

2021

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Recommended Citation

Bowen, Brandie; Chang, Ellen S.; and Aldama, Yvette P.. (2021) . "House/Full of Blackwomen: The Insistence Movement," *International Journal of Human Rights Education*, 5(1) . Retrieved from <https://repository.usfca.edu/ijhre/vol5/iss1/10>

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Notes From The Field

House/Full of Blackwomen: The Insistence Movement

Brandie Bowen^{*}, Ellen Sebastian Chang^{**}, and Yvette Aldama^{***}

What one does realize is that when you try to stand up and look the world in the face as if you had a right to be here, you have attacked the entire power structure of the western world. (James Baldwin, 1969)

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We write this underneath a fiery sky in the Bay Area where Black people are looking the world in the face with an unyielding certainty that we have a human right to be here. Nevertheless, our certainty goes beyond the simple right to *be* and exist and stretches into the right to live deeply joyful, abundant, and unshackled lives. While the fight for Black lives stretches across the globe, we focus specifically on local attacks meant to suppress the existence of Black women in Oakland, California and how we rise up through powerful insistence. The subjugation of Black women in this localized context is a direct reflection of a widespread effort to uproot Black communities from their guaranteed human rights. As Eleanor Roosevelt, the first Chairperson in the Commission on Human Rights, once said “Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home” (Roosevelt, 1958 as cited in Horton, 2007).

While we are experiencing the widespread mathematics of apocalyptic change, we focus in on our small place—the city of Oakland in the State of California. Presently in California, there are 600,000 cases of Covid-19, nearly 12,000 deaths, and in the last 72 hours a historic amount of nearly 11,000 lightning strikes have caused about 367 fires. People are also standing on the front lines of protests and other projects for systemic change calling for the city to disinvest from a police force that murdered Oscar Grant, Raheim Brown, and many others in Oakland. Furthermore, Black women and girls are disproportionately affected as they manage living in the midst of a global pandemic while also facing rapid gentrification, high rates of institutional and physical violence against Black queer women and gender non-conforming people, and absurd criminalization of everyday Black life. This is the world that Black women are boldly looking in the face, and, undoubtedly, the world is looking back.

The world James Baldwin (1969) refers to above was not the Earth,

Land, or community that nurtures us. Baldwin was talking about a White¹, colonial gaze that zooms into our “small places, close to home” in order to survey our joy and resilience and then attack our right to imaginative, self-determined life. [House/Full of Blackwomen](#) (“House/Full”), conceived by Amara Tabor Smith and co-director Ellen Sebastian Chang, is a site-specific ritual performance project that strikes back by building a bridge that links the promises of universal human rights to direct realities of Black people. They produce transformative art that addresses issues of displacement, well-being, and sex trafficking of Black women and girls in Oakland. Set in various public sites throughout Oakland over a five-year period, this community-engaged project is performed as a series of “Episodes” that are driven by the core question, “How can we, as Black women and girls find space to breathe, and be well within a stable home?”

We Insist

Resistance is always about being in response or reaction to something. We are in the resistance movement, but what if we become the insistence movement? We insist on our humanity. We insist upon housing, we insist upon respect. Because when you look up the word ‘insist’ in the dictionary, its root meaning is perseverance. It’s more of a demand. And it’s an actualization as such.

House/Full is all about the insistence movement. We insist on the dignity of our life. And you can’t take that away from us. If my circumstances which are interconnected to this racist capitalist

¹ Editorial note: in adherence with the style guide of the American Psychological Association, the IJHRE capitalizes all racial groups for articles, including Black, White and Indigenous. There has been general consensus for the capitalization of the “B” in “Black” with more debates around the term “White” versus “white.” As scholar Eve L. Ewing writes (see [here](#)): “Language and racial categories have some important things in common: They are fluid, they are inherently political, and they are a socially constructed set of shared norms that are constantly in flux as our beliefs and circumstances change.” We understand that language and conventions may change, and have decided at this moment in time, to capitalize all racial groups referenced in this special issue.

system forced me on the streets, I understand that my value as a human being is not diminished by my circumstances. I still exist as a full human being who insists on my human rights. (Ellen Sebastian Chang, 2020).

House/Full of Blackwomen is a revolutionary group that asserts their right to a stable, vibrant life and cites the guarantees of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) as a means to changing the material conditions of Oakland's Black community. They focus specifically on UDHR articles that affirm their right to "a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of one's self and of one's family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security" (Article 25). They also cite their right to rest and leisure (Article 24) and the protection guaranteed to them that "no one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms" (Article 4). House/Full of Blackwomen transforms the promises of these articles into [active art](#) that educates and heals the community while dismantling oppressive power structures.

This powerful group of Black women assert that their role as lead artists is to understand their community's needs in order to alchemize and distill them into public performance, as well as ritualize them into private actions of healthy change. House/Full of Blackwomen offers financial stipends, meals, and healing circles: This is "shadow work," quiet work, work that happens over time and space and in respectful service to the (un)recognized creative service and brilliance of countless unnamed Black women and girls who inhabit and fuel our global imaginations. One powerful episode, titled "[Black Womxn Dreaming](#)," portrays Black women ritualistically resting and dreaming in interactive, magical installations.

Capitalism has historically overworked Black women to the point in which they suffer disproportionately from sleep related illnesses and are denied health and rest at its full capacity. Angela Davis' "Reflections On The Black Women's Role in the Community of Slaves" describes the violence of laboring excruciatingly long hour days under the thumb of brutal overseers and slave patrols. She also points out that Black women had to perform a double duty because they played a central role in the community of

enslaved people as well. After hard days in the field or the master's house, a Black woman was expected to continue working in her slave quarters by performing domestic labor (Davis, 1972, p. 85). Her body was treated as a machine made to labor and birth more labor power for the economic interests of the slave owner. Davis (1972) also notes that because Black women were pushed into being “the center of domestic life...and thus as an important source of survival, the Black woman could play a pivotal role in nurturing the thrust towards freedom” (p. 11). Black women have been so essential in their communities within these caretaking roles and beyond them. Their rebellion, artistry, and leadership have historically been a measurement of the Black community's endurance and fortitude within movements toward fully realized emancipation. Furthermore, we must also be careful not to confine Black women into anti-Black and patriarchal tropes that force them into monolithic servant and lone saviour roles. This would only reproduce the imbalance of labor, power, and suffering House/Full is fighting against.

House/Full of Blackwomen is grounded in ancestral knowledge as they break these toxic, capitalist cycles that have bled into the everyday lives of 21st century Black women and tried to rob them of their right to rest and leisure. This beautiful episode is one of many that subverts hegemonic goals to isolate Black women from their joy and health and provides them space to embody the liberation they are manifesting for themselves and their lineages.



Photo entitled “Reparations Vaudeville”, provided by House/full of Blackwomen

This work operates spiritually, physically, and politically as it employs what Audre Lorde (1978) would call the “use of the erotic,” (p. 53) whereas the erotic is an internal and collective sense of reclaimed joy and empowered creative energy that generates freedom. It is not based on neoliberal ideologies that goodness and satisfaction are grounded in profit and labor. Revolutionary art like House/full’s rituals and installations have the power to shift this dynamic and halt the exploitation of Black women. Recognizing Lorde’s power of the erotic within our lives can offer us:

the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama. For not only do we touch our most profoundly creative source, but we do that which is female and self-affirming in the face of a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society. (Lorde, 1978, p. 59)

We plant seeds of change in the Oakland community, looking the world in its face like we have the right to live a holistic life. We insist. Consequently, as Lorde and Baldwin predicted, House/Full’s bold insistence on life threatens a Western power structure that is contingent on the repression of Black women, especially.

Lavender Honey Ice Cream: The Flavor of Insistence

In 2018, Yvette a member of House/Full (who can be seen in [this episode](#)) was fingerprinted and booked for “selling” small batch homemade ice cream. She served this organic ice cream as a treat during the twelfth Episode as an offering to “sweeten” the path for their audience. The House/Full program was used as evidence for her “wrongdoing.” Undercover officers came to her home under the pretense of buying ice cream. The report detailing elements of her life (the skin color of her husband, the Orisha altar in her home, etc.) all listed for the unlawful making of ice cream, leading to court hearings and yearlong probation.

These White supremacist laws serve as reminders that joy and sweetness facilitated by a Black woman is sign of humanity being fully realized—and that is a danger to the status-quo. The state takes intentional measures to quell the revolutions of Black women and then hides its hands,

calling Black women guilty, crazy, and subhuman. There are deep-seated contradictions between what the Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantees and what is real to Black women. K.W. Yang (2015) illuminates this contradiction as he reminds us that “the rights to work, leisure, adequate living conditions, and education...were not unmet rights but rights actively destroyed by the state” (p. 229).

Here, Yvette recounts her experience:

Briefly and for a minute, my spirit left my body, and the crocodile tears that fell, stained the Summons I had carried in and had laid on the table, I felt that. I say... “Ice Cream?” she sits in silence as I try to gather myself, and repeats it again, “Yes. Ice Cream.” She then explains to me that two undercover officers had come into my home to purchase ice cream and then proceeds to read me all thirteen of the charges and assures me she will fight this while she is still trying to fix this moment by not slowing me down. I am numb. Someone came into my home to harm me and I welcomed them in and I didn’t know? At this time, my mind is racing and scanning the faces of every person who walked through my door wondering who it was? I had only reached out to people that I knew and that were friends of friends. She then tells me that a complaint had come from someone who attended a performance that I had participated in where ice cream was served as part of the performance; the agents had followed my Facebook page and made contact.

I desperately try to explain to her all the reasons why I made small batches of ice cream, it was **because it brought me joy, because it saved me, because it helped me with the grief and recent loss of my father and because I was good at it** and just like that, I realized, the more I knew the reasons why, the more I became angry. I rarely broke even ...but what I did get was joy. She let me just cry. She didn’t rush it; she understood that I, a Black woman with no criminal record, was just dragged into the criminal justice system, and had I been a White or an Asian woman, this would have never gotten this far and would have likely been handled administratively.

The fact that Alameda County sent undercover agents to my home is a betrayal of trust and resources to every resident of Oakland and the State

of California. What could and should have been handled administratively, was instead handled by spending thousands and thousands of dollars and resources, spread across local and state agencies, laboratories, and departments to prosecute me for ice cream. It was ice cream, not crack; why the force? Why did they NOT directly send me a cease and desist letter? They knew how to contact me.

My home, where I laid my head down had become a crime scene, and I didn't even know it.

On May 30, 2018, I was required to turn myself into Santa Rita Jail for fingerprinting and booking. The Booking Officer had no record of me in the system, nor how to book me, despite the paperwork that I presented. He, himself a guy with lines on his face that looks like he has seen it all, was slightly disgusted after he spent 20 minutes trying to understand how to “charge” me. I was told to wait two hours in the lobby for “booking hours”. When the two hours passed, I was led into the jail by two young sheriffs who stayed in character for fingerprints and mugshots and released two hours later. I walked out dazed; I was met by my friend Amber who came to meet me as support, who looked me lovingly in the eyes and just let me just be broken. I remember walking out thinking...***Wait. I was just assaulted by the criminal justice system, who do I call?***

Matthew Bettramo, an overzealous District Attorney, who stands no more than 5'4 in shoes, was the prosecuting DA. He had built a case and threw the whole force of the law at me involving Alameda County's Environmental Health, The California Department of Food and Agriculture, The State of California Milk Advisory Board, and a few testing labs.

On June 24, 2018, exhausted, in fear and broken, I had agreed to a “Deferred Prosecution” ... essentially probation, in exchange for “one year of not getting in trouble.” Two months later, on August 18, 2018, the Senate passed Assembly Bill 626 – and one month later on September 18, 2018, Assembly Bill 626 the Homemade Food Operations Act (AB 626) was signed into law by then-Governor Jerry Brown. The legislation allows independent cooks to start small cooking operations from their home kitchens. And why was this not considered in my defense?

Ellen and Amber supported me through this process and in court.

They had researched resources, held my tears and shame, and got angry too. I sat amongst people who were before the judge for a lot of reasons, probation violations, drunk driving charges, domestic violence charges. We watched a Black woman who was a new mother breastfeeding, standing before the judge, and a room full of White men as she petitioned the judge “I am a breastfeeding mother.” She was handcuffed and sent to jail for a minor offense.

“I just want to be restored” -Yvette

Yvette’s experience is common amongst Black women because we are policed for seeking joy and healing while creating change in our community. House/Full of Blackwomen provides meals, healing spaces, and support in Oakland similar to the work of the Black Panthers, a political organization that fought against the oppression of Black people and offered direct service to communities across the nation including The Free Breakfast Program and the People’s Medical Clinic (Marobia, 2016). Fred Hampton, Chairman of the Chicago chapter, was also persecuted for “ice cream” charges. He was falsely accused of robbing an ice cream truck for \$71 and was sentenced to serve two to five years in the Menard Penitentiary (Palmer, 2009). Certainly, these deliberate attacks have nothing to do with ice cream and everything to do with an oppressive State’s historic and futuristic strategy to police the humanity of Black people as a means to sustain their false social position as inferior subjects for profit and subjugation.

The Insistence Movement is important to House/Full because insistence regenerates a tangible connection between humanity and what it holds as sacred: health, nature, having a stable home, making ice cream, community, ancestry, art, and much more. When we truly bear witness to the dance that happens between power and humanity, we realize that our insistence lifts the veil and pivots power in our favor enabling us to set the terms and the foundation for radical change. Over time, the corrupt system that Baldwin (1969) refers to loses power as it tumbles over itself responding, and therefore yielding, to the direction of unshackled Black









improvisation until it can no longer exist comfortably within the layers of change we shape.

House/Full of Blackwomen rises up in its full expression of dignity and humanity insisting and conjuring a bridge that leads Black women to their inherent right to beautiful, restored, joyful life. Their work is a portal to the world as it should be—a world where the colonial White gaze is not the gatekeeper to basic necessities like housing and safety. Instead, this world honors human rights as a living guide to our collective liberation.

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Appendix

Performance Pieces	
 <p style="text-align: center;">Referenced on p. 2</p>	<p>Watch at:</p>  <p>SCAN ME</p>
 <p style="text-align: center;">Referenced on p. 4</p>	<p>Watch at:</p>  <p>SCAN ME</p>
 <p style="text-align: center;">Referenced on p. 4</p>	<p>Watch at:</p>  <p>SCAN ME</p>
 <p style="text-align: center;">Referenced on p. 6</p>	<p>Watch at:</p>  <p>SCAN ME</p>

Film Credit: Alexa Burrell

Poem: original work, Vanessa L. German “I got arrested for selling ice cream”