

TREES AS  
REPOSITORIES  
OF  
BLACK SPACE  
AND  
MEMORY

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Olu Ogunnaike

*Did I fall here*

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*companions*



There's a mirror. No, a window. You may see it; you may not. It sits, unmoving, in the darkness. This mirror/window is watching, no, *witnessing*, you, me, *us*. And through this mirror/window, you, me, *we*, witness life. Or we think we witness, but *we* is complicated. Some of *we*, mistake watching for witnessing, whilst the Other *we* perform. Through this mirror, you either see you or me. And so, like me, or this Other we, you're forced to occupy the *in-between*. You are at once spectator *and* subject. Offered a view into a world you want to, but cannot ever truly know, and at the same time asked to participate in the witnessing of that world. There's a mirror. No, a window. It sits at the entrance of a gallery. Do you see it? Do you see you? Do you see *us*?

In his book, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*, Darby English contemplates the positionality, politically and spatially, of art audiences by reflecting on David Hammons's 2002 exhibition *Concerto in Black and Blue*. Consisting 'only' of a physical gallery space cast in total darkness with the lights switched off, illuminated by the dim blue glow of tiny lights carried around by viewers of the exhibition, 'one could only know *Concerto*'s peculiar darkness from the inside, not from a position of contemplation but from one of collaboration'.<sup>1</sup> For English, '*Concerto* can be seen to stage the contradictory and contested processes whereby racial blackness is conceptualised and represented, and diverse subject positions are assigned, felt, embraced, or contested in relation to it.'<sup>2</sup> By making it impossible for the viewer to perceive the work without becoming a part of it, literally, Hammons acknowledges and draws attention to viewer complicity in the reproduction of increasingly inapplicable viewpoints on the nature of the work that black artists do, a viewpoint that, for English, 'is often grounded outside the work of art itself and beyond the profound intentions of an artist...[and] the work of many contemporary black artists reveals that, for them, black is but one mode among the many in which they elect to work.'<sup>3</sup>

*What does it mean to make an image?*

*What does it mean to make an image of Blackness,  
where Black is only one mode, or layer?*

These are some of the questions that shape Olu Ogunnaike's exhibition *Did I fall here?* Through works like *Empty nests* (2026), we are brought into an intimacy with the layered nature of memory and identity. As a printmaker, Ogunnaike was drawn to the layered nature of surfacing an image in the printmaking process. Memories and worlds are brought into being through layers of (C)yan, (M)agenta, (Y)ellow, and blac(K). In *Empty nests*, each of these colours also represents a layer of Ogunnaike's heritage and kinship: C(the place of birth of his paternal grandmother), M(the place of birth of his mother), Y(the place of his own upbringing). The construction of the image is, at the same time, a construction of his identity. And the K? Here, the K is the Blackness, but the Blackness is not, does not need to be, is already, is always, represented. In *Empty nests*, black is not tasked with the work of

representation; rather, it emerges through the layering of place, memory and relation. The Blackness is the image, the image is the Blackness. Blackness is innate, ephemeral, ubiquitous, undetectable, omnipresent. As Rasheedah Phillips, co-creator of Black Quantum Futurism, among many other things, writes, ‘sometimes Black(ness) becomes so present that it’s invisible, unseen, like oxygen, filling a space.’<sup>4</sup>

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One of Ogunnaike’s earliest memories is as a young boy, walking through Balogun market in Lagos, Nigeria with his family, overwhelmed by people running up to him, pulling his cheeks and shouting ‘*London boy, London boy, London boy*’. A connection to place so unmistakable as to be immediately identifiable seemingly everywhere *but* that place, where it becomes suspicious, questionable.

*Where are you really from?*

Ogunnaike has always occupied this in-between space, as a ‘Londoner in Nigeria, and from elsewhere in London’. And for him, there is satisfaction and delight in the unease created by spatial interventions that reveal and reflect an audience’s unbelonging to particular moments, histories, or places, while providing deeper understanding of his own experience. Where the inclination to spectate is disrupted by being made immediately self-aware, ‘*aware that you’re looking into something that you are not of*’.

The transformation of memories or meanings of self through spatial interventions allows Ogunnaike to demarcate a ‘catchment of legibility for the uninitiated’. *More than a glimmer* (2026) is a series of eight black-and-white images, composed of charcoal. Diary entries that, when read concurrently, reveal the transience of life: ‘markers of time, space and memory’. While some of the images hold meaning for Ogunnaike and those connected to the memories captured within them, others have no emotional significance. As he tells me, ‘it could just be a good image...*right?*’. In some cases, these images/entries are represented only by an outline of charcoal dust. Here, Ogunnaike gestures towards the paradoxical nature of memory, which can be both enduring, withstanding cultural and ecological losses, and at the same time incredibly fragile and prone to being lost itself. But perhaps, the exclusion of particular images is also a practice of refusal, of boundaries. Of asking the viewer to accept that there are places, experiences and times they cannot know, but that still deserve *witnessing*. Taken from the artist’s phone, they include images that depict birthdays, dates and walks. Ogunnaike describes how these prints ‘may be void of individual meaning to the unfamiliar eye’, speaking to the way in which the particular meaning and memory held within an image can only be accessed by yourself and those with whom you shared those particular moments. In this way, the image acts as a bookmark or stimulus for only the ‘*initiated*’ body/bodies to remember.

Through Ogunnaike's *What are you holding on to* (2026), the viewer is asked to more deeply contemplate this ongoing exploration of boundaries and (un)belonging. It is through this spatial intervention that Ogunnaike finds it possible to 'posit questions as to [his] concreteness', to ask 'what does it mean to define black space?', and to explore how his experiences of being *[of here]* and not being *[of here]* can be gestured towards, illustrated and translated. As he articulates, 'I am "black"; therefore the space that I am occupying in said moment is ultimately a black space', and so we could consider anyone occupying that space, the viewer, to also be existing within, influencing and shaping Black space, whether or not they see themselves as of that space. In this way, his work becomes a practice of backscattering. Recasting the projected expectation for performance, of a clear line of demarcation between the spectator and spectated, into a recognition of participation. Sitting in conversation with Darby English's reflections on David Hammons's *Concerto in Black and Blue*, Taylor LeMelle, in her review of Rizvana Bradley's *Anteaesthetics: Black Aesthetics and the Critique of Form*, describes the act of perceiving

*oneself as an audience to an artwork and available to be moved by it rather than as someone or something which is deeply implicated in the conditions that produce that work, in other words a co-creator of the circulation of that [as] a comfortable and naive privilege predicated on*<sup>5</sup>

the perpetuation of a social order which could not exist without the formulation of a [feared/desired/envied/exotic/intriguing] Other. Rejecting these reductive patterns, and encouraging altered interactions with Black art/artists/space, Ogunnaike's work says 'I am from here, but I am not from here. These images are of people I care about, but they also could be you, the audience. They could be anyone'.

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There's a mirror. No, a window. You may see it; you may not. It sits, unmoving. Outside gates, outside walls. On the street. In the woods. This mirror/window is a tree. It's always watching, no, *witnessing*, you, me, *us*.

Trees play a central role in Ogunnaike's construction of memory, space and identity. They are the frame of the two-sided mirror, scaffolding inner and extrospection. They are the gatekeepers visible in the *Empty nests*. They are the charcoal, the *blackness*, dusted and layered in *More than a glimmer* and *Leftovers* (2026). Ogunnaike traces his fascination with observing, representing and working with and through trees to his childhood. Staring skywards in the playground, observing cascading trees overhead. Drawing trees out of the window, in the back of the car, as their forms blurred in motion. But beyond forms to be observed, studied and depicted, Ogunnaike's childhood revealed to him that, as he describes, trees are 'repositories of memory within the places and communities in which they

grow'. A game on the table, played by his grandfather. A chopping board in a family member's kitchen. Their provenance issuing from the places connected to the lives of his relations, the places they grew up, the places they called home. These early realisations, expansions of Ogunnaike's concept of the interlinked material and archival nature of trees laid roots for his practice that, as Cédric Fauq writes, involves 'work[ing] with and through wood – with its different 'states' and with the stories it contains, laid up in store for somebody to tell'.<sup>6</sup>

In her 2020 book, *Material Witness*, Susan Schuppli explores the 'role of matter as both registering external events and exposing the practices and procedures that enable matter to bear witness'.<sup>7</sup> Trees are some of the earth's oldest and, potentially, most recognised material witnesses. Through dendrochronological and dendroclimatological studies, the rings of trees guide our knowledge of the past and how we face the future, cataloguing, storing and altered by changes in the environment over decades, centuries and millennia.<sup>8</sup> The significance of trees as material witnesses, as repositories of memory, lies not only in their preservation of ecological history but in what they see, experience and communicate culturally, on the historical social events and entanglements imprinted in and on their bark. It is through trees that our memories become embodied. As Janine Clark describes, these memories 'are effectively sealed into these trees, whose altered morphologies – the "bulgy forms", consisting of new layers of bark and wood, emerging from their trunks – bear witness'.<sup>9</sup> This witnessing, which she sees as 'an expression of cross-world connections and a way of deepening and thickening them', brings to the fore the relational nature in which our lives are archived by trees, what Tiffany King refers to as porosity, between human life and non-human life forms.<sup>10</sup> Most of us are familiar with this porosity on a biological level, our life tied to the breath of the tree, and it to ours. The porous nature of trees, their absorption of human life, biologically and metaphysically, lies at the root of the alchemical process Ogunnaike undertakes in working with wood across its many forms in the making of space and memory. Seeing, as Rasheedah Phillips writes, trees 'not as merely functional but as artefacts of memory and meaning, storing up energy – energy that is neither created nor destroyed in the larger universe...[but] artefacts of memory tell events as they actually happen – as they have been experienced'.<sup>11</sup> This experiential quality of tree-held memory is particularly salient in Ogunnaike's use of charcoal in the making of new works, in which his own memories arise from and through the memories already held within the material. As he considers,

*you cut [the tree] down...it's still going to have some form of this matter that was left...from community, from place, from time, and then it becomes an object in another place, and then I or we imbue it with...further notches...If everything is innately kept in wood, and then wood is transformed into charcoal. I hope, with that transformation, these drawings I'm making still carry some of the previous narratives...*

And this process of making, this ‘constant regurgitation of stories’, is a source of deep excitement and possibility, particularly in transforming the Blackness of the charcoal, which, representationally, holds Black memory, into more than the ritualised portrayal or performance of Black suffering. As Ogunnaike contemplates, ‘if violence and love and everything is implicit in said material or said objects, then what showings or what presentations allow [different memories or experiences] to be heightened or to be [hidden?]’.

Black trees, like Black spaces, represent and bear witness to more than Black suffering; ‘Black life and Black spaces are not solely containers of violence, death and degradation’.<sup>12</sup> The tree lives, it witnesses, it dies, it breaks, it’s felled. It becomes table, frame, game, board, charcoal, *black*. It holds chemicals, metals, and elements. It holds moments of unimaginable pain and horror. But, as Tiffany King writes, ‘the archive is not a closed system that contains only one story’.<sup>13</sup> In witnessing and participating in the framing of mirrors, the printing of memories, the scattering of dust, the making of marks, we can and must, as King urges, in conversation with Katherine McKittrick, ‘dare to betray the archive of violence to look, listen, and feel for “what else happened”’.<sup>14 15</sup> Asking whether the tree witnessed tears of joy, as well as pain? Whether it shared in the tenderness of a loving embrace? If it remembers the births of children and the building of walls? If a line of relief appeared on its bark as it watched a London boy return home?

- 1 Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010).
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Rasheedah Phillips, *Black Across Time, Space and Depth*, ICA Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania, 2016, <https://icaphila.org/notes/black-across-time-space-and-depth/>
- 5 Taylor LeMelle, 'On Rizvana Bradley's *Anteaesthetics: Black Aesthetics and the Critique of Form*', *Tangents Art*, 2024, <https://tangents.art/writing/taylor-lemelle-on-rizvana-bradley-s-anteaesthetics-black-aesthetics-and-the-critique-of-form>.
- 6 Cédric Fauq, 'Scent of the Pines', *Crumbs / I'd Rather Stand* (Capc musée d'art contemporain, Bordeaux and Museum Folkwang, Essen, 2023)
- 7 Susan Schuppli, *Material Witness: Media, Forensics, Evidence* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2020).
- 8 Mary Gagen, 'How using tree rings to look into the past can teach us about the climate changes we face in the future', *Geography Directions*, 2021, <https://blog.geographydirections.com/2021/11/11/how-using-tree-rings-to-look-into-the-past-can-teach-us-about-the-climate-changes-we-face-in-the-future/>
- 9 Janine Natalya Clark, 'Whose Testimony? Thinking About Other-Than-Human Witnesses in Transitional Justice', *The International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 2025, Vol 19, Issue 2, pp.242–259
- 10 Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019)
- 11 Rasheedah Phillips, 'Black Across Time, Space and Depth', 28 April 2016, <https://icaphila.org/notes/black-across-time-space-and-depth/>
- 12 Tianna Bruno, 'Ecological Memory in the Biophysical Afterlife of Slavery', *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, Vol.113, Issue 7, 2023, pp.1543–1553.
- 13 Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2019)
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Katherine McKittrick, 'Mathematics Black Life', *The Black Scholar*, Vol.44, Issue 2, 2014, pp.16–28.