

Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum

February 10 - May 8, 2022

A Community Project and Installation in conjunction with *Being Muholi: Portraits as Resistance*

JD Stokely, Interdisciplinary Artist and Scholar (they/he)

Transcript of 8-minute Audio Story

KEY:

JDS: JD Stokely

AG: Arielle Gray

AG: JD Stokely is a natural born storyteller.

JDS: And if you'll indulge me, I just wanted to tell one other story. I'll tell a very

AG: We're meeting over Zoom. That crinkling sound you hear in the background is Stokely flipping the pages of a family album. Inside are water damage pictures that they saved from their father's house.

JDS: And most of these photos are some of the only photos I have of myself as a baby.

AG: The pictures bloom with hazy blotches of orange and blue. Details shine through like the rings on their father's hand or church in the background.

JDS: There is something eerie and ghostly - this one is like, completely gone. Um, about these images, but I can, but there's also something comforting because I can look at them and, and

AG: This family album is a perfect example of the work that JD Stokely does.

JDS: I think a lot about what is an archival material? How do we collect stories and why do we collect them? What happens when you introduce fiction and memory, which can often be futile or can be, um, kind of fabricated.

AG: My name is Arielle Gray and you are listening to the *Future Archives*, a project and installation at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. As an artist and reporter, I'm constantly thinking about documentation. And, as a Black queer woman, I know oftentimes those most marginalized have no say in how we're represented in our archives and if we're represented at all.

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Future Archives highlights the stories of 5 Black queer and trans people here in Boston in their own words. Stokely is calling into our session from Rhode Island, where they're currently

JDS: A PhD student at Brown studying Theater Arts and Performance Studies. And roughly my research interests are, um, so hard to describe, unfortunately, but I'm really interested in Black queer performance and aesthetics in general, but I think a lot about directionality and movement.

AG: Their work is influenced by both their queerness and their Blackness. As a trans non-binary person, Stokely knows that there's a lot at stake and whose stories get told and which ones are added to the archive.

JDS: One of the interventions in the archive is, is really to challenge and come take down this idea of an archive with a capital A, which can often be really exclusionary, right?

AG: Stokely does this through many ways. One of them is as a member of the Unbound Bodies Collective, a queer and trans BIPOC organization here in Boston. Another is through the reclamation of their own family archives.

JDS: So, my first interest in archives came out of this want to look a little bit closer at the story of my grandmothers. And, it came from a want of wanting to like, rewrite the story for her.

AG: Like so many in the African Diaspora Stokely's family history is bisected by the ocean. Stokely's grandmother is from Jamaica, but immigrated to the US.

JDS: I had a quarter of these stories that my grandmother told me about her life growing up in Jamaica, her relationship to herself as a Jamaican Black woman, but also as like a British woman, right?

AG: But Stokely didn't know as much about their grandfather. Just that he had moved to England. Their journey to find him took them across the ocean, to the UK.

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JDS: My collaborator and I found a Caribbean cultural center and we found someone whose name wasn't quite the name of my grandfather, but could have been. Jamaicans love to have a million different names.

AG: But unfortunately, it was too late.

JDS: So that the person who the director of this cultural center told us about had already passed away. And so, I was kind of, you know, in the city with an image of this man who could or could not have been a family member.

AG: Stokely decided to use their art practice to help grapple with their experience.

JDS: I felt at a loss until I decided to put all these pieces together incorporating, um, British path , which were like 1950s old, um, audio recordings of the Queen's visit to Jamaica.

And then in addition to that, I kind of played with this idea of, of blank slides, blank photos. What I emerged with was this solo performance called *Reparations*.

[Recording taken from Stokely's performance] So, there's a picture of my grandma that sits on the very top shelf in the cupboard, in her living room. It's about the width of my whole hand and

AG: In this performance, Stokely stands at the front of the room and goes through those blank slides. They describe the slides as if the pictures are there. Some audience members blink with confusion. Others laugh.

JDS: [Recording taken from Stokely's performance] Next slide please. Oh, yeah. This is Jamaica.

People thought it was really funny. They thought the blank slides were really funny because I was literally like, you know, showing a blank slide and saying, hey, this is a picture of my grandma, or this is a picture of Jamaica, right? They thought that this absence was humorous.

AG: but the reaction was markedly different when Stokely performed this piece in front of a mixed, predominantly British Jamaican audience.

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JDS: There was a recognition that the blanks were not because they don't exist, but because of their own limit. I think in some ways, a lack of being able to see ourselves in the archives, right? It makes you feel like you don't have a history, right? It makes you feel like your history has been erased.

AG: For so many of us in the Diaspora, old records and photos are hard to find. They're kept behind paywalls or stored away in inaccessible archives. This all sparked Stokely's exploration into what they came to call, The Impossible Archives.

JDS: In a way, there's also this idea that we are already fiction to the archive, right? That this idea of like, who we are, is already impossible.

AG: In these empty spaces Stokely found possibility.

JDS: In some ways, my play with fiction in the archive and this play with like nostalgia and longing and, and, uh, homesickness and like lack, this feeling of lack, quote-unquote, is actually me kind of say like a fuck you to the archive. And, and it's kind of like a search for a really kind of, almost like an imaginary reparations.

AG: Stokely's fuck you to the archive is present, not just in the performance work, but also in their community work with the Unbound Bodies Collective. The collective is in the midst of a multi-year project.

JDS: It was a project working with queer and trans Black elders and also queer and trans artists, activists, community members, to create living alternatives. And, a part of that was, yeah, interviewing folks, asking them about their lives, their stories, their dreams.

AG: Through this process, the collective has been able to expand the archive specifically the archives surrounding Black queer history in Boston.

JDS: The ways that, um, Black queer history in Boston is just it's there, it's so present. Um, we just don't know, we don't know how or where to look for it.

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AG: And I Stokely points out, just because we can't find something doesn't mean it wasn't there. Sometimes we have to dream to fill in those gaps. For Stokely, the water damage photos are a reminder of that.

JDS: What I found was that there's this space when there are these blanks and gaps to play and to reimagine and speculate. And that opens up these other possibilities for, yeah, other worlds, other, other timelines. I mean, Black queer people were so great at finding like beauty and joy and celebration and abundance in loss.

AG: Thank you so much for listening to this installment of the *Future Archive* project. There is so much, as usual, that we could not fit into this story, from Stokely's work at Brown University, to more of their family history. Head to the website to hear more of the full interview.

Lead artist and host is Arielle Gray. Sound and mixing is by Palace Shaw. The *Future Archive* project is a community-based exhibition at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.