The Noise My Leaves Make: Black British Women and Surrendering to Belonging

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Interview notes: Harmony first became aware of Tia-Monique's film "The Noise My Leaves Make" during their shared time on the research project *Dunham's Data: Katherine Dunham and Digital Methods for Dance Historical Inquiry*. Upon first viewing, Harmony knew this was an important film for the screendance community and invited Tia-Monique to reflect on her experience of the process and the completed film. Their conversation initially took place over Zoom in December 2022, and they edited and updated the transcript in 2023.

Image 1: From left to right: Chevon Edwards, Natifah White, and Shanelle Clemenson, in "The Noise My Leaves Make." Image courtesy of Tia-Monique Uzor.

Harmony Bench (HB): When I first saw your film "The Noise My Leaves Make," I was really excited by the imagery, the intensity, and the felt experience. It's a powerful film, which you created under the auspices of a research project *Creative Approaches to Race and In/security in the Caribbean and the UK* (CARICUK), led by Pat Noxolo.[1] How would you describe the film, and what you were interested to convey?

Tia-Monique Uzor (TMU): "The Noise My Leaves Make" is a contemporary dance film that follows three dark-skinned Black women as they use movement to search for pleasure and belonging in the British countryside. It's my first film, after being exclusively interested in choreography for the stage. I think the three main areas that are most important to me within my work are Black geographies and culture, Black identities, and how these intersect with African and African diasporic dance. The title of the film

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comes from Derek Walcott's essay "Isla Incognita."[2] He's talking about the land and the people both experiencing the same kind of violence against them. In the end he is trying to reconcile this violence. He talks about claiming and being one with the land out of necessity and desperation—not choice—because he has to find somewhere to belong. And so, my reading is that he has to take belonging, because where else will he find it? I'm Black British Caribbean—of Jamaican and Bajan heritage. I grew up in a town in Essex, which is a county just outside of London, where historically, there has been a large concentration of British National Party membership. It's really quite a harsh environment, to grow up Black in. I spent a lot of my childhood watching my mother defend us against racists who would egg our house and torment us. She, in turn, taught my sister and I how to recognize danger and how to defend ourselves. So, what does it really mean to be Black British Caribbean in this country? How can I begin to repossess my body in this space? Because I felt so disembodied in so many ways. I couldn't show up with my entire self. So, the film is about claiming the spaces from which I—and others like me—have been denied.

HB: You're representing specifically Black British experiences and perspectives. For those of us who don't have much awareness of the lived experiences of Black women moving through the UK, could you help us understand what it means for Black British women to be in the English countryside, and maybe by extension, how that informs your investment in Black geographies? What's that dynamic? What's that history? What are the politics and tensions of being in that space?

TMU: The film is very specific to the English environment. Around ninety percent of the countryside in the England is owned privately, and then access is granted for people to be able to walk through or use.[3] So for example, the scene in the film of Shanelle [Clemenson] in the green dress was filmed on an estate called Bradgate Park, and that's owned by a trust that grants public access to that space. This often means that there are huge racial and class tensions. Because who gets access to that space? When do they get access? How do they get access? There isn't a history of Black people finding belonging in the rural areas of the country in the same way as they have in towns and cities—the views held there are often very conservative. As a consequence, the British countryside is considered a "hostile space," not just for Black people, but anyone considered "other than," including white working-class people. I was interested in exploring this space because Black British women in particular are underrepresented in the countryside. A lot of people from the USA that have seen the film say, "Oh, this could be somewhere in the US." But for me, knowing that it was filmed in Leicetershire, England is like "Oh, it really looks like the UK." The bends and sight lines of the country roads, the reservoir—as a Black British person, it speaks of England. We already get a lot of images of Black people in rural environments from the US, but we don't get these same images for Black people in the UK. It's actually a strategy that gets used. We're watching things in a globalized perspective, and by amplifying African American voices, we don't have to deal with the politics here. So, I really wanted to center Black Britishness. At the same time, I appreciate how the sensibility of the film transcends time and space into mysticism. I am aware how our local experiences also pull-on diasporic threads across global Black geographies. Black Britishness is never just about Black Britishness! My Black Britishness comes from a trajectory of the Caribbean—specifically of the English-speaking Caribbean—actually, most of the people in the film are of Caribbean heritage. That wasn't a choice, it just happened!

The film came from a place when I was thinking about the disconnect that many Black British people experience between the British countryside and their own ancestral practices. I always find that when I go to Jamaica, Senegal, Nigeria or other majority Black countries, that I experience more freedom with the natural environment: jumping in the rivers, climbing up trees, hiking, I am able to really embody the space in many ways that I can't in England and particularly in relation to the environment. My identity is

tied up with being in the natural world—not just because of the dance and food cultures that are part of my heritage, but also the significance of being able to run down to the river as the generations before me did. In the Caribbean and Africa, these kinds of natural sites are more accessible. In the UK, we are faced with barbed wires and people watching. There is always a question around your presence. “Why are you here?” “What are you doing here?”

HB: Given what you’ve said, was this film for you a kind of healing process, a repair to the disconnection that you’re talking about, or did it lead to an even greater rupture in your experience?

TMU: I hope the film give does give some of that reconciliation or spiritual healing, but the process was actually very, very difficult. For example, when we were filming in the reservoir, which is open to the public, a white man approached us and started questioning us, “Why are you here?” We have a whole camera crew, it’s clear we are filming something. He then came back later with more people and a dog. And he was very confrontational because he didn’t want us to be there. My director of photography, Nick [Hamer], is also a white man and he was able to engage that farmer in a way that I couldn’t as a Black woman. I wouldn’t have been able to protect my crew in the same way, or confront those people in the same way. I realized how vulnerable I was. It was quite a traumatic experience. It was a rupture of the process where we had to acknowledge, “Oh, yeah, it is really dangerous about. It’s really hostile.” But at the same time, there were some moments that were completely magical. Like Natifah [White]’s solo at the reservoir was shot in one take—the first take—and it was almost as if time and everything stood absolutely still. Everybody was holding their breath and she just did it, she just did what she had to do, and it’s so beautiful.

Image 2: Natifah White in “The Noise My Leaves Make.” Image courtesy of Tia-Monique Uzor.

HB: You’re trained as a dancer and choreographer, but then you entered into this filmmaking process. How did the shift of medium change your creative voice, if at all?

TMU: I choreographed the film as if it was for stage, really. And so I learned a lot in that sense. I spent a lot of time thinking and considering pathways, which probably doesn't come across so much in the film. But as far as dance training, I really see my encounters with Acogny Technique, specifically Alesandra Seutin's approach to Acogny Technique, as the beginning of my training. Not necessarily the form, but the approach to movement as a place of pleasure and self-discovery, and understanding that every movement we're doing has an ancestry, a history, a heritage. Of course there's the cliché that diasporic people don't know where they belong—I'm not British, I'm not Caribbean, I'm in the middle—so reconnecting, and embodying it in a form that I feel most at home in, is really important.

So for the film, we're working from the inside out. It's not just about doing the choreography. It's also about how people feel. It's also about their experiences. We started in nature: mud, trees, and bodies of water before we took it back to the studio. It took a lot of time to explore and to rehearse the feeling of it. I asked the dancers questions like: How can you dance with a tree? How do you draw this movement out? How do you indulge? How do you *sit* in this movement? The toes in the mud. How can we really dig in? It was less about the movement itself and more about how it was done. I wanted the dancers to be seen, and I chose each dancer because they had a quality in their dancing style that I was interested in. We reflected on possession, and what it means to be possessed. Not in a colonial way, not possessing to be possessive. Possessing to survive, to be able to hold on.

The process of choreographing the film was very collaborative—until it came time to shoot. That time was highly pressured. We had previously rehearsed in each spot, but when it came to shooting, the conditions were completely different. We spent a lot of time on the first shot, trying to create that really safe space we had in the studio, but on this country lane. But then it was like—let's just get this. It's raining. People are chasing after us. We hadn't planned for the mud—it looked good, but we hadn't planned for it. I learned a lot, including what to do for the next film. I need a bigger team to support the kind of process I want.

HB: Clearly the filming itself was a fraught process. I'd like to come back to the question of intention from earlier, particularly in the post-production phase. How did you conceive of your relationship to the material, and to the film as it was unfolding?

TMU: I approached the film as research. I was reading so many things! *Belonging*, by bell hooks, and a lot of Kamau E. Brathwaite. I tried to answer the questions I originally had. My research is focused on Black British Caribbean identity and experiences, but it isn't really race-centric—by which I mean I'm not assuming or catering to a white audience or white gaze. I'm more interested in how Black women are presented in their complexity. Does what I am creating present the nuance of Black experience? Does it invite pleasure and joy? I would question every choice that Nick and I would make during the edit. We would get into these deep conversations over a cut. I would ask, "why did you edit this scene this way," and he would answer, and I would think about the perspective from which that edit was made and whether it communicated what I needed it to. Key for me was: Where is whiteness in this film? Are we centering the indulgent, pleasurable actions of these women? Or are we centering a hostile racist environment? Because even though that's part of the understanding of the film, I really didn't want it to be the center. Nick was editing the film from his positionality as a white man and I was very aware of that and so would question some of his choices. Equally, there were ideas in the film that I was not articulating clearly or able to resolve, and that is what Nick was able to recognize and question. Approaching the edit as a dialogical exchange where we both questioned each other's choices was integral to achieving the final edit.

Image 3: Chevon Edwards in “The Noise My Leaves Make.” Image courtesy of Tia-Monique Uzor.

Another key part of the research was the feeling of it. Each scene has a feeling. In the beginning, Chevon [Edwards] is in a white dress in a field, which is reminiscent of images we get from narratives of enslavement. I wanted that sensation and a kind of breathlessness with power when Chevon is dancing down the hill. The scene with Shanelle in the tree with this huge dress is much more about softness. She has such a strong look—she’s bald and has all of these muscles—and is an amazing performer. The perception might be that she’s a “strong aggressive Black woman,” so I wanted there to be that feeling of being very soft and indulging in self-pleasure. Natifah’s scene was supposed to be more of this sacred, holy moment. We called the end scene a baptism. We cut out a section, “rituals of care,” that led up to and prepared everyone for the final scene in the water. It was important for it to be there in the process, but it didn’t work for the film. There is a real feeling of care, which you won’t necessarily get just by seeing those two hands pushing her down. Those scenes are supposed to feel quite heavy. Not sad, but heavy like a Jamaican sound system where it’s just a wall of sound, a wall of feeling. In *Sonic Bodies*, Julian Henriques talks about sound as a healing thing, because it’s so loud that the bass goes right through your body like a vibrational healing. It’s a powerful thing but also a heavy thing. That is what I was holding when choreographing the feeling of each scene. For each edit, we referred to our guiding questions. That meant post-production was slow and considered. The process was intense. It was the same with the accompaniment—I worked closely with each collaborator on the film. Elliot [Popeau-George] and I went back and forth about the music. I wanted things to be dark and heavy without being “horror.” Heavy as in rich, heavy as in full—like you’ve just eaten. Elliot was able to capture the balance perfectly.

Image 4: Shanelle Clemenson in “The Noise My Leaves Make.” Image courtesy of Tia-Monique Uzor.

HB: "The Noise My Leaves Make" was a Festival Finalist at the 2023 Dance Camera West film festival, and won Best Experimental Short at the 2023 Cannes Short Film Festival. Congratulations! I'm sure that more accolades are to come for this powerful film.

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Biographies

Tia-Monique Uzor is a lecturer in Contemporary Caribbean and African Diasporic Performance at The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. As an artist-scholar, she critically engages Africanist dance as a vehicle for creating and interrogating African and African Diasporic worlds through interdisciplinary approaches and embodied research. Her current practice is interested in exploring the intersections of ecological and social injustice experienced across Black geographies through digital performance. For this, she has been awarded a grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) for the project *Digital Black Dance Ecologies* (AH/Y002326/1 2023-2024). In 2022, she produced, directed, and choreographed the short dance film *The Noise My Leaves Make* which explores Black British women's intimacy and pleasure in the English countryside. This film was funded during her tenure as a postdoctoral research fellow on the AHRC project *Creative Approaches to Race and In/security in the Caribbean and the UK*, led by Professor Pat Noxolo. *The Noise My Leaves Make* has been showcased at festivals worldwide and has received multiple accolades, including being a finalist at Dance Camera West 2023 in Los Angeles, winning the jury award for Best Experimental Short at the Cannes Short Film Festival 2023, and receiving Best Director and Cinematography awards at Black Lives Rising in New York, along with a special mention in the international competition at Cámara Corporizada, Buenos Aires. Tia-Monique has also presented and taught her work internationally, and has published in the fields of Dance, Geography, and Black feminism.

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Harmony Bench is author of *Perpetual Motion: Dance, Digital Cultures, and the Common* (University of Minnesota Press, 2020) and Associate Professor at The Ohio State University. Her research addresses practices, performances, and circulations of dance in the contexts of digital and screen media. From 2014-2019, she co-edited *The International Journal of Screendance* with Simon Ellis, and in 2021, she guest-edited the special issue *This Is Where We Dance Now: COVID-19 and the New and Next in Dance Onscreen* with Alexandra Harlig. Bench and long-time collaborator Kate Elswit work to bring the digital humanities and dance history into greater dialogue through computational analysis and data visualization with projects such as *Dunham's Data: Katherine Dunham and Digital Methods for Dance Historical Inquiry* (Ref: AH/R012989/1; https://www.dunhamsdata.org/), winner of the 2021 ATHE/ASTR Award for Excellence in Digital Scholarship), *Visceral Histories/Visual Arguments: Dance-Based Approaches to Data* (https://visceralhistories.wordpress.com/), and *Radical Accounting: Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's Data as a Framework for Historical Imagination* (time-based interventions at the Whitney Museum of American Art, September 2024). Independent and collaborative work includes affect and kinesthesia in screendance spectatorship, and critical and practical engagements with motion data and machine learning.

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Erratum

10/22/2024: Added corrected endnotes.

[1] See https://caricuk.co.uk/ for more information about CARICUK.

[2] The passage reads: "It has taken me over thirty years, and my race hundreds, to feel the fibers spread from the splayed toes and grip this earth, the arms knot into boles and put out leaves. When that begins, this is the beginning of season, cycle, time. The noise my leaves make is my language. In it is tunneled the roar of seas of a lost ocean. It is a fresh sound. Let me not be ashamed to write like this, because it supports this thesis, that our only true apprehensions are through metaphor, that the old botanical names, the old processes cannot work for us. Let's walk" (Walcott [1973] 2005, 57).

[3] See Rob Evans, "Half of England is owned by less than 1% of the population," *The Guardian*, 17 April 2019. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/money/2019/apr/17/who-owns-england-thousand-secret-landowners-author (Accessed: 30 January 2023).