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Author(s)

Poppy Menzies Walker

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About the author(s)

is the winner of the 2022 Burlington Contemporary Art Writing Prize. She is a documentary researcher and writer previously based at the BBC. She has an MA from the University of Oxford and specialises in modern and contemporary art, including documentary practices, film and photography.

The fragment in 'All That You Can't Leave Behind'

by Poppy Menzies Walker • 23.09.2022

In the experimental film installation *All That You Can't Leave Behind* FIG.1 FIG.2 by Ufuoma Essi (b.1995), exhibited at Public Gallery, London, it is the effect of fragmentation – integral to both the work's medium and content – that renders the reimagining and celebration of Black, musical femininity so powerful. Three soul-baring performers feature centrally as the pillars of Essi's work. In a small room replete with a plush red carpet, Abbey Lincoln FIG.3, Nina Simone and Grace Jones FIG.4 are dignified with a reverence that is not typically afforded to Black women in mainstream art, culture or politics. The sign instructing viewers to remove their shoes before entry creates a quasi-sacred atmosphere for what is displayed: a triptych of large-scale projections, across which flickers a dynamic assemblage of archival material, homemade VHS tapes, YouTube clips and 16mm analogue footage.

The title of Essi's work is taken from a 2008 essay by the African American Studies professor Daphne A. Brooks, in which Brooks explores the political potential of Black female soul singing as a site for the redefinition of narratives about Black womanhood. Essi's selection of imagery makes clear that the theme of Black reinvention is central to her own practice. The inclusion of an interview with Simone, for example, in which the singer passionately proclaims 'we are the most beautiful creatures in the world' showcases a consistency with Brooks's exploration and is a potent statement. Nevertheless, it is the effect of fragmentation, a consequence of the aggregate nature of the work's fluid montage of uncontextualised clips, that operates most powerfully in the gallery space. The fragment – a broken-off or split-up thing – functions within *All That You Can't Leave Behind* in two ways. At first it appears to be the product of separation. Ultimately, however, the fragment asserts itself as a force for unity.

In the film, the fragment is initially understood to be the result of a shattered entity. This is poignantly reflected in both the construction of the film's agglomeration of footage and the exploration of colonialism within it. A woman's voice describes 'three hundred years of European slave trading', while images of beaches, shipping barges rocking on tumultuous oceans, engine propellers, planes and airports remind the viewer of the transportation and mass dislocation of Black bodies. The removal of these clips from their original context reflects the millions of individuals separated from their native countries by the pernicious

force of the dividing and conquering colonial oppressor.



Fig. 1 Installation view of *Ufuoma Essi: All That You Can't Leave Behind* at Public Gallery, London, 2022. (Courtesy the artist and Public Gallery, London).

By contrast, in the aftermath of this splintering effect, the viewer experiences the fragment as a positive force enacting construction. Through her curation of carefully selected footage, Essi exemplifies that no matter how many pieces the whole (be that object, person or community) is divided into, each separate piece still retains the kinetic potential to be progressively reassembled. The realisation of this artistic and social victory resonates through the inclusion of a video taken in 1964, of Lincoln's rousing performance of her song 'Freedom Day'. She is accompanied by the jazz drummer Max Roach, whose rhythm thrums and sustains the entirety of the work as if it were its heartbeat.

As the music builds in fervour and emotion, Lincoln and her lyrics advocate for the liberation of slaves from oppression. A close-up of her face immerses the viewer in her passion as it swells in the gallery space. The tension built from the freneticism of the music is enhanced as a stream of moving imagery plays across all three projections. Black women dance in night clubs and debate politics on television; Jones struts regally before an audience in an androgynous suit **FIG.5**, the range of emotions conveyed in her performance amplifying Lincoln's appeal to freedom. Professor Kara Keeling's contention in her book *Queer Times, Black Futures* (2019) that 'Cinematic reality involves a synergistic relationship between [...] living organisms and the technologies, economies, and social relations they participate in producing, reproducing, and shaping' is well suited to describe the myriad moments in Black 'cinematic reality' that Essi has visualised and blended in her own 'synergistic' creation.¹ *All That You Can't Leave Behind* is the

'living organism' within which a network of 'technologies, economies, and social relations' are exposed, deconstructed and reproduced. These elements present themselves throughout the film as visual motifs – the dancing Black woman, the slave transported across the ocean – and exist together to shape new notions of Black female musicality and power. The context of each filmic segment is less important than the story the pieces tell collaboratively. Similarly, Simone, Lincoln and Jones are recognised as independent from another, yet their stage presence and expressions of joy and pain harmonise to achieve peak agency as a collective voice celebrating Black female musicianship. Fragments, therefore, reunite in unprecedented and innovative patterns to create a space in which the subject can redefine herself.

As I stood to leave the exhibition, I momentarily obstructed the light between the projector and the closing frame of Lincoln's bowed head. My opaque shadow fell across her image, fleetingly occupying a space within the film, and I too became a passing fragment within the larger story on display. Essi's chosen medium allows the viewer to analogise the Black female body with the transience of her moving imagery, representing in her film the pieces and people that have ricocheted across geographical borders and sociopolitical boundaries. She supplants old notions of Black womanhood with a contemporary legacy and means of understanding the Black, female soul singer and her community. Consequently, the Black female body is not a victim of stagnation but is instead triumphantly and continuously evolving. This paradigm of mobility and multiplicity is both musical and magical. The initially disparate fragments of Essi's work are bound for unity and self-reimagination. They cannot be left behind.



Fig. 2 Installation view of *Ufuoma Essi: All That You Can't Leave Behind* at Public Gallery, London, 2022. (Courtesy the artist and Public Gallery, London).



Fig. 3 Installation view of *Ufuoma Essi: All That You Can't Leave Behind* at Public Gallery, London, 2022. (Courtesy the artist and Public Gallery, London).



Fig. 4 Installation view of *Ufuoma Essi: All That You Can't Leave Behind* at Public Gallery, London, 2022. (Courtesy the artist and Public Gallery, London).



Fig. 5 Installation view of *Ufuoma Essi: All That You Can't Leave Behind* at Public Gallery, London, 2022. (Courtesy the artist and Public Gallery, London).

Exhibition details

Ufuoma Essi: All That You Can't Leave Behind

Public Gallery, London
11th May–11th June 2022

Footnotes

- 1** K. Keeling: *Queer Times, Black Futures*, New York 2019, p.111.

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