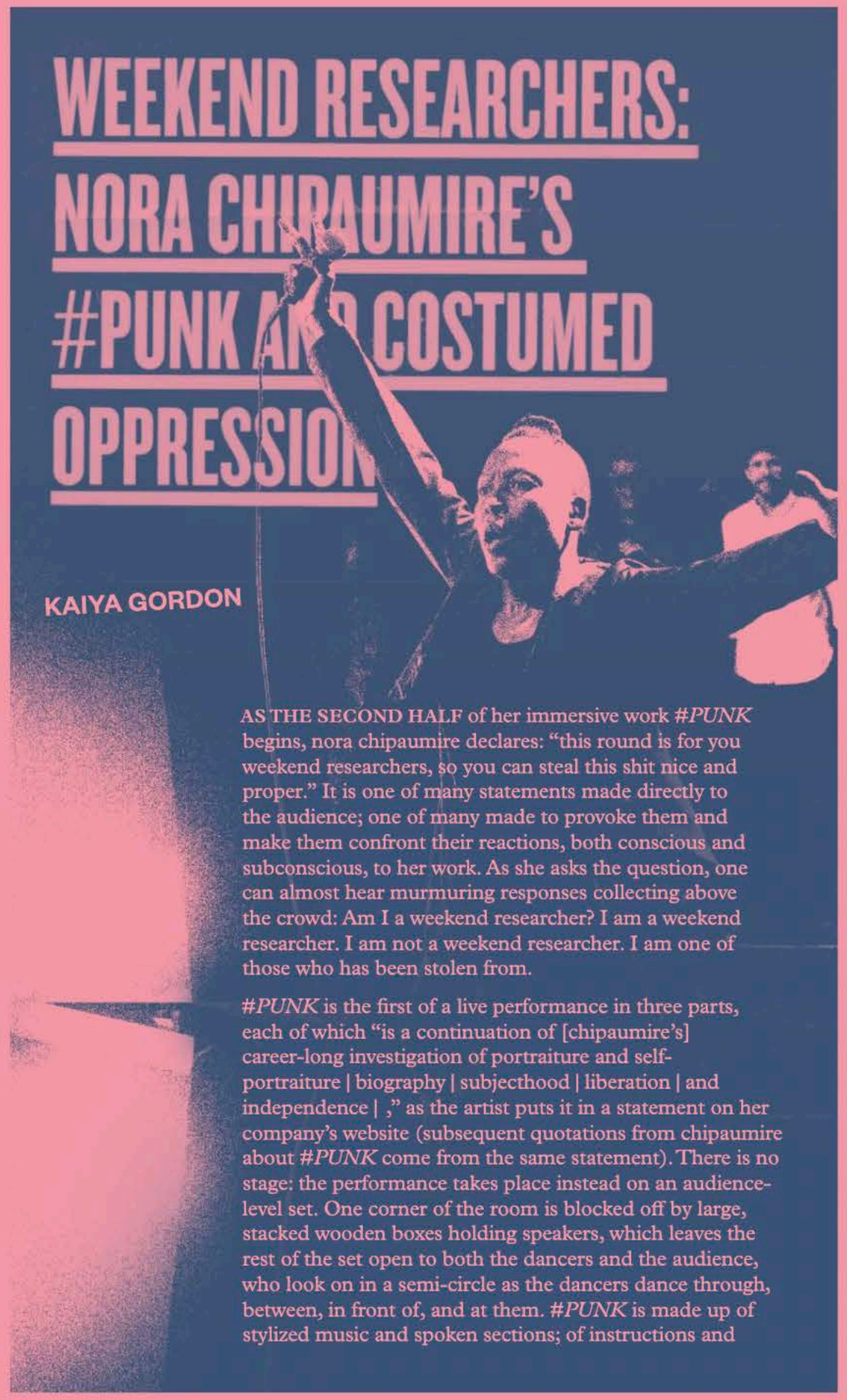
WEEKEND RESEARCHERS: NORA CHIPAUMIRE'S #PUNK AND COSTUMED OPPRESSION

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AS THE SECOND HALF of her immersive work *#PUNK* begins, nora chipaumire declares: "this round is for you weekend researchers, so you can steal this shit nice and proper." It is one of many statements made directly to the audience; one of many made to provoke them and make them confront their reactions, both conscious and subconscious, to her work. As she asks the question, one can almost hear murmuring responses collecting above the crowd: Am I a weekend researcher? I am a weekend researcher. I am not a weekend researcher. I am one of those who has been stolen from.

#PUNK is the first of a live performance in three parts, each of which "is a continuation of [chipaumire's] career-long investigation of portraiture and self-portraiture | biography | subjecthood | liberation | and independence | ," as the artist puts it in a statement on her company's website (subsequent quotations from chipaumire about *#PUNK* come from the same statement). There is no stage: the performance takes place instead on an audience-level set. One corner of the room is blocked off by large, stacked wooden boxes holding speakers, which leaves the rest of the set open to both the dancers and the audience, who look on in a semi-circle as the dancers dance through, between, in front of, and at them. *#PUNK* is made up of stylized music and spoken sections; of instructions and storytelling; of eye-contact and bounding movement; of stomping, contorting, and dancers mirroring each other's movements. And it is spurred, specifically, by the Patti Smith song "Rock 'n' Roll N*****" (asterisks mine), a song that appears on the same album as "Because the Night," and has been covered by Marilyn Manson—and yet is also a song I did not know existed before researching and viewing *#PUNK*. How is it that Patti Smith, beloved underground icon, Rock and Roll Hall of Famer, and indie book darling, released a song that not only flagrantly employs the N-word in its title, but repeats it throughout, and that song is not thought of as a scourge on her career? And how might that song, as used by nora chipaumire, indict the very whiteness of punk, which foregrounds its use of that word?

"What was the Patti Smith Group thinking when they recorded 'Rock 'n' Roll N*****' in 1978?" queried Stephen Duncombe and Maxwell Tremblay in their anthology *White Riot: Punk Rock and the Politics of Race* (p. 18). "This was the post-Civil Rights, pre-Gangsta Rap era, and the N-word was strictly *verboten*.... The song made no commercial sense. But it did make sense in the logic of another tradition: the history of White outsiders and their identification with racial and cultural Others."

When I tell my roommate or my friends that Patti Smith has a song that included the N-word, they assume I mean that Smith has a song in which she perhaps says the word once, perhaps as an aside, an afterthought. "That's WILD," they say, when I explain that, in fact, the word is integral to the thesis of the song: that Smith *is* someone who might be called that slur, as though she, a white artist, can identify with and assume the trauma of a word that comes directly from slavery and the (continued) genocide of black Americans. It is wild. But it is not out of step with punk ethos; rather, as Duncombe and Tremblay describe in *White Riot* and Maureen Mahon also discusses in *Right to Rock: The Black Rock Coalition and the Cultural Politics of Race*, white artists who make their art outside of the mainstream—whether they are pushed underground or pull themselves—have continuously aligned themselves, aesthetically, with Black people. That alignment of aesthetic is important: because "from Harlem's white jazz fans of the 1920s to the Beats and rock 'n' rollers of the 1950s to the blues revivalists of the 1960s to the rap fans of the 1990s," white artists have found in Black culture "an exhilarating way to elude the stodgy status quo," (Mahon, p. 205). Blackness has been donned as a costume, as in Smith sliding on the character of a n***** much like the tradition of blackface and minstrelsy on the stage and in Hollywood and drag. Costuming oppression is the foundation of "Rock 'n' Roll N*****." It is the foundation of white punk in general and of punk's "attempt to articulate oppositional identities" (Duncombe, p. 20) failing because of the insistence to identify *as* rather than *with*.

In her performances, chipaumire approaches this failing ironically, setting up a space in which she is able to expose the violent absurdity of white punk's appropriative stance. Her introductory sequence, which is repeated throughout the piece, tells the audience they are "introducing an introduction from Africa ... this is an introduction from anywhere in Africa." The refrain points to the absurd practice of colonist countries approaching Africa as though it is a singular and vague grouped area, refusing to acknowledge the varied cultures, languages, practices, and lived lives in the continent's fifty-four independent countries. It is a refusal that functions within the colonist, white-supremacist belief that Africans are less-than; that they are simultaneously exotically different from the west and in need of saving because of that difference. By suggesting that her choreography may be placed as from "anywhere in Africa," chipaumire presses against that belief, co-opting its violent identification for herself. In the piece, chipaumire "declares [herself] to be an 'African n*****' (asterisks mine)—the sort who fucks with the past and fucks even harder with the present | future." It is a kind of backwards costuming; chipaumire dresses her performance as globally "African" to take back and undress the terms of whiteness (and, therefore, of white punk).

If the first lines of this piece ironically introduce, the next sequence comes as an implication or invitation, depending on the audience's position within the violence and

nora chipaumire, *100% POP*, photo by Ian Douglas.

power of whiteness. This is emphasized by the existence of two audiences: one made up of those who have arrived themselves to see the show, and one made up of other Black dancers, presumably part of the dance cohort, who are always engaged, looking, following, swaying. The performers ask the onlookers to join them in movement, encouraging them to stomp and clap as steps are counted. Even if one tries, it is impossible to escape this performance; merely by standing still within the crowd, one is engaging, albeit passively, in chipaumire's ask. And really, there is no stillness there—the set's ground shakes with the stomping of feet and the largess of the music. If you are, as I am, one of those implicated in chipaumire's taking back of the character of "Rock 'n' Roll N*****," a take-back that chipaumire makes explicit as she recites words from Smith's song, there is no hiding from that implication. In the middle of the crowd, I looked around at those around me, trying to discern who was discomforted, and how. Some took chipaumire's ask and engaged, especially after soothed with a direct invitation—"white folks, you too can smash your brain," chipaumire suggested at one point—some moved backwards, and some fidgeted nervously. Afterward, I heard much talk about the performance in "dance terms," as though by talking about the work in the language of the dance institution, it would be possible to get out of the being in it; out of being a white person in it; out of the dis-ease of being placed in position along with the racist legacy of white punk. Am I good? If I am good enough, can I distance myself from Smith? Can I be good by not talking about race?

Have I not done this here? Have I not, in focusing on Patti Smith's song, in someone else's fault, suggested that the white punk violence chipaumire presents is historical, that I do not carry it within me? I do. So does the white audience of each performance chipaumire makes, even when the predominantly white canon of dance makes it comfortable to talk about chipaumire's performance without self-implication. This urge to distance oneself with specifics, or those-other-people-ing, or theory, is mimicked by a 2016 Reddit thread about the Smith song, called "Let's (probably uncomfortably) talk Patti Smith's 'Rock N Roll N*****'." It's notable, I think, that the thread comes so far after the creation of the song, far after the crystallization of Smith as a legend—and it is notable, too, that it isn't, after all, an uncomfortable conversation. It is, instead, a conversation that blends theory and bended history, a conversation in which all anonymous users feel comfortable using the N-word, uncensored, unquoted, and in which user Air–putih claims it is "important to take into account…that while institutionally racism has not changed much in the US in the past 40 years, culturally the worlds are completely different and that Smith's experience of and usage of the word 'n*****' [asterisks mine] are completely different and carry an altogether unlike charge. This is not an attempt to absolve Smith of anything nor to set a further conversational tone, but rather a reminder of caution." Caution for what? Should we be cautious in indicting whiteness? In resisting supremacy? In calling out co-optation as violent? Here, again, is the problem with white punk: the attempt to costume oneself as Black and be white too. And, in *#PUNK*, this problem is active, just as the asks to the audience are active, just like the white worries that thread through the crowd are active. Just like, always, white supremacy is active, sowing the ground for people like Smith to use Blackness aesthetically, to use it for oneself to further solidify the place of power each of us white people is born into.

About *#PUNK*, chipaumire says: "having inherited zimbabwe's historic and political baggage, I use my work to question how status and power are experienced and presented with the body." If this is the burden of chipaumire, the burden of her white audience is the history and continuation of the white supremacist settler-land we live on. While white punk, in collapsing social rejection with social oppression, seeks absolution in outsider status, chipaumire's performance rejects that, instead encouraging white audience members (rock 'n' rollers, perhaps) to examine the violent repercussions of their ambivalent whiteness.

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