WE BELONG: BLACK WOMEN CREATIVES AFFIRMING BLACKNESS THROUGH ART

Born in Kenya, and raised in both Germany and Kenya, **Atieno Odera** has had an international education since birth. Her dual education in Europe and Africa gave Atieno a unique experience before choosing to attend UBC. After completing the Coordinated Arts Program, Lilian completed a bachelor's in media studies, and began exploring her interests in communications, and how technology and media inform the way we think today. Atieno was an executive of the UBC Africa Awareness Initiative, where she planned the annual four day Conference Week to promote the UBC African Studies Program.

On the west facing wall of 258 Union Street on the downtown east side of Vancouver stands a vibrant mural depicting a happy black family playing music together while their ancestors watch from above. Both celebratory and melancholic, the mural commemorates the historic site of what used to be Hogan's Alley, a neighbourhood that was home to a large number of Black Canadians in Vancouver until 1970. The untitled mural that honors the black community, present and past, is on the site where the home of Nora Hendrix once stood – the celebrated community leader and grandmother to the legendary rock star Jimi Hendrix. What used to be a flourishing community of black businesses, residences and the only black church in Vancouver, the African Methodist Episcopal Fountain Chapel, the destruction of Hogan's Alley represented not only the loss of home, but also that of community and a unified sense of identity. It is a loss that is still felt in the streets of Vancouver half a century later.

People of African-descent make up roughly 1.2% of Vancouver's population, which is only slightly lower than the national total of 4%. The black experience in Vancouver is constantly challenged by those who seek to maintain its invisibility. It is on one hand characterized by fragmentation, tokenization and racism and on the other, also being positively redefined by creatives and activists seeking to assert the presence of blackness. A conversation with three Black Women Artists in Vancouver unveiled their thinking about the current social and cultural landscape of the black community in Vancouver.

The creator of the Hogan's Alley Mural, Ejiwa "Edge" Ebenebe affirms that black creatives are powerful, untamable and loud: their collective voice to change how people of African descent are perceived in Vancouver will inevitably be listened to. This is a sentiment shared by the South African poet Palesa Koitsioe and self-proclaimed self-care and wellness artist, Dora Kamau.

"Being black is an important part of my life because it affects the way people see me and treat me. It's essential who I am but it's not all that I am," says Edge. Her body of illustrations, which she describes as amorphous, feature magical black women in fantastical settings. She is inspired by her own personal experiences as an openly queer black woman in Vancouver carving out her space, and her artistic style speaks to this through bold strokes and bright colors that demand to be seen. She asks and challenges through her art: "Is it harder to relate to black people?" She describes her vision behind the mural was to highlight the ordinariness of black people. Indeed, black people are expected to be strong, resilient and for black women, there is the image of a magical black goddess, as popularized on social media with the hashtag #BlackGirlMagic. However, deification is still dehumaniza-

tion that situates whiteness within the normalcy of humanness. Rather than confine her craft to a tool for diversity schemes, she asserts that she aims to capture the holistic lived experience of black communities: more than struggle and pain, she also captures joy, love, family, community and belonging.

It is black creatives and community leaders who take the lead when it comes to the representation of blackness in Vancouver, since the local government and established brands often only engage with blackness when it comes to diversity campaigns or Black History Month in February. Such lackluster engagement with the black community results in pigeonholing black creatives' abilities and talents that serve not to capture a holistic black experience, but to fulfill capitalistic agendas geared towards profiting off 'diversity' representations.

The more sinister consequence of inadequate engagement or involvement with members of the black community concerns the mental health and general wellbeing of black Vancouverites. In recent months, Dora Kamau's revolutionary approach to art as a healing vessel has proven to be high in demand, especially for black women and women of color.

As a self-care and wellness artist, Dora has identified that there exists an internal conflict for black Vancouverites to either conform to whiteness or stick to their roots. Her practice, which mainly comprises informational workshops, is informed by her previous work as a psychiatric nurse and is aimed at creating safe spaces for black women and other women of color to practice self-care and self-love. She states, "It was really a yearning for a space or community where we could have authentic and meaningful conversations... to train and hold space for women who might not have anyone in their life to talk to or feel shame or feel judgement about the things they're going through." There exists a permeating sense of loneliness that leaves people of African descent, of both immigrant and generational settler backgrounds, vulnerable to systemic challenges and health related factors, including mental health in Vancouver. Dora's work therefore is a testament to the critical work being done by black people for black people to create a heightened sense of belonging and a healthier way of being.

Palesa moved to Vancouver about 3 years ago from South Africa. She further reiterates the challenges of finding a community in Vancouver. It was through her spoken word poetry that she was able to find a community that fulfilled her. She defines relationships among Vancouverites to be in a constant state of transition, where people are either very new to Vancouver or about to leave the city. Her poetry, her art that she honed and practiced even before her arrival to Vancouver, became her gateway to share herself with her community and allow them to practice vulnerability with her. By sharing intimate pieces about her life, she has received applause and tears from those who endured the same and those who witness her truth. Beyond the gendered experience of race that goes ignored, Palesa articulates the necessity of artistic spaces that allow individuals to be seen and to exist in spite of their racial background. Even as she contemplates the future of the artistic and cultural landscape of Vancouver, she notes that Vancouver presents tremendous potential: "As more and more black people come into Vancouver, people in general are going to be able to grow a little better and understand who they are."

Through their art, these three phenomenal women speak truth to power and affirm blackness in Vancouver. Indeed, there are plenty of black artists in Vancouver who engage in similar work: from musicians such as Tonye Aganaba, self-made diversity consultants such as Cicely Belle, Social Justice Doulas who educate and radicalize, and even other illustrators like Pearl Low who share heart-warming snippets of daily life in Vancouver. In a city where the physical and representational presence of blackness is constantly pushed to the margins, we live in a climate where a rising black population consistently challenges preconceived notions about blackness. There is optimism that in the future blackness can thrive openly and freely and be in conversation with indigeneity so as to move towards a community building that is anti-colonial, revolutionary and liberating. It is no coincidence that Black and/or Queer women are at the lead, for their identities have eternally been at the intersections where these systemic oppressions play out the most. As the non-profit community organization, Hogan's Alley Society, embarks on a project to establish a cultural centre that will act as a common gathering space for black Vancouverites, it is imperative to acknowledge the artistic and healing work being done by Black Women and Femmes.

The great Toni Morrison summed up the power of art and its role in community best when, in 2013 at Vanderbilt University, she echoed the following words: "Art invites us to take the journey beyond price, beyond costs into bearing witness to the world as it is and as it should be. Art invites us to know beauty and to solicit it from even the most tragic of circumstances. Art reminds us that we belong here. And if we serve, we last. My faith in art rivals my admiration for any other discourse. Its conversation with the public and among its various genres is critical to the understanding of what it means to care deeply and to be human completely. I believe."