

Triple Consciousness

Films by Akosua Adoma Owusu

May 11, 2019 — Yerba Buena Center for the Arts
Akosua Adoma Owusu and Leila Weefur in person
presented in association with Headlands Center for the Arts

Drawing from W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of double consciousness—the split subjectivity of the oppressed African-American subject—Ghanaian-American filmmaker Akosua Adoma Owusu creates works of cinema embodying a “triple consciousness”—the collision of identities of the African immigrant in the United States. Working in the traditions of Third Cinema, Owusu's films swirl with a mixture of intersecting subjectivities and perspectives including feminism, queerness and the experience of African immigrants interacting in African, white American, and black American cultures. Owusu appears in person with Leila Weefur of local curatorial collective The Black Aesthetic to discuss recent works including *On Monday of Last Week*, *Mahogany Too* and *Reluctantly Queer*

Reluctantly Queer (2016) by Akosua Adoma Owusu; digital video, color, sound, 8 minutes, exhibition file from the maker

This epistolary short film invites us into the unsettling life of a young Ghanaian man struggling to reconcile his love for his mother with his love for same-sex desire amid the increased tensions incited by same-sex politics in Ghana. Focused on a letter that is ultimately filled with hesitation and uncertainty, *Reluctantly Queer* both disrobes and questions what it means to be queer for this man in this time and space.

Thematically, my films have been explorations in telling and retelling stories. Many of my films have been inspired by, personal stories or my own experiences related to my struggles with identity. Though my works have been personal to me, I think part of their appeal is that they are extremely relateable. With *Reluctantly Queer* I am again retelling a story rooted in struggles with identity, though in this film I found inspiration in a story not my own but in one parallel to mine in many ways. *Reluctantly Queer* is my collaboration with Kwame Edwin Otu based on his dissertation at the Carter G. Woodson Institute. The film chronicles his struggles with his identity as a queer Ghanaian man and the tensions that it brings with his mother.

His conflicts with identity were internal while mine were external; so our narratives parallel. I am also interested in taking advantage of the cultural privilege I have of communicating, on a public platform, issues that are considered taboo in many parts of the world. It's the privilege of telling these stories as an American and a Ghanaian; a privilege my Ghanaian parents gave me by immigrating to this country. I use my voice or my art to convey stories about the human experience and commonalities within our differences. (Akosua Adoma Owusu)

Mahogany Too (2018) by Akosua Adoma Owusu; digital video, color, sound, 4 minutes, exhibition file from the maker

Inspired by Nollywood's distinct re-imagining in the form of sequels, *Mahogany Too*, interprets the 1975 cult classic, *Mahogany* (1975, dir. Berry Gordy), a fashion-infused romantic drama. Starring Nigerian actress Esosa E., *Mahogany Too*, examines and revives Diana Ross' iconic portrayal of Tracy Chambers, a determined and energetic African-American woman enduring racial disparities while pursuing her dreams. *Mahogany Too* uses analog film to achieve its vintage tones which emphasizes the essence of the character, re-creating Tracy's qualities through fashion, modeling, and styling.

While living in Ghana promoting *Kwaku Ananse* (2013) in 2013, I met Nigerian actress Esosa E. in Makola Market, a popular market place and shopping district in the heart of Accra. I recognized Esosa from several of Kevin Jerome Everson's films. Our serendipitous encounter in Ghana and direct connection to Virginia, places where I consider home, called for a collaboration. Our mutual obsession with Diana Ross' style and attraction to West African features inspired me to overcome the anxiety I felt around returning to analog filmmaking aesthetics. Our schedules eventually synced up across the Atlantic in Virginia, where *Mahogany Too* had its genesis. (Akosua Adoma Owusu)

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On Monday of Last Week (2017) by Akosua Adoma Owusu; digital video, color, sound, 14 minutes, exhibition file from the maker

Set in an urban home, *On Monday of Last Week* follows Kamara, a Nigerian woman, working as a nanny caring for Josh, the five-year old son of Tracy and Neil, an interracial couple. Tracy is an African American artist working on a commission in her basement studio—a space she rarely leaves. The absence of Josh’s mother, Tracy intrigues Kamara. When Tracy finally emerges from her studio one afternoon, Kamara’s growing curiosity is piqued. Their brief encounter inspires Kamara to become Tracy’s muse.

I was compelled to create a new work by adapting literature from contemporary African writers. The themes of race, liberalism, and sexuality in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s short story “On Monday of Last Week” resonated with my films on the “triple consciousness” of the African immigrant as I transition between avant-garde cinema, fine art and African tradition to complicate the nature of identity.

Through my film work, I hope to open audiences to a new dialogue between the continents of Africa and America; one that incorporates more than just stereotypes, but includes both conventionalized and un-conventionalized discourses of race in its service. By creating complex contradictions, I hope that new meaning can emerge and be deposited into the universal consciousness. If I can do this by creating an experience for the audience that enables them to experience what it is like to find oneself, while being foreign in a community, then perhaps I can help that new meaning come to light. (Akosua Adoma Owusu)

Pelourinho: They Don't Really Care About Us (2019) by Akosua Adoma Owusu; digital video, color, sound, 9 minutes, exhibition file from the maker

Pelourinho: They Don't Really Care About Us is freely inspired by a 1927 letter from Pan Africanist W.E.B. Du Bois to the American embassy in Brazil. This colorful film explores how it was impossible for African Americans to travel to Brazil through a series of vignettes and reminds us of the inequality still faced by that country’s black inhabitants. (Akosua Adoma Owusu)

Akosua Adoma Owusu (born January 1, 1984) is a Ghanaian/American filmmaker, producer and cinematographer whose films and installation work address the collision of identities, where the African immigrant located in the United States has a “triple consciousness.” Owusu interprets Du Bois’ notion of double consciousness and creates a third cinematic space or consciousness, representing diverse identities including feminism, queerness and African immigrants interacting in African, white American, and black American culture. www.akosuaadoma.com

Leila Weefur is an artist, writer and curator who lives and works in Oakland, CA. She received her MFA from Mills College. Weefur tackles the complexities of phenomenological Blackness through video, installation, printmaking, and lecture-performances. Using materials and visual gestures to access the tactile memory, she explores the abject, the sensual and the nuances found in the social interactions and language with which our bodies have to negotiate space. Weefur is the Audio/Video, Editor In Chief at Art Practical and a member of The Black Aesthetic. www.leilaweefur.com

Special thanks to the CCA Wattis Institute for facilitating this screening
Akosua Adoma Owusu’s installation *Welcome to the Jungle* is currently on view through July 27, 2019

www.wattis.org

www.sfcinematheque.org

