

*“Love, Always Love”:
Conversations about un/settled with
Otoniya J. Okot Bitek, Chantal Gibson,
and Ebony Magnus*

Artwork by Otoniya J. Okot Bitek and Chantal Gibson in collaboration with Mily Mumford and Adrian Bisek

Photos by Ebony Magnus

Written by Mizuki Giffin and Kitty Cheung

Anyone who has taken the R5 bus downtown or walked near Vancouver’s Gastown in recent months has surely noticed *un/settled*. This exhibit features the work of poet Otoniya J. Okot Bitek and artist-educator Chantal Gibson, shown in Figures 1.1 and 1.2. Gibson’s photos were taken in collaboration with Photographer Adrian Bisek and Artistic Director Mily Mumford. In an SFU News article titled [“un/settled art installation centres Black womanhood at SFU’s Vancouver Campus”](#) (2021), writer Chloe Riley explains that this exhibit covers 240 square feet of the windows at SFU’s Belzberg Library (Riley, 2021, para. 3). Okot Bitek is a 2021 Shadbolt Fellow hosted by the SFU Department of English. Meanwhile, Gibson is a University Lecturer in SFU’s School of Interactive Arts and Technology and a 2021 3M National Teaching Fellow. These two artists also worked alongside the Head of Belzberg Library, Ebony Magnus, to bring this exhibit to life. *The Lyre* is grateful to have spoken with all three collaborators about the accessibility of public art, expressing grief through creativity, and what it means to be un/settled.



Figures 1.1 and 1.2. This installation of poetry and photography looms over 240 square feet of the SFU Belzberg Library windows. Okot Bitek's poetry comes from her collection *100 Days*. Gibson's photos were taken in collaboration with Photographer Adrian Bisek and Artistic Director Mily Mumford. Photos courtesy of Ebony Magnus.

A Union of Literary and Visual Art

Both Okot Bitek and Gibson bring a breadth of perspectives to this piece through their diverse backgrounds in literature and visual art. During an interview with *The Lyre* over teleconferencing software Zoom, Okot Bitek explains that she is an Acholi poet, noting that this is a term she has just recently begun to use and claim. Okot Bitek describes an Acholi poet as someone who documents what happens through poetry while inviting

audiences to think about and discuss what happened through the delivery of the poem itself. In this way, the poem is “both the container and the form” (O. J. Okot Bitek, personal communication, April 9, 2021).

The poetry displayed in *un/settled* comes from Okot Bitek’s collection entitled *100 Days*. In the SFU News article “[Otoniya Okot Bitek bears witness in Shadbolt Fellowship](#)” by writer Geoff Gilliard, Okot Bitek explains that *100 Days* was written as a reflection on the Rwandan Genocide (Gilliard, 2021, para. 7-9).

Figure 2. Gibson’s image shown here was taken in 2019 and only titled “In Lieu of Flowers (for Breonna)” in 2020 as she mourned Breonna Taylor, a Black American emergency medical technician lost to police violence. Photo courtesy of Ebony Magnus.



Meanwhile, Gibson explains in an email interview with *The Lyre* that her photos were taken in late 2019 with help from Bisek and Mumford. We note that these photos are both deeply personal yet distanced—the photographs are of her own body, though the images are faceless.

When asked about this facelessness, Gibson explains that she covered her face because she was using process to figure out an issue she was encountering as an artist. Gibson expresses that she was “trying to capture the dis/comfort and ambivalence of working and creating in this de/colonial moment” (C. Gibson, personal communication, April 7, 2021).

Gibson continues, “When Otoniya and Ebony and I decided to collaborate on a public art project about Black womanhood, the facelessness of the portraits created space for Otoniya’s poetry and [...] for others to identify with and find their own meaning in the work” (C. Gibson, personal communication, April 7, 2021).

Having worked with braids in her series *HistoricalIn(ter)ventions* (Gibson, n.d., para. 6), where braided threads resembling Black hair are woven into colonial

academic books, Gibson explains that she has only recently begun to use her own body as a medium. She states this choice allows her “to get out of my head—and to consider how the braids may take on new meanings juxtaposed against the body” (C. Gibson, personal communication, April 7, 2021).

The vast interpretive potential of Gibson’s photos is evident in Magnus’s evolving thoughts about the piece. In a Zoom interview with *The Lyre*, Magnus mentions that she saw the photos before they were hung up in the library windows. For the image running along Richards street, photographed by Magnus in Figure 2, she had initially thought it looked like Gibson was carrying a heavy weight or burden. However, once the installation was finished, Magnus’s perception shifted into seeing an embrace. As for the image along Hastings shown in Figure 3, Magnus notes that the braids over Gibson’s face can be interpreted as silencing, though they can also be seen as secure when considering protective styles for Black hair (E. Magnus, personal communication, April 16, 2021).

Writer Linda Kanyamuna expresses other interpretations in *The Peak*, SFU’s

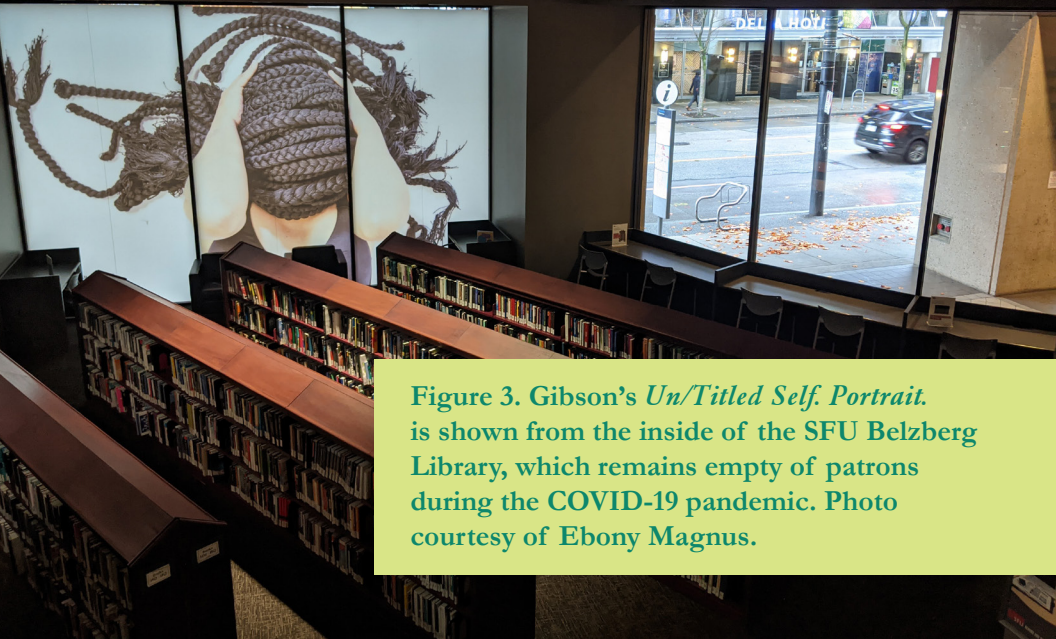


Figure 3. Gibson's *Un/Titled Self. Portrait* is shown from the inside of the SFU Belzberg Library, which remains empty of patrons during the COVID-19 pandemic. Photo courtesy of Ebony Magnus.

independent student newspaper. In a feature titled “SFU celebrates Black womanhood through art,” Kanyamuna discusses the significance of this exhibition:

“Black womanhood is depicted in the artwork through the strands of braids, representing her crown, her history, her heritage, her protection, and her identity, all the while acknowledging her inner void through the dark, empty space on the inside of this art. The installation reminds us that Black bodies are allowed to occupy space, in a world where they are so confined” (Kanyamuna, 2021, para. 12).

What does it mean to be *un/settled*?

Further in our interview, Magnus notes that *un/settled* came together out of sadness from 2020, with its quiet and empty streets, despair from recent events, and exhaustion from being isolated (E. Magnus, personal communication, April 16, 2021). The title *un/settled*, adds Okot Bitek, speaks to our unsettling times, though she emphasizes that we *should* be unsettled because of these events. “It’s a proposition,” she explains, “for someone who wants to reflect on what it means to be unsettled. Because we should all be unsettled” (O. J. Okot Bitek, personal communication, April 9, 2021).

Yet, Magnus further questions whether being unsettled is *enough* in some circumstances. She notes that when a Black SFU alumnus was violently arrested on Burnaby campus in December of 2020, SFU President Joy Johnson described this incident as an “[unsettling event](#)” (Johnson, 2021, para. 6). Magnus adds that there was something disconcerting about describing an event which could have ended a man’s life in such language. Though events such as these may lead people to being unsettled, Magnus

notes that it’s important to think about for whom this unsettling feeling is temporary and for whom it is not (E. Magnus, personal communication, April 16, 2021). In other words, who will go back to being settled, and who will never know what it means to be settled again?

Adding to the depth of *un/settled*’s title, Magnus and Okot Bitek both address the connection between this exhibit’s title and the common use of the term “settler” to describe those of us occupying Indigenous land. Magnus notes that this title serves as a reminder that she must unsettle herself and not be complacent in how she occupies this land from which others were displaced (E. Magnus, personal communication, April 16, 2021). Okot Bitek adds that this title digs at those who call themselves “settlers” and asks how we can claim to be “settlers” in the face of those who can never truly be settled (O. J. Okot Bitek, personal communication, April 9, 2021).

Being unsettled is often perceived as a temporary moment of change—as the liminal gaps between dormant periods of being settled. This exhibit and its layered title forces viewers to consider the dangers that lie in being “settled”

and ignoring the glaring injustices that should never allow us to be comfortable.

“I think it’s taken at least 500 years for this unsettling,” says Okot Bitek, “So, it should take at least 500 more years for us to start to feel settled” (O. J. Okot Bitek, personal communication, April 9, 2021). Viewers are forced to consider being unsettled as a permanent, not temporary, state. This exhibit questions what our role can be within this space of reflection, growth, and change.

Consuming Poetry as an Act of Window Shopping

Following this conversation on the exhibit’s title, we discuss the significance of *un/settled*’s location. Building on insights offered by Magnus at SFU Library’s “An un/settling event: Readings and reflections on Black art, identity, and place” in February 2020, Okot Bitek notes that before *un/settled*, passersby could see into the library and its tall shelves of books. However, it was unclear who had the ability or privilege to access the texts within. By covering these windows with poetry, *un/settled* serves as a piece of art accessible to

all, not just to those with special access inside (O. J. Okot Bitek, personal communication, April 9, 2021).

Otoniya compares this to window shopping: gazing into shop windows at the (typically expensive) goods within. However, she adds, departing from the inherently commercial act of window shopping, *un/settled* doesn’t demand that a viewer spend money to fully experience what is on display. Rather, it remains open for all to engage with and reflect on; no one is barred from the experience (O. J. Okot Bitek, personal communication, April 9, 2021).

According to [RDH](#), the building firm responsible for conserving the Spencer heritage building which houses SFU’s Vancouver campus, this location was once a department store (RDH, n.d., para. 1). When considering that Belzberg Library’s windows were originally a department storefront, *un/settled* more clearly comes to serve as a reclamation—it breaks down the barrier between who belongs inside versus outside a building, inviting everyone to experience and enjoy the art freely.

Libraries - Spaces of Neutrality or Power Inequity?

un/settled's public location allows it to be accessible to all, though it simultaneously calls into question why poetry needs to be on display *outside* of a library for it to be accessible. Aren't libraries meant to be public spaces open to everyone? In a promotional article for a 2021 panel event about *un/settled*, writing festival Word Vancouver describes Magnus's work as "[undermin\[ing\] myths of neutrality](#)" (Word Vancouver, 2021, para. 4). On this topic, Magnus notes that even though libraries are presented as free, open, and welcoming, there are written and unwritten rules that put limitations on who "belongs" in the space. For instance, she explains that there are often rules in place regarding how people are allowed to conduct themselves in library spaces, such as prohibiting patrons from napping or eating. Magnus emphasizes that such rules serve certain populations while inevitably creating disadvantages for others. When she entered this profession, Magnus explains that she really started to think about how these policies were designed. "Rules and policies don't exist in a vacuum," she notes. "Someone had to write them

for a purpose" (E. Magnus, personal communication, April 16, 2021).

Magnus adds that libraries are an easy thing to feel good about, conjuring ideas of being free, open, and resourceful. Yet, she emphasizes, when it comes to social structures, there's no such thing as neutrality—the positive imagery associated with libraries can sometimes eclipse real problems of disparity and exclusion. Magnus adds that the vast majority of librarians in North America are white, making it hard to move through this field as a person of colour. Moreover, libraries must often demonstrate value to justify funding and support, though there are seldom conversations regarding the power imbalances this can create (E. Magnus, personal communication, April 16, 2021). *un/settled* serves as a statement against this neutrality, revealing it to be a fabrication.

Exploring Grief through Art

The *un/settled* installation was created as a tribute to Breonna Taylor: a Black American woman who was murdered by police in 2020, as reported by *The Guardian* journalist Joanna Walters in the article "[DoJ opens inquiry into](#)

Louisville policing over Breonna Taylor's death" (2021). In the process of creating art born from grief, *The Lyre* is curious how these three collaborators maintained a sense of hope or healing, or if it sometimes felt like only despair.

Okot Bitek attributes her friend, Irish poet Padraig O'Tuama, in stating that it is "better to write from scars than it is to write from wounds." Okot Bitek explains that when artists experience pain, they can find ways to cope and separate themselves from the art that is created from this experience. For example, Okot Bitek explains that *100 Days* is a work of memory two decades after the Rwandan Genocide and she writes from the position of an African from that region. She explains that this distance helps her find the space necessary to reflect on tragedy in her work.

Okot Bitek states that, for her, the job of the artist is to witness, and that in order to continue onwards as an artist, "you need to be able to wipe the tears from your eyes and be clear-eyed and be brave." To writers expressing pain in

their own work, Okot Bitek advises that their first priority should be to take care of themselves so that they can write about "it," whatever that "it" may be (O. J. Okot Bitek, personal communication, April 9, 2021).

Magnus mentions that, when collaborating on this piece with such prominent themes of grief and loss, it definitely felt like only despair at times. However, she adds that she, Okot Bitek, and Gibson spent a lot of time meeting and having conversations while coordinating this exhibit. Through these conversations, Magnus explains how they created a space for each other in a way that felt very needed at the time. She recalls how she felt comfortable and seen in this community with two other Black women, and even though they were brought together by despair, Magnus felt that they were also able to relish in joy and community. When she heads to work at the Belzberg Library, Magnus mentions that she can feel herself smiling the minute she sees the installation from the street (E. Magnus, personal communication, April 16, 2021).

Gibson also emphasizes the importance of community that emerged from collaborating with Okot Bitek and Magnus. While she doubts whether she will ever heal from this grief, she states,

“there was some relief and respite in creating a monumental tribute to Breonna Taylor with Otoniya and Ebony, both in the scope and size of the project, in the act of collaborating with two Black women who cared as deeply as I did, and in the process of sharing our grief and pain and love, always love, with Black women, BIPOC folk, and others trying [to make] sense of the senseless” (C. Gibson, personal communication, April 7, 2021).

We thank Okot Bitek, Gibson, Bisek, and Mumford for sharing their art with the SFU community, and Magnus for facilitating these opportunities for representation within a higher institution. We would like to especially and wholeheartedly thank Okot Bitek, Gibson, and Magnus for taking the time to speak with us. The thought and care they put into their interview responses have tremendously enriched this article.

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