Fi Har: Zinzi Minott

We are here because they were there—our ancestors. Violently forced to arrive and depart. Ships slice like deathly blades through the sea, creating shapes resembling scalene triangles.

We are here because they came here. Bloodlines and Blood ties. Our grandparents, parents, aunties and uncles, siblings, cousins, and chosen family.

HMT Empire Windrush, a passenger ship, brought hundreds of Caribbean people to the port of Tilbury, near London, on the 22nd of June 1948. Many were workers from Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago and other islands taking advantage of the 1948 British Nationality Act inviting 'Citizens of the United Kingdom and Colonies' to 'return to the mother country'. This migration was the beginning of the Windrush Generation.

A community of nearly half a million introduced the UK to carnival; sound system culture; ska, reggae, calypso, and jazz. To be able to continue to feel pleasure when your ancestors have gone through social death and colonial violence is a monumental act of survival, refusal, and resilience. Windrush arrivals and their decedents created and demanded, out of necessity, alternative models for residing, which has seismically impacted British civic engagement today.

Zinzi Minott has been honouring herself, her communities, and the legacies that have been passed onto her by the first generation of Caribbean people to settle in the UK. She has been upholding this heritage by broadly focusing on the relationship between movement, bodies, and politics. Her practice is direct in its mission to think through what is surviving, despite the inflictions of violent political systems onto racialised and gendered bodies.

As a trained dancer, Minott has an ongoing exploration into the intersectional reality of being Black, Queer, and Woman. A state of being that is fluid and fluctuating. Through varied visual and live artworks, she investigates how dance is perceived through the perspective of race, queer culture, gender, and class.

Collectivity, community building, and shared resource building are values integrated into her approach to artistic creation. Her body of work takes the form of cross-discipline—live dance, performance, prints, time-based media, installation, wall based media, research—and a collaborative approach to creating art by working with different types of practitioners. From *The Rebel Man Standard* (2015-2016) at Chisenhale Dance Space (London) which was a collaboration with choreographers and dance artists SERAFINE1369 (Jamila Johnson-Small) and Hamish MacPherson, to *Black on Black* (2022) commissioned by CONTINUOUS (BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art (Gateshead) and Siobhan Davies Studios (London)). Minott's *Black on Black*, features a newly commissioned sound by British artist Gaika and choreography contributions from peers Greta Mendez, Harold Offeh, Keyon Gaskin, Malik Nashad Sharpe, Onyeka Igwe, Yewande YoYo Odunubi & Rowdy SS.

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Socially engaged and participatory practice is deeply embedded through her making, manifesting into performances such as *Flat White*- an installation of 100 kilos of coffee considering the colonial history of the product-and *30 Skanks*, one of her early works, looking at how the Black British community use dance and reggae as a resistive force; lays the ground work for later works like BLOODSOUND discussed below. Minott's collaborative work can be characterised as a bodily discourse—a conversation without talking. Culminating into dynamic projects in which personal histories and communal presents; bodies and space; rage and joy; the planned and unplanned are coalescing and intersecting. Generosity and transparency are instilled into her process as she develops opportunities for collective understanding.

> "My ancestors meddle, they interfere, they see cracks and breakthrough and they scream with us, they rage with us, they remind us."[1]

Dance and water have something in common: movement.

Since 2018, each iteration from Zinzi Minott's *Fi Dem* (For Them) series is a visual manifestation of a year lived: lives moved and moving in contemplation of the legacies of the Windrush Generation. She describes Fi Dem as an annual work released on the 22nd of June, which is 'durational, repetitive, exhaustive', and water is a consistent motif within the films. Be that through brightly-coloured CGI animated waves, a recording of Minott dancing on the beach or of running water. As of late, iterations of the series have been commissioned and presented within the UK at FACT Liverpool; Spike Island; Berwick Film and Media Festival; Transmissions; Third Horizon Film Festival; and LUX Scotland.

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The title of the work stems from Patois, a Jamaican language. During *Tides of Propagation: Zinzi Minott and Gail Lewis in conversation* with Spike Island (Bristol), the artist describes titling her work in Patois as a form of refutation. Referencing the historian and curator Françoise Vergès, Stuart Hall writes in his essay *Creolité and the Process of Creolization* that Creole in the context of the Francophone Caribbean "was long considered a debased, corrupted 'patois' or 'bad French' spoken by 'the natives. It long retained this association with the 'native' and the 'abjected'." Similar perceptions are made of Jamaican Patois. He goes on to further state, "translation is an important way of thinking about creolization, because it always retains the trace of those elements which resist translation, which remain left over, so to speak, in lack or excess, and which constantly then return to trouble any effort to achieve total cultural closure."

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The vernacular of her lineage is incredibly important to Minott, and she frequently talks about creating her work for *them*, the communities that she feels she belongs to. In relation to this, some of the songs and spoken language within her live performances and films can

[1] Minott, Z. (no date) *Ancestral Interference*, *Spike Island*. Available at: https://www.spikeisland.org.uk/programme/digital-commission/zinzi-minott/#:~:text=My%20ancestors%20meddle%2C%20they%20interfere (Accessed: 19 June 2022).

be interpreted as an ode and elegy to what and who has gone before, particularly in *Black on Black* (2022), which can be described as an amalgamation of phrases that are modified, corroded by unabated exertion, delineating a shifting and vulnerable existence of the archive and of Black and Queer life.

Fi Dem V - A Redemptive Song (2022)

I enter. I see 'blood triangles'—'a watery grave' on the floor as vinyl. The shape references the route of the transatlantic slave trade: Liverpool to West Africa to the Caribbean and back (circa. 5300 voyages). I venture further inside and sit on chairs which I believe to be made from cane, hearing the soothing and grounding voice of Aretha Franklin singing "Bridge Over Troubled Water":

♪ Don't trouble the water... ♪
[Voice echoes]
♪ I won't... ♪
[Music stutters]
♪ Why don't you, why don't you let it... ♪
[Music distorts]
♪ Be... ♪
[Distortion softens]
♪ Ooh, still water run deep[2]

The sound is deepening and rich, with the vibrancy of pink-tinted windows and a collage of rectangles painted in multiple colours on the walls reminding me of SMPTE colour bars. Minott's most recent work *Fi Dem V - A Redemptive Song* (2022) at FACT Liverpool, is a moving-image installation incorporating plants, chairs made from cane, CGI animation, photographic imagery, personal archives, and archival video footage, digitally manipulated sound. Both in this series and in her live art practice, she incorporates 'critical fabulation' and the glitch to look at how her personal history and cultural memory intersect with the phenomenological history of Black Britain and the Anglophone Caribbean. Cultural historian Saidiya Hartman coined the term 'critical fabulation' to refer to the use of storytelling and speculative narration as a means of redressing history's omissions, particularly those in the lives of enslaved people.

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Purposeful glitches in the form of TV static and noise are a constant feature within the multi-screen film. As you sit, watching and listening, you notice the record wind back, the sound of "Pull it up, selecta.", Toots and the Maytals, synths, and monologues from people being interviewed by the artist. Minott's use of the glitch, which is understood as 'an error, a mistake, a failure to function', is 'celebrated as a vehicle of refusal, a strategy of non-performance[3].

[2] An excerpt of a transcript from *Fi Dem V - A Redemptive Song* (2022)
[3] Russell, L. (2020) *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*. S.L.: Verso.

The glitch is adopted as a conceptual gesture which signifies a cutting through, a re-defining, and rupturing of the rampancy of ongoing colonial legacies. It is a consideration of the value of digital and sonic bodily presence and archives. The scratching of a vinyl record and the constant visual of white noise is denoted as self-defence, the body enduring and continuing to self-love. A 'black visual frequency' which weaponises ephemerality—something 'viscerally disruptive' that 'concatenates' multiple stills and clips that register a wide spectrum of the 'vicissitudes of black life'.[4]

She has situated the work in Liverpool through engaging with the city's Caribbean community and amplifying the current struggles of Merseyside's Windrush community. The film features discussions around the uncertain future of a community Caribbean Centre - highlighting the precarity perpetuated by political and civic systems in the UK.

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Her solo exhibition, *BLOODSOUND* (2022), which was held at Transmissions (Glasgow), featured newly commissioned works of prints, moving image, sound and sculptures expanding from Minott's durational film work(s), Fi Dem. The artist presented "the Soundsystem as a fugitive entity, a living and active agent grounded in its complex history of insurgent and resistant sonic dance practices. Forged by communal perseverance, economic endurance and the advanced phonographic technologies of Jamaica, Minott reflects on the underground movements of Caribbean sound cultures."[5] Her solo exhibition was the first time she brought together all the Fi Dem films.

Recruiting immersive sound and swathes of Blackness, Minott forms linkages of autobiography and collective histories to irrefutably connect what is seen, felt and then, known. Presenting possibility through the encounter of the vibration, she seeks to refuse the dissonances which separate the sonic from liberatory and reparative motions. Such multiplicities are encapsulated through the loud, haptic, visceral, explosive and auditory phenomena of the Soundsystem."

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***Black on Black* (2022)**

The notion of rupture is echoed in Minott's live artworks, which in many circumstances, has incorporated visual imagery and moving image. In *Black on Black* (2022), both dance, Blackness and Queerness, are archived physically via witnessing, passed from body to body to form a physical archive of Black and Queer lineage. Sensing sound vibrations, real-time audio frequencies, kinetic energies, and haptic communication all coincide. Transmission, movement and pace, both literally and metaphorically, are ideas explored within this work.

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[4] Campt, T.M. (2019) 'The Visual Frequency of Black Life', *Social Text*, 37(3), pp. 25–46. doi:10.1215/01642472-758503.

[5] *BLOODSOUND – Zinzi Minott* (no date). Available at: https://zinziminott.com/works/bloodsound (Accessed: 19 June 2022).

“If you could imagine a physical archive of dance”, asked Minott, “what nugget or phrase would you donate?”[6]

Extending the process out to her network, she draws on autoethnographic methods focusing on Black interiority and reflexive ways of being in dialogue with Black and Queer artistic communities. As a curator, I also believe that we hold living histories within our bodies—trauma, joy, ancestral spirituality, rhythm, and cultural memory—which develop and evolve.

How do we balance wanting to take care of our bodies and yet assume the role of disrupter and agitator?

Minott’s vocalisation and notes around safety within her writing, *An introduction on becoming unruly* and *A note on liveness…* are important to acknowledge. Minott and other Black performance practitioners have been thinking closely about how they can create strategies for safeguarding emotional, physical, and artistic labour that often gets exploited and depleted within public gallery contexts. The disruptive and rapturous absence of physical bodies within her artworks are experiments into how a live artist could retain agency by negotiating the conditions of presentation. Her self-published writing raises public awareness of the complex relationship and fraught power dynamic between artist and institution. Can we dream and then manifest counter-existences where Black bodies are not bounded or governed by the sector's unwritten conventions? Could we potentially think of liveness as real-time interaction with digital corporality and remains—isn't this connection just as deepening, just as intimate? What if the purpose of a work is for the audience to be present, live with what was and is there? To look inwards, introspect, and respond to their own performativity and implicate themselves in what is still extant.

Zinzi Minott is an interdisciplinary artist in defence of Black life. Her archival practice is a search for communal and self-discovery. It aims to be operative through a process of emancipating the body so it can be loud and quiet, disruptive and interior. Minott’s practice is also asking, “what does the body need to dream?”. A question and enquiry which has been borrowed from a mutual co-collaborator and friend, Yewande YoYo Odunubi. How do we move to a place where our Black bodies—without external expectation or consequence—can eb and flow, move and flex: freely.

Jade Foster is a British artist and curator of Jamaican and Saint Lucian heritage based in Nottingham and born in Sandwell, UK.

[6] *Black on Black, Zinzi Minott - CONTINUOUS Network* (no date) *continuousdance.com*. Available at: https://www.continuousdance.com/works/zinzi-minott-black-on-black (Accessed: 19 June 2022).