

# Between Our Selves: Conversations on Race and Representation

Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik

**Abstract:** The promise of self portraiture is that we can see ourselves and be seen as queer, women, non-binary, and people of color. Racialized and gendered bodies can also be rendered objects and spectacles in their representation. This essay and interview by Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik in conversation with artists Patrick “Pato” Hebert and David Lydell Jones, is a dialogue between artists of color that contends with the problems and possibilities of self representation.

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## 1. Introduction

If the camera is a way for *them* to see *us*, self-portraiture—for racialized and gendered subjects—can be a way for *us* to see *each other*. As an art student, I became conscious of how my body was read by a larger world through photography. This is where I wrestled with the questions of phenotype, race, gender, and identity. Although my practice of art began with the self, it could not remain there. Critical inquiry is not possible in isolation; it develops in conversations between students and teachers as makers of art. This is how I became an artist—in dialogue. In the interviews that follow, I revisit these conversations with a former teacher, Patrick “Pato” Hebert, and a former student, David Lydell Jones, each of us photographers of color who share a deep love of the camera and a distrust of the ways in which representation and its technologies are used against us. These exchanges between artists are a critical part of the creative process—thinking through, making, and supporting each other in being ourselves in the world.

My twenty years of creative practice spanned a transition from adolescence to adulthood, student to teacher, analog to digital photography, and self-portraits to selfies. The dialogues I have shared with many artists, including Pato and David, have expanded my understanding of what portraiture and self-portraiture can be. In conversations that have unfolded over years, we have asked ourselves and each other, “Why represent the body?” and “What is photographic representation beyond phenotype?” The promise of self-portraiture is that we can see ourselves and be seen. In its more troubling manifestations, we can reproduce ourselves along with the narcissism that inhibits us from seeing beyond ourselves. We can also unintentionally render ourselves objects and spectacles. As artists with an uneasy relationship to self-representation, each of us has used stand-ins for the body. I have appeared as a black and white cutout re-photographed in color in *My Trials Have Not Ended Yet Said*

*She* (Figures 1–4, 2002), Pato has photographed landscapes, appearing in a suit of reflective silver paillettes in the *Oscillator* series (Figure 10, 2014–ongoing), and David has represented Black people murdered by police through abstract film photography in *Silence and Stillness* (Figure 11, 2015).

As people of color, we understand very clearly, and very personally, the power dynamics of making photographs and being photographed. On the one hand, our bodies can be hyper visible through media and advertising, art, surveillance, police body cams, mug shots, lynching photographs—both historical and contemporary—and simultaneously invisible on the other. It begs this question: In a colonial legacy that codifies and controls bodies, what aspects of self are represented in each of these realms? Where can we be angry and tender? The role of the camera in picturing, measuring, owning, surveying, and controlling land and people cannot be overstated. We describe images without people as empty, as though this implies a lack. This misperception has been a dangerous justification for the colonization of the American West as a space to be filled with white bodies.

Art became exciting to me when I learned that it could engage these very ideas, as a way to not only make sense of the world but to participate in it. In college, I had become obsessed with how my body as a young, mixed race, Asian American woman was seen by others. How did my representation function in the larger world? At Scripps College, Susan Rankaitis, Ken Gonzales-Day, Patrick “Pato” Hebert, Alexis Weidig, and T. Kim-Trang Tran introduced me to these ideas and to writers who gave language to my experience. The works of John Berger (1995), Coco Fusco (1997), Kobena Mercer (1994, 1991), Alan Sekula (1993), and Edward Said (1995) illuminated the ways that my image could become a racialized, gendered object.

I was my most available subject and I appeared often in my photographs. In response to all that I was becoming newly aware of, I created a series of black and white self-portraits as a paper doll with “outfits” that represented something of my different identities. I appeared in a sari, a kimono, a pollera, and jeans and a t-shirt. I packaged the cutouts in cellophane, complete with little paper tabs to attach the clothing. But I soon felt that the costumes reinforced the very stereotypes I was trying to critique. As a multiethnic, multilingual Asian American, I experienced the world at the intersections and this separation into stereotypes was a literal flattening of my body into discrete objects.

The cutouts migrated to different parts of my dorm room. I started playing with them, curious about the secret life of my image. What did she do when I was not looking? Where did she go? Could she get away with things that I could not? What was the difference between my physical body and its representation? I began re-photographing the undressed paper doll in her gray tank top and black underwear on color slide film. I photographed her at school, at my parents’ house, at the pool, applying makeup to her black and white body, caught in a doorway, sticking out

her tongue (Figures 1 and 2). The series culminated in my undergraduate thesis show where the slides were viewed through a loupe embedded in a gallery wall (Figures 3 and 4). I titled it *My Trials Have Not Ended Yet, Said She*, after a line from my namesake Ramayana. And it became my first body of work as an artist.



**Figure 1.** *My Trials Have Not Ended Yet, Said She*, color slide film, courtesy of the artist, Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik, 2002.

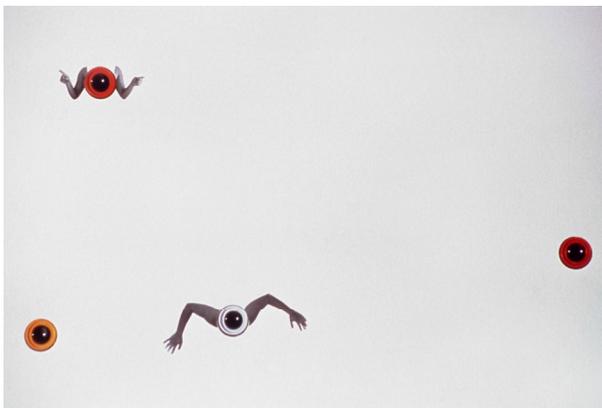


**Figure 2.** *My Trials Have Not Ended Yet, Said She*, color slide film, courtesy of the artist, Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik, 2002.

As I learned how to use the camera I was learning not only about my image, but who and how I wanted to be as a creative person. Pato, my professor at the time, modeled this for me. I had never encountered anyone like him—an activist, educator, *and* artist. Our conversations in developing *Trials* showed me what it was like to be part of a discourse, to engage in exchanges that brought in the world beyond. As enthralled as I was with art theory, a simple assignment in his photography class brought photography home. After a critique, Pato asked us to take our photographs off the wall. On the reverse of one, he asked us to write a note of gratitude. On the other, an apology. This connection, beyond the walls of the classroom, was the first time I considered how art could change our relationships with one another.



**Figure 3.** *My Trials Have Not Ended Yet, Said She*, Installation View, courtesy of the artist, Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik, 2002.



**Figure 4.** *My Trials Have Not Ended Yet, Said She*, Installation View, courtesy of the artist, Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik, 2002.

Looking back on these formative years, I was the last generation of art students to exclusively learn photography through film. Photography was material—something you bathed, dried, and reused. *Trials* became my document of a medium—a black and white photograph in a technicolor world. With the introduction of digital photography and the selfie culture that followed, I, who once made hundreds of self-portraits, stopped. I turned away from self-portraiture in my creative practice, only appearing in front of the camera within the frame of my installation work. The more critical I became of the world around me, the more I applied this to my own work—until it became difficult to continue making photographs.

While I first saw the medium as a way to contest stereotypes, I could not shake the feeling that I was reproducing myself as an object for something to be done *to* me. In Alan Sekula's brilliant essay, "The Body and the Archive", he argues that photography, since its inception, has functioned both repressively and honorifically (1993). He investigates the history of policing, criminalization, and eugenics, to show how our images and their archives have been used by the state to identify and control our bodies. Sekula's writing had such a profound effect on me that I came to see my own image as always already a mug shot. Even though Sekula continued to see promise in contemporary photography, I began to see self-representation as a trap.

Did my authorship matter? In "The Death of the Author" Roland Barthes argued that the author's biography and their intentions were unrelated to the work (2010). For Barthes, the death of this singular Author-God gave rise to the birth of the reader, a political promise that redistributed power. But what did this mean for the self-portrait? In reading this, I felt a double bind. In the works of Sekula and others, I was learning that I had little control over how my image might be read or used in the larger world. These theories gave language to my lived experience. However, as an author of my own image, I knew that I had felt a sense of agency and generative power in this process. As David pointed out to me in our conversation, what does it mean for people of color to use cameras that we were not even meant to operate? When Barthes proclaimed the author dead, he ignored what authorship meant for racialized and gendered subjects. This was not merely a lateral replacement of the Author-God with a different body. Self-representation has the potential to disrupt the hierarchy of the gaze between subjects and creators.

Photography and its limits led me to look beyond vision to interrogate the *other* senses of hearing, smell, taste, and touch. I pushed against visual supremacy as part of a sensory hierarchy that was raced, classed, and gendered (Classen 1998). In Visual and Critical Studies at California College of the Arts, Jacqueline Francis, Doug Hall, Tina Takemoto, Tirza True Latimer, Jeanette Roan, Michele Carlson, Julian Carter, Martin A. Berger, and Angela Hennessy were among the many teachers who shared my urgency about the implications of representation. Although I still had an insatiable curiosity to research, my time as a grad student was defined by a fear of representing

myself and a fear of making mistakes. I was afraid of doing what I wanted to do most—make meaning. I had become attuned to identifying the problems. Criticality holds us accountable to the decisions we make as creative people. But what I learned was that the movements of self-critique and making are opposed. They can happen in succession, but not simultaneously. This is where the relationships that support our creative practices can dislodge us from fear. During and after grad school, my references grew to include Roland Barthes (2010), Audre Lorde (2007), Martin Berger (2011), the works of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense (Hilliard 2008), The Combahee River Collective (Taylor 2017), and Grace Lee Boggs (2012). I became increasingly involved in community organizing work and my classroom extended to places like Kearny Street Workshop, Hyphen magazine, Marcus Books, and countless conversations with people doing the work.

By the time I began teaching, my students were adept at photographing themselves—frequently and with great skill—through selfies. In arts education, we often start with the self-portrait. In my version of this assignment, I asked each student to create a series of self-portraits without their bodies in the frame. This gave us an opportunity to get to know one another in perhaps surprising ways, through the objects, spaces, and activities that each person chose to represent themselves. The social currency associated with selfies, and the criteria that increased this perceived value, were so instinctive to my students that removing the physical body revealed some of these assumptions. The assignment also eased some anxieties with how our bodies looked. It gave us space to talk about the ways in which our bodies are read by the larger world and to be aware of the decisions that we make in how we choose to self-represent.

Even though I no longer photographed, I still taught photography. I still loved photography. It was not that I did not believe in the power of representation, it was that I was overwhelmed by it. In my first years of teaching, I recognized this struggle between representation in my student David. I was struck by his dedication to film at a school that did not have a darkroom and a leaning towards abstraction that was rare among his social media-obsessed peers. At its best, photography can be an opening into difficult conversations, and that is what the image facilitated between us. In his final body of work during college, *Silence and Stillness*, David represented Black victims of police violence through abstract film photography. That semester, photography lived up to its promise as a medium that could acknowledge, honor, mourn, inquire, and connect.

Just as I saw the classroom as a place for mutual recognition of power between students and teachers, I returned to photography in mutual recognition of the power between author (photographer) and reader (viewer). I recently returned to making photographs in the *The Archive of Dreams/El archivo de los sueños* (Figures 5–7, 2019), a project that traces my lineage as a photographer to my mother, Alicia Kuratomi de

Bhaumik. At the core of *Archive* are the self-portraits my mother made as a newly arrived photography student in the US. What I saw in my mother's self-portraits was a rare opportunity for her to see herself, and for me to see her in her agency. In the process of its making, I called on many of the same voices, including Pato, who had guided me nearly twenty years before. As artists, Pato, David, and I have each woven in and out of self-representation, and even in and out of photography. What has remained constant is our inquiry and support years beyond the classroom, an investment in the process and in each other, and a desire for each of us to be able to live as more of ourselves.



**Figure 5.** *The Archive of Dreams/El archivo de los sueños*, Installation View, courtesy of the artist, Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik, 2019.



**Figure 6.** *The Archive of Dreams/El archivo de los sueños*, Installation Detail, courtesy of the artist, Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 2019.



**Figure 7.** *Untitled (Self Portrait)*. Courtesy of the artist, Alicia Kuratomi de Bhaumik, a 35-mm color slide in Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik’s *The Archive of Dreams/El archivo de los sueños*, 1969.

The following interviews are selections from *We Make Constellations of the Stars*, a book about the relationships that shape our creativity by Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik forthcoming in 2021 from Kaya Press.

## 2. Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik in conversation with Patrick “Pato” Hebert

August, 2019

**Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik (SKB):** Can you tell me about the time in which we met?

**Pato Hebert (PH):** 9/11 happened just a few weeks into the start of the school year. It changed everything, obviously. We were just at the beginning of eight years of Bush. In the HIV world we were only about five years or so into protease inhibitors. The larger political stage was really intense and taking a very conservative turn and you were navigating an institution that was predominantly white, but at the same time feminist, and a women’s college.

**SKB:** You know, I have a very specific association with 9/11. It was my senior year and I was working on my undergrad thesis show, *Trials*.

I had gone to the darkroom on campus either that night or a couple nights after. Things were so uncertain. People were on edge. Because I was so paranoid and unsettled, I had the brilliant idea that I was going to alarm myself into the dark room [laughs].

I thought, this way, at least if someone came in I would know. I locked the front door, activated the alarm with the keypad, and went into the closet to roll film. Of course there’s a motion sensor, right? So while I’m fumbling with the film roll in total darkness, the alarm goes off and I panic. I think someone is inside. So now I’m

shaking, trying to put the loose film into an empty canister but also not wanting to leave. The alarm is screaming and I get to the front door of the classroom. Security is standing outside, baffled. I'm staring at him through the little window in the door and he's staring back at me. I finally realized what had happened. You can't alarm yourself in. You can only alarm yourself out.

**PH:** Not to be too prescriptive, but I think you should work with that story. There's something really powerful, intense and concentrated there. The "alarming myself in" is a beautiful way to say it, and the intensity of the solitude and darkness. Implications of being in the closet and how we're so often illegible to institutions. There's also the political allegiance you might have or aspire to with that security guard who's *just doing their job* as you're just doing your job as both an artist and student.

I don't want to lose the anxiety element when you were talking about connection earlier. The anxiety of that era, as well as that particular moment when you were alarming yourself in.<sup>1</sup>

I wouldn't want you to be depressed or anxious, at least not beyond the usual rhythms that we all have as part of being human. But I'm trying to hold isolation, depression and anxiety in relationship to all that we do to stay organized in relationship to these challenges, for instance staying meaningfully connected to people. Maybe I'm projecting a little bit, but I'm wondering what would happen if we both spent more time inhabiting the much more raw and nasty places.

**SKB:** I remember you came into the classroom once and you were—frustrated, I would say. You asked us why, in a class of twenty intelligent, capable people, not a single person was addressing what was going on politically in the world. It stuck with me, obviously, but I didn't know what to do with that at the time. I thought, "Is he talking to me, too? Is he disappointed in me and what I'm making?" It almost felt easy for some students to go to those inward "raw and nasty" places, but not make the connections to the world outside of themselves. For me, it was the opposite. I could easily make work about the world around me but not my interiority. In many ways, conceptualism gave me an excuse to not be vulnerable.

**PH:** We talked a lot about race that year together. I really feel like you were birthing yourself out as an artist into multiple worlds— unshackled by nation, language, expectations of race, etc., while certainly wrestling with these questions and pressures.

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of writing, we are in the midst of a global pandemic and sheltering in place. As we reconsider how we connect and gather when it is not safe to do so in events, museums, and galleries, I hear echoes of the anxiety, fear, and xenophobia that followed 9/11.

Your thesis project was happening right at the nexus of all that. In some ways you presaged selfie culture, right? It's all about presenting and being seen. But it's not because the viewer's body gets implicated in relationship to your mediated body. Your images were goofy. As emotionally heavy as you were back then, as was I, you were also really hilarious and brilliant and I feel like that body of work in college let it out. You were a paper doll putting yourself in a blender. There was a ton of humor and Sita irreverence in that work. She's literally isolated in the images except that she keeps herself company, right?

**SKB:** [laughing] That's right, I even staged a competition between my photographic cutout and my physical body! You know, I never really thought of the connection between my self-portraits and your *Oscillator*<sup>2</sup> pieces, but they are both about our body in relationship to place – and the physical sizes of our bodies and our visibility and invisibility. And in your case, a reflection of the space that you're in.

**PH:** Up to that point as a photographer, I had really been an observer, right? I've spent a lot of time photographing place and other people's bodies in place. Those were some of the most important early works that I had done prior to my series in Panama and I think I got really worn down on body.

While working at AIDS Project Los Angeles I was mostly shepherding other people's work. I enjoyed it very much and felt very fortunate to do it. It was important political and community work especially because it was happening in the pre-social media moment. But one of the impacts of all that organizing work with *Corpus*<sup>3</sup> (Figure 8) was that I'd been working with the body and narrative and queer bodies of color a lot and I was just sort of done with what for me at that time were the limits of it.

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<sup>2</sup> *If Not Always Of* Is a series of photographs by Patrick "Pato" Hebert in which a being or presence, called "The Oscillator", appears in various landscapes. The Oscillator reflects its environment, without simply or always being of its context.

<sup>3</sup> *Corpus* was a journal that featured art, cultural criticism, poetry, short stories, essays and humor to reveal the fissures and possibilities of HIV prevention efforts in gay and bisexual communities. From 2003 to 2008, seven editions of *Corpus*, totaling 35,000 copies, were made available for free across the US.



**Figure 8.** *Corpus: An HIV Prevention Publication*, courtesy of the artist, Jaime Cortez, Patrick “Pato” Hebert, editors, 2003–2008.

And so with *Hay una vieja que está enamorada* (Figure 9), to take my abuelita’s rocker out into these military and colonial spaces, from Spanish and US. empire, on the isthmus, was a huge leap for me [laughs]. It’s just a small and obvious thing, but for me at the time it was like this massive leap.



**Figure 9.** *Hay un a vieja que está enamorada*, courtesy of the artist, Patrick “Pato” Hebert, 2003.

*Oscillator* (Figure 10) came back to me in a whole bunch of ways because I realized that a lot of my work was dealing with place. I’ve been feeling very much called to ecology and unbuilt spaces after spending twenty years turning myself into an urban creature and enjoying that and making work in urban spaces. In a long way of agreeing with you, Osci is like the rocker. What happens if you presence something

in a space? What does the disruption or incision do to the space in these sorts of strange, quirky ways?



**Figure 10.** “*The Oscillator in Tualatin Hills Nature Park*”, from the ongoing series, “*In, If Not Always Of*”, courtesy of the artist, Patrick “Pato” Hebert, 2014.

**SKB:** Yes, absolutely. I feel like that’s what I was doing in *Trials*. That series was about imagining my life as a photograph. What did she do? Where did she go? Where did she get stuck? What kind of trouble did she get into and out of? The title was also a line from the Ramayana, the Hindu epic where my name comes from. The complicated story of the goddess Sita is something I’ll be wrestling with for my entire life because it is a cultural portrait of this ideal, all-sacrificing woman I was supposed to live into. My grandmother hated that name for that reason [laughs].

**PH:** When you were making your thesis work, it felt to me like your images were not easily comprehended by a lot of people in your life. Your peers also had that kind of white woman liberal, “Oh, these are so great” response. But how do you have a richer conversation about all the things you doubt about the work? Or the ways that the images excite you or scare the hell out of you?

I do remember that years later, when we found each other in Hong Kong in 2016—that sounds funny and awesome to say by the way—I thought *wow, you seem really strong*. A lot was happening and you had all your Sita fire. Your barely breathing go energy. You said you *were* really strong and a lot was happening that was great. You

said, “I think it’s because I’m collaborating and because I’m accountable to myself and others”.

It was a very succinct, beautiful way to say it. But I have to say now some two plus years later, I’m—I’m struck and moved by you asking what does it mean to bring that home as it were. That’s a question I’m profoundly wrestling with, like on steroids.

**Sita:** What does it mean to be accountable to self?

**Pato:** Yeah. Buddhism teaches me that the notion of self is false anyway. Yet it also teaches that I have to attend to and mind not only this flesh but the very notion of self, other beings, collectivity, my own quirkiness, this interconnectedness. This web of relations has always been very complicated. Very rich, but very complicated.

I do think that right now I am the most hungry to be able to indulge whatever I want to make and maybe have some other people care about it and also resource it. There’s a lot of craving and grasping there. I’ve also developed a lot of tools for how to propel work with and for others, and against things politically. But I’m a little worn down by group process right now.

I’ve said this to you before, but what does the work want? One question that I will often ask the work or myself is, “*What else might you be? Talk to me*”. I don’t know if you are one of those artists who believes work has a kind of life of its own and we’re in a very complicated co-dependent [laughs] dance with it as artists. Or do you feel like no, “*I produce the work and it is a thing that I bring into being*”.

**SKB:** I don’t know . . . [laughing] I believe in Coltrane.

**PH:** I’m not sure about full-on autonomy.

**SKB:** I don’t know if I do either. But I do believe that we receive things—messages, stories, that filter through us.

**PH:** Yes. Beautifully said. What rails does the work want and what jumping of lanes does the work want? That’s a hard enough question as it is.

I feel like if you can sit with the ways that you may still feel isolated, even from yourself, but also give yourself and the work all the connective love that you give everybody through your artwork, then there’s something really special that might happen. Including things that are really harrowing and scary as fuck.

**SKB:** Academia was really good at showing me how meaning was constructed—revealed the problems of representation. So everything began to mean too much and I was afraid to make mistakes. If signs and symbols also mean all of these other unintended things then how could I possibly use them? That has scared me into paralysis at times.

**PH:** For any of us who are perfectionists and/or have things to work on in ourselves, I think the easing up is really important. Yet one of the hardest parts about this political moment we're in right now, is that things are so freighted and so fraught that sometimes there's no room to play. It can feel like the stakes are too high.

That can be the left eating itself alive. That can be the inability to talk to somebody with whom you have very different values and opinions. That can just be exhaustion or fear or anxiety or wanting to alarm ourselves in, as it were. So there's something about your dedication and the freedom and sense of urgency and the need and the play that you gave yourself to go to that closet and roll some film in the aftermath of 9/11.

I was younger when I first worked with you. And at that time most of the teaching I had done had been in community spaces—public middle schools, or HIV organizing, or work with teenagers. I was trying to find ways to connect with people and helping them connect to themselves and one another. Support young Sitas to more fully connect with themselves.

It's so interesting to me that we're talking now so many years later. While I hardly feel like you're still doing the same thing, there is a beautiful echo, right? Not exactly a return, but a kind of echo.

### **3. Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik in conversation with David Lydell Jones**

**February, 2020**

**David Jones (DJ):** I don't know if we ever talked about this, but in the middle of that photo project I found myself crying ... just crying my eyes out trying to get through it.

At that point, I had taken every class that you taught. And it was in that last semester in the independent study that I started the *Silence and Stillness* series (Figure 11). I wanted to connect the photographic medium and the treatment of Black bodies.

**Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik (SKB):** I've always wanted to talk to you more about that project. It was such an honor to see it develop and to participate in some small way in facilitating its presence in the world.

I remember this distinct moment where we were sitting in my terrible office with shitty lighting.

**DJ:** Yeah, [laughs].

**SKB:** There was no critique wall to pin up work and the only option was to put these beautiful memorials that you had made on the floor so we could step back and see them together.

There was something that made it even more devastating to look at these images on the floor of this office in the middle of this institution where it was clear that it was never meant for this work, let alone this line of questioning. It felt like you were making this work despite school, not because of it.

Can you tell me more about how you made them?

**DJ:** For that series I would rip the film out of the canister. I'd crumble it, tear it, and throw it in a pinhole camera. I never recorded my exposure. I never treated anything "properly". Sometimes the temperature was too high, or it was too cold. But there was this intentional destruction and disregard of the film. I would take that purposefully destroyed film and scan it. Then I'd give each film strip the name and age of a Black person murdered by police. It was really important for me that you weren't sure what you were looking at but that it had a name and an age.

It's empowering that in art there are various ways to talk about an issue or a topic. At that moment, I felt that was how I could best do it.

**SKB:** It's interesting that there's a simultaneous disregard and an act of care that you're ...

**DJ:** ... bringing to the process. Yeah. I agree. From being unexposed all the way through rendering what could have been in an image—there is a mistreatment that's happening to the film throughout.

**SKB:** What did it mean for you, as a young Black man, to be the person—the agent—of that process?

**DJ:** It was so hard ... It felt like I was in some capacity doing this.

I was a pallbearer.

I was bridging two worlds. Abstract photography and violence against Black people. It was such a time of grief. Who's next? Could this ... you know ... something like this happen to me?

It really hit home.

**SKB:** As much as these are memorials, what is their relationship to your body? could these also be considered self-portraits?

**DJ:** When I created the images I felt like I was offering the viewer something that felt outside of the notion of a self-portrait. Now that time has passed, I do very much see these in that vein. There are physical traces of myself throughout the images, from the film's exposure to the handling of the film. The presence of my own physicality in the work as a Black man has just as much to offer internally as it does externally, if that makes sense.



Walter Scott, 50



Tamir Rice, 12



John Crawford III, 22



Janisha Fonville, 20

**Figure 11.** *Silence and Stillness*, courtesy of the artist, Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik, selection from a series of eighteen images, David Lydell Jones, 2015.

**SKB:** Absolutely, it seems like what came together in that project was the unexpected intersection of form and felt experience that was meaningful for you and for other people who experienced it to say, "This is at the service of something deeper. This is bigger than any one person".

I think of Audre Lorde's writing about how our feelings can guide us into knowledge (2007). Do you think your tears had to do with not only a feeling of sadness, grief, anger, fear, but also truth?

**DJ:** To this day the photo project is, like you just said, bigger. If I'm being honest, I remember the moment where I would just cry. I had the feeling that this wasn't just a photo project about playing with light. This, this . . . was bigger than me. This was bigger than trying to turn heads about what the medium is.

It was like a brief connection. A moment . . .

. . . of seeing.

**DJ:** I remember it was so tough to get through that part there. It was the first time in my life where I found myself at my computer, bawling, trying to scan. Trying to type the names and the ages . . . You know, I could have been spelling my own name and putting my own age on these images.

**SKB:** This connects me back to the question of self-portraiture. How do we picture our bodies and what we do with the visuals of unspeakable things? Violence can be a spectacle. Instead of identifying with the person it can render them objects. Something to be looked at, be afraid of, or feel sorry for, instead of recognizing the subject's agency and power.

In your work, I saw a transformation of the film that you were working with that felt really creative. And I say that word, creative, intentionally. It produced something that wasn't there before.

And this is all made with cameras . . .

**DJ:** . . . that weren't built for me to operate.

**SKB:** Right. After spending years photographing myself, I moved away from picturing bodies in my work for a good fifteen years. I still love seeing people in pictures, but only recently have I started to incorporate my mom's self-portraits in the *The Archive of Dreams*. In what you consider to be your body of work, do you usually picture physical bodies?

**DJ:** No.

**SKB:** Neither do I.

**DJ:** Yeah. [laughing].

**SKB:** I mean, I guess that's not entirely true. I did as an undergrad and I'm beginning to again.

**DJ:** I only have one photograph picturing a body that I would show people as my work. It's my little cousin with a muscle shirt. He's been running through dirt. He's got rocks in his hand, and he's so ... I just remember growing up as a young Black boy and playing in dirt with the sun setting. The light is coming across the frame like you've been out all day, and like ... there's just something there.

But other than that, I want people to ask "why aren't there people here?"

**SKB:** You know, it's funny, 'cause I showed a friend of mine the pictures that I've been taking and he said, "Sita, there's no people in any of these". And he kind of said it as if it was a negative thing. But it's an instinct. I'm always waiting for people to leave the scene. I'm waiting for emptiness.

Sometimes it feels like the body means too much. Not that landscape doesn't mean things ... in fact, it's dangerous to think that landscapes don't mean as much or that space is empty or neutral.

**DJ:** Right, a landscape's subtlety can be mistaken or overlooked.

**SKB:** Absolutely. What I tried to show my students in my history of photography class was that it's not just about what is pictured, but also how it is pictured. The violence of the American West is to look out on indigenous land and to say, "There's nothing there".

Everything means something. As I'm returning to photography, I've been fascinated by the presence of light. It feels meditative to notice myself noticing these small moments of wonder. My mentor Pato Hebert, who I interviewed for this project, also has a meditation practice, but you and I have never talked about that before. I wonder what this is pointing to.

**DJ:** When I think about the connection between our meditation practice and photography, I do think there was something really interesting you mentioned about the magic in the moment. Our practice has allowed us to accept how special one project or one photograph may be, but not hold ourselves to reproducing that, you know? In coming into a practice, we might start with embodiment, but there are people who practice and whose bodies become like ...

**SKB:** It's like you're erasing the edge, the outline of yourself.

**DJ:** ... the I, the me, the ego, it's just all sort of dissolved into this experience. It seems to be like a bridge.

I didn't have a meditation practice then. At the time, I was like, a photograph is gonna last longer [laughing]. Here's this moment that I could preserve for generations ahead of me. They could see how I saw something at that time. Maybe they had a similar observation? What other medium could offer a window like that? That's what I fell in love with at first.

**SKB:** Which is in a way the opposite of what we're talking about as non-attachment.

**DJ:** Yeah, yeah. That's exactly it. Again, photography, I think, my obsession with it, and seeing thousands of images, and seeing thousands of photographers and different styles of doing it, it's just how versatile the medium is. I think that's honestly what keeps me going.

Before I took your course I had almost let go of photography. I felt like I had to attend to the commandments. Like here's your f-stop, here's your exposure. Put the film in your camera and make sure you don't crease or dent it.

But I think, more recently, that interest is in thinking about how other people interact with the medium and how the generation now and the upcoming generation will interact with it. What does it mean to them? How will it make sense in their lives and their experience? How can they use it to make sense of the world?

**SKB:** I've thought about the *Black Archives* Instagram project a couple of times in our conversation. [Renata Cherlise] is taking old pictures, old media. Things that hypothetically people don't care about any more, right? And the overwhelming response to it feels like movement making to me. I think it has to do with being seen in the ways that you want to be seen. Many of the photographs are family pictures or snapshots that would certainly have been selfies if the technology existed then. Now, many years later, a Black curator is making those selections by and for a Black audience. I think of bell hooks and Deborah Willis' writing. When you have not seen yourself represented in the world, it is so powerful to see that on a mass scale.

**DJ:** It's beautiful.

**SKB:** And in this question of self, *Black Archives* is all about picturing bodies over and over, and over again. But this says, we are here, we exist, we're important. This happened. We are celebrating ourselves.

**DJ:** With something like *Black Archives*, I feel an immense sense of pride and appreciation because my experience hasn't been shared and celebrated in that light. Especially on a platform like that. When I think of the Buddhist notion of "no self", I think of a middle-aged white man being able to see the significance in *Black Archives*. I think no self in some respect is a way for people who in no way, shape or form are the subject or focus of a platform like that, but they can also, through a moment of no self, come to understand and appreciate that. Almost like a bridge.

**SB:** That's really interesting. I'm thinking of Martin Berger's *Seeing Through Race*. He's the one who taught me that representation can be an important tool for social change when we recognize each other's power. He argues that, for white viewers in the North, the most famous images of the Civil Rights era reinforced Black victimhood. And we're not going to get anywhere better if the image reinforces the superiority of one group of people over another. Those assumptions happen so quickly, so instinctively, so quietly. How do we navigate that as artists?

Some of us feel this need to grapple with this and to make from it. And if you don't do that in some capacity in your life, you will always have this sense of unease. That you're not doing what you're supposed to be doing.

**DJ:** Yeah, it feels like you're not talking.

**SB:** There you go. It feels like you're not talking.

**DJ:** Sita, is it too simple to say that our art practice is our way of trying to make sense of this experience?

**SB:** Oh, I think that's very wise, David. [laughing] I think that's very wise.

#### **4. Conclusions**

As artists with distinct practices, Pato Hebert, David Jones and I operate from the understanding that the personal is political. Personal relationships—including ours—are at the core of that. It is what supports us in making, which supports us in living. To quote activist James "Jimmy" Boggs, "It is only in relationship to other bodies, and many somebodies, that anybody is somebody" (Ward 2016). This is how I understand the potency of self-portraiture—our images can build power in dialogue.

At the time of writing, in spring 2020, we are in the midst of the global uprisings in defense of Black life and Black power. George Floyd was murdered on May 25th 2020, as this piece was being edited. There is a new groundswell asking questions about art, institution, and empire. For Pato, David, and myself, our relationships as student and teacher were made possible both because of—and sometimes in spite of—the academy. But our commitment to each other reimagines the classroom. In each of us there is a hybrid of lived experience, mentorship, friendship, respect, and a genuine investment to each other's wellbeing. The instinct that makes us pick up the phone to ask for or offer our support, our critique, parts of ourselves—that is what we build on from here. If we return to the idea of creativity as something that builds on what *was and is* to produce something that *is and will be*, artists, based on mutual recognition of power, can imagine the possibilities.

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