

***A spell for wellness***

I [20:12]

## **“Y’unnastand” (You understand)**

This Caribbean patois phrase, equal parts question and statement, surfaces up through the waves of ambient sound that tie together Michael.’s moving-image work *cleave to the BLACK*. The film, featuring three screens, uses repetition and slowness as a means of creating a space of calmness to reflect on the pace of life and feelings of bodily discomfort for Black men across generations. This phrase is the only element of speech in the 35-minute work, which retires language as a means of communication. It instead relies on looping sounds and images to create a space of relaxation. It is a site of regeneration.

The work starts and finishes with a black screen - marking a simultaneous beginning and end - followed by storm clouds parting in the middle screen. Slowly, the screens to the left and right come alive in a muted black and white. The left screen shows an outdoor staircase on an unknown estate, up which six men slowly ascend before walking out of the frame. The screen to the right features close up shots of men sleeping - some gently repositioning themselves to find an optimal position of repose, while others are so still that their rest could be mistaken for something more permanent.

As the film progresses, the middle screen cuts between various, calming nature scenes - ponds rippling, undulating fields, trees - in vibrant oranges, yellows and greens. It’s as if the left and right screens, representing slowness and rest respectively, buttress the sense of rejuvenation suggested by the middle screen.

## **“Y’unnastand”**

Growing up as the child of Caribbean immigrants from Jamaica and Guyana, this is one of the patois phrases I heard growing up. Patois was not spoken regularly in my home - it was more of a special occasion dialect: something that started as a trickle and then poured out from my parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins at family gatherings or when we were “back home”. It was a way of expressing comfort and togetherness without fear of judgement that their language would be policed or understood as “funny” or “strange” or “improper”. My parents also used it when conveying larger life lessons in the form of patois proverbs. It is a language of safety and guidance. For me, for whom this language was familiar but not fully mine, there was a sense of warmth - of being held by something passed down from my ancestors.

This intergenerational warmth and care is conveyed visually, sonically and linguistically in Michael.’s work. The phrase ‘cleave to the black’ comes from the Jamaican preacher Paul Bogle, who led the 1865 Morant Bay uprising, protesting legal injustices that entrenched poverty and prevented Black Jamaicans from participating in the governance of their country. *cleave to the BLACK* is part of a larger phrase “cleave to the black and cleave from the white” suggesting a break from systems of oppression and a focus inward that gently latches onto a commonality while leaving room for new possibilities. A simultaneous claiming, relinquishing, and expressing.

The ages of men featured in the work range from 18 to 60, spanning generations. In speaking with Michael., I also learned that most of them did not know each other prior to this project.

However, experiencing the film without this knowledge, and by suspending some disbelief, these figures could be connected in numerous ways. They could be the same man at different stages of his life, relatives in the same family, a group of friends, or strangers that share their race and gender in common. Additionally, the shooting location for this segment of *cleave to the BLACK* does not have any characteristics that strongly link it to a specific city or country. This engenders a placelessness that coincides with the film's timelessness. The ensuing ambiguity allows for a sense of connectedness across multiple paths: generational, personal, historical, and geographical. It also suggests the creation of new legacies of rest and repair. As each man moves out of the frame after climbing the steps, another immediately appears at the bottom of the staircase. The figures ensure the meditative rhythm of the film continues by literally following in each other's footsteps at the same, slow pace. Each man cements the path of his predecessor, and symbolically the care and rest taken in treading it, while making clear the path whoever follows him will tread next.

### **"Y'unnastand"**

"The black body moves at the tempo of emergency"

Michael. referenced this phrase in his conversation with Elijah and Josh from Untitled Book Club for Montez Press Radio. It's something that I think most Black people, especially those in the diaspora can understand and have felt in situations that others may not consider emergencies; being the only black person in a room, interacting with the police or other institutions, being asked about something from a homogenising and racialised perspective.

When I first saw *cleave to the BLACK*, I was rushing. To pack up my work gear. To get changed into something nice. To catch the bus. To not be late. As I was heading toward Jerwood Space, I was constantly checking my phone, making sure I was on track. After running up Union Street, I arrived breathless. When I found my seat, I was still checking my phone, there wasn't a message or notification I was waiting for in particular, but just because I felt like there was something I needed to do, something I was preemptively missing. At this point, I was rushing without reason. As the film began, and the audience had found their seats, on benches, chairs and beanbags on the floor, I felt the urge to check my phone and ensure that things on the outside were okay. However, as the slowness set in, my urge to check my notifications waned, and I eventually relaxed into my body as it synchronised with the rhythm of the film. I allowed myself to unwind, to just be.

Exhale.

Rest.

## II Voices

**As part of the film, Michael. assembled an intergenerational group of men between 18-60, most of whom hadn't met each other prior to the filming of this project. I asked three of them, Lloyd, Abdoulah and Keith about the themes in the film and what they've taken from the experience.**

**What does slowness mean to you?**

"When I think about slowness, what comes to mind is peace and control. In the society we live in, we're naturally taught to pick up the pace and be always on your toes... This applies to a job, career, education, and hobbies. But I feel like when you are allowed to be slow and take your time, then that is true freedom." - Abdoulah

"...the slow walk is that slow journey in time that our ancestors took, our relatives took and really the slowness of progression to be recognised as a human being, recognised as a Black community, um, the recognition of the work and the talent within our community, even with regard to the legal and legislative status around criminal justice – taking time to investigate crimes against Black people...changing laws and legislation of Black people being trapped in the mental health system, the criminal system." - Lloyd

**What did you learn from the process of making this film? About yourself? Your body?**

"having to sort of really readapt my mindset and then my physical body to go at a slow pace was really quite difficult and more difficult than I thought because I just don't do that." - Keith

"I learned that there is still a lot about myself that I don't and that I may never discover. During the rehearsals, I always was asking myself if I'm doing the right thing or is this action true to who I am. The fact that I couldn't answer all those answers at the time made me realise I've got time to check who I am." - Abdoulah

"You just don't realise how much you needed to slow down in your own life. You know, the world will take care of itself. But who's going to take care of you unless you slow down?" - Lloyd

**What was your reaction to the film?**

"I really enjoyed it. When shooting, we understood the kind of vision Michael. was going for, and I wanted to deliver the best performance for him. However, when seeing it completed, it made me feel more accomplished than I ever thought I would. I remember after my first viewing of it, I fully acknowledged what must have made Michael. inspired to create this art." - Abdoulah

**What was it like working with the other participants?**

"I actually still learn from them [younger people] anyway, it's good that we can learn from each other, you know. So yeah. And we all just gelled together." - Keith

**Thinking about this film and the themes it surveys over a period of several months brought me to consider Black men's mental health. As a Black woman, I know that there are some common experiences that I share with Black men in terms of the emotional and psychological effects of navigating the world in our bodies. However, I felt that to gain better insight into what slowness, togetherness and silence mean for Black men, it would be important to speak with someone who has both personal and clinical experience in this area. The text below is a series of quotations from Paul, a Black, London-based therapist with who I used to go to for counselling. He spoke with me about his mental health experiences as well as themes that he has seen come up in his own therapeutic practice.**

"It didn't really bother me. 'It was calm'. Calm is what [my clients'] words are. 'I'm calm, it was fine.' It wasn't, but I'm going to tell you [my therapist] that it is. So therefore, you know, that's closed. Shut, locked up. Don't need to talk about it. Move on."

"Black men aren't supposed to cry. They're supposed to be tough."

"You may be in an environment where you have to bite your tongue because you're going to be judged."

"There was an expectation that you filtered who you were to fit into the environment. So I couldn't show anger because of the 'Angry Black Man', because you were seen as out of control and unintelligent. And all of those things chip on your shoulder, universally known as a troublesome, Black man. That's what you were...so you literally had to filter. It was almost like a tightrope you were walking."

"So we're always going to feel this lethargy, this tiredness, this tenseness, and we have to create the times where we can sit quietly. We have to create those ourselves. Otherwise we shrivel up and die, and we're not going to do that. We're made of sterner stuff. You know, we have to make sure we're equipped, which is why we create those moments where there's no talking."

"You need to have space for the slowness. And there isn't space for the slowness because of the tenseness. The only way the slowness comes in is when you're not challenged emotionally. And often [that happens when] you're in your own environment where you can relax. And whereas outside, it's almost like the armour is on because you're ready."

"When you're with like-minded people, definitely - that's probably where the slowness will come in. Where you can just be. Because the slowness is just being without any judgment at all, just

being able to be. It's like listening to a good song and just being able to close your eyes and gently just swaying to the music and just be... that's when the slowness comes in."



### **III Surveillance and ingredients**

The three screens in Michael.'s film evoke multiple readings: a clock (hours: minutes: seconds), a vivified triptych, or perhaps, more sinisterly, as a sort of surveillance device. Being watched or recorded has been a feature of Black life for centuries. Often that watching and recording is in service of a larger system of control. One that demands that 'the watched' perform appropriate behaviour in service of a power that scrutinises every step and misstep, combing through, frame by frame, looking for a misalignment - something worthy of punishment. A panopticon so vast it almost becomes invisible.

Environmentalist and literary scholar Rob Nixon uses the term "slow violence" to describe the gradual and often imperceptible destruction of natural environments that links a never-ending past to our present moment. I think the idea can be applied to surveillance apparatuses as well, and the gradual way in which they alter behaviour through their seemingly innocuous omnipresence. This slow violence is also generational violence, passed down through people and technological systems.

<p>Clarion Security Systems estimates that, in 2022, there are:            942,562 CCTV Cameras in London            1 CCTV for every 10 people            A person is likely captured on CCTV up to 70 times a day</p>	<p>What effect does this have on our bodies?            The way we move?            Our comfort?            Our ability to rest, both in mind and in body?            Where can we find peace?</p>
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In thinking about *cleave to the BLACK* over these last few months, conducting research into Paul Bogle and the Morant Bay Rebellion (which lead me to discover my great-great grandfather was involved fighting for the rights of Black Jamaicans over a century ago), and in speaking with participants in the film and my former therapist Paul, I have distilled a few answers or, rather, ingredients:

**Togetherness:** Whether this is through sharing a knowing silence or being in the physical presence of others, we need each other: to smile; to laugh; to hold; to listen; to advise; to care; to understand; to be visible; to see ourselves. We also need each other as a reminder that our struggles, in all forms and intensities, are not insurmountable. While unique to us, they can be carried by more than our own two hands. We need each other to know that someone has dealt with this before and may deal with this again. We need each other to be reminded that there is support. We can lay down the load.

**Slowness:** Set up a metronome, and let it tick at any of the following musical tempos:

- Lento – 45–60 bpm
- Largo – 40–60 bpm
- Grave – 25–45 bpm
- Adagissimo – 24-40 bpm
- Larghissimo – 24 bpm

Try and time your breathing so that it syncs up with each beat. Let your thoughts pass through you with minimal resistance. Feel the heaviness of your head

on your shoulders  
 on your torso  
 on your hips  
 on your legs  
 on your feet.

On your feet. Slowly stand up. Reacquaint yourself with the feeling of walking without the urgency of traversing the space between Point A and Point B. Feel each step and what it means to move forward at a pace that is truly your own. This will likely be uncomfortable at first. You probably don't do it often enough, but with each stride it will become easier, calmer, ultimately restful.

**Acknowledgment:** This is a balanced mix of being vulnerable and being present. In solitude or in company. Just being. Accept what was, what is and what will be. Allow yourself to cry, scream, be angry. Allow yourself to be what you shouldn't, to be what you should. To be what you know you truly are. Experiment. Allow yourself to transform. Allow yourself to become. Most importantly, do this with a deep honesty.

Together +  
 slowness +  
 acknowledgment  
 (in the amounts and ratios required for the circumstance)  
 = *a spell for wellness*