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# “Bill ‘Blackjack’ Horton”

(a multidisciplinary art work)

Between the River and Lagoon

Artist-in-Residence Project

Onajide Shabaka - January 31, 2014



*“Bill ‘Blackjack’ Horton”  
(alternative view)  
archival pigment print  
© 2014*

## Uncovering Places of Memory

The narrative of "Bill 'Blackjack' Horton," is a work of historical fiction documenting the past from a retrospective viewpoint. There are two site specific locations in this project that have very different presences. One, a now boarded up house on Avenue "A" in the urban neighborhood near downtown Fort Pierce, Florida. This neighborhood north of the central street of the city proper, Orange Avenue, was the area of residence of Shabaka's family. They had moved to Saint Lucie County in 1920 or so. The County had only been incorporated since July, 1905, and was formerly part of Brevard County. The other location was rural and features grassy waters, hammocks, and a variety of flora and fauna (mushrooms, medicinal and poisonous plants, hawks, vultures, alligators and gopher tortoises).

Much of the architecture Shabaka had observed and previously documented from his residence in the late 1970s and again from 1987-1994 are now empty spaces with many elderly residents deceased and their children living away from the County. After so many years and a changing generation of residents one would likely expect such an occurrence.



Two unknown women



"Mamie" Jordan (landowner)



Poling a skiff (FL State Archives)

Using photography as a medium to interrogate socio-political concerns with reference to the past, "Bill 'Blackjack' Horton," highlights a typical small migrant town along central east coast Florida in the 1930s. The rural landscape of work and play documented by the artist over thirty years of travels to Saint Lucie County also reveals racial and class injustices, including formerly restricted use of local beaches, housing segregation, and institutionally sanctioned discrimination. We also have to remember that well into the late 1970s Fort Pierce had an active Ku Klux Klan organization. Landscapes inhabited by African Americans during the last hundred years represent meager environmental episodes and speak to cultural fragmentation and racial segregation.

The prospect of uncovering an episode from the past relies on the ability to trigger the mind to remember. This unfolding episode is dynamic and in trying to recover a recollection we become conscious of the act, work to adjust, and focus.

As a performative activity during the residency Onajide Shabaka's body acted as a repository of history (ethnic and specific to Fort Pierce, Florida) as this project offered a shifting or reinterpretation of both "site," "self," and "space" as these relate to one's experience by discretely transversing various neighborhoods where the artist had identified historically archived sites and material remains.

This project is one that is not isolated within the institutional setting, but one that gains vitality through direct engagement with its environment and its audience. One thing that has to be considered in the project is a re-thinking of site-specificity in both aesthetic and political terms because,

*“Whether fixed permanently, installed temporarily or performed on site for only moments of time, site-specific art engages with the social, cultural, historical and ideological infrastructure of the city. These interactions resonate permanently as fixed assets or in documented forms such as video and still photography. This resonance is bound up in an empirical and tactile but also sensorial experience of place.” (Paul Cooper)*

The artist is interested in the equation between words, image, and place. However, some slippage occurs when moving between thinking, drawing, and producing. The juxtaposition of image, text and speech is important as is the spaces between them. There is also a liminal space between history and the urban landscape provoking a reformulation of ephemeral space and the visible bodies of those from 1930s - 40s, largely African American, Bahaman, Jamaican, and Anglo Americans.

Although this project has a transience and the seemingly permanent nature of the site as a fixed place requires that we understand the notions being investigated to have a lingering effect. Many situations of note here recall a violence, an injustice or a radical (perhaps even violent) change of some sort. In a sense place, community and memory become important concepts in realizing the fractious space of the city, even a small one like Fort Pierce, Florida.

*“The question is, can we bring place out of hiding and expose it to renewed scrutiny? A good place to start is by a consideration of its own complex history. To become familiar with this history is to be in a better position to attest to the pervasiveness of place in our lives: in our language and logic as in our ethics and politics, in our bodily bearing and in our personal relations. To uncover the hidden history of place is to find a way back into the place-world – a way to savor the renaissance of place even on the most recalcitrant terrain.” (Edward S. Casey)*

(A big thank you and a note of gratitude to all those that supported the Kickstarter campaign for this project to make it a reality. Each supporter received a gift of art for their financial assistance to complete the residency and produce their gifts. The art works were based on ongoing investigations of life along the Indian River Lagoon.)

## The short narrative of “Bill ‘Blackjack’ Horton”

"On the 22nd day of November, 1937, the body of Bill 'Blackjack' Horton was found naked, covered in mud, and entangled in swamp undergrowth. His black body was found by two women, Annie and Maizie Williams, sisters, as they searched for medicinal plants. They returned to town and notified the skeptical and slow acting authorities. The sheriff's office claimed they never received a written missing person filing. However, in a court sealed document Annie and Maizie were named as witnesses, yet the coroner's report has been open to continual questions of incompetence and racial bias. Annie and Maizie never again spoke of their ordeal. One year later the sisters moved into their new homestead made possible by a small cash windfall." (© all rights reserved 2014)





*(top) "Annie & Maizie Williams Homestead"  
(bottom) "Bill 'Blackjack' Horton, Drowned"  
archival pigment prints (diptych) © 2014*