

Emeka Ogboh, *The Song of the Germans, The Power Plant, Toronto & Here We Are Here: Black Canadian Contemporary Art*, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto

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Michèle Pearson Clarke

Suck Teeth Compositions
(After Rashaad Newsome) featuring
Simone (left) & featuring Greg (above),
video stills, 2017.

Photos : courtesy of the artist

Emeka Ogboh

→ *The Song of the Germans*, installation
view, The Power Plant, Toronto, 2018.

Photo : Toni Hafkenscheid, courtesy of the artist

Emeka Ogboh *The Song of the Germans*

Here We Are Here: Black Canadian Contemporary Art

Biennials and large-scale festivals often sprawl across multiple sites, temporarily shifting the geography of a city. This spring, a similar transformation occurred in Toronto by coincidence, as the programming cycles at major institutions aligned. An exhibition of Berlin-based, Nigerian artist Emeka Ogboh's ten-channel sound installation, *The Song of the Germans*, opened at The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery¹ on the same day the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) launched the landmark group show *Here We Are Here: Black Canadian Contemporary Art*, which featured the work of Sandra Brewster, Michèle Pearson Clarke, Chantal Gibson, Sylvia D. Hamilton, Bushra Junaid, Charmaine Lurch, Esmaa Mohamoud, Dawit L. Petros, and Gordon Shadrach. Both exhibitions confronted viewers with Blackness as a political position that troubles claims to nationhood or common national culture and employed sound as a medium with space-defining properties that oscillate between local, national, and global geographic registers. The context for each exhibition was, however, strikingly different. One venue is a bright star in the constellation of the global art world of biennials and festivals, the other is a nationally oriented culture and natural history museum—one that fairly recently issued a public apology for a legacy of racist exhibition practices.

At The Power Plant, *The Song of the Germans* reads as minimalist abstraction. First exhibited at the 56th Venice Biennale, which was curated by Okwui Enwezor, it consists of ten, individually mounted speakers sitting in a half-circle in an intimately lit room. For the piece, Ogboh worked with ten members of the Berlin-based Afro-gospel choir Bona Deus to record a rendition of the German national anthem, which Joseph Haydn originally composed in the nineteenth century as a longer piece. The singers translated the third stanza (part of a revised anthem for a reunified nation created in 1990) into their mother tongues: Igbo, Yoruba, Bamoun, More, Twi,

Ewondo, Sango, Douala, Kikongo, and Lingala. The names of each language are printed on the floor, and the speakers have been adjusted to correspond to the respective heights of the singers. This is a powerful sonic intervention because, in liberal democracies, anthems sung in official languages play a symbolic role in state governance, as the repeat performance of a common cultural and linguistic reference subsumes the identity of individuals. This call to a common culture is predicated upon the legal categorization—and exclusion—of groups of people from citizenship status. Ogboh uses an algorithm to generate unique arrangements each time the languages begin a new cycle of anthems. Commonality thus takes place in the act of translation, recording, and broadcasting, which aggregates multiple languages and individual voices within a field of sonic difference.

Here We Are Here, on the other hand, draws upon personal lyricism and conventions of portraiture to challenge concepts of nationhood in Canada, where intersections between language and racialized identities exist alongside national myths of ethnic harmony and multicultural diversity. Robyn Maynard has described this process of mythification in visual terms as a “widespread anti-Blackness that continues to hide in plain sight.” For this reason, it is hard not to view the show in terms of the local significance of Black cultural activism in Toronto, for which the colonial attitudes and stereotypes perpetuated in the exhibition *Into the Heart of Africa* (1989–1990) at the ROM acted as a flashpoint. The current exhibition emerges from the multi-year and multi-platform *Of Africa* project, proposed to the ROM by Dr. Julie Crooks and independent curator Dominique Fontaine, as a counter-measure to this past exhibition history.

Among the many engaging works included in the exhibition is Sylvia D. Hamilton's installation *Here We Are Here* (2013–2017), which includes objects selected from the ROM



collection, and other museums. Shackles sized for a child, for instance, confront the viewer with the undeniable fact of slavery as part of the economic development of colonial British North America and New France. These objects of horror are juxtaposed with the more familiar narrative of Canada as a safe haven as told through the oil portrait of Alfred Butler, an escaped slave from Tennessee turned Queen Street entrepreneur. They are accompanied by large-scale, scroll-like digital prints listing the names of a burgeoning population of Black Nova Scotians in the nineteenth century. A recording of Hamilton's melodic voice speaks these names, thus bearing witness to the bodies and lives attached to them, as well as trans-Atlantic trade routes that are the material history of nation building in Canada—and of the ROM's collecting practices. Michèle Pearson Clarke's three-channel video piece, *Suck Teeth Compositions (After Rashaad Newsome)* (2017), combines stunning high-definition video portraits with the distinctive oral gesture of sucking teeth (in French, this is called "*le tchip*," as viewers are informed by bilingual curatorial signage). This symphony of portraits conveys highly individualized utterances of annoyance or disdain in the face of casual stereotyping and discrimination, which are potentially being performed in real-time by the viewer of the piece. When contemplated as a whole, the composition works as a kind of counter-anthem to Canada's national formula of bilingualism in a multicultural framework.

Ogboh's *The Song of the Germans* takes shape at the Power Plant as an allegorical meditation on language, citizenship, and postcolonial nationhood. Listening to this work also conjures the image of Toronto and its diasporic cultures as they are connected to the cosmopolitanism of global art worlds. *Here We Are Here* makes an irrefutable claim for visibility of the complex histories of Black culture in Canada on a national level. But the preponderance of Toronto-based artists and Toronto-specific

referents work to subtly shift local viewers' engagement with the ROM as an exhibiting institution (whether they identify with African and Caribbean diasporas and local Black communities, or not).² When experienced together, these exhibitions orient the viewer towards Black culture as a political force in the city, even as they address the nation-state as an anachronistic form in a globalizing world.

Felicity Tayler

1 — In conjunction with the current exhibition at The Power Plant, and as part of the annual CONTACT Photography Festival, Ogboh is also presenting a billboard on the south façade of The Power Plant. Titled *WER HAT ANGST VOR SCHWARZ: Casino Baden-Baden series* (2017), the work is part of his *Sufferhead Original* project and also touches on the themes explored by *The Song of the Germans*.

2 — *Here We Are Here* travelled to the Montréal Museum of Fine Arts (May 12 to September 16, 2018). To reorient the sense of locality, the exhibition was expanded to include the work of Manuel Mathieu, Eddy Firmin dit Ano, and Shanna Strauss.

The Power Plant, Toronto,
January 27—May 13, 2018

Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto,
January 27—April 22, 2018