Ryan Dohoney

THEASTER GATES, AN ORGANOLOGY

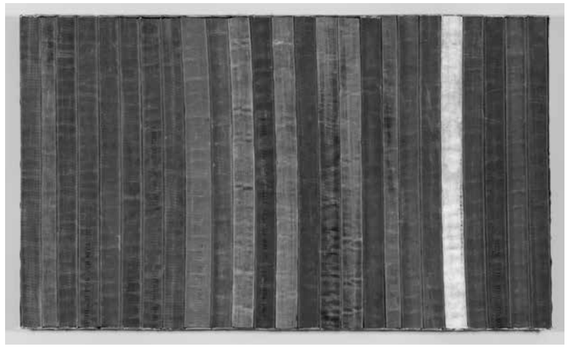

Figure 1. *Minority Majority*, 2012

I

How might we listen to the work of Theaster Gates? For an artist whose expansive vision utilizes all sensory domains, perhaps it seems reductive to isolate one for special critical attention. To stake a claim on the importance—nay, even centrality—of the sonic register of his art risks reducing his practice to a singularity when it thrives on phenomenal plurality. My tack then is to keep faith with an expansive notion of the sonic as a particular that is always already synesthetic. Sound *touches*. Sound *expresses*. Sound *effects*. Sound *remembers*. And, of course, sound *moves*. As something that can't help but be more than what it is, sound opens us up to grooves and vibrations—those low sub-frequencies gifting knowledge other than what is in front of our eyes. In this essay, I'll highlight some of Gates's work from the last decade, giving an account of the sonic register operative across it as I listen close for home truths. At stake is a conceptualization of Gates's postmedium production not only as architectural intervention into urban landscape and gallery space but also as a form of instrument-making in which informal archives of Black sound resonate.

It was Janet Dees's 2022 exhibition "A Site of Struggle: American Art against Anti-Black Violence" that got me thinking along these lines. This gutting, incisive, reconciliatory show brought together a range of responses to that most American of offenses: the brutal suppression and destruction of Black life. Ranging from the poetic to the documentary, the abstract to the implicating (especially of the complicity of white spectatorship), Dees's show confronted us with hard facts about US life and its predication upon racist violence. Her inclusion of two works by Gates, *In Case of Race Riot II* (2011) and *Minority Majority* (2021), demonstrated her critical curatorial insight into aspects of his practice.

After repeated encounters with the exhibition, Gates's *Minority Majority* (Fig. 1) was the work I kept coming back to, mulling over its constellation of aesthetico-political concerns. In its material construction, *Minority Majority* is composed of decommissioned cotton hoses salvaged from Chicago firehouses. With their historical provenance, the hoses have the status of an ambivalent documentary object. Perhaps they inflicted pain on protesting Black folks as well as extinguished out-of-control blazes that threatened those (and other) lives. As such, the documentary indeterminacy reveals an unsettling moral equivalence made more so through aesthetic elaboration. What Sampada Aranke writes of *In Case of Race Riot II* is equally poignant in conjunction with *Minority Majority*:

> Abstraction here engages the viewer's sense of touch—how it must have felt to have water blasted onto your body, how it must have felt to hold the hose still. . . . These haptic encounters move us toward another kind of understanding of the historical anti-Black violences that structure our present. Here, the hose acts as a body whose materiality alerts us to a past in order to prompt us to make another kind of future.[1]

Aranke brilliantly describes the sensorial misfire that Gates's work engenders, how his aesthetic reworking of historical material short-circuits our phenomenal experience. The visual becomes tactile through empathic imagination. My experience was—perhaps unsurprisingly, given my professional deformation—acoustic more than haptic. I heard *Minority Majority* more than felt it. Gates's trans-sensory art filled my mind with the sound of water blasting out from the firehoses. This particular response was not unrelated to my subject position as a white male spectator. Unless I was putting my own body on the line—that is, working in solidarity with my Black brothers and sisters—I would be the one holding the hose or standing aside listening to the torrent fall on others. Sound—in this instance, divorced from touch—recapitulated the moral ambiguity of the hose itself as both instrument of violence and protection. But this ambiguity implicated me as I sought to understand my own relationship to the documentary evidence and the mode of aesthetic elaboration that initially brought it into my awareness.

My experience of the sonic register of Gates's visual art, abstracted from historical objects, seems an instance of what Tina Campt calls "listening to images," which is, for her, "at once a description and a method" that "recalibrates" documentary material (such as vernacular photographs) in order to access "the affective registers through which these images enunciate alternate accounts of their subjects. It is a method that opens up the radical interpretive possibilities of images and state archives we are most often inclined to overlook."[2] She goes on to raise the methodological stakes for sound, which she "theorize[s] . . . as an inherently embodied process that registers at multiple levels of the human sensorium. . . . Sound need not be heard to be perceived."[3]

1 Sampada Aranke, "Functional Abstraction: Sensorial Afterlives of the Black Body," in *Site of Struggle: American Art against Anti-Black Violence*, ed. Janet Dees (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022), 81.

2 Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 5.

3 Campt, *Listening to Images*, 6.

4 Campt, *Listening to Images*, 6.

5 Aranke, "Functional Abstraction," 81.

6 Fumi Okiji, *Jazz as Critique: Adorno and Black Expression Revisited* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), 4.

7 Okiji, *Jazz as Critique*, 4.

8 Cecilia Sjöholm, "The Birth of the Transnational Spectator: Arendt's Proposals and Beyond" (keynote lecture, Everything Was Designed to Make Us Sound: Hannah Arendt and Aesthetic Judgement, Northwestern University, IL, May 19, 2022).

9 Theaster Gates, "Artist Talk with Theaster Gates and Hamza Walker," Haus der Kunst, January 27, 2020, https://hausderkunst.de/en/explore/videos/kuenstlergespraech-mit-theaster-gates-und-hamza-walker.

10 Andrea F. Bohlman, "Solidarity and the Sound Document," *Journal of Musicology* 33, no. 2 (2016): 236.

Figure 2. Dr. Wax Vinyl Collection on view at Dorchester Projects, Chicago, 2010

Figure 3. *A Song for Frankie*, 2017–21

Such non-acoustic audition is what I experienced in my encounters with *Minority Majority*. Though it was not necessarily resolved within the sense of touch, which Campt understands as the common ground of sensorial experience: "Sound must be theorized and understood as a profoundly haptic form of sensory contact."[4] I don't disagree necessarily—we feel vibration viscerally, certainly—but there is an interpretive potential lost when sound is resolved in touch. Instead, privileging sound as that into which other senses apotheosize might offer us a different critical potential. Feeling vibration is another way of hearing, and keeping our ear-mind in the sonic register allows us to better articulate the failures of relation, failures of empathy that Gates's art challenges us to redress. Methodological quibbles aside, Campt's emphasis on the document as a site of aesthetic reflection is a salutary invitation to think about the ways in which historical objects resonate in the present moment and how Gates's practice, to return to Aranke's words, produces "functional abstractions" where "the future is not only an accumulation of recalled violences but also an abundance of sensed possibilities."[5]

II.

"To see and recognize everyday black living requires X-ray vision."[6] Fumi Okiji's incitement to see beyond the obvious is a superpower we need to acquire. She notes that we find it "particularly where it comes up against its appropriated and sanctioned mainstream images and uses, where it misshapes the categorical smoothness of race," where "it provides invaluable insight."[7] Gates's art gives us X-ray specs to view such living by transfiguring documents (as in *Minority Majority*) through aesthetic elaboration that, as Cecilia Sjöholm notes of the process, allows political and ethical claims to come to the fore.[8] As I mentioned above, this elaboration effects a powerful synesthesia, one productively resolved in the sonic domain.

A particular tack Gates has taken in his work has been his recovery of documents of everyday Black life—specifically record collections. These preserve an archive of listening and make subjective ways of hearing available to our ears. Such affordances are found in the Listening Room at Dorchester Projects and in expansive exhibitions such as "How to Build a House Museum" at the Art Gallery of Ontario (2016), "Black Madonna" at the Kunstmuseum Basel (2018), and "Black Chapel" at the Haus der Kunst, Munich (2019). Of his collecting, Gates described:

> An important South Side record store called Dr. Wax [Fig. 2] went out of business, and, in this case, I basically asked for all the dregs. They had this sale, and everything was priced at one dollar. I told them, "Look, let's fix this. Stop selling. I want the entire collection." I didn't want Dr. Wax scattered. Dr. Wax was all about a white dude in a Black neighborhood, but it was also something about his commitment to hip-hop and house and soul that was a kind of Black Archive. He serviced Black DJs all over the city. That was before Amazon and before you could buy stuff online—when you'd have to go to the record store. So, I have five or six collections of albums that are in varying stages of being made public, or they're really just for me.[9]

Most prominently, Gates has become the steward of Frankie Knuckles's five-thousand-plus LP collection, installing it at the Stony Island Arts Bank, where it functions as a living archive and community resource for Chicago house music. Along with preserving it there, Gates worked with the Knuckles collection (Fig. 3) in his Ontario exhibition "How to Build a House Museum," demonstrating how the archive can be put to use as a "functional abstraction" through which to hear other possibilities. Gates frequently transforms archives into what Andrea F. Bohlman calls "sound documents"—artifacts that rely upon the sonic "to establish historiographic authority"—which creatively imagine a vibrant future for everyday Black living.[10]

This openness to Black futurity is registered in the "Progress Palace" section of the Art Gallery of Ontario show, in which history is narrated musically and affords the formation of new collectives. Dominating the palace is *House Heads Liberation Training* (2016), a two-channel video in which we see a beautiful community brought into being. At the outset, the vocalist Yaw Agyeman stands amid a silent collective. He intones the words "There is a house," slowly at first and then repeating them to reveal the first line of "The House of the Rising Sun." Gradually, non-diegetic disco swells up in the soundtrack (including South Shore Commission's rapturous "Free Man") as we sonically trace the genealogy of house back to the blues and, in doing so, retrace one path of the Great Migration from New Orleans to Chicago. The video then focuses on a pedagogical scene in which a multigenerational community learns to move to the music (Fig. 4). Gates evinces a deep understanding of the sonic as an affective component of documentary history. In *House*

Figure 4. *House Heads Liberation Training*, 2016 (still)

11 Gates, "Artist Talk."

12 See Kevin Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012).

13 Gates, "Artist Talk."

14 Antoine Hennion, "Loving Music: From a Sociology of Mediation to a Pragmatics of Taste," *Comunicar* 34 (2010), 26.

15 Hennion, "Loving Music," 29.

16 Hennion, "Loving Music," 32.

Figure 5. Theaster Gates with The Black Monks, Menil Collection, Houston, 2014

17 Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 19–20.

18 Anthony Reed, *Soundworks: Race, Sound, and Poetry in Production* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 38.

19 Reed, *Soundworks*, 37–38.

20 Antoine Hennion, "The Musicalisation of Visual Arts," *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image* 2, no. 2 (2008): 179.

21 I discuss this performance in greater musical detail in Ryan Dohoney, "Black Abstraction, Black Ecstatic, *Black Chapel*," in *Theaster Gates: Black Chapel* (London: Serpentine Gallery, 2022).

Heads Liberation Training, it is precisely through the aesthetically radical juxtaposition of diegetic blues with non-diegetic disco that a profound feeling of historical depth emerges.

The public prominence of Knuckles's legacy allows Gates, through his remediation, to make a claim about the archival power of Black sound. There is, however, another side—a quieter role for sound documents that Gates dramatizes in his work with other archival collections. One form this takes is an intimate history or recovery, as in the artist's work with the collection of Olympian Jesse Owens, whose vinyl archive was an integral feature of the "Black Chapel" exhibition at Haus der Kunst in 2019. Owens's nearly 1,800 records were, in Gates's words, "absorbed into my vortex of object making" and represented the quiet, inner life of Blackness: "One way of defining Blackness has to do with the ability to be publicly, maybe even eagerly available, and then there are the moments for survival where you choose to be private, or non-disclosing."[11] Exemplifying what Kevin Quashie has called "the sovereignty of quiet," Gates presents Owens's record collection as a metonym for the Olympian's inner life and a sign of everyday Black living.[12] He makes this symbolic connection explicit when discussing another collection of his friend Marva Lee Pitchford-Jolly:

> After she passed, her partner called me and said, "Hey, can you help us clean out the basement?" And Marva had these albums, this collection. . . . Man! It was almost like pre-feminism in Black music. She had the earliest Aretha Franklin and the earliest Nina Simone. She probably had the most articulate collection. I'm most proud of Marva's collection, because it showed me her interiority. She would never talk about politics or feminism, or about being gay or queer, but these albums demonstrated the things that she believed in. There's something of the albums that was a code and that was exciting.[13]

Gates notes the political importance of Pitchford-Jolly's collection ("It was almost like pre-feminism in Black music"), but this does not come at the expense of the personal. As the physical traces of amalgamated listenings, Pitchford-Jolly's collection provides Gates with the material through which his friend shaped her emotional (and political) subjectivity, legible to Gates as proto-Black-queer feminism. Even though she never articulated those political positions in conversation, her listening practices reveal structures of feeling subtending her quotidian activities. At first blush, it might seem that Gates, in his equation of music and personal interiority, is trafficking in discredited artistic aesthetics. Yet, his view is much closer in line with recent interventions in the sociology of taste, which understand record collecting as a reflexive activity that "can be articulated and form subjectivities (not only responding to social labels), and have a history that is irreducible to that of the works."[14]

As such, Gates values the informal archives of amateurs such as Pitchford-Jolly for their X-ray vision into the singularity and irreducibility of everyday Black life. Such irreducible histories support aesthetic elaboration and reveal interiors carefully and pragmatically fashioned through music-loving. Antoine Hennion argues:

> Listening is not only an instant, it is also a history. Its reflexivity is also its ability to build itself as the framework of its own activity. This time we no longer consider it in the present of a contact with the sounds that happen, but in the improbable duration of a slow invention, that of an art and a technique of listening for the sake of listening.[15]

Interiors are subtly produced through the invention of techniques that can be borrowed, developed, and refashioned by immersing oneself in "a world of mediations and effects in which [world and subject] are produced together one by the other, the body that experiences the taste and the taste for the object, the collective which loves and the repertoire of loved objects."[16] The mutual constitution of self and world is what Gates celebrates in Pitchford-Jolly's collection—it reveals the mutual constitution of herself and a world of "pre-feminism in Black music."

By taking up the listening archives of both public figures like Knuckles and intimate, lesser-known friends like Pitchford-Jolly, Gates refuses to distinguish between the archive and the repertoire as they have been dirempted in Euro-centric, lettered epistemologies. Diana Taylor notes the conventional division between these terms:

> The rift, I submit, does not lie between the written and spoken word, but between the *archive* of supposedly enduring materials (i.e., texts, documents, buildings, bones) and the so-called ephemeral *repertoire* of embodied practice/knowledge (i.e., spoken language, dance, sports, ritual). . . . Archival memory works across distance, over time, and space. . . . The repertoire, on the other hand, enacts embodied memory. . . . The repertoire requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by "being there," being part of the transmission.[17]

In Gates's preservation of Knuckles's and Pitchford-Jolly's collections, the boundary blurs between archive and repertoire. The rift Taylor laments is mended. Fragile commodities (LPs) are protected, enduring objects and valued for their potential to feed back into a living, dancing community.

Returning to *House Heads Liberation Training*, we can see this very process of archive-returning-to-repertoire on display. Records from Knuckles's archive move the bodies of novice dancers who "participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge" through their embodiment of the archive's latent energies. Archives, in Gates's practice, are never ends in themselves but are consistently reanimated and put to work. As instruments structuring his "vortex of image making," the archives of Knuckles, Owens, Pitchford-Jolly, and Dr. Wax evince a form of Black sound that survives as historical document (something needing preservation) while testifying to a continuing generative power. The archives refuse to live only as documents and surge toward new forms. Or, as Anthony Reed notes of similar arguments within the work of Amiri Baraka, "black sound has become at once a way of mediating history and itself a medium of transformative energy."[18]

III

Even before Gates made record collections into instruments for resolving the inherent tensions between archives and repertoires, his ensemble, The Black Monks (formerly The Black Monks of Mississippi), did similar work through their virtuosic performances of Black vernacular music, spirituals, and creative music. Their performance practice posits Black sound as "a unified whole greater than the sum of its parts" and with that reiterates Baraka's celebration of the survival of "the *system* of African music" audible beneath "just a thin veneer of Euro-American camouflage," which has produced "the only so-called popular music in this country of any real value."[19]

The freedom work of The Black Monks takes as its improvisational impulse the genealogical and archival logic of Gates's work with his record collections and, it seems, preceded it. Their way of working with the repertoire of Black song begins with frequent invocations of objects from the archive creatively transformed into a living repertoire. Speculatively, we might argue that this improvisatory elaboration of historico-aesthetic documents seems to have migrated from musical performance into Gates's installation and visual artwork. Furthermore, we might think of this through Hennion's concept of "the musicalization of the visual arts," in which art objects take on the provisional, iterative character of musical works. "Stable objects" become "open-ended instantiations," as in the performance of a jazz standard or a spiritual.[20] This iterative nature is apparent in Gates's reworking of "Black Chapel" at the Haus der Kunst in 2019 and at the Serpentine Pavilion in 2022. "Black Chapel" functions as a theme that Gates alters through distinct material (and acoustic) variations.

A discussion of a specific instance of The Black Monks's performance practice will clarify my meaning (Fig. 5). In November of 2014, Gates, along with fellow monks Yaw Agyeman (voice), Mikel Avery (percussion), Khari Lemuel (cello, flute, voice), and DJ Madrid Perry (turntables and laptop), performed at the Menil Collection in Houston.[21] The performance unfolded over nearly seventy minutes of almost unbroken Black ecstasy produced through improvisatory reworkings of sacred and secular songs intercut with samples of civil rights–era recorded audio by John F. Kennedy et al. The performance begins with invocations of "We Shall Overcome" and "Peace Like a River," followed by a crystalline fragmentation of Psalm 116 intensified by digital delays. JFK's American University speech on peace drops in suddenly and awkwardly and gives way to the traditional song "See-line Woman," made famous by Nina Simone. The riotous femme energy of "See-line" suddenly flips into the gospel tune "Walk with Me," which quickly substitutes Mahalia Jackson for Simone as the diva most on our minds. "Walk with Me" undergoes a metamorphosis, transformed beyond recognition into an ecstatic realization of transcendence. From there, the performance unwinds the almost unbearable tension and concludes with the Monks riffing on the phrase "I'm so glad Dr. King didn't sneeze"—a reference to the 1958 assassination attempt on King by Izola Ware Curry.

In keeping with works like *Minority Majority*, Gates achieves a particular aesthetic shudder from the abstraction of documentary materials (JFK's famous speech, for example) and their insertion into new contexts. The seeming fungibility of documentary audio and the songs

Figure 6. Theaster Gates with the support of Adjaye Associates, *Black Chapel*, 2022. Installation view: Serpentine Pavilion 2022, London, UK

themselves evince their shared status as archival material. Indeed, the whole performance has the feeling of a riveting history lesson. However, this historicity is not the same across the material. The unaltered, citational quality of the recorded audio makes it baldly stand out against the creative vitality of the Monks's performance. The lack of aesthetic elaboration gives JFK's speech a benumbed affect that points up the gaping disparity between his hopes for peace and our present-day realities. This contrasts sharply with the vibrant presentation of the archive of Black song, which returns to life as an embodied repertoire, to borrow Taylor's formulation.

Against the ineffectuality of official archives, The Black Monks gives us an acoustic world where archive and repertoire are not estranged, where the impulse to preserve does not cut off documents from living presence but revels in sheer Black liveness. A description of the Haus der Kunst iteration of "Black Chapel" captures this dimension of Gates's practice, as it operates in both the musical and visual domains:

> Anything that signifies the possibility of liberation or freedom, let's throw it in and see what happens. ["Black Chapel"], in that sense, is less about formalism and having a reconciled show. It has more to do with, "Can you feel the power?" I'm interested in a weight that can exist, more than I am interested in a practice of reconciliation through objects. . . . I can't call it archival because it's not archival. It's amateur collecting. It's a storage facility waiting to be given meaning.[22]

Through the performance of The Black Monks, we see how such material in storage can be given meaning through creative musicking and documentary citation. Such meaning-making works through the proliferation of contradictions and sedimented histories activated through the revivification of documents through performance. Even as Gates insists that he is not as interested in "reconciliation through objects" as he is in the physically affecting power of objects (their weight), a dialectical play of reconciliation and estrangement is at work throughout his artistry: reconciliation of informal archives with lived repertoires and the estrangement of documents from their contexts to critically appraise their successes or failures.

IV

The sonic labor of The Black Monks resounded within Gates's Serpentine Pavilion commission, which elaborated on themes of the Haus der Kunst exhibition. Whereas the earlier iteration used installation and sculpture to realize the concept of a Black chapel within a preexisting space, the Serpentine Pavilion allowed Gates to work through more direct means and produce the chapel's architectural program from the ground up (Fig. 6). Of the work, Gates writes:

> The name Black Chapel is important because it reflects the invisible parts of my artistic practice. It acknowledges the role that sacred music and the sacred arts have had on my practice, and the collective quality of these emotional and communal initiatives. Black Chapel also suggests that in these times there could be a space where one could rest from the pressures of the day and spend time in quietude. I have always wanted to build spaces that consider the power of sound and music as a healing mechanism and emotive force that allows people to enter a space of deep reflection and/or deep participation.[23]

While the chapel commission reflects what Gates considers *invisible* in his practice, the elements have hardly been *inaudible* for those that have experienced his work as a musician or sonic archivist. What "Black Chapel" achieves is a new kind of visibility for Gates's practice that allows us to see what we have been hearing all along. Whether at Dorchester Project's Listening House, "How to Build a House Museum," or *12 Ballads for Huguenot House* (2012), Gates has been building instruments for Black resonance.

I do not mean this metaphorically but in a real materialist sense. This is in keeping with a long history of architecture functioning as instrument—whether the cavernous spaces of gothic cathedrals in which Catholic liturgy reverberated, the church of San Marco, which inspired Giovanni Gabrieli to spatialize his multi-choir choral music, or even in the work of architects such as Harry Weiss, John Hejduk, Jesse Reiser, and Nanako Umemoto, who conceptualize buildings as musical instruments channeling people and air.[24] Such efforts to direct sound and effect have their traces across Gates's work.

As such, we might come to a deeper understanding of his comprehensive practice if we think of it organologically—that is, by analyzing the affordances his buildings, installations, and performances make possible *as instruments*. An organology would, following Campt and others, mean listening to Gates's images while also examining the compositional and improvisatory strategies he crafts through his performances with The Black Monks. Doing so would illuminate their potential effects upon that visual work. Following John Tresch and Emily I. Dolan, we would home in on "an ethics of instruments" realized by Gates through his manifold creative endeavors.[25]

As I've suggested, this ethics is one in which documents either become reflexively generative of new repertories or reveal themselves to be inert and historically stagnant. Gates's instrumental ethics of Black sound insists upon the former over the latter but, in doing so, doesn't offer the cold comfort of music functioning as a universal language. It matters that Gates archives and amplifies Black music in all its complexity. Much like my self-critical experience with *Minority Majority*, which forced me to ask if I would be holding the hose or be blasted by water, Gates's instruments structure our encounters with Black resonance and require that we take up some specific position in relation to it. Will we (and I am speaking to white folks here), in the words of Fumi Okiji, "allow ourselves to be gifted, or perhaps messed-up, by blackness?"[26] Being gifted is also to be messed up; there are no easy reconciliations. Sound flows through Gates's work as both remedy and poison.

22 Gates, "Artist Talk."

23 Theaster Gates, quoted in "Theaster Gates Reveals Black Chapel Serpentine Pavilion," *Architecture Today*, May–June 2022, https://architecturetoday.co.uk/serpentine-pavilion-2022-black-chapel-theaster-gates/.

24 I am grateful to Stewart Hicks for bringing these architects to my attention. See his delightful video on buildings as instruments: "Surprising Ways Sound Shapes Our Environment," Stewart Hicks, YouTube, posted on March 17, 2022, 1:14, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tpO99KinLgI.

25 John Tresch and Emily I. Dolan, "Toward a New Organology: Instruments of Music and Science," *Osiris* 28 (2013): 283.

26 Okiji, *Jazz as Critique*, 55.


PEECKE