



Ja'Tovia Gary, *Giverny I (NEGRESSE IMPERIALE)* (still), 2017
 film, single-channel video, stereo sound, HD and SD video footage, 6 minutes, looped,
 color/black & white 1920 x 1080, 16:9 aspect ratio dimensions variable © Ja'Tovia Gary.
 Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

Black life.²¹ Gary denies us the spectacularization of Black death and instead leaves the viewer to imagine these abominable events as represented through sound. This unsettling of the narrative intertwined with soundbites from political activist Fred Hampton demands that we acknowledge the ways in which the placement of Black people at the bottommost point of class position aptly shapes the contours of violence directed toward us.

Continuing through anguish and lamentation is the short film *Living in the Wake of the Lust for Sugar*, 2023 by British artist and activist, Elsa James. Commissioned by Museum of London, James' work responds to institutional narratives of heritage and identity within the museum's London, Sugar & Slavery Gallery that "documents the social, cultural and economic impact" of Britain's sugar trade with the Caribbean. It is in this place that James assumes

²¹ Eyder Peralta, "Philando Castile's Girlfriend Speaks out: 'I Need Justice; I Need Peace.'" NPR, National Public Radio, Inc., 7 July 2016.

the returned spirits of both "I" and "we," those who were enslaved and those who did not survive "the holding, the Middle Passage, the plantation life or the plantation torture."²²

Considering her proximity to the events of the Middle Passage, the artist begins by informing us that James is her last name, "...a reminder of the cruellest, most brutal, and the darkest time in human history." Channelling the "we," James then asks of the institution, "Who was permitted to tell our story in this setting?" "Who signed it off?" and "Who controls the narrative?" while noting that so much is missing and, in turn, deflected.²³ As the artist moves hypnotically through the space, as if to physically invoke ancestral presences, we hear her delivery of the haunting account of Mary Prince, the first enslaved Black woman to publish an autobiography of her experiences under British colonialism.



Elsa James, *Living in the Wake of the Lust for Sugar*, 2023, 4K video with stereo sound, 07.53 minutes, Courtesy Museum of London Docklands

²² Elsa James, and Mary Prince, "Narration for 'Living in the Wake of the Lust for Sugar,'" Museum of London, 1 Sept. 2023.

²³ Ibid.

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Living in the Wake of the Lust for Sugar not only lays a foundation for understanding the necessity of Moten's challenge to a rethinking of the hold in all of its violence and possibility, it also allows for the drawing of geographical and narrative parallels of colonialism and the sugar trade to Canada. Just as Museum of London sits on a dock constructed by merchant, slave trader and ship owner Robert Milligan, our Redpath Sugar Museum sits in pride of place on Queens Quay as constructed by Scottish businessman John Redpath.^{24, 25} Both Milligan and Redpath were instrumental in bolstering their local economies through infrastructure built to enhance the profits of the transatlantic slave trade. And while the institutional narrative of the Redpath Sugar Museum casts John Redpath as "...a man of integrity, with a prodigious work ethic and a keen business sense,"²⁶ it conspicuously omits the fact that even as slavery was abolished in Canada in 1833, Redpath continued to benefit from "the provincial shipping infrastructure that facilitated triangular colonial transoceanic trade for nine years" through his participation in "the exchange of goods for slave workers and slave-produced commodities."²⁷

This first theorization of Moten's moment in the hold could leave one feeling that all is lost and that Blackness as nothingness is all that will remain. But, we are reminded by the author that perhaps there is more than Patterson and Fanon's pessimistic views of Black life. As both Gary and James' works illustrate, even in our deepest grief and vulnerability, there is an unfathomable strength and power.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ A short history. "A Short History of Redpath Sugar." Redpath Sugar, ASR Group, 13 Nov. 2012.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Zhang, Michael, "The Life of John Redpath: A Neglected Legacy and its Rediscovery through Print Materials," pp. 25-35, *Behind the Roddick Gates Repath Museum Research Journal Volume III*, Students' Society of McGill University, 2014.

author's lived experiences, we bear witness to his ability to resist patronization and dismissal while maintaining composure and grace under repeated verbal attacks.

The work of Elsa James returns in this postulation, expanding on our journey of resistance. In *Goat Curry & Rap*, 2010, James responds to an article written by right-wing provocateur and journalist Rod Liddle in *The Spectator*, a British weekly focused on politics, culture and current affairs. Liddle attributed "the overwhelming majority" of street, gun, knife and sexual violence to young men from London's Afro-Caribbean community and finished off his damning missive by saying, "...in return, we have rap music and goat curry and a far more vibrant and diverse understanding of cultures, which were once alien to us. For which, many thanks."⁵⁰ The journalist's incendiary linking of Black men to violent crime and Blackness to a form of alien-ness is a common tool of mass media which employs stereotyping to dehumanize racialized populations.⁵¹⁻⁵²

James, centering Blackness by turning the camera on herself, decisively humanizes these demeaning tropes that some viewers may share. Sitting calmly at a dining table the artist tucks into a plate of curry goat accompanied only by the soundtrack of grime music, a genre of rap that plays on stereotypes in a satirical

⁵⁰ Liddle was later censured by the Press Complaints Commission due to insufficient evidence to support his claims. See John Plunkett, "Rod Liddle Censured by the PCC." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 29 Mar. 2010.

⁵¹⁻⁵² Here I reference the representation of Black people in media, in particular the use of stereotypical tropes that deem Black people as lazy, violent, overly sexualized and ignorant leading to misrepresentative views of Blackness on a large scale. This misrepresentative view comes partially from media such as William Seller's Colonial Film Unit, which employed tactics of omission and division in the making of films in West Africa. Seller's ethnographic and racist observations of African audiences, which he deemed "primitive" and "illiterate" served a colonial and political agenda of re-education and control under the guise of modernization. See Ingrid Jones, "The Way We See: A Comparison of Gaze in the Work of Colonial Film in West Africa," 2024. and Herman Gray, "Politics of Representation in Network Television." *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness*, by Herman Gray, University of Minnesota Press, 2005, pp. 70-90.

manner. James, whose works address misrepresentations of women and the Afro-Caribbean community, delivers this commanding on-camera performance with a direct, unflinching stare.



Elsa James, *Goat Curry & Rap*, 2010
Film performance still. Courtesy of the artist.