of a major church and used to whip, punish, and otherwise abuse enslaved Africans that challenged their "masters." Salvador's *pelourinho* once stood in front of a gold-laden St. Francis church, where a cross stands now in its place.

The collision of DuBois's correspondence with contemporary pop culture and its implications for present-day Black Brazillians under Bolsonaro are layered atop one another in Ghanaian-American avant-garde filmmaker Akosua Adoma Owusu's recent film *Pelourinho: They Don't Really Care About Us.* The film continues Owusu's investigation into the multilayered concept of identity and exploration of what she calls a "third cinematic space," riffing on Homi Babha's term *third space* and what DuBois described as the "peculiar sensation of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others." In his seminal book *The Souls of Black Folks*, DuBois called this sensation regarding the relationship Black Americans had to the concept of self *double consciousness*. For Owusu, her cinematic third space is a kind of "triple consciousness" that accommodates additional layers of identity such as queerness, gender identity, immigrant status, and others, troubling binaries and creating space for her work to come into fruition.

Owusu's films often explore ideas of Ghanaian-ness in America and American-ness in Ghana, and the exchange, importing, and exporting of ideas, aesthetics, resources, and people that have taken place between Africa and the Americas for centuries. Drawing from her own biography—she was the first in her family to be American-born—and shooting work between the U.S. and Ghana, Owusu uses hybridity as an informative and catalytic tool toward creation. In *Kwaku Ananse,* the 2013 winner of the African Movie Academy's award for Best Short, Owusu tells the story of a young woman returning to Ghana for estranged father's funeral. Interwoven with this modern narrative is the story of Kwaku Ananse, the legendary sometimes-man, sometimes-spider character of Ghanaian folklore. The film follows the woman and her conflicting feelings about her father. A trickster of a sort, the protagonist's father is a man who led one life in the United States and another in Ghana. In *Kwaku Ananse,* the collaging of traditional African storytelling with contemporary narratives evokes, as much of Owusu's work does, the principle of *sankofa,* or bringing forth of the knowledge of the past in order to make progress in the present.

Akosua Adoma Owusu, *Kwaku Ananse* (production still), 2013; film, 25 minutes.

Akosua Adoma Owusu, *Reluctantly Queer* (video still), 2016; Super 8 transfer to video, 8 minutes.

In 2016, Owusu acquired the rights to Nigerian author Chimamanda Adiche's short story "On Monday of Last Week." Taken from Adiche's collection *That Thing Around Your Neck,* the story and film explore the life of Kamara, a Nigerian woman grappling with self-actualization while working as a nanny in the home of an interracial couple. Kamara's complex attraction and confusion with the often inaccessible Black American wife, Tracy, creates a vehicle for both dramatic tension and many personal realizations for Kamara. Owusu has described adaptation, especially adapting works by contemporary African writers, as a form of "sculpting on the timeline"—exploring the social and racial interactions that are often outside of the dominant Western gaze and metanarrative. The same year, Owusu also debuted *Reluctantly Queer,* an epistolary short that centers a young Ghanaian man's conflict between loving his mother while also loving men. Written and performed by Kwame Edwin Otu, the movie is contextualized by the intense politics surrounding LGBTQIA+ identity in Ghana. Owusu is uniquely poised to respond to and realize these conflicts in cinematic form. Through the cinematic third space she has spent a decade crafting, Owusu's onscreen investment in her identity as Ghanaian-American allows her to move freely between borders and cultures. This freedom of movement facilitates her ability to accumulate the layers of experience she, in turn, renders visually.

In the short film *Mahogany Too,* Owusu borrows from the Nollywood tradition of "sequels" to already popular films. In this case, she creates a sequel to the 1970s cult classic *Mahogany,* starring Diana Ross. In the original film, Ross plays Tracy Chambers, a Black American fashion student dealing with rampant discrimination in the fashion and entertainment industries. In Owusu's three-minute sequel, Nigerian actress Esosa Edosomwan (also known as Esosa E) recreates the street scenes from *Mahogany*. Owusu overlays these sequences with footage of E's character constructing garments and applying makeup. Rendered on Super 8 film and transferred to video, *Mahogany Too* evokes nostalgia and the glamour of the period, with Esosa E's portrayal of the lead character also troubling any linear sense of time. The film's soundtrack consists of a compilation of sounds from her humming and garment construction, among other unidentifiable sounds. This layering of pre-existing footage with new images and sounds is Owusu's hallmark, an avant-garde strategy that echoes the cut-up technique. Through a cacophony of timelines, cultures, orientations, and narratives, new tropes and motifs emerge. These new cultural tropes, motifs, and fabulations created by Owusu populate and concretize the triple consciousness that she says has defined her life and practice.

Akosua Adoma Owusu, *Mahogany Too*, 2018; Super 8 transfer to video, 3 minutes.

Owusu's embrace of the short-film format paradoxically acknowledges the enormity of the subject matter her works address. The questions Owusu confronts could not even be adequately answered in a feature-length film. Western cinema has traditionally focused on the premise that it can at least bring resolution, if not answers, in the standard eighty- to ninety-minute runtime. Owusu's work challenges this notion with brevity and complexity. *Mahogany Too* asks the viewer to imagine this new iteration of Ross's Tracy Chambers beyond the three literal minutes we see on film. The lack of resolution we experience, the desire for more that we are left with, creates these third spaces in our mind for individual interpretation, imagination, and greater knowing. What comes "next"

in the sequence of events? Rather than didactically guiding viewers, Owusu pushes them to think differently about time and narrative fulfillment. This formal investment in brevity pairs well with Owusu's use of Super 8 film. Originally conceived as an instrument for the production of home movies, the analog grain and handheld camera shake that sometimes appears in Owusu's work brings us in as viewers, stylistically acknowledging that the images in front of us are the construction of an individual—something Western cinematography works to obscure. In many of these works, viewers see the hand that holds the camera. In this regard, Owusu's films deconstruct Western cinema's notion that the perspective being presented is somehow "universal," outside of individual particularity.

The exhibition *Welcome to the Jungle*, on view through February 2 at the Contemporary Arts Center in New Orleans, combines the three films in Owusu's "hair trilogy" in one installation. Together the films *Me Broni Ba* ("My White Baby"), *Split Ends, I Feel Wonderful,* and *White Afro* depict and deconstruct the politics around Black hair and beauty practices. In some way, each of the films respond to and confront the aesthetic legacy of colonialism and imperialism in Africa. In *Me Broni Ba,* these effects are evident in still images of white dolls in Ghana juxtaposed with a young girl's story of migration to the United States. These images are also reminiscent of the famous doll experiments used to make the case that segregation in harmful to Black children in *Brown v. Board of Education*. *Split Ends* collages kaleidoscopic imagery with found footage from Black hair salons in 70s-era New York, while *White Afro* layers Owusu's own mother's voice-over narration of how to give a white person an Afro.

Installation view of *Akosua Adoma Owusu: Welcome to the Jungle* at the Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans, 2019.

(Photo by Jonathan Traviesa and courtesy the Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans.)

In their own ways, Akosua Adoma Owusu's films speak to both double consciousness and DuBois's concept of "the veil," which he also elucidated in *The Souls of Black Folk.* Du Bois died in Ghana in 1963 after renouncing his American citizenship two years earlier. The news of his death was announced by an NAACP member at the March on Washington on the eve of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. The veil, according to DuBois, is worn by both Black and white individuals in a society constructed around white supremacy. For white people, this veil prevents them from seeing Black people as fully embodied human beings, and for Black people, on both sides of the Atlantic, it can prevent an individual from accurately seeing themselves. DuBois argues that the ubiquitousness of the veil is aided by its invisibility: it is difficult to see through and sometimes even more difficult to be aware of its presence. Owusu's collaging of images and sounds, her layering of Black American iconography and theory with contemporary African stories and traditional folklore, accomplishes a great deal to reveal the veil's trappings. Maybe this third space Owusu has created is the place for us all to be truly seen.

Akosua Adoma Owusu: Welcome to the Jungle (https://cacno.org/welcometothejungle) *is on view at the Contemporary Arts Center in New Orleans through February 2, 2020.*

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