

ONYEKA IGWE'S *THE NAMES HAVE CHANGED, INCLUDING MY OWN AND TRUTHS HAVE BEEN ALTERED*

at Berwick Film & Media Arts Festival, 2019

“What does it mean to go looking for yourself in the archive?” Onyeka Igwe thinks out loud on the other end of our Skype call. We are discussing her latest film, *the names have changed, including my own and truths have been altered*, which won the New Cinema Award at the 15th Berwick Film & Media Arts Festival in October 2019. A web of overlapping origin stories that puts personal, mythic, and bodily ways of knowing on par with official histories, *the names have changed* goes looking in four sets of archives: diary entries from Igwe’s visit to her family hometown in Nigeria’s Imo State, modeled on the papers of colonial inspector E. H. Duckworth; a folktale of two brothers, illustrated with British colonial film; the story of Igwe’s paternal grandfather, enacted by herself and dancer Titilayo Adebayo; and

a Nollywood TV series based on the first published Igbo novel. Whether or not Igwe ‘finds’ herself in all this is, for me, beside the point. Her film is remarkable as a study of how we interact with the objects, bodies, and institutions that make memory – and how these interactions position us in relation to the lives the archive contains.

The names have changed looks and sounds like a collage. Jittery ethnographic reels alternate with cool digital shots of yams, hens, and earth. Intimate family conversations blend into low, pulsing synths. But each part brings us back to Arondizuogu, where Igwe’s family is from (“ARO-NDI-ZUOGU,” she breaks it down for us in one of many interrogations into the politics of knowing a name). This town was once the largest settlement



ALL IMAGES Onyeka Igwe, *the names have changed, including my own and truths have been altered* (2019), frame enlargements. Courtesy the artist.



of the Aro Confederacy, the dominant power in Igboland (Southeastern Nigeria) during the 18th and 19th centuries. It was also a key supplier for the Aro slave trading network, which continued up until 1912. By the turn of the 20th century, as British rule encroached, a new class of merchant elite trading in palm oil and human beings was rising to challenge the authority of local chiefs.¹ When Igwe’s father handed her the biography of one such aristocrat, she was afraid, she tells us in voice-over, that her grandfather would turn out to be the eponymous hero Omenuko. Instead, he appeared as Omenuko’s “side-kick,” a third-party advisor who helps the former reconcile himself with the land after selling his workers into slavery. A dim presence haunting the film, the grandfather Igwe never met becomes a stand-in not only for the land and history with which she is vaguely familiar, but also for the archive’s promises to mediate and reconcile.

In one scene, Igwe plays clips from a TV adaptation of *Omenuko* for her father. We only hear their conversation, and we only see the images – warm, fuzzy VHS with English subtitles but no audio. Omenuko sits down with a creditor to repay him “three or four boys,” and a line of bound men wearing burlap sacks shuffles through the forest. In snatches of off-screen dialogue, we sense the difficulty of Igwe’s relationship with her father, triangulated by the hazy traces of their shared ancestor. As the distance between them becomes entwined with their distance from this obscure figure, the viewer, too, is placed at a remove from images we cannot hear and speakers we cannot see. By the time Igwe’s grandfather appears, bearing a wooden staff and feathered cap, the layers of mediation only add ambiguity. This is not Igwe’s grandfather, but the image of an actor playing a character on the fringes of a semi-fictional account of another man’s life. A black text box above his head reads “[my grandfather]” – as if to remind us that this archive lies, but to also sit with its truth and ask, *could this really be my grandfather?*

That question returns when Igwe scans a colonial documentary in the Jos National Film, Video, and Sound Archive. As we watch the take-up and supply reels spin in place on the German scanner, Igwe’s voice-over narrates what they

hold. A title card reads “Arondizuogu,” she tells us, and we hear garbled voices off-screen – this time sound without image. Black men unload bricks from a train and pile them onto their heads as another Black man looks on. Igwe hesitates. “He looks pretty... stern, but serene.” A text box appears at the center of the spinning reel, in close-up: “[my grandfather].”

When I ask Igwe about these invisible images, she grins: “How much do you want to know?” Apparently, the film she describes is entirely fictional – or, almost. Igwe’s grandfather built the first brick house in Imo State. What I had taken for a variation on the *Omenuko* scene, where we meet a semi-stranger in the archive, is really Igwe’s imagined account of what might have been, substituted for an absence in the colonial record. It is the nervous question, *who built my family’s house in Arondizuogu?* As the lines between artist and archive blur, the channels through which they affect each other come into focus – and new ones open up.

At the end of our Skype call, we talk about a scene where Igwe films herself in the Jos archive. Wearing a white face mask, she rummages through shelves of old footage, picks one container, and walks towards the camera to show us. First the metal surface, labeled many times over, then the reel, wrapped snugly inside. Cut. The reel and container are gone, and Igwe holds her hands up for the camera, palms out. There is some dirt on them. Igwe is curious, she tells me, about what it feels like to be in those spaces where history happens. She is interested in the moment when you touch the archive because that is also when the archive touches you back. Its dirt rubs off on your hands, its dust enters your lungs. “You get bits of it inside of you.”

JOSH VAN BIEMA

¹ Raphael Chijioke Njoku, “Ogaranya (Wealthy Men) in Late Nineteenth Century Igboland: Chief Igwebe Odum of Arondizuogu, c. 1860-1940,” *African Economic History* 36 (2008): 27-52



Luiza Prado de O. Martins' Technologies of the Body

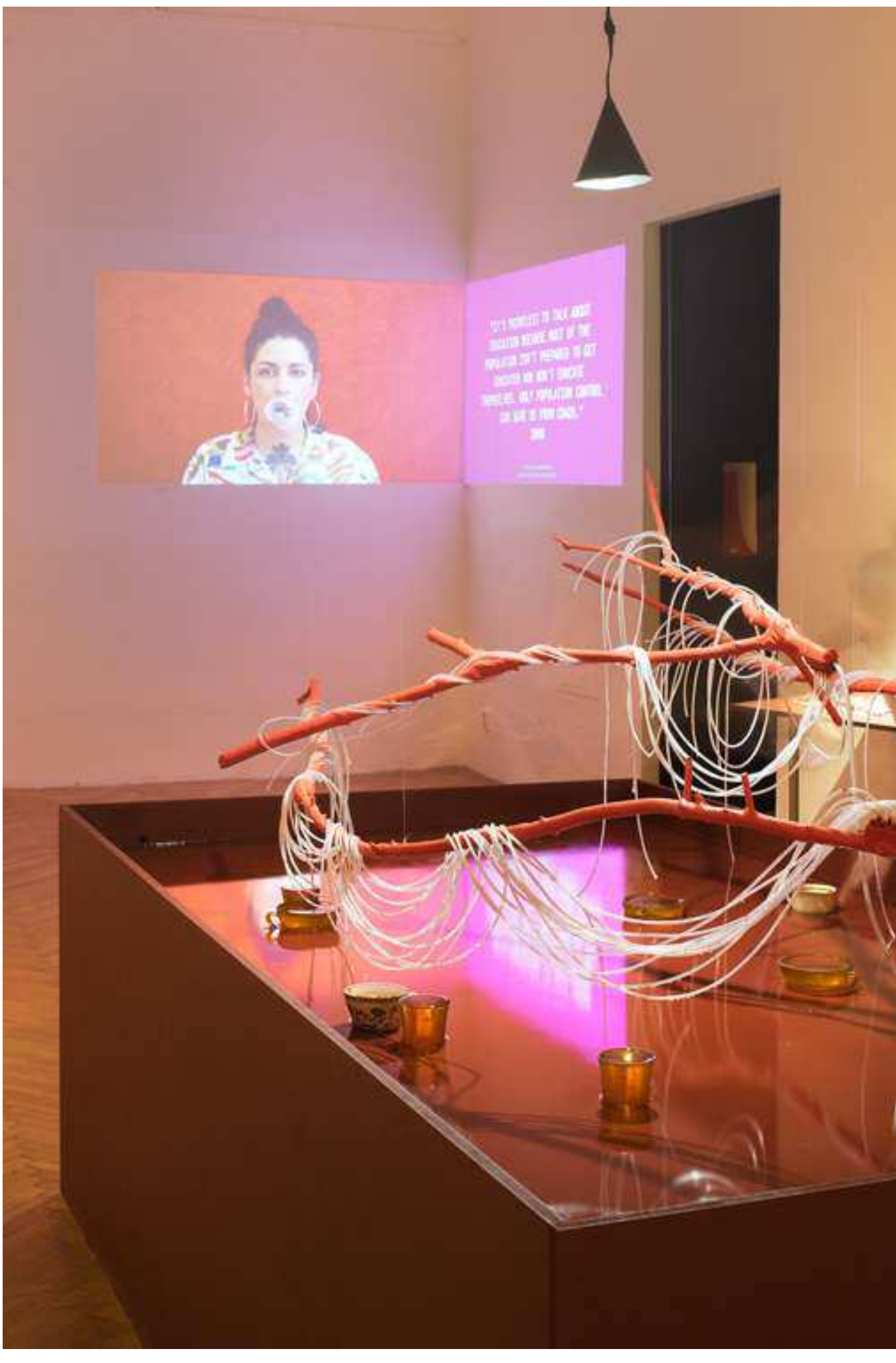
At Display, Prague, the Brazilian artist questions the insidious mechanisms that govern women's reproductive health

BY PHOEBE BLATTON IN REVIEWS | 29 MAY 19



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'Multilogues on the Now', a series of thematic events and exhibitions curated by Zuzana Jakalová and Hana Janečková, has been exploring the topic of health in late capitalist society for three years running. The main commission for this year's programme, 'Technologies of the Body', is a presentation by Brazilian artist Luiza Prado de O. Martins, whose research into the technologies and practices that govern women's reproductive health is firmly rooted in decolonial theory. I visit in the week that Donald Trump's administration vetoed the UN resolution on rape as a weapon of war, and only months after the far-right politician Jair Bolsonaro was elected president of Brazil. Prado's commission feels painfully prescient, as the personal, particular and often disturbing revelations of her research respond to a very precarious moment for anyone who still believes in so-called 'Western values'.



Luiza Prado de O. Martins, *The imaginary becomes complete on the margins of every new linear projection*, 2018, installation view, Display, Prague. Courtesy: the artist and Display, Prague; photograph: Tomáš Souček

A spectrum of reds and pinks colour the artworks, many of which are produced by dyes extracted from plants used in medicines indigenous to Brazil. Prado knows that some people will instinctively find this clashing palette 'unpleasant', as she puts it. Indeed, my first blasé thought is that the colours adhere to clichés of feminist art, and there are further spectres: sculptures wrought from fabrics and a performance straight-to-camera that sees the artist dropping contraceptive pills into a surgical glove that she appears to have half-swallowed. But, when considering tropes of feminist art as technologies transferred between women, can we have too many? Prado is highly aware of creating tension through excess: here, excess exposes the prejudices at the intersection of race and gender. In a 2018 article published in *Artalk Revue*, she writes that the 'insidious mechanisms' of colonialism and enduring Western hegemony mean that 'the bodies of colonized others are judged as incapable, unintelligent, primitive – condemned to a role of eternal subjugation, simultaneously excessive and lacking; too much, too many.'

Faced with an abundance of contraceptive-pill blister packs, I consider the repetitive, brief action of a finger popping pills. This modest 'technology of the body' recurs as an agent of powerful mechanisms. In the video essay *As Flames Engulfed the River* (2018), the artist travels via a hovering finger on Google maps to an urban river where she grew up, along which the striking peacock flower flourishes. The plant, abundant in Brazil, was used as an abortifacient by slaves resisting the subjugation of future generations. Prado's grandmother, oppressed by poverty and the church, is thought to have once used it. With every click of her finger, I sense Prado's melancholy; at once 'back home' and not, simultaneously brimming with knowledge and conscious of the gaps.



Luiza Prado de O. Martins, *Luiza's Prado's Archive*, 2019, installation view, Display, Prague. Courtesy: the artist and Display, Prague; photograph: Tomáš Souček

An *Accumulation of Gestures* (2019) comprises sculptures based on shapes that Prado's finger-swipes made whilst entering information into a period tracker app. Fashioned from rags dyed with the urucum seed, which, amongst other uses, is thought to guard against evil, they are distinctly hand-crafted, the vulva-like forms recalling Hannah Wilke's sculptures. I think of the phrase 'on the rag' and makeshift methods still used to cope with 'the curse'. That Prado's *Gestures* originate in an intimate yet corporate technology such as the app installed on her phone speaks to the idea that, across the globe, women control their reproductive health under 'curses' both flagrant and mysterious.

In *The imaginary becomes complete on the margins of every new linear projection* (2018), peacock-flower tea mixed with the artist's saliva is pumped around branches resembling Rio de Janeiro's river system. The liquid drips into teacups, which overspill and feedback. The spot-lit installation alludes to the drama of Catholic sculpture, which reverberates through the story of how Prado conceived of the piece: she imagined the moment in which one such cup would have met the lips of her grandmother. If the piece suggests interdependencies, they are ignited by Prado's ability as a storyteller, sharing tales that began centuries ago, yet continue to unfold and interweave.

'Multilogues on the Now: Technologies of the Body' runs at Display, Prague, until 9 June 2019.

Main image: Luiza Prado de O. Martins, *When Flames Engulf the River*, 2018, installation view, Display, Prague. Courtesy: the artist and Display, Prague; photograph: Tomáš Souček

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Phoebe Blatton is a writer based in Berlin, Germany, and London, UK. She is the editor of *The Coelacanth Press*, which reissued Brigid Brophy's 1956 novel, *The King of a Rainy Country*, in 2012. She also publishes *The Coelacanth Journal*.

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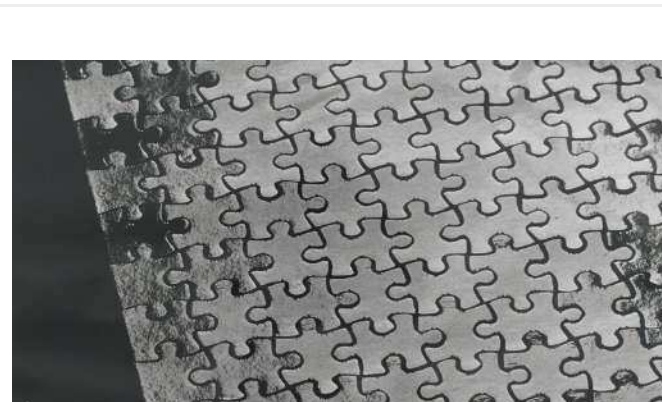
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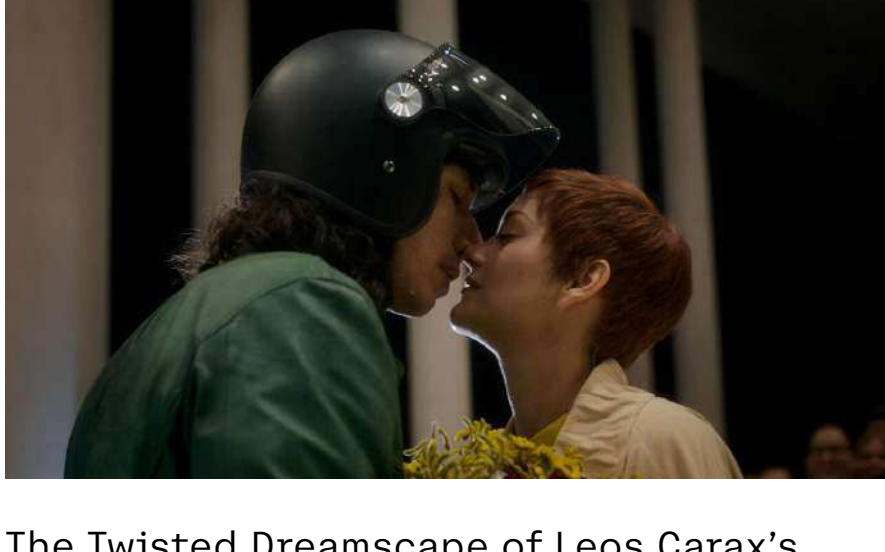


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