

Chosen Family Values: Examining the Creative Practices of Kiera Boulton, Madelyne Beckles, Kalale Dalton-Lutale and Cason Sharpe

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Submitted to OCAD University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of Master of Arts

in

Contemporary Art, Design and New Media Histories

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, May 2021.

Delilah Rosier, 2021

Abstract

This major research paper presents an autoethnographic account of the cultural production: performances, plays, video, poetry, short stories, Instagram takeovers and lived experiences of Black biracial Canadian artists Madelyne Beckles, Kalale Dalton-Lutale, Kiera Boulton, and Cason Sharpe. Putting these artists in conversation with one another serves to connect and archive a creative community and moment by way of shared identities, and shared stylistic, generational, and critical vocabularies. The thread that runs throughout their works is a critical framework informed by Black thinkers and perspectives encompassing Black art and artists, feminism, queerness, pop culture, class consciousness, and intersectionality stemming from a distinctly Canadian context. As a commemoration of kinship and as a contribution to the current discourse of contemporary Canadian art, this paper makes a case for how their creative practices speak from and about a unique, intersectional perspective and make a significant contribution to the Canadian art landscape.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to my advisors Johanna Householder and Andrea Fatona for your rigorous edits and thoughtful commentary, Rebecca Diederichs for guiding my writing spiral, Daniel Payne for your incredible bibliographic assistance, OCAD University and the Ontario Graduate Scholarship for financially supporting my studies, Fraser Wrighte for your continual support and Madelyne, Kiera, Kalale and Cason for your participation and trust in me.

Dedication

For my chosen family.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	7
Literature Review	15
Methodology	20
Killjoys Kastle: A Lesbian Feminist Haunted House	24
Collaboration and Knowledge Making Through Performance.....	29
Kiera Boulton	31
Kikiology 101	35
Lorraine O’Grady’s Mlle Bourgeoise Noire and Camille Turner’s Miss Canadiana.....	43
Madelyne Beckles.....	47
I’m a Bitch. I’m a Lover.....	51
After Sontag: Notes on ‘Camp’	56
Talkin’ Body	58
Kalale Dalton-Lutale	61
I’m a Child. I’m a Mother.	62
Same City, Same Friends if You're Looking for Me	71
Cason Sharpe.....	74
Vivid Queer Realities	75
I’m a Sinner. I’m a Saint. I Do Not Feel Ashamed.....	79
The Makings of Sharpe’s Voice.....	80
Conclusion	86
Bibliography	91

List of Figures

Figure 1: Allyson Mitchell and Deirdre Logue, <i>Killjoy's Kastle: A Lesbian Feminist Haunted House</i> (2013) Exterior view.....	26
Figure 2: Riot Ghouls Madelyne Beckles, Cason Sharpe, Kiera Boulton, and Delilah Rosier in Philadelphia, (2019) behind the scenes photograph.....	29
Figure 2: Kiera Boulton, <i>The Truth Booth</i> , (2014-2019) photograph from live performance.....	32
Figure 3: Kiera Boulton, <i>The Truth Booth Presents: Art is the New Steal: Appropriating the Hamilton Landscape</i> , (2016) digital image of printed brochure.....	34
Figure 4: Kiera Boulton, <i>#Teamkiki (For Institutional Use Only)</i> , (2018) video still.....	36
Figure 5: Kiera Boulton, <i>Ki True Hollywood Story</i> , (2020) video still.....	40
Figure 6: Kiera Boulton, <i>The Solidarity Collection</i> , (2018) video still.....	41
Figure 7: Lorraine O'Grady, <i>Untitled (Mlle Bourgeoise Noire Shouts Out Her Poem)</i> (1980-83/2009) photograph.....	44
Figure 8: Madelyne Beckles, <i>Womanism is a Form of Feminism Focused Especially on the Conditions and Concerns of Black Women</i> , (2016) video still.....	49
Figure 9: Madelyne Beckles, <i>The Whole Woman</i> , (2018) video still.....	53
Figure 10: Jose Esteban Muñoz, <i>The Sense of Brown</i> , (2020) book cover.....	55
Figure 11: Cherríe Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa <i>This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color</i> , (1981) book cover.....	59
Figure 13: Madelyne Beckles, <i>This Bridge Called My Back</i> , (2017) photo documentation from live performance.....	60
Figure 14: Sadie Laflamme-Snow as Snow White in Kalale Dalton-Lutale's, <i>i am entitled to rest</i> (2020), online performance still.....	64
Figure 15: Kalale Dalton-Lutale, <i>Crybaby</i> , (2019) live performance documentation still.....	68
Figure 16: Kalale Dalton-Lutale, <i>Crybaby</i> , (2019) photo documentation of live performance.....	70
Figure 17: Cason Sharpe, <i>Our Lady of Perpetual Realness and Other Stories</i> , Metatron Press, (2017) book cover.....	75
Figure 18: Photograph of Cason Sharpe, (2016).....	77

Introduction

This major research paper presents an autoethnographic account of Black biracial Canadian artists working contemporarily in Tkaronto/Toronto, the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples, and Hamilton Ontario, situated upon the traditional territories of the Anishinaabek Nations, specifically the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation and the Haudenosaunee Nations.

The artists whose work and lived experiences inform this paper are the interdisciplinary artist and performer Madelyne Beckles, playwright, artist and performer Kalale Dalton-Lutale, artist and performer Kiera Boulton, and writer and critic Cason Sharpe. As Black biracial artists, their positionality occupies a space that is often erased and/or marginalized in Canadian art histories. The decision to foreground these artists' Black biracial identities is not to categorize them as outside the multiplicity of Black arts communities. Rather, to align them with the ongoing rejections of a Black monolithic identity imposed by a white supremacist art system of viewership and curatorship that consolidates Black experiences into a single category.¹

Acknowledging these artists as 'Black biracial' is to recognize nuanced, intersectional identifiers and experiences that are in proximity to both Blackness and whiteness. Each artist's identity and relationship to Blackness and whiteness as racial categories that are socially constructed relate to their lives and work, are personal, unique, complex and in flux. My

¹ For a recent example, the fall 2020 "Chroma" issue of *Canadian Art* magazine features a portrait of M. NourbeSe Philip on its cover. Editors Yaniya Lee and Denise Ryner's introductory essay describes Philip as "a Black thinker whose presence and work have been routinely overlooked by Canada's cultural gatekeepers." Outlining their reasoning behind naming the issue "Chroma" they write: "Blackness, and Black creative practice, has survived through its excesses and refusals. This is how we think about Blackness. Like chroma, it is more about difference than any singular colour. The entire issue escapes singularity." They explain that the aim of the issue is to "avoid monolithic and overly prescriptive descriptions of 'black.'" Similarly to Lee and Ryner's aims, this work attempts to escape singularity. Denise Ryner and Yaniya Lee, "Excesses and Refusals," *Canadian Art*, September 14, 2020, <https://canadianart.ca/essays/chroma-an-introduction/>.

intention with this project is not to dictate an identity category but to map the influences, experiences, and concerns of their practices.

Putting these artists in conversation with one another not only serves to connect and archive a creative community and moment by way of shared identity, but by shared stylistic, generational, and critical vocabularies. In exploratory ways, the artists' works address personal and political subject matter by way of popular culture, parody, pastiche, autobiography, camp, performance, and politics in ways that are unique to each artist's own experiences, ingenuity and handling of form within their multidisciplinary practices.

The thread that runs throughout their works is a critical framework informed by Black thinkers and a perspective based in Black critical thought, feminism, queerness, class consciousness, and intersectionality stemming from a distinctly Canadian context. This paper documents and archives the realities and contributions to the arts of Black biracial artists. Black biracial identity is often marginalized in art history and understandings of Blackness, not specifically by the Black arts communities but by a still predominantly white art world's limiting modes of categorization. The task of examining the work of these artists is not an attempt to concretize Black biracial identity but to begin to build a living archive where the artists' ideas, politics, experiences, and poetics can be accessible to enrich future scholarly and community-based conversations on art and identity.

By speaking on nuanced, intersectional experiences and by situating this community of artists and their works in conversation literally and figuratively, I investigate their practice based political expressions. My hope is that my reader views this paper both as a commemoration of kinship and as a contribution to the current discourse of contemporary Canadian art.

As a friend, writer, scholar and in this case, autoethnographer, I don't have all the answers. While I refer to this writing as an archive, it is one that is in flux. This paper therefore reflects a particular moment in time as the work, ideas and politics of the artists profiled will undoubtedly change and transform.

Providing historical and theoretical frameworks to understand the works is a way to become acquainted with the artists, their distinct positionalities and the creative and political impact of their practices. My writing on a highly specific scope of material required immense editing and decision making, and there remain many artworks, writings, performances, plays, and collaborations omitted from this paper. The analysis, comparison and discussion of these omitted works might tell another story; left untold. I view this as the beginning of an archival project spanning the lives and ongoing work of a community of artists who I love and learn from. I look forward to mapping, documenting, and archiving how their methods, intensions, inspirations, passions, and politics transform and inform the work they will produce over the course of their careers and lives.

By drawing on scholarship from the areas of Black studies, feminism, queerness, performance, and Canadian contexts, this paper maps the artists' influences, passions, politics, and identities to make a case for how their creative practices speak from a unique, intersectional perspective and have fostered a significant contribution to the Canadian art landscape.

In our digital era, much of these artists' works exist in contemporary social/digital media spaces that are subject to deletion by the precariousness of digital media and the internet. Given the uncertainty of digital material, this paper will provide a connection from their time of emergence to the work that they continue to generate. Documenting and analysing the artist's

work from the space of academia allows for the creation of a counter canon, marking it in history, allowing their cultural and artistic contributions to be traced.

Working from inside an academic institution that can shape conversations on art and theory, I have the privilege to critically record these artists' productions and situate them within a discourse of Canadian art. As a writer, interdisciplinary visual artist and performance scholar, my research, writing, and visual works to date have explored gender, critical race, queer theory, intersectionality and popular culture. I have come to these critical frameworks in my practice by mapping my own nuanced, intersectional experiences and upbringing in Toronto as a white cis-gendered settler woman, and interrogating the operations of class, race, gender and sexuality in my own familial, community and cultural circles.

Before deciding on my subject matter for this project, I knew that I wanted to write about that which concerns me. Though, in drafts of my work, it was noted by my advisors that I had managed to write *around* me. In hindsight, I feared disclosure of my own positionality as a mere justification for my interests, passions, and intensions, but see the importance in offering my reader an understanding of how and why I approach the work and what experiences and relationships inform my values that motivate me to move the margins to the centre.

There are deeply personal stakes in my writing this and situating myself as researcher, writer and friend. I owe my reader and the artists profiled in this paper an analogous disclosure of intimacy and vulnerability, if only briefly. My perspective as an artist, writer, and critical thinker, but more so my personhood is in many ways informed by my lived experiences and circumstances.

I come from a family that celebrates jazz and Black performance. My white father made his career as a jazz musician, and I was raised with an appreciation for Black artistry among

Black and racialized performers and family friends. By virtue of the jazz scene I was immersed in as a child, I witnessed the worship of a particular kind of Black American masculinity at a space and time where conversations on appropriation were not accounted for or considered in dialogues within my family or direct community. Navigating these spaces through my upbringing, I eventually became skeptical of white fascination with, fetishization and appropriation of Blackness and later became interested in these areas of research and study in my academic career.

Growing up in various parts of downtown Toronto in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the segregation of people was less prevalent than in the Toronto that I see and live in now. I lived in proximity to Blackness based on my various neighborhoods, schools and community. As a child, I attended French immersion elementary school where hierarchies of class were prevalent, as the program was made up of white, Black, racialized, and predominantly upper and middle-class students. During these years, I was stigmatized and experienced microaggressions by friends, peers, parents, and teachers based on my poverty. Living downtown, my mother was vigilant about my safety as a young girl, and these engrained fears, anxieties and instances of class and gender-based oppression taught me distinct ways of operating and moving through the world.

My relationships to Boulton, Beckles, Dalton-Lutale and Sharpe come with thinking through these intersectional experiences, divisions of whiteness and Blackness and the space that the artists occupy as both; as biracial. As I employ an autoethnographic method in this paper, and to write honestly and meaningfully, I must name, acknowledge, and consider my whiteness explicitly and carefully. While I share similar experiences and traumas with some but not all of the artists with regard to our class formations and gender, it is essential that I contemplate and consider my whiteness and relationship to Blackness with careful criticality as I differ from them

in regard to race. What motivates me to move the margins to the centre in my research and this project is a kinship I share with these artists as friends and the allyships with Black people I learned from a young age. Through this allyship, in my life and scholarship I have further developed a commitment to understanding complex intersectional experiences and systems of oppression across race, class, gender, and sexuality as means to unity.

As a settler, I acknowledge the colonial structures implemented forcefully upon the land and its original people as well as how I benefit from these structures.² As a critical writer, ally, lifelong friend, and artistic collaborator with all the artists in question, I have a specific entry point to take up this project. I write this to honour and represent their work artistically and politically as these artists have impacted my politics, my life, and the ways in which I learn, care, and grow. I am honored to call these artists my chosen family. When I began to write, Kalale Dalton-Lutale sent me the following quote attributed to artist Camille Billops in conversation with bell hooks: “Put all your friends in [your art], everybody you loved, so one day they will find you and know that you were all here together.”

Over the chapters that follow, this project is structured around individual portraits of each artist and their work combining close readings of key performances, videos, and written works. Using an autoethnographic methodology and critical frameworks applied from Black, queer, feminist thinkers, and quotes from the artists in dialogue with myself and each other drawn from collective discussions I facilitated for the purpose of this project, I make a case for how these

² For further exploration of decolonization practices for settler populations, see: “Land Reparations & Indigenous Solidarity Toolkit,” Resource Generation, July 12, 2019, <http://resourcegeneration.org/land-reparations-indigenous-solidarity-action-guide/>.

artists create politically significant works drawing on lived experiences as millennial Black biracial Canadian artists.

My exploration is prefaced in the subsequent “Literature Review” section which outlines my relevant research to date, including specific concepts and theories in the fields of Black Art/Black Cultural Production, Feminism/Black Feminism/Black Feminist Thought, Queerness/Queer Theory, Autoethnography/Autofiction, Performance Art/Performance Studies, Canadian Content/Context. These texts often mine the personal and political in ways that are essential to my own approach towards cultural analysis.

The following “Methodology” chapter describes my autoethnographic approach to this project and how self-reflexive, qualitative research illustrates unique and intimate profiles/portraits of the artists that follow.

The chapters “Killjoys Kastle: A Lesbian Feminist Haunted House” describing Allyson Mitchell and Deirdre Logue’s collaborative performance installation project, and “Collaboration and Knowledge Making Through Performance,” contextualize my and the artist’s experiences performing in *Killjoys Kastle*, framing the experience as influential.

Chapters “Kiera Boulton” and “Kikiology 101” profile and examine Boulton’s live and video-based performances that critique gentrification, arts and educational institutions, and her own positionality through humor and camp. I offer analysis and insight into Boulton’s persona, Kiki, to share understandings of Kiki’s origins and how the persona manifests in the work.

“Lorraine O’Grady’s Mlle Bourgeoise Noire and Camille Turner’s Miss Canadiana” presents historical groundings on Black women artists who similarly implement persona in their performance works to address Blackness.

Throughout “Madelyne Beckles” and “I’m a Bitch. I’m a Lover” I compare the artist’s satirical performance practice and subject matter to Boulton’s, as well as examine Beckles’ live and video-based performances that use her body, feminist theory and popular culture to critique white-centric feminism and discuss Beckles’ own performance persona.

“After Sontag: Notes on ‘Camp’” follows a discussion on reality television as prompted by Beckles’ and Boulton’s interest in the genre to speak on how the artists use camp in their work.

“Talkin’ Body” discusses Beckles’ live, durational performance *This Bridge Called My Back* (2017) which pays homage to a foundational 1981 anthology of essays of the same name, edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa, credited with bridging activist feminist circles across race, class and sexuality.

“Kalale Dalton-Lutale” and “I’m a Child. I’m a Mother” look at Dalton-Lutale’s experimental theatre works which take up themes of Blackness, adolescence and mother-daughter relationships, through surreal and poetic forms.

Prompted by the inclusion of the musical artist Drake in Dalton-Lutale’s work, “Same City, Same Friends if You’re Looking for Me” contextualizes the Toronto born artist’s experiences of the city and examines Drake through the lens of Canadian Blackness.

“Cason Sharpe”, “Vivid Queer Realities”, “I’m a Sinner. I’m a Saint. I Do Not Feel Ashamed” and “The Makings of Sharpe’s Voice” discuss Sharpe’s autobiographical and fictitious writings which deal with personal experiences and understandings of shame, class, race, and queerness as expressed through Sharpe’s complex perspective.

The concluding chapter of this paper makes an argument for how this document’s function as an achieve.

Literature Review

This paper investigates the work of a community of artists anchored in theories pertaining to Blackness, performance, queerness, and feminism. As these theoretical frameworks often intersect, many of the writers and works that follow resist categorization within one particular discipline. For the sake of contextualizing how my writing, thinking and research is informed, I classify them based on the concepts that are most influential to my writing and understandings. To date, specific scholarship on a community of emerging, Canadian Black biracial artists is non-existent, so I draw on literature that looks at categories of ‘Blackness’.

Black Art/Black Cultural Production

My understandings of Black art and cultural production is largely informed by the American feminist author and cultural critic bell hooks. hooks’ interdisciplinary cultural criticism applies lived knowledge and scholarly sources to challenge the marginalization and appropriation of Black and racialized cultures and identities by the nuanced operations of white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal society. hooks’ holistic approach to cultural criticism as a means to analyze and interrogate oppressive forces as they appear in academic institutions, everyday life and popular culture is integral to discourse concerning and connecting popular culture, race, activism and politics of the past and present that myself and the artists profiled take part in.

While hooks also offers rigorous writing on the cultural appropriation of Blackness, contemporary conversations on appropriation are informed by the writings of American scholar and cultural commentator Lauren Michelle Jackson. Jackson’s book *White Negroes: When Cornrows Were in Vogue... and Other Thoughts on Cultural Appropriation* (2019) includes critical essays on the contemporary and historic practice of appropriating Blackness for means of cultural and financial capital, in turn playing “a role in keeping Black people from achieving

economic, political, and social equity.”³ Jackson’s consideration of appropriation informs my understandings of and discussion on appropriation of Blackness as it is ingrained in and perpetuated by popular culture.

Feminism/Black Feminism/Black Feminist Thought

British-Australian feminist scholar Sara Ahmed’s particular brand of feminism centers a queer of colour critique. In her writing, she presents the figure of the Feminist Killjoy as one who is juxtaposed with the trope/fantasy of the happy housewife. Instead, the feminist killjoy “spoils the happiness of others; she is a spoilsport because she refuses to convene, to assemble, or to meet up over happiness.”⁴ Ahmed’s exploration of the feminist killjoy is a key concept in partners and collaborators Allyson Mitchell and Deirdre Logue’s travelling performance installation project *Killjoy’s Kastle: A Lesbian Feminist Haunted House* which Boulton, Beckles, Dalton-Lutale, Sharpe and I participated in as performers and was influential to aspects of our practices.

Ahmed also compares the feminist killjoy to the stereotypical figure of the “Angry Black Woman.” She writes “We can place the figure of the feminist killjoy alongside the figure of the angry black woman, explored so well by writers such as Audre Lorde (1984) and bell hooks (2000). The angry black woman can be described as a killjoy; she may even kill feminist joy, for example, by pointing out forms of racism within feminist politics.”⁵

American activist, lawyer, Black feminist, and critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality speaks to how feminist and anti-racist discourses of the 1990s

3 Lauren Michele Jackson, *White Negroes: When Cornrows Were in Vogue ... and Other Thoughts on Cultural Appropriation* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2019).

4 Ahmed, “Feminist Killjoys”, in *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 65

5 Sara Ahmed, “Feminist Killjoys,” 67

neglected discrimination faced by Black women and women of colour across intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality.⁶

Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge's book *Intersectionality* (2016) builds upon Crenshaw's term to explore how it can be regarded as an "analytic tool" to give "people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves."⁷ By framing thematic concerns that appear in the artists' works as concerning their intersectional politics and lived experiences, Collins' and Bilge's expansion on intersectionality is fundamental to this paper and is useful in understanding how the artists' experiences and practices are not tied to any one identity category.

Queerness/Queer Theory

Disidentification is a term coined by the late Cuban American queer, performance, and cultural theorist José Esteban Muñoz, who describes it as a practice of performance and production and as a tool used by racialized and queer artists that enable coded and multiple readings only accessed by audiences who speak the language to convey ideologies and or habitus that are alternative to those dominant in society. Muñoz writes, "disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture."⁸ Muñoz's theory and definition of disidentification is helpful in understanding and analysing the nuances, codes and multiplicities of meanings in the work of the artist's profiled in this paper.

6 Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): pp. 1243-1244, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>.

7 Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, "Intersectionality," in *Intersectionality* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2016), pp. 1-31, 2.

8 José E. Muñoz, "Performing Disidentifications," in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: The University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 31.

Further, I position the work of Beckles, Boulton, Sharpe and Dalton-Lutale in the same continuum as Muñoz and his subjects in his writings, but with particular attention to the complexities of Canadian Black biracial identity. Muñoz often wrote about artists with whom he had personal relationships. The approach and analysis I take in this work is influenced by his curiosity, innovation, and careful consideration for writing about individuals or communities that one is implicated in.

In addition, American queer theorist and professor Jack Halberstam's comparative writing on high and low culture that critically examines gender, capitalism, heteronormativity and queerness using examples from mass media and fine arts in his book *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) inspires my investigations into the pervasive messages of dominant culture.

Autoethnography/Autofiction

Autoethnographic and auto-theoretical inspiration comes to me through the work of contemporary queer, experimental writers and memoirists such as Andrea Long Chu, Jas M. Morgan, Alexander Chee, Carmen Maria Machado, Hilton Als, Maggie Nelson and Sara Ahmed who fuse theory with personal history. This form of writing is derived from a lineage of Black feminists and women of colour writers such as Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga and bell hooks.⁹ Sara Ahmed writes, "reading black feminist and feminist of color scholarship was life changing; I began to appreciate that theory can do more the closer it gets to the skin."¹⁰ By using autoethnography as a means to analyze the artists in this paper, I too have gained a greater appreciation for theory's capacity to unveil deeper meanings.

⁹ The creative nonfiction author Arianne Zwartjes writes that autotheory is "not a new literary practice, and it is one whose roots are in the intersectional writing and performance art of many Black feminists and women of color" Arianne Zwartjes, "Autotheory as Rebellion: On Research, Embodiment, and Imagination in Creative Nonfiction," *Michigan Quarterly Review*, July 23, 2019, <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/mqr/2019/07/autotheory-as-rebellion-on-research-embodiment-and-imagination-in-creative-nonfiction/>.

¹⁰ Sara Ahmed, "Living a Feminist Life," in *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 10.

Performance Art/Performance Studies

American performer and scholar E. Patrick Johnson's book *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* investigates appropriation, performance, sexuality, and Blackness to analysis how Blackness is performed and appropriated. Johnson's autoethnographic writings in *Appropriating Blackness* inspired my methodological approach to this project.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's writings on shame as a modality for queer politics and performance in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* informs my understanding and writing on shame, queerness, and performance.

Canadian performance artists Johanna Householder and Tanya Mars' *More Caught in the Act: An Anthology of Performance Art by Canadian Women* provides a contemporary history of major Canadian women performance artists who set the stage for the four artists I will examine through the course of this project. The anthology's format, which highlights the practices and influences of key artists working in the medium was influential to my decision to historicize the contemporary artists working around me, and whose work I admire.

Canadian Content/Context

While American artists and scholars such as Adrian Piper have generated work and writings concerning the Black biracial experience, and the artists in this paper often integrate, appropriate and critique aspects of American popular culture, it is important to differentiate the American Context from the Canadian. The work of Black Canadian writers brings specificity to this work, as the structures that allow culture to be made are unique to Canada given how it operates as a multicultural space with a different legacy of Black migration. While useful and integral to discussions on social justice in Canada, I acknowledge, consider, and contextualize the

experiential writings of Black and racialized theorists such as hooks, Johnson, and Muñoz as coming from a context of American Blackness and BIPOC anti-racist movements. The rigorous writings on art, artists, and culture by Black Canadian scholars such as Rinaldo Walcott, Yaniya Lee, Charmaine Nelson and Katherine McKittrick have informed my understandings of Black Canadian cultural production. I am anticipating the release of associate professor at Waterloo Dr. Naila Keleta-Mae's experimental book *Performing Female Blackness* that looks at Black female performances of fantasy and takes into consideration how Canada forms them.¹¹ Exhibitions, writing and cultural production by Black Canadian curators such as Julie Crooks, Sarah-Tai Black, Geneviève Wallen, Liz Ikiriko, and Andrea Fatona have informed my understandings of the ways in which Black Canadian cultural production can be framed and explored in Canadian art and cultural institutions and publications.

Methodology

Contrary to conventional art historical methods which prioritize case studies and rigid biographies where the writer and researcher is not personally implicated or explicitly identified to the reader, autoethnography as a method relies on centering the researcher's personal experience to create unique cultural critique. Considering the themes and values of the artists as well as the critical theorists integrated in this paper centre marginalized experiences, I employ autoethnography as my methodology to underscores knowledge making through community. Identifying myself, my relationship to the artists and by facilitating the artists in conversation with each other, I generate uniquely intimate research and writing that celebrates our friendship and contextualizes their work. As autoethnography centers the researcher, autoethnographic truth

¹¹ Naila Keleta-Mae, "Performing Female Blackness," WLU Press - Transforming Ideas, 2021, <https://www.wlupress.wlu.ca/Books/P/Performing-Female-Blackness>.

is not objective truth; but partial and subjective.¹² While the weaknesses of autoethnography are that it can be circular and hermetic, there is a distinct power in the intimacy made possible by mine and the artists' vulnerability in sharing our experiences in conversation, accessing truths directly through the artists' subjectivities.

In order to conduct this research, myself and the artist engaged in collective, free-form discussions that were had in person in my apartment in Toronto and over Zoom, which I recorded and later transcribed. My preparation for these informal, collective conversations involved the writing of questions specifically tailored to each artist's practice, questions for anyone and everyone to answer, and questions to be asked to each artist individually. Some of my questions inquired as to how and if the artists shared aesthetic and thematic similarities, what it meant to have their work read and analysed in relation to one another, when they first identified as artists, what it means to be creating work in the particular cultural, political and geographical context of Canada, what their ideal and least ideal audiences are, what the importance of humour is in their work, who is in on the joke and who is excluded. These discussions did not differ much from ones we would have in a social context; I was not the only questioner, and we made space for the telling of anecdotes, getting off topic, debates, tangents, gossip and jokes.

Given the way our discussions transpired, we deviated from the script; not all questions were asked, some would be organically answered in response to others, some would become irrelevant, and new questions would arise; posed not only by me. Revisiting my list, question

¹² Cason Sharpe is currently reading the Black, queer science fiction writer Samuel R. Delany's autobiography *The Motion of Light in Water: Sex and Science Fiction Writing in the East Village* (1998). Sharpe told me that Delany disputed a date with a fact checker, claiming that the date he wrote *sounded* more real.

number 9 has taken on a different meaning: “What are the stakes in disseminating autobiographical information with your audience?”

During my process of transcription, I had the opportunity to revisit the conversations and draw thematic connections. Using these transcriptions alongside close readings of their cultural productions, I interpret and relate their works to one another, creating space for self-reflexive analysis.

New knowledge is produced in this process as the statements made by the artists have yet to be documented with such rigour that reflects our distinctive, personal, and intimate relationships to one another. By putting our dialogues into writing and critically contextualizing their works and lived experiences throughout these pages, I make thematic connections and analyse their works alongside each other, drawing on both critical frameworks as well as my own personal understandings and relationships to the artists as friend and chosen family. By providing and producing traces and intentional documentation, I leave marks and draw pathways for future discovery in the field of Black Canadian Contemporary Art History, inside and outside academic institutions.

I discuss how the artists grapple with the following themes: Blackness, community, family and culture in their lives and their work, as influenced by representation across class, race, gender and sexuality in popular culture, as well as their own social and familial upbringings in Toronto and Hamilton. My role as a writer is to connect understandings of self, as evidenced in their individual and collective work and statements and make connections to larger theoretical and cultural contexts.

Autoethnography allows for an account of the artist’s work that I am suited to conduct based on my longstanding friendships with them and their trust in me as a writer and researcher

of contemporary art histories. While I sought out for this work to be clean-cut and itemized, as with any multiple-person conversation, this is something that cannot be. Instead, this inductive, qualitative analysis allows for more nuanced readings by referring to statements from the artists, looking to their intensions, and how they approach their materials and subject matter. The artists' subjectivities and concerns weave through one another and appear throughout; often in conversation. As a community of artists and friends, we draw from a specific bank of references, using language that reflects this and permeates the pages that follow.

I engage in close readings of the artists' images, videos, texts, reviews and analyses by scholars and writers, recount my recollections of live durational/under-documented work, as well as transcriptions from our conducted group discussions where the artists were prompted to speak to their work, community, identity, and each other's practices. Unless otherwise indicated, the majority of quotes from the artists are taken from our discussions. I have deliberately given space for the artists' own words to enable their voices to be heard, contrasted, and compared to those of my own as well as select theorists who I draw upon to analyze and situate the artist's practices. Dr. DD Rosé is my performative, professorial persona who appears in Kiera Boulton's video work *Ki True Hollywood Story* (2020). Throughout the writing of this paper, I conjured her. Despite her lack of academic credentials, offering my own and embodying her criticality and amorous gaze has allowed me a performative critical distance between the works and lives of artists I know and love.

Furthermore, using an autoethnographic method allows me to speak about the formative experience of myself and the artists profiled in this paper's participation in *Killjoys Kastle: A Lesbian Feminist Haunted House*. *Killjoys Kastle* inspired a reoccurring performance project by Kiera Boulton.

Dalton-Lutale and Beckles contributed essays to the 2019 publication *Inside Killjoy's Kastle: Dykey Ghosts, Feminist Monsters, and Other Lesbian Hauntings* that compiles personal essays from performers and facilitators, performance scripts, photo documentation and responses to criticisms regarding the “politics of representation in the Toronto and Los Angeles” exhibitions.¹³ By discussing *Killjoy's Kastle* through the methodology of autoethnography, I make connections to how the works of Boulton, Beckles, Dalton-Lutale, and Sharpe featured in this paper explore pop culture and identity and reposition themselves in dialogue with one another and a larger queer, creative community. Parody, performance, critiques of academia and the arts and educational institution are exemplary in the politics and methods of *Killjoys Kastle* as well as in the practices of these four artists.

Killjoys Kastle: A Lesbian Feminist Haunted House

KillJoy's Kastle: A Lesbian Feminist Haunted House is a reoccurring performance installation that celebrates queerness, community, lesbian feminism and intersectionality, and critiques hetero-normativity, patriarchy, and capitalism through humour, parody, camp, and satire. *KillJoy's Kastle* acknowledges problematic and complicated histories of the project and of white, lesbian feminist politics by looking to the future in ways that are generative, honest, and rooted in self-reflexivity. As myself and the artist's profiled in this paper have performed in iterations of the *Kastle*, I look to it as a case study to examine how it functioned as to inspire, influence, and legitimize work and collective performance. Among many other projects, *Killjoys Kastle* co-creators Allyson Mitchell and Deirdre Logue¹⁴ co-founded the Feminist Art

13 Cait McKinney, and Allyson Mitchell, “Facebook Statements: ‘We Learn More Every Time We Do This,’” in *Inside Killjoy's Kastle: Dykey Ghosts, Feminist Monsters, and Other Lesbian Hauntings* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2019), 138.

14 Allyson Mitchell is a feminist maximalist artist who works in sculpture, textiles, film and installation to take up affect, queerness, craft, fatness, and intersectionality through the frameworks of popular culture and feminism. Mitchell is an Associate Professor and Graduate Program

Gallery (FAG) out of their converted Parkdale garage in 2010. (FAG is a non-traditional, community-oriented gallery that is dedicated to supporting queer, racialized and emerging artists.)¹⁵

KillJoy's Kastle: A Lesbian Feminist Haunted House began in Toronto in 2013, took place in Los Angeles in 2015, and Philadelphia in 2019. Among other inspirations, *KillJoy's Kastle* re-appropriates the homophobic practices of evangelical hell houses¹⁶ where “performer-animated installations showcase a gruesome retribution for the sins of fornication, abortion, suicide, occultism, and—of course—same-sex relationships.”¹⁷ Mitchell and Logue describe the project as “a litany of current and historical stereotypes using an intersectional mirror to reflect and shatter the ways in which women, trans and gender non-conforming individuals are made into monsters by mainstream society, acting as an archive and think tank to playfully mourn and exercise feminist histories, demons and ghosts.”¹⁸

Director at the School of Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies at York University. Deirdre Logue uses film, video and installation as a form of self-portraiture. Logue has a longstanding history of working with artist-run organizations and is the Development Director at Vtape, the Toronto-based artist-run centre and distributor of video art.

15 “Artists-in-Residence - FAG Feminist Art Gallery,” Art Gallery of Ontario, 2015, <https://ago.ca/artist-in-residence/fag-feminist-art-gallery>.

16 A 2002 documentary follows the Cedar Hill Trinity Church's youth group creating and performing in a hell house. Ratliff, George, dir. *Hell House*. 2002; Cedar Hill, TX: Devorah DeVries, Zachary Mortensen, 2002.

17 “KillJoy's Kastle: A Lesbian Feminist Haunted House,” ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives at the USC Libraries, October 16, 2015, <https://one.usc.edu/exhibition/killjoys-kastle-lesbian-feminist-haunted-house>.

18 “KillJoy's Kastle: A Lesbian Feminist Haunted House,” Icebox Project Space, October 20, 2019, <https://iceboxprojectspace.com/killjoys-kastle-2019/>



Figure 12: Allyson Mitchell and Deirdre Logue, *Killjoy's Kastle: A Lesbian Feminist Haunted House*, Toronto, (2013)
Exterior view. Photo courtesy of the artists

While the *Kastle* varies in its cast of characters over its multiple iterations, it follows the same immersive structure. While waiting in line for entry, participants catch a set by Lesbian Zombie Folk Singers and encounter a Valerie Solanas¹⁹ impersonator who sets some ground rules (do not photograph nude performers, no flashlights, be respectful!). A Demented Women's Studies Professor invites you inside the *Kastle* where contents from decor to costumes are laden with handmade elements, carefully crafted, visceral and sensorial; constructed and curated to pique, provoke, and perturb. The Intersectional Activist in tie-dyed morph suit boxes in oversized gloves, one finger tatted with "out" the other with "rage" with swinging, soft and heavy punching bags representing "Racism, Capitalism, Transphobia, and Ableism." The Polyamorous Vampiric Grannies, enmeshed in crocheted cobwebs, sit in their rocking chair beneath a banner reading "Just Not Married" reciting quotes from Dossie Easton and Janet Hardy's *The Ethical Slut: A Guide to Infinite Sexual Possibilities*. A Menstruating Trans Man begs you to dump his DivaCup into a bathroom sink, pre-bloodied by the aid of a previous participant, and The Plaid-Wearing Ball Bustas smash testicular plaster casts with gusto and

¹⁹ American radical feminist and author of the *SCUM (Society for Cutting Up Men) Manifesto*, played in the *Kastle* by Felice Shays.

vigour, filling the room with thick, chalky truck-nut shrapnel. The Graveyard of Dead Lesbian Feminist Organizations and Ideas functions as a shrine, allowing participants a chance to grieve them. The last destination, a ‘processing room’ facilitated by real-life feminist killjoys, encourages participants to reflect; to share experiences, thoughts and emotions provoked by the exhibition.

Some criticism of the *Kastle* spoke about triggering, harmful and transphobic components featured in the Toronto exhibition such as The Ball Busta room, and the fact that the majority of performers were white. Christina Hajjar’s review of Allyson Mitchell and Cait McKinney’s book *Inside Killjoy’s Kastle: Dykey Ghosts, Feminist Monsters, and Other Lesbian Hauntings* (2019) outlines her initial skepticism of the text. On the project, she writes “Many trans people, people of colour and allies spoke out about the triggering and offensive nature of (The Ball Busta room) and other aspects of the kastle—such as a white performer in dreads and a general lack of representation...”²⁰ Hajjar questions the effectiveness of the processing room, the contradictions housed in parody, critique and nostalgia, and asks “What does identity based art owe to those whom it claims to represent, and how do its viewers contend with that?”²¹ Mitchell and Logue’s written responses to the criticism acknowledges these shortcomings and blind spots and notes how the project “will always be in progress.”²²

I participated in the Los Angeles (2015) and Philadelphia (2019) iterations of the project and can attest to how the criticism the *Kastle* garnered was fundamental to its mutation. In 2019,

20 Christina Hajjar, “C Magazine / Inside Killjoy’s Kastle: Dykey Ghosts, Feminist Monsters, and Other Lesbian Hauntings: Allyson Mitchell and Cait McKinney,” C Magazine (C The Visual Arts Foundation (Toronto), July 1, 2020), <https://cmagazine.com/issues/146/inside-killjoys-kastle-dykey-ghosts-feminist-monsters-and-other>.

21 Christina Hajjar, “C Magazine / Inside Killjoy’s Kastle: Dykey Ghosts, Feminist Monsters, and Other Lesbian Hauntings: Allyson Mitchell and Cait McKinney.”

22 Cait McKinney, and Allyson Mitchell, “Facebook Statements: ‘We Learn More Every Time We Do This,’” 146.

I worked closely with Boulton, Beckles, Dalton-Lutale and Sharpe and consider the experience to be an important catalyst for our collective performances. Witnessing callouts and call-ins roll in in real-time and how Mitchell and Logue listened to and integrated criticism from communities offered a chance to learn about transparency through positionality and opportunities for artistic and personal growth through reflection and accountability as *Killjoy's Kastle* operates as a radical, intersectional, and intergenerational space that centres community, care, growth, safety and understanding.

Kalale Dalton-Lutale's essay in *Inside Killjoy's Kastle* speaks about her experience in 2013. She writes: "These spaces of community and queer utopia, where I cut my teeth *per se*, where I met and made memories with my best friends.²³ These were beautiful safety zones. Out there-in the world-isn't always like that."²⁴

As Jose Esteban Muñoz writes in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*:

Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon, imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. The future is queerness's domain.²⁵

The scale and recognition of the queer, radical, intimate, and flawed "utopia" of the *Kastle* placed us inside a performative queer criticality that integrated critique from queer communities and used the language of academia and popular culture to address oppressive forces of dominant, heterosexual, cisgender culture as well as the elitism found in arts and educational institutions. The artist's practices reflect a similar system of beliefs as the *Kastle*, integrating

23 Kalale's essay concludes with how we (Kalale, Madelyne and I) had "Killjoy" tattooed on our shoulders to "make sure we wouldn't forget" Allyson Mitchell, Cait McKinney, and Kalale Dalton-Lutale, "Once upon a Time I Was a Riot Ghoul," in *Inside Killjoy's Kastle: Dykey Ghosts, Feminist Monsters, and Other Lesbian Hauntings* (Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 2019), 116.

24 Dalton-Lutale, "Once upon a Time I Was a Riot Ghoul", 116.

25 Muñoz José Esteban, "Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity," in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009), 1.

popular culture, performance, and criticism, reliant on personal experience, community dialogues, and academia with continual space for growth and reflection.

Collaboration and Knowledge Making Through Performance

The formative experience of participating in *Killjoys Kastle* allowed for free-form and improvisational exploration through performance that was impactful to myself and the artists profiled in this paper. This chapter describes how our performance strategies were transformed by a critical feedback loop.



Figure 2: Riot Ghouls: Madelyne Beckles, Cason Sharpe, Kiera Boulton, and Delilah Rosier. Philadelphia, (2019)
Behind the scenes photograph

Performing as Riot Ghouls in Philadelphia (2019), lit by spinning disco balls, Cason, Madelyne, Kiera and I performed, danced, and writhed when the Demented Women's Studies Professors invited participants to peer into our Gender Studies Professor and Riot Ghouls dance party. Positioned in a constructed library/cave wallpapered with reproductions of pencil drawings of a feminist literature library²⁶ and littered with oversized, papier-mâché replicas of feminist

²⁶ The wallpaper of Mitchell's drawings of texts that she found in the Brooklyn Lesbian Herstory Archives also papered the walls of her 2010 exhibition at the AGO. "Allyson Mitchell: A Girl's Journey to the Well of Forbidden Knowledge," Art Gallery of Ontario, 2010, <https://ago.ca/exhibitions/allyson-mitchell-girls-journey-well-forbidden-knowledge>.

texts, participants weaved through our party and were instructed to look but not to linger at risk of radicalization. We were quite literally dancing with critical feminist theory; manically getting down and sweating to a pastiche soundtrack of Riot Grrrl bangers. No two performances were the same, for as groups of participants appeared, different portions of the soundtrack played, dictating our gesticulations accordingly. My face became numb from my grin over shift work of stomping, and I noticed how participants refused to maintain eye contact. At first, I was saddened and took it as a sign of disengagement, but after enough trips to the bathroom mirror, I began to understand that they looked away in fear, in discomfort.

Between tours, we would browse the spines of the texts, and when abstracts and blurbs were painted on our props, we would read their backs, taking note for future reference. Author, Adrienne Maree Brown's *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good* (2019) became a go-to prop of mine to hoist over my head. Upon arriving home, I ordered it, and have since given it to Kalale as a plea for her to seek pleasure as she says I do.²⁷ In Los Angeles, we bullied participants, scolding them had they not read a particularly canonical text.²⁸

Knowledge was produced through improvisation, experimentation and trial and error in our performance. What grew to be a favourite routine of ours was arbitrarily singling out a particular participant, pointing and whispering, then erupting, shrieking, literally calling out and cancelling them, chanting "problematic!" a double word score self-referential SJW millennial drag.²⁹

27 Despite my seeking pleasure, please note that undertaking a second graduate degree is not an act of hedonism. For more information on such pursuits, see: Masochism.

28 For instance, Cherríe Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa's 1981 feminist anthology: *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*.

29 For those seeking translation, here I am borrowing "double word score" from the Hasbro word board game Scabble to refer to a 2-for-1 achieved through our act. A "Social Justice Warrior" or "SJW" originally referred to a person (frequently of the millennial generation) involved in activism for social justice. The term has since taken on negative connotations (attributed to Twitter and SJW's participation in cancel culture and slacktivism.) As millennials, our act was intended to parody, or "drag" (not to be confused with the performance-based art form, to drag is to

In Philadelphia, we were instructed instead to focus on the books, to act amorously and entranced by them, embodying the knowledge. Word trickled down that in the processing room, a participant said they were most triggered by our Riot Ghoul room, claiming their experience with us brought forth anxieties. This boomerang of feedback allowed us to transform our performance, comparing how what might please us or might harm a participant. In the makeshift bathroom/greenroom, out of character, we contemplated the accessibility of feminist theory, how it had or hadn't aided our thinking, shaped our identities, or made us feel less or more alone.

Kiera Boulton

Kiera Boulton's video-based works have been shown at Toronto performance art collective 7a*11D's online residency and Trinity Square Video. She has performed live at the Art Gallery of Ontario (2019), on the final Art Gallery of York University's Performance Bus (2017), and in Life of a Crap Head's Doo Red live performance series (2019). Boulton was the 2019 recipient of the Hamilton Emerging Visual Artist Award and is the Submissions, Collections & Outreach Coordinator of Vtape. Boulton's practice uses her persona, Kiki, to speak to and critique gentrification, arts and educational institutions, whiteness, activism, popular culture, her hometown of Hamilton, Ontario and her positionality as a Black biracial artist operating in the Canadian art landscape. Kiera and I met and became arguably codependent as undergraduate students in the Criticism & Curatorial Practice Program at OCAD U and have since collaborated on performance works.

roast; to insult) ourselves, our generation, and SJW culture. For information regarding the etymological shift of the term SJW, see: Abby Ohlheimer, "Why 'Social Justice Warrior,' a Gamergate Insult, Is Now a Dictionary Entry," The Washington Post (WP Company, April 28, 2019), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2015/10/07/why-social-justice-warrior-a-gamergate-insult-is-now-a-dictionary-entry/?variant=116ae929826d1fd3>, and for a definition of drag see: "Drag," 2015, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Drag>.

Reflecting on her experience in *Killjoy's Kastle*, Boulton expresses how her involvement in the project was immensely demanding, as she had divorced herself from her persona Kiki.



Figure 3: Kiera Boulton, *The Truth Booth*, (2014-2019)
Photograph from live performance

In her recollection, she articulates how her performance suffered when her persona was neglected, deviating from her standard approach to performance: “...in preparing, I didn't bring Kiki, and I couldn't do the performance. It was so difficult to do it as Kiera and not Kiki, and it was the first performance where I realized this problem that I have, where I don't know how to perform if I am not performing as this persona.”³⁰

³⁰ Kiera Boulton in discussion with the author, Madelyne Beckles, Kalale Dalton-Lutale and Cason Sharpe. Zoom, December 12, 2020.

Boult announced her participation in the Philadelphia *Kastle* on Instagram,³¹ where she shared how its first iteration functioned as a model for cultural criticism using humour and camp, inspiring her public performance, social practice project *The Truth Booth* (2014-2019).³²

Referencing Lucy's psychiatry booth from Charles M. Schulz's *Peanuts*, the artist erected a structure with room for only one; a semi-portable pink box fashioned from Polycarbonate sheets of plastic, spray-painted pink, accented with golden leopard spots and fitted with a backdrop of gold tinsel. When standing in the booth, above her head, gold hand-cut lettering read "Truth Booth." Performing as her charismatic persona Kiki, Boult took the booth to the streets and engaged the public. Using camp, comedy, and pop-cultural references, she offered advice and printed brochures concerning gentrification, neoliberalism, the creative class, community building and land ownership through the lens of class and race.

31 black_fran_drescher. "Six years ago I attended the 2013 Killjoy's Kastle" *Instagram*, October 14, 2019.

<https://www.instagram.com/p/B3nF2JCAK69HSY3Od9qiJUXm86RTMZmRDeiyNw0/>

32 A keg party to bid farewell to the *Truth Booth* and to raise funds for the extraction of a Papillon/Chihuahua's tooth was held at Boult's home in 2019.



Figure 4: Kiera Boulton, *The Truth Booth Presents: Art is the New Steal: Appropriating the Hamilton Landscape*, (2016)
Digital image of printed brochure

A 2016 iteration of the work entitled “The Truth Booth Presents: Art is the New Steal: Appropriating the Hamilton Landscape”³³ offered participants an “accessible guilt free experience in navigating issues of gentrification and the creative class” as a criticism of American urban studies theorist Richard Florida’s class prejudice advocacy for a creative class and cities. While members of the 9/11 Truth Movement are referred to as “Truthers,” Boulton plays

³³ “The Truth Booth: Art Is the New Steal: Appropriating the Hamilton Landscape” was performed at the Hamilton Art Crawl in 2016. A Toronto version also took place and was Boulton’s cumulative project for her undergraduate degree at OCAD U.

upon the culture of conspiracy by referring to the booth's facilitators as "The Truthrz" defining them as a community of artists working in collaboration to create a "shared consciousness in community."³⁴

Kikiology 101

Boult's performative persona Kiki is intrinsically linked to her hometown of Hamilton.³⁵ In conversation with our friend, the artist Leah Schulli and Madelyne Beckles on their podcast *High T*, Boult speaks about her persona and states, "I really enjoy the character, but I think that she has her limits. The past year of performances that I did not living in Hamilton, it felt like she didn't belong in Toronto, she is truly a Hamilton Gal."³⁶ This articulated site-specificity of the character played by Boult fits within understandings of the contextual and formative background of the artists' life and practice. The city of Hamilton operates simultaneously as her muse and as a device that taught her about the complexities of her identity and privilege, based on the design of the city itself. Boult reflects:

Once the industrialization of Hamilton happened, Hamilton was a middle-class city. All of the Rust Belt was majority middle-class. So, then the only way to divide people was through geography and space, which is why you had these bridges to these different parts of the city. And then the people that got rich or that were upper-middle-class, moved to the mountain. What all of this taught me was how because I grew up in Westdale, and then I moved to the mountain, I had this different experience of my race. My experience was the same, but it was different. I was initially in French Immersion when I was a younger, so I had friends of colour. And then when I went to English, I only had white friends, and then when I moved up the mountain, I feel like class had a big part to play in overt racism.³⁷

34 Boult, Kiera, *The Truthrz, The Truth Booth Presents: Art Is the New Steal: Appropriating the Hamilton Landscape*. Toronto, 2016.

35 This is explored in Boult's Canadian Art Magazine Instagram takeover, where she shares part of her "Hamilton is my Lady" project, its title appropriated from the 2012 one-hour CBC special I, Martin Short, Goes Home, where the comedian sings a tune entitled "Hamilton is my Lady" Canartca, @kieraboult. "Kiera Boult Takeover" *Instagram*, July 20, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CC3nXvZpB4l/>

36 Madelyne Beckles, Leah Schulli and Kiera Boult, "If You're Not Political, You're Drake w/ Kiera Boult" *High T*, Podcast audio, October 26, 2020. <https://podcasts.apple.com/ca/podcast/if-youre-not-political-youre-drake-w-kiera-boult/id1479420621?i=1000496243393>

37 Kiera Boult, Zoom, December 12, 2020.

Throughout Boulton's works, the artist uses social practice and performance to contemplate and critique gentrification and neo-liberalism while using her biography and positionality as entry points. By embodying Kiki through the stylings of camp and comedy, Boulton's persona renders the roots and manifestations of community injustices as accessible but still complex.

In her video works, Boulton relies on lo-fi technology, her persona, and the vocabularies of internet culture to integrate challenging conversations on identity, race, capitalism, neo-liberalism, arts and educational institutions and the co-opting of activism into the banality of the digital every day.



Figure 5: Kiera Boulton, *#Teamkiki (For Institutional Use Only)*, (2018)
Video still

#Teamkiki (For Institutional Use Only) (2018) features reaction GIFs of Kiki overlaid with quotes from theorists and popstars. A macaroon pink, blue and orange cloudscape, lifted and GIFed from Kanye West's "Famous" music video is behind her, a reoccurring backdrop in her video works. By working with GIFs, Boulton appropriates the form and subverts it by replacing a usually banal banner of text with provocations borrowed from Kanye West "You love me for me could you be more phoney" and Sara Ahmed "equality can be treated...as contributing to the

optimal performance of an institution.” At the one-minute mark, Kiki winces and cringes in looped succession; animating the text that reads “The face you make when you realize: that intersectionality continues to center whiteness as a marker of difference.”

American activist, lawyer and critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” in 1989.³⁸ The concept of intersectionality presents the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexual identity, and was added to the Oxford English dictionary in 2015.³⁹ According to Crenshaw, it gained “widespread attention during the 2017 Women’s March.”⁴⁰ Misinterpretation of the term is prevalent, hence Kiki’s wince. She opens *#Teamkiki* with a reminder to viewers; a dual-purpose double roast from inside the Art Gallery of Hamilton where the work was shown that her positionality and activism come with their own district bias and oversights: “Don’t mistake light-skinned hubris for solidarity.”

Katherine Brown’s Master’s thesis notes how the GIF⁴¹ is embedded with parody, one that is “paramount to any embedded humour. Referring to popular cultural moments or online referential obscurities, while relating to a banal everyday experience is often the desire of users.”⁴² Boulton’s use of parody and the appropriation of pop culture in this work take up all the conventions of the GIF while complication and subverting its typical use.

38 Crenshaw looks to three legal cases involving racial and gender discrimination and relays the practice of treating race and gender as disjunctive. Kimberlé, Crenshaw. “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics [1989].” In *Feminist Legal Theory*, 57–80. (Routledge, 2018) <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429500480-5>.

39 Merrill Perlman, “The Origin of the Term ‘Intersectionality’,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, October 23, 2018, https://www.cjr.org/language_corner/intersectionality.php.

40 Jane Coaston, “The Intersectionality Wars,” *Vox* (Vox, May 20, 2019), <http://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/5/20/18542843/intersectionality-conservatism-law-race-gender-discrimination>.

41 In Lauren Michelle Jackson’s book *White Negroes: When Cornrows Were in Vogue and Other Thoughts on Cultural Appropriation*, Jackson refers to the use of reaction GIFs of Black and queer folks on Tumblr and other social media platforms as digital blackface and modern minstrelsy. Lauren Michele Jackson, “The Meme: Kermit the Frog Meets Nina Simone,” in *White Negroes: When Cornrows Were in Vogue ... and Other Thoughts on Cultural Appropriation* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2019), 98.

42 Brown, “Everyday I’m Tumblin’: Performing Online Identity through Reaction GIFs”, 7.

Her video piece *Ki True Hollywood Story* (2020) responds to her self-inflicted cancellation featured in a previous performance, *Kiki Gets Cancelled* (2019) and addresses rumours of her retirement to ignite Kiki's comeback.⁴³ In the work, Boulton appropriates the format and title of the American television series *E! True Hollywood Story*.⁴⁴ It begins with found footage from *E!*'s opening sequence with an ominous, upbeat soundtrack backing it. Cut to Kiki, in a sequined top, long, straight blond hair, and tiny, black, flame shaped shades. She sits before a backdrop of gold synthetic tinsel ribbon curtains and introduces herself. "Hi, I'm Kiki. I'm the iconic persona created by the artist Kiera Boulton, and I'm your institution's favourite artist. I wonder why?" she asks, whilst peering from beneath her shades. She tells the viewer how they might be acquainted with her, listing notable performances to date as stills from the artist's oeuvre and promotional materials from past performances graze the screen. "Kiki, me? I'm the art. Kiera, she's the administrator." The music dies with Kiki's read.

Kiki's collaborator, Mathew Crans appears before the golden curtain, outfitted in Kiki's iconic pink cowboy hat with rhinestone fringe dripping before his face. "My name is Mathew, and I'm the man behind the Kiki." Her signature Kanye West cloudscape gathers and dissipates behind Crans as he poses. Credited as Kiki's collaborator, he describes the first time he witnessed her perform,⁴⁵ how their bond began in treks back to Hamilton and confesses how he is compliant to and complicit in Kiki's every request. In response to Crans' devotion, Kiki tells us "The way that Mathew looks at me, and loves me, and worships me, and listens to me, is showing people how happy they could be if they would just do that. Mathew's a star because he

43 "Kiera Boulton," Artcite Inc., 2021, <https://www.artciteinc.ca/portfolio-1/project-one-rs5ha>.

44 The series was rebooted in 2019, and the second episode, "Who is Kim Kardashian West?" functioned as Boulton's inspiration.

45 During Kiki's performance at the since-demolished OCAD U Student Gallery, she created bundles made from the bed sheet she lost her virginity on, a photograph of her breasts, a piece of her hair weave and a sprinkling of glitter. Photo documentation and Crans' description of the work appears in *Ki True Hollywood Story* (2020) "Kiera Boulton," Artcite Inc., 2021.

worships me, don't you want that same thing? Kiki gives the currency of celebrity and social capital.” When I ask Boulton who she addresses with her work, there are fragments of Kiki’s philosophy filtered through Boulton’s reality.

Kiki has always been speaking to white hipsters, specifically white hipster men that won't fuck her. That one white hipster who didn't think that they were attracted to Kiki until they saw that she's a star and an icon and how much social capital there is to gain by fucking her... it's petty and it's vain and it's also how you can see where Kiki comes from. That is the audience. I want the white people to feel shame and guilt, but at the same time, an attraction and a need and a want. That is the audience.⁴⁶

Here, Boulton exposes how she addresses an audience that she simultaneously despises and desires. Kiki’s philosophy that embodies hubris and exudes charisma become intertwined and troubled with Boulton’s real, honest, and human desires that are enacted through the act of performance.

In *Ki True Hollywood Story*, we see snippets of collaborative work between Kiera and me,⁴⁷ leading up to my cameo where I am credited as the Leading Kiki Expert. Introduced as my professorial persona Delores Derosier (colloquially referred to as Doctor DD Rosé), I appear in a black turtleneck, red lipstick and a beret pulled over a blonde wig with dark roots exposed.⁴⁸ As Bill Withers and Grover Washington Jr.’s “Just the Two of Us” plays softly in the background, Rosé explains how she earned the title of the Leading Expert on Kiki, after the

⁴⁶ Kiera Boulton, Zoom, December 12, 2020.

⁴⁷ This footage was created for the exhibition *a map for this place: 43°73'n, 79°61'w*. The work consisted of a large-scale mask I constructed, fitted with a virtual reality headset inside of it. When the viewer wore it, they would see our collaborative video in virtual reality where we sought to revisit, parody, and pay homage to the time paid within the institution formally known as school, while simultaneously offering and arming the viewer with tips and tricks of deprogramming one from the clichés, stereotypes, problematics, and tropes of the neoliberal art school experience extravaganza. “Humber Galleries,” *a map for this place: 43°73' n, 79°61' w* | Humber Galleries, September 4, 2018, <http://humbergalleries.ca/exhibitions/north-space/map-place-43%C2%BA73-n-79%C2%BA61-w>.

⁴⁸ The wig was originally procured for a performance I did as Kiki for her birthday roast on January 11, 2020. My roast included jokes such as “Slap some leopard Spanx on me and call me for the biennale... I’ll blurt out the first thing that comes to mind, it won me an emerging artists award!” and “Kayne’s people have been emailing me cease and desist letters since *College Dropout*, but since these shade blind curators have been calling him Drake, I’ve been getting off scot-free!”

completion of her dissertation *The Icon Wore Spanx: From James Street North to the Stages of the Institution*, and how she pioneered the underfunded and understaffed Faculty of Urban Criticism and Kikiology (FUCK).⁴⁹



Figure 6: Delilah Rosé as Delores Derosier, AKA Doctor DD Rosé in Kiera Boulton's *Ki True Hollywood Story*, (2020)
Video still

The work concludes with Kiki saying that she knew she had to come home and that her future lies in politics. Her last words “I think I’ve *been* running for mayor.”

By way of Boulton's thoughtful appropriations from the pop-cultural landscape, her insistence of iconic status and the self-referentiality to her persona, the artist offers her viewers insight into the problematics and contradictions of Kiki and her audience. Parodying the *E! True Hollywood* format of celebrity origin stories, exposé, and tabloid news, she satirizes the way

⁴⁹ Rosé lists some choice courses offered at FUCK, including “Kikiology 101, Performance and performativity, Gentrification and Castration Anxiety, and *Is Hamilton my lady?* Coloniality and Gendered Spaces” “Kiera Boulton,” Artcite Inc., 2021.

clout, social capital and a comparable star system are mirrored in white art institutions and academia, blending conceptions of high and low culture, popular culture, and identity.



Figure 7: Kiera Boulton, *The Solidarity Collection*, (2018)
Video still

Boulton's video *The Solidarity Collection* (2018) appropriates the format of the infomercial to critique the co-option of activism through commercialization. Team Kiki insignia, featuring her face in black and white with morsels of leopard print is affixed to the bottom right corner of the screen. Kiki narrates questions that appear in sync on-screen in yellow text "Left out of a movement? Complacent in white supremacy?" If the viewer might agree, she encourages them to shop. The artist appears on-screen, tripled, in a shimmering sequined top, clutching and posing with a black fur stole. When water-marked stock images of paparazzi encroach the frame, she smiles, waves and nods, prompting the viewer to dial 1-800-TEAM-KIKI and place orders for "Who Gonna Detect Me, Boo?"⁵⁰ Face Masks" as a means to deter facial recognition software.

50 Shereé Whitfield is an original cast member of Bravo network's *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* (2008-present). In its second season, when a fight erupts between Whitfield and her party planner, she asks him "Who gon check me, boo?" speakerebox, "Who Gone CHECK Me BOO?" (YouTube, December 6, 2011), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YrRZ_AKaCGo. Boulton's masks were before their time, as the official *Bravo* website currently offers "The Real Housewives of Atlanta Who Gon' Check Me, Boo? Washable Face Masks" retailing at \$12.95 USD. "<https://shopbybravo.com/products/whos-gon-check-me-boo-washable-face-mask>, accessed March 17, 2021.

Need an incentive for ordering now? Kiki will throw in a jewelled picket stick! PayPal, American Express, Visa, MasterCard and Discover, all acceptable means of purchasing. In *The Solidarity Collection*, Boulton delivers an intrinsic awareness and collapse between high and low culture. Her use of satire makes fun of discrepancies when conversations on art, activism, and community are held in arts institutions complicit with the demands of commerce and capitalism.

American writer Andrea Long Chu writes in her auto-theoretical book *Females* (2019) that “Jokes are always serious.”⁵¹ When asked at an event about what she meant when she used the term “ethics” she explains:

I hesitated and then said, ‘I think I mean commitment to a bit.’ The audience laughed, but I meant it; they laughed *because* I meant it. In stand-up comedy, a bit is a comic sequence or conceit, often involving a brief suspension of reality. To commit to a bit is to play it straight—that is, to take it seriously. A bit may be fantastical, but the seriousness required to commit to it is always real. This is the humorlessness that vegetates at the core of all humour. That’s what makes the bit funny: the fact that, for the comic, it isn’t.⁵²

Through this suspension of reality and by making space for contemplation of the commodification of activism by institutions and capitalism, *The Solidarity Collection* addresses Kiki’s implications by operating inside the in the arts intuition, as well as the viewer’s though their experience of the work from inside the arts intuition. The sacrifice and commitment Chu alludes to, inherent to delivering comedic performance, is one we can trace in Boulton’s practice and relationship with her persona.

Speaking with Sally Frater in *Canadian Art Magazine*, Boulton revealed a desire to retire Kiki. Citing her reasons, Boulton claimed how she found it “hard to see this work as political. And

⁵¹ Andrea Long Chu, “BONGI. You’re Wrong—I’m Not a Watcher; I’m a Woman of Action,” in *Females* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books, 2019), 18.

⁵² Long Chu, 18–19.

if my work is not political, then I am just Drake.”⁵³ She was given the opportunity to explain this comparison further on her guest appearance on the *High T* Podcast:

The notes they gave her (Frater) were like ‘you have to go back and ask Kiera why she wants to retire Kiki, so, Sally was like, ‘what’s the deal dude? so I was like, ‘I’m Drake if I’m not political.’ The aesthetics of my practice are fun and enjoyable and they’re easy, and if it doesn’t go beyond that, then it’s like “Hotline Bling” where it’s a lot of fun, but it’s not that hard for anybody.⁵⁴

Her clarification naturally became the episode’s title: “If You’re Not Political, You’re Drake w/ Kiera Boulton.” Despite Boulton’s fear of Kiki’s apoliticism, her work continually asks its audiences to meditate on their intentions; to be simultaneously suspicious and swindled by Kiki’s allure. By replicating the egocentric attributes of renowned public figures and masking cultural criticisms in digestible guilty pleasures, she never neglects to point to her positionality. She tells me “the first thing my work always comes for is my identity.” Boulton’s dedication to creating work that interrogates her identity, societal and ideological barriers create openings for intersectional dialogues on accountability, privilege, and self-reflexivity.

Lorraine O’Grady’s Mlle Bourgeoise Noire and Camille Turner’s Miss Canadiana

A key antecedent to the contemporary works in this discussion, and in the continuum of Black women artists using persona to address the complexity of identity in a white art world context, is the American interdisciplinary artist and writer Lorraine O’Grady. In 1980, O’Grady first enacted her performance persona Mlle Bourgeoise Noire, at Just Above Midtown Gallery in New York City.⁵⁵ Outfitted in a gown constructed from 180 pairs of thrifted white gloves, a sash

⁵³ Sally Frater, “Making Throughlines,” *Canadian Art*, October 13, 2020, <https://canadianart.ca/features/making-throughlines/>.

⁵⁴ Beckles, Schulli and Boulton, “If You’re Not Political, You’re Drake w/ Kiera Boulton”

⁵⁵ O’Grady’s 2021 retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum features the 2020 work *Announcement of a New Persona (Performances to Come!)*. O’Grady calls the persona “an avatar of Mlle Bourgeoise Noire forty years later, setting out to finish what she started” As the persona is suited in armour, she says that this job will prove difficult: “If you conceal everything—race, class, age, gender—what is left? What is possible?” David Velasco, “Lorraine O’Grady Talks about *Announcement of a New Persona (Performances to Come!)*,” *Artforum International*, February 1, 2021, <https://www.artforum.com/print/202102/lorraine-o-grady-talks-about-announcement-of-a-new-persona-performances-to-come-85001>.

strewn across her, emblazoned with her persona's name, she carried a white sail rope whip, embellished with white chrysanthemums, evoking a 1950s beauty queen as she infiltrated the gallery. O'Grady refers to Mlle Bourgeoise Noire as "an equal-opportunity critic" who "gave timid black artists and thoughtless white institutions each a "piece of her mind."⁵⁶



Figure 8: Lorraine O'Grady, *Untitled (Mlle Bourgeoise Noire Shouts Out Her Poem)*, 1980-83/2009. Silver gelatin fiber print in 14 parts, 15.13 x 15.13 x 0.88 in (38.42 x 38.42 x 2.22 cm). Edition of 20 + 2 AP. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, NY. © 2021 Lorraine O'Grady / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Inside the gallery, the artist administered a self-inflicted floral flogging, giving herself 100 lashes, all the while reciting "THAT'S ENOUGH! No more boot-licking...No more ass-kissing...No more buttering-up...No more pos...turing of super- ass..imilates...BLACK ART

⁵⁶ Lorraine O'Grady, "Mlle Bourgeoise Noire," Lorraine O'Grady, October 5, 2017, <http://lorraineogrady.com/art/mlle-bourgeoise-noire/>.

MUST TAKE MORE RISKS!!!.”⁵⁷ Despite O’Grady calling her performance a failure,⁵⁸ she describes how it took on a “mythic aftermath” when images from the performance were circulated and decontextualized, perpetuating misreadings of the work.⁵⁹ Inspired by the Futurist’s declaration⁶⁰ that art had the power to change the world, the creation of O’Grady’s persona was a reaction to the racism and sexism in the American art world of the 1980s.⁶¹

American feminist author bell hooks relays how performativity is intrinsically linked to Black identity and asserts that works by Black and racialized artists are “designed to disrupt mainstream white sensibilities” naming artists Anna Deavere Smith, Adrian Piper, and Coco Fusco.⁶²

In O’Grady’s first appearance as Mlle Bourgeoise Noire, the text she recited during her lashing was aimed at the New York City art world as well as “black artists who she believed were compromising their identities to make work that was agreeable to white curators and audiences.”⁶³ O’Grady’s performance provides a historical understanding of using persona as a disruptive strategy to intervene in the white art world, demanding authority, and change.

Speaking to her influences, Boulton cites the Jamaican Canadian educator, media and performance artist Camille Turner as influential to her performance practice. While O’Grady’s

57 “MoMA Learning,” MoMA, accessed March 17, 2021, https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/lorraine-ograde-untitled-mlle-bourgeoise-noire-1980-832009/.

58 O’Grady stated that the art world was not “meaningfully integrated” until exhibitions by Adrian Piper and David Hammons in 1988 and 1989. O’Grady, “Mlle Bourgeoise Noire”

59 O’Grady, “Mlle Bourgeoise Noire”

60 In 1909, the Italian poet, art theorist and founder of the Futurism (Futurismo) movement Filippo Tommaso Marinetti published The Futurist Manifesto that embracing speed and rejecting the past to embrace the future. While the manifesto called for the dismantling of feminism, it also called for the dismantling of museums and libraries. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *The Futurist Manifesto*. (Milan, Italy: Gazzetta dell’Emilia, 1909.) https://www.societyforasianart.org/sites/default/files/manifesto_futurista.pdf

61 “MoMA Learning”

62 Catherine Ugwu and bell hooks, “Performance Practice as a Site of Opposition,” in *Let’s Get It On: The Politics of Black Performance* (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1995), 219.

63 “MoMA Learning”

persona is enacted to disrupt the American white art world of the 1980s, Camille Turner's work performed over twenty years after *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire* also enacts the beauty queen though performance persona.

Inspired by an instance of othering in her everyday life, *Miss Canadiana* was first performed in 2002 at a public intervention on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, Ontario. While Miss Canadiana has made appearances worldwide, performances in Canada such as the Heritage and Culture Walking Tours where she led participants in a historical tour teaching the "hidden Black histories of Toronto's Grange neighbourhood"⁶⁴ are most useful to illustrate how the artist enacts persona as a disruption to white expectations in Canadian contexts.

In a red gown, a tiara atop her head and a sash donning her title, Miss Canadiana publicly performs the roles and duties of the beauty queen, as representative of Canada to trouble notions of fetishization and the perception of Canada as a multicultural, cultural mosaic imposing her authority and Blackness as an iconic representative of the nation. Speaking on the intentions of the work, Turner states: "My image as Miss Canadiana points to the contradiction of the Canadian mythology. My body, as a representative of Canadian heritage, is surprising only because Blackness is perceived as foreign in Canada."⁶⁵

Canadian curator Michelle Jacques references O'Grady's performance persona as a pretendant to Turner's and writes about how "Turner uses this "othering," imposed upon her as a black Canadian woman, to trouble her viewers' expectations of who is imagined to be exemplary of this country."⁶⁶ Jacques argues that the success of Miss Canadiana is a product of the audience

64 "Heritage Walking Tour," Camille Turner, 2021, <http://camilleturner.com/project/miss-canadianas-heritage-and-culture-walking-tour/>.

65 "Miss Canadiana," Camille Turner, 2021, <http://camilleturner.com/project/miss-canadiana/>.

66 Michelle Jacques, "Camille Turner," in *More Caught in the Act: An Anthology of Performance Art by Canadian Women* (Toronto, ON: YYZ Press, 2016), 367.

interaction, and how through persona, Turner enables conversations of inclusion, identity, and race.

Turner's photo series *Hometown Queen*, forefronts this relationship where she returns to her hometown of Hamilton, Ontario. In the photographs, she poses and smiles in Miss Canadiana's glamorous uniform clutching a bouquet of roses behind Hamilton's landscape to pay homage to her fraught relationship to it as a place pride and pain.⁶⁷

Similarly to Boulton's work in progress *Hamilton is my Lady*, notions touched on in *Ki True Hollywood Story* (2020) and communicated through our collective discussions, Hamilton functions as a space in which the artist's work through complicated relationships between race and place.

Although Turner is an influence and predecessor to Boulton, Boulton uses different tools of her generation that allow for explorations of similar subject matter. Connecting Boulton's citation of Turner's performance works as influential to her practice and examining how Turner's persona Miss Canadiana follows in the footsteps of performances by O'Grady, we can trace Boulton and Turner on a continuum of radical Black performance artists connecting back to O'Grady, who use persona to challenge their white audiences.

Another artist in this paper specifically confronting injustices and systemic racism world through parodic performance and demanding complex readings of her Black biracial identity is the interdisciplinary artist and performer Madelyne Beckles.

Madelyne Beckles

Madelyne Beckles performed at Miami Art Basel in 2016 and the Art Gallery of Ontario in 2017. She is the co-host of the podcast *High T* alongside Leah Schulli. *High T* employs the language of

⁶⁷ "Miss Canadiana," Camille Turner, 2021.

art criticism to critically speak on popular culture and current affairs.⁶⁸ Her 2017 one-night-only curatorial project *In Search of Us*, curated in collaboration with photographer Petra Collins, featured a living tableau of three women of colour and a digital salon⁶⁹ at the MoMA. *In Search of Us* again drew inspiration from Lorraine O’Grady, using her germinal 1992 text “Olympia’s Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity” that takes up art historical representations of the Black female body.⁷⁰ Beckles’ live and video-based performances frequently feature the artist’s body to perform critiques of white-centric feminism. Her use of camp, humour and abjection explore femininity, gendered labour, consumerism, and narcissism. Beckles holds a BFA in Art History and Women’s Studies from Concordia University. Much of her video work incorporates and critiques foundational feminist texts that were exposed to her throughout her education.⁷¹

Madelyne and I share a collaborative practice as Masking Collective, an interdisciplinary artistic duo. Theory informs our practice as we have and continue to generate works that critique the art and pop historical canon, through an intersectional feminist lens. For our forthcoming exhibition, we will re-visit, re-appropriate and, to some extent, re-stage a 1968 pulp erotica novella by AA Bronson⁷² that recounts the life of a “sexually liberated” poor Black teenager to prompt conversations around allyship, agency, Black femme sexuality, and appropriation, while

68 Madelyne Beckles, Leah Schulli, and Kiera Boulton, “Chroma Launch: High T Podcast x Canadian Art,” Canadian Art, November 2, 2020, <https://canadianart.ca/interviews/chroma-launch-high-t-podcast-x-canadian-art/>.

69 Collins photograph *Not Olympia* (2017) was included in the exhibition and features Beckles in repose on silky salmon pink bedsheets piled with Benzagel and birth control. Like Olympia, Beckles gaze is directed at the viewer. Jenny Brewer, “Petra Collins to Curate Night at the MoMA ‘Confronting How the Female Body Is Represented,’” It’s Nice That, March 13, 2017, <https://www.itsnicethat.com/news/petra-collins-moma-in-search-of-us-porally-130317>.

70 Cason Sharpe, “Madelyne Beckles and Petra Collins: In Search of Us,” C Magazine (C The Visual Arts Foundation (Toronto), September 1, 2017), <https://cmagazine.com/issues/135/madelyne-beckles-and-petra-collins-in-search-of-us>.

71 Amanda Parris, “Feminism Is the New Black! Why One Artist Pokes Fun at Feminist Theory and Performative Activism,” CBC Arts (CBC/Radio Canada, January 25, 2018), <https://www.cbc.ca/arts/feminism-is-the-new-black-why-one-artist-pokes-fun-at-feminist-theory-and-performative-activism-1.4504210>.

72 Penn interviews AA Bronson’s about republishing of his early erotica works. Asher Penn, “Pre-P.C.: AA Bronson Republishes His Famous Erotica,” ARTnews.com (ARTnews.com, December 18, 2017), <http://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/interviews/aa-bronson-lana-56089>

interrogating erasure and whiteness in the Canadian art historical canon. Madelyne and I share a fondness for the absurd, and the clownish.



Figure 9: Madelyne Beckles, *Womanism is a Form of Feminism Focused Especially on the Conditions and Concerns of Black Women*, (2016) Video still

Beckles demands authority in her video *Womanism is a Form of Feminism Focused Especially on the Conditions and Concerns of Black Women* (2016).⁷³ The piece borrows from the aesthetics of the cam girl,⁷⁴ and, like Boulton, appropriates the format of the infomercial. The video opens with Beckles posed behind a faux waterfall, one crooked finger, beckoning the viewer to come along. On-screen, in bold white text, 1-800-FLIRTY-FEMINIST appears. “Enter the new world of feminism,” she instructs. Dressed in a matching set of undies and bralette, posing, she picks up a copy of bell hooks’ book *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*. The title appears inverted, text backwards. Her actions accelerated, sped up in time, she smiles, winks, and slides

⁷³ This video and others by Beckles were featured in the 2018 exhibition *Arrangements* that explored themes of consumerism and object fetishism. “Arrangements,” Gallery 44, 2018, <https://www.gallery44.org/exhibitions/exhibition-arrangements>.

⁷⁴ “Cam Girl” is colloquialism for sex workers who perform/work online. The website *OnlyFans* has significantly changed the game. Jacob Bernstein, “How OnlyFans Changed Sex Work Forever,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times, February 9, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/09/style/onlyfans-porn-stars.html>.

the open text over her body, presenting an avenue to wokedom without sacrificing sex appeal. Beckles emerges in a tight black pleather sleeveless high-necked mini dress, loosely laced. She smokes a cigarette, pink crushed velvet behind her now, replacing the waterfall. The music changes, more of a boudoir vibe. She exhales into the camera and proclaims, “feminism is the new black!” Simone de Beauvoir’s title accompanies her, inverted again, and the titles flash on-screen in the same white text. Beckles lets us in on a secret; for a limited time, her service will curate texts from the canon of feminist literature tailored to one’s tastes sans student loans for the price of \$69.69 (plus tax). She smacks her ass with *The Second Sex*, listing notable feminist radicals we might have the pleasure to be acquainted with should we take her up on the offer. With a third fit change into a silky number, she tells us how this process is not only easy but will render you all the more desirable. Flashing Germaine Greer’s *The Whole Woman*, with a beachscape behind her, she kicks her legs and gazes alluringly from behind the text. A final pitch, “Call now to start your journey into womanhood, woke womanhood.” In workout gear, performing Pilates with a book’s spine cracked open to our left, she turns the page, core still engaged. While Rosemarie Tong’s *Feminist Thought* takes the spotlight, Beckles’ initial pitch replays. Behind blue skies and white clouds, she presents Audre Lorde’s *Sister Outsider* and shimmies with it. Boulton tells Beckles “The work that you do is so much of what I’ve been trying to do, and it makes me feel so validated to know that we were doing this at the exact same time before we knew each other.”⁷⁵

Similar to Boulton’s, Beckles’ persona uses humour, satire and authority to deliver a complicated truth on the entwinement of activism and commercialism by appropriating the language and tactics of the infomercial. While Boulton’s *The Solidarity Collection* (2018) critiques

⁷⁵ Kiera Boulton, Zoom, December 12, 2020.

the co-option of activism by selling us protest props and tapping into the viewer's guilt, Beckles' *Womanism is a Form of Feminism Focused Especially on the Conditions and Concerns of Black Women* (2016) offers up a critique of commodification and commercialization of feminism and the institutionalization of Black radical feminist thought. Looking back at her video work, Beckles explains how her motive was to troll white feminism, directly reprimanding the American blogger turned actor turned influencer Tavi Gevinson.⁷⁶

I'm a Bitch. I'm a Lover.

Writer, curator, and video artist Lauren Fournier describes Beckles' persona in the work as a "seemingly oxymoronic flirty feminist killjoy" who "critiques academia and the forms of cultural capital that circulate through its systems of valuation."⁷⁷ Beckles explains how and why she chose to enact the role of "bitch" through her persona. "Being a bitch meant that you were hot and cool. When I think about how I've used that caricature of the bitch, to me, it's a successful way of getting the message across."⁷⁸ When asked how this trope might signal the stereotype of the angry black woman, Beckles states that alternatively, the bitch signals an over-sexualization to the character, again, borrowing from the aesthetics of the cam girl. Gender and media studies scholar Susan Hopkins discusses how millennials using the internet for sex work allows for an exercise in agency. "Constant surveillance can be a dream come true - an affirmation of identity.

⁷⁶ Gevinson rose to fame in the mid-2010s with the founding of her crafty, white, pop feminism online magazine *Rookie*. Later, she took to posting Instagram spoco for a boujee, luxury apartment in Brooklyn, New York where she once resided. Allie Jones, "The New Frontier in Celebrity Spon-Con: Tavi Gevinson Advertises Her Own Address," *The Cut* (The Cut, March 15, 2017), <https://www.thecut.com/2017/03/celebrity-sponcon-tavi-gevinson-advertises-her-own-address.html>.

⁷⁷ Lauren Fournier, "In Your Face: A National Survey of 10 Artists Who Find New Ways to Define Feminism," *Canadian Art*, June 17, 2019, <https://canadianart.ca/features/in-your-face/>.

⁷⁸ Madelyne Beckles, in discussion with the author, Kalale Dalton-Lutale and Cason Sharpe. Toronto, November 28, 2020.

Today, it seems, you're nobody if you're not on camera.”⁷⁹ This affirmation of identity that Hopkins speaks to, is one that Beckles employs in her video work through the appropriation of the cam girl aesthetic. This appropriation was also informed by her limited means of making. “The only things I had available to me when I started to make art were my body and my webcam and my phone and objects around my house...”⁸⁰ Using the same materials as the cam girl, Beckles appropriates her aesthetic and enacts the bitch to assert authority.

Not unlike how, through persona, Boulton “uses popular culture and reality TV to interpret theory,”⁸¹ Beckles cites popular culture and reality TV as influence and inspiration to generate critique through an intersectional lens. Beckles relays how the persona she enacted in her early work was implemented to enable growth and command authority. “I needed to adopt this authoritative persona to work through it, and for people to be able to see me in a way that they now see me.” Of the collective, she contemplates the expiration of persona. “Personas were a way for us to start to express in the world and maybe they're dissolving or melding in different ways now because we've broken that threshold.”⁸²

79 Susan Hopkins, “Camgirls: Live on the Net,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, August 10, 2002, <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/camgirls-live-on-the-net-20020810-gdfj1a.html>.

80 Yaniya Lee, “Video: In the Studio with Madelyne Beckles,” *Canadian Art*, February 8, 2018, <https://canadianart.ca/videos/video-in-the-studio-with-madelyne-beckles/>.

81 Frater, “Making Throughlines”

82 Madelyne Beckles, Toronto, November 28, 2020.

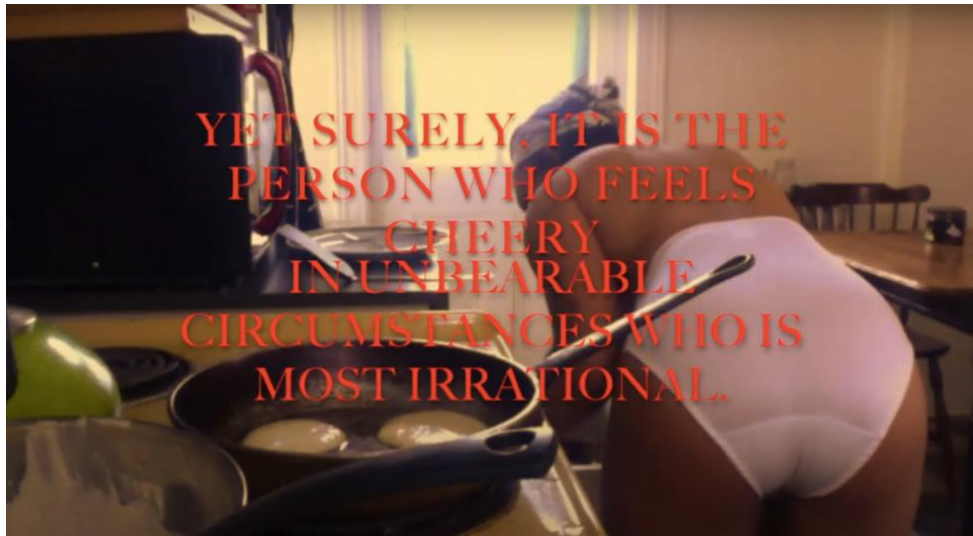


Figure 10: Madelyne Beckles, *The Whole Woman*, (2018)
Video still

Beckles' video *The Whole Woman* (2018) opens with the artist, topless, posing then struggling with the cardboard of an Aunt Jemima pancake mix box. The following quotes from Germaine Greer's book, *The Whole Woman* (1999) graze the screen: "She has guts full of decomposing food; she has a vagina that smells and bleeds." With this dose of honest abjection, the artist arranges and releases her wedgie, hikes up her undies, and gets to the making of the cakes. She remains cropped and decapitated, granting us a view of only tits and spatula at work. American Professor Patricia Hill Collins defines the figure of the mammy as one who was "created to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain Black women's long-standing restriction to domestic service, the mammy image represents the normative yardstick used to evaluate all Black women's behaviour."⁸³ With *The Whole Woman*,

⁸³ Hill Patricia Collins, "Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images," in *Black Feminist Thought* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1990), 72.

Beckles subverts the trope of Jemima, the inception of Quaker Oats Company in 1889, born out of minstrelsy.⁸⁴

The artist describes her influences as "in line for when I was growing up, which was also the height of Lindsay Lohan, Paris Hilton — that kind of pink, plastic Playboy⁸⁵ vibe that really informed my understanding of my own gender. It's re-contextualizing this super-feminized imagery that we're really familiar with and is very appealing because of its bright confectionary nature,"⁸⁶ and sites the artist Anne Hirsch as an influence.⁸⁷ Hirsch is an American performance artist who infiltrated the VH1 reality television series *Frank the Entertainer in a Basement Affair* (2010), a spinoff of a spinoff of the significantly more popular *Flavour of Love* (2006-2008). Performance artist Nao Bustamante was a competitor on the reality television program *Work of Art: The Next Great Artist*⁸⁸ where she was misunderstood, misinterpreted, and prematurely eliminated from the competition. In Jose Esteban Muñoz's posthumously released book *The*

84 Riché Richardson, "Racist Symbols To Reconsider," The New York Times, June 24, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2015/06/24/besides-the-confederate-flag-what-other-symbols-should-go/can-we-please-finally-get-rid-of-aunt-jemima>.

85 For an illustration of this infantilizing and over-sexualizing of young women in the recent mediascape, one can look to the reality television series *The Girls Next Door* (2005-2010). The program offered viewers a sanitized behind the scenes look at the inner workings of the Playboy Mansion. While acting as ambassadors of the Mansion, The Girls embody an infantilized and performative guise. The program functions as a fiction counter to the reality corroborated and disseminated by the participants once they are emancipated from the environment. "Girls Next Door News, Pictures, and Videos," E! Online, accessed March 18, 2021, https://www.eonline.com/ca/news/girls_next_door. And Jill Ann Spaulding, *Hefnerland*. (Self-published, 2005).

86 Amanda Parris, "Feminism Is the New Black! Why One Artist Pokes Fun at Feminist Theory and Performative Activism," CBC Arts (CBC/Radio Canada, January 25, 2018), <https://www.cbc.ca/arts/feminism-is-the-new-black-why-one-artist-pokes-fun-at-feminist-theory-and-performative-activism-1.4504210>.

87 Leah Schulli, "Healthy, Complicated Relationships: An Interview with Madelyne Beckles," C Magazine (C The Visual Arts Foundation (Toronto), 2020), <https://cmagazine.com/issues/146/healthy-complicated-relationships-an-interview-with-madelyne-bec>.

88 *Work of Art: The Next Great Artist* was explored by video artists Greg Youmans and Chris E. Vargas in their collaborative episodic web series *Falling in Love... With Chris and Greg* (2008-2013). In season two of their project, the artists parody the program and insert themselves into the competition, reassigning the challenge to one asking competitors to create "a successful piece of queer art about failure." (Bustamante appears in season 1) Greg Youmans and Chris Vargas, "Work of Art! Reality TV Special," Vimeo, 2012, <https://vimeo.com/41664388>.

Sense of Brown,⁸⁹ he discusses a work by Bustamante from her exhibition *Soldadera* (2015) where she responds to her participation in the television program and argues that Bustamante's involvement, similar to Hirsch's, "seemed to be a performance of infiltration."⁹⁰

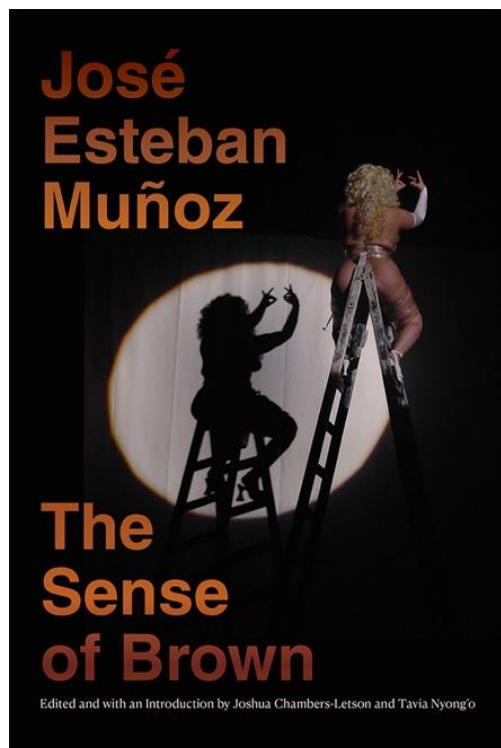


Figure 11: Jose Esteban Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, (2020)
Book cover

Looking to Beckles' generationally specific context growing up, receiving these images of hyper-femininity through the world of the celebrity and reality TV, it is understandable why performance artists infiltrating that universe such as Hirsch resonate with Beckles' performance practice. As a conscious consumer of reality television who is simultaneously engaged in critical race and feminist theory, Beckles was an early surveyor of performance practices that broke the wall between art world elitism and the specific reality television of the 2000-2010s. By

89 Nao Bustamante appears on the cover of the publication. José Esteban Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).

90 Muñoz José Esteban, "Wise Latinas," in *The Sense of Brown* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 113.

legitimizing these program as exemplifying dominant cultural narratives and oppressive social structures ripe for complex critique, Beckles shares with Boulton a specific generational embrace for popular media or low culture as not to be dismissed.

After Sontag: Notes on ‘Camp’

As explored in the works of Boulton and Beckles that critically take up reality television as inspiration and source material, we can contemplate the genre’s voyeuristic landscape as a space of performance where participants of programs might create persona unwillingly or strategically, or have a narrative arch imposed upon them by production. This strategic, subconscious or unwilling occurrence must be contextualized and considered within a history of reality television production habitually leaning on stereotypical, offensive and fetishistic portrayals of Black, queer, racialized and marginalized participants.⁹¹ For example, Author Teresa Wiltz discusses how critics have taken up the racial stereotypes at play in *Flavour of Love*, both of Flavour Flav (William Jonathan Drayton Jr.) and his suitors, but with Flav playing the role of a modern-day minstrel.⁹² Wiltz weighs varying nuanced criticisms of the program, quoting from theorists, co-creators, and viewers, and asks the reader whether the program reinforces demeaning readings of women, particularly Black women, asking “Or is it just camp? Should we be outraged? Or is it just outrageous?”⁹³

91 For reading on portrayals of Black women in reality television, see the 2015 Collection of essays *Real Sister: Stereotypes, Respectability, and Black Women in Reality TV* (2015) edited by African American Literature professor Dr. Jervette Ward that contains critical essays by Black women identifying scholars. Jervette R. Ward, *Real Sister Stereotypes, Respectability, and Black Women in Reality Tv* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2015).

92 Teresa Wiltz, “Love Him, Or Leave Him? Flavor Flav’s Popular Show Sets Off Passionate Debate On Comedy and Race,” The Washington Post (WP Company, November 2, 2006), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/2006/11/02/love-him-or-leave-him-span-classbankheadflavor-flavs-popular-show-sets-off-passionate-debate-on-comedy-and-race-span/2f019f1f-0838-49be-a254-ed7d8e3cfd74/>.

93 Wiltz, “Love Him, Or Leave Him? Flavor Flav’s Popular Show Sets Off Passionate Debate On Comedy and Race”

When asked about how humour informs or enhances their respective practices, a discussion regarding camp, humour and appropriation ensued. Kalale Dalton-Lutale remarks that in the collective's works "we use comedy as a way to disarm people and to allow them to dive deeper into the work that is actually happening."⁹⁴ Beckles maintains that this functions too, as a tactic of survival, and speaks about how her work uses camp, (much like it uses parody) to engage with shameful, taboo subjects and feelings; to make it fun for the viewer, and to point to it before they can. Beckles claims that camp should be intentional.⁹⁵ Cason Sharpe speaks about how the identity of an artist is inherently campy; one that simultaneously demands self-seriousness and appeasement, and that a self-aware artist might understand how society laughs at its artists. As evident in her work, Kiera Boulton argues that the use of camp alongside humour, allows for an enabling of conversations on race, class, intersectional feminism, relational aesthetics, and the institution, and building on Sharpe's sentiments, expresses the power of camp:

What I love about camp is that so much of being Black and being queer often feels like it's so easily taken away. Miley Cyrus has got it all. She's got the mullet, and she's super good at appropriating queerness. Sometimes, the appropriation is so good that you're like, 'no one is ever going to be able to clock that this is fake.' It wasn't until the Met Gala that I understood that it's impossible to appropriate being funny and being campy. Camp is difficult to appropriate because you can't be campy unless you are implicating yourself. Camp is not good unless it's self-reflexive in a way, but in a way that is also delusional.⁹⁶

Boulton's example of how camp fails to be appropriated and the artist's sentiments on how it ought to be implemented suggests how camp can remain an important means for capable, self-aware

94 Kalale Dalton-Lutale in discussion with the author, Madelyne Beckles and Cason Sharpe. Toronto, November 28, 2020.

95 The artists cite a lack of intentionality as the reason the costumed celebrities at the 2019 Camp-themed Met Gala got it wrong, and others agree. See: Samantha Powell, "The Met Gala Proved That It's Not Camp If You're Trying," (The A.V. Club, May 7, 2019), <https://www.avclub.com/the-met-gala-proved-that-its-not-camp-if-youre-trying-1834571351>.

96 Kiera Boulton, Zoom, December 12, 2020.

artists to perform, intentionally critique and disarm audiences through various media to enable conversations of larger political and societal significance.

Talkin' Body

Dialogues concerning bodies and the identification of bodies emerged throughout my writing and research and in our collective discussions. Early on in my research, I encountered a change that Beckles made to her biography.⁹⁷ Currently, she describes her work as exploring themes of femininity, abjection, humour and camp through feminist and critical race theory, while an earlier version claimed that “Art history, feminist texts, and/or pop culture are employed as an entry point to explore the/her black body, and to create new contexts, identities, and environments.”⁹⁸ During a collective discussion amongst myself and the artists, I asked Beckles’ when this change occurred. Beckles says, “I used to say (my work) is about the Black body, and now I don’t, because it’s not...It’s about my body, so I changed it to my/the body. It’s broader, I feel like what I take up in my work is femininity, and yes, my Blackness intersects.”⁹⁹ In response, Dalton-Lutale challenges Beckles, and they work through it:

D-L: “But is it necessary to make some explicit exclamation?”

B: “Now that you're saying this, no.”

D-L: “Does it have to be Kara fucken Walker and the fucken mammies? We understand that that’s about the Black female body!”

B: “So, maybe not wanting to claim that is maybe delegitimizing my experience?”

D-L: “I guess that this is the question.”

⁹⁷“ Holding Space Series - Artist Feature: Madelyne Beckles,” London Ontario Media Arts Association, 2020, <https://lomaa.ca/event/holding-space-series-artist-feature-madelyne-beckles>.

⁹⁸“ What Motivates Her? Allyson Mitchell and Madelyne Beckles,” Akimbo, 2019, <https://akimbo.ca/listings/what-motivates-her-allyson-mitchell-and-madelyne-beckles/>.

⁹⁹ Madelyne Beckles, Toronto, November 28, 2020.

B: “Yeah, it's like on Roncesvalles, I'm a fucken Black body, at Ossington and Bloor, I'm not a Black body.”

D-L: “it’s relational.”

Here, the artist’s grapple with identifications and the nuances, anxieties and hesitations of naming and claiming Blackness as it is embodied.

Beckles' use of her body in her work is integral, and she regards her live, durational performance *This Bridge Called My Back* (2017) as one that birthed her practice. The work pays homage to the feminist anthology *This Bridge Called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, which was ground-breaking in its intersectional unifying of feminist activists across race, class, gender, and sexuality.

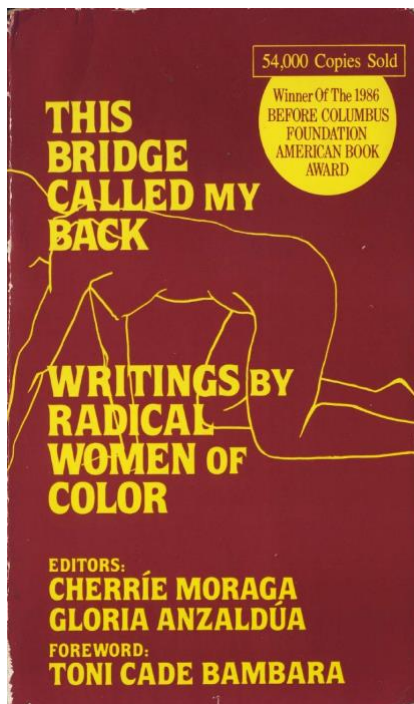


Figure 13: *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*
 Edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa, (1981)
 Book cover

Beckles spent two hours on hands and knees, nude, save a smear of yellow paint, emulating the pose featured on the cover of the foundational text. Jean-Thomas Tremblay's dissertation discusses Beckles' physicality during the performance, paying particular attention to her breath. "In between Beckles' postural adjustments, her breathing was especially noticeable. Her lower belly went up and down with decreasing regularity and increasing theatricality. Beckles' breathing magnified just how hard it had been for someone like Moraga to remain focused in racially stratified feminist spaces."¹⁰⁰



Figure 13: Madelyne Beckles, *This Bridge Called My Back*, (2017), Photo documentation from live performance
Photo by Deirdre Logue

¹⁰⁰ Jean-Thomas Tremblay, "We Don't Breathe Alone: Forms of Encounter in Anglophone North America Since the 1970s," PhD diss., (University of Chicago, 2018), 93.

Speaking of her support system of artists and friends, Beckles says “I could spiral out to filth¹⁰¹ if I didn't have this validation of you all recognizing that this work (*This Bridge Called My Back*) that is so contentious and so triggering to me is actually one of the most important things I've done, it's important to have that balance.”¹⁰² Through the use of her body, borrowing from and challenging essential (and essentialist) feminist theory, the artist provides a critical, revisionist history, and while different in tone from her video works, still foregrounds Black feminist thought, commanding authority through contradictory femme spectacle.

Kalale Dalton-Lutale

Kalale Dalton-Lutale is a queer, Black biracial playwright, artist, and performer. She is a graduate of the National Theatre School of Canada's playwriting program, and Concordia University's Creative Writing program. Poetry and an experimentation with form is infused throughout her theatrical works. Notably, in monologues written for her cumulative play for National Theatre School *i am entitled to rest* (2020) and in her autobiographical one-woman

101 To describe the severity of her hypothetical shame spiral, Beckles bastardizes/borrows from the phrase: “read to/for filth” that derives from queer, Black and Latina/o drag and ballroom culture. Linguistic anthropologist Jeremy Calder defines “reading” as “the art of ritual insult.” Jeremy Calder, “‘Let's talk about Reading!': The Role of Rhythm in Drag Queen Ritual Insult,” abstract, (Stanford University, 2017) <http://www.nw43.illinois.edu/program/documents/Calder-longabstract.pdf> To “read to/for filth” means to insult spectacularly and vigorously with specificity and undeniable accuracy. Reading was featured in the documentary *Paris is Burning* (1990), and the reality series *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009-present) includes a challenge where drag queens read one another for entertainment and competitive advantage. Since the challenge's debut, RuPaul routinely states iterations of: “In the grand tradition of Paris Is Burning, get out your library cards” before the ritual begins. Lecturer at the University of California Dr. Carl Douglas Schottmiller 2017 dissertation “Reading RuPaul's Drag Race: Queer Memory, Camp Capitalism, and RuPaul's Drag Empire” states: “Referencing Paris Is Burning allows Drag Race to establish a dialogue with the film, connecting the contemporary show to a queer historical continuum, as well as equating the two in terms of social value.” Carl Schottmiller, “Reading RuPaul's Drag Race: Queer Memory, Camp Capitalism, and RuPaul's Drag Empire” PhD diss., (University of California, 2017), 89. Regrettably, I am unable to source the entirety of Jeremy Calder's essay ‘Let's talk about Reading!': The Role of Rhythm in Drag Queen Ritual Insult” though anticipate Calder's Manuscript of “‘The library is open!': Dimensions of Rhythm in Drag Queen Ritual Insult.” “Projects,” Jeremy Calder, 2021, <http://www.jeremycalder.com/projects>. A RuPaul's Drag Race Reddit forum where Calder conducted research on the art of reading is available here: “r/Rupaulsdragrace - Writing an Academic Paper on the Art of ‘Reading’ in RuPaul's Drag Race. I Want Your Input!,” reddit, 2014, https://www.reddit.com/r/rupaulsdragrace/comments/1np6z9/writing_an_academic_paper_on_the_art_of_reading/.
 102 Madelyne Beckles, Toronto, November 28, 2020.

show, *Crybaby* (2019) Much of Dalton-Lutale's work as a theatre artist draws upon her experiences as a Black woman growing up in downtown Toronto. Her play *Pinky Swear* (2017) focuses on the relationship between two Black biracial girls about to enter high school, and explores themes of shadism, passing, classism, and sexism. From 2015-2018 and with an imminent reprise, Dalton-Lutale shared an experimental podcast with Cason Sharpe entitled *Two Hungry Children* where they discuss their daily lives, film, popular culture, love, and politics.¹⁰³

Dalton-Lutale's autobiographical work as a theatre artist invites her audience to comprehend the nuances of her identity. By appropriating from the pop-cultural landscape, she communicates the complexities of a gendered, Black experience and maps the specificities of a particular time growing up in Toronto. The use of surrealism and poetics throughout her plays provide entry points to both fictional and auto-biographical memories, often exploring the overarching themes of motherhood and daughterhood. Kalale and I attended rival middle schools, but while in high school, we dreamt of beginning a theatre company together. In a stint of consecutive sleepovers in 2012, Kalale would accompany me to Cheryl L'Hirondelle's Performance by Artists class held at OCAD U, sneakily auditing. We have co-written ridiculous stories and call each other on Mother's Day.

I'm a Child. I'm a Mother.

In a group discussion, Cason Sharpe speaks about Dalton-Lutale's knack for reassembling, compiling and revisiting pieces of writing to render them new in alternative forms. Madelyne Beckles mentions the earliest work she saw of Kalale's was a patchwork quilt composed from fragments of fabrics preserved from childhood, reassembled by hand. "Your work is like a quilt.

¹⁰³ "Twohungrychildren," SoundCloud, September 10, 2017,

<https://soundcloud.com/twohungrychildren?fbclid=IwAR27FyTqsf6AYHS0LOcoo0IzTxqPxoaczMQ3A11vHjYd4cNB1c8iGVIIJ-s>.

I wouldn't call it a collage, it's weightier, and it's rooted in the domestic, a lot of your work is rooted in the home.”¹⁰⁴ Dalton-Lutale’s online biography includes that which she cannot escape, and instead chooses to embrace, the relationship between mother and child. “Her work, which embraces surrealism, mothers, loss and pop culture, always reveals, at its core, a curiosity about people.”¹⁰⁵

This relationship is a predominant theme in *i am entitled to rest*¹⁰⁶ where Dalton-Lutale expands on the archetype of Snow White as “pure” and quasi-maternal to instead speak on loss, grieving, forgiveness, parenting, and growth. The playwright explains “*i am entitled to rest* is about the relationship between mothers and daughters about what we long for /it is a dirge /a lament for what is lost.”¹⁰⁷

The play opens with Snow White, alone in her bedroom. In blue jeans, a butter yellow long sleeve blouse and a red bow tied in her hair, she leans in to adjust the laptop the audience views her from. She fixes her hair. She smiles, standing, and waves to the camera, bracing herself and searching for words. She spits it out. “I’m here, well, ‘cause...well ‘cause I love Whitney Houston!”¹⁰⁸ Snow White expresses a pained romantic fondness for the iconic Black popstar; her talent, her celebrity and her fall.

104 Madelyne Beckles, Toronto, November 28, 2020.

105“ Kalale Dalton-Lutale: Playwriting 2020,” École Nationale de Théâtre du Canada, 2020, <https://ww2.ent-nts.ca/en/graduates-and-recent-cohorts/biography/2020/dalton-lutale/kalale/>.

106 *i am entitled to rest* was originally written for the stage and was adapted for the screen via the use of actors, puppets and digital technology due to the pandemic.

107 “New Words Festival i Am Entitled to Rest by Kalale Dalton-Lutale, Directed by Murdoch Schon,” YouTube (École Nationale de Théâtre du Canada, May 12, 2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ix9_PeRxGSM.

108 “New Words Festival i am entitled to rest by Kalale Dalton-Lutale, Directed by Murdoch Schon.”



Figure 14: Sadie Laflamme-Snow as Snow White in Kalale Dalton-Lutale's *i am entitled to rest*, (2020)
Online performance still

Snow White then recounts watching as her mother, a queen, applied her makeup; blotting ruby red kisses into Kleenexes, though she hated being watched. Snow White didn't understand this but understands Houston; understands her sickness. As the monologue continues, the audience witnesses a shift between the constructed fantasy world of the fairy tale archetype and the reality of Houston's biography told by Snow White; an erratic entanglement, intertwined. Snow White speculates that despite not knowing how to apologize, Houston is sorry for her parenting and the circumstances of daughter Bobbi Kristina Brown's life and death. Snow White would forgive Houston if she were Kristina Brown. She tells us "I want to fuck someone up the way only a mother can"¹⁰⁹ Once upon a time, Snow White had taken in a box of six abandoned kittens, cleaned and cared for them. The audience learns that Snow White is dead.

In the following scene, Snow Wife's seven dwarfs congregate in the forest. Some sing songs and play games like "Snow White at the Grammys." Some wish for Snow White to wake.

¹⁰⁹ "New Words Festival *i am entitled to rest* by Kalale Dalton-Lutale, Directed by Murdoch Schon"

They prepare for a ceremony, a celebration of life. The play concludes with a rendition of Houston's "I Will Always Love You" sung by the whole cast, each member appearing in their own box on screen, harmonizing and adding trills before Dopey, Snow White's orphaned child, delivers a melancholic, poetic monologue on grief and the times she misses her mother most:

I miss you in the suburbs. I miss you in above ground pools and crab grass and dirty white siding. I miss you in bungalows. I miss you in prefab sheds that are shades of green-grey-brown. I miss you in big, big blue skies above fields of peppers and corn. I miss you in the rows, in the space between the rows. I miss you in south western clouds, the kind that look like they could come down and swallow you whole.¹¹⁰

This monologue offers a tender expression of sorrow. By placing the audience in an abstract space, occurring in fantasy yet grounded in reality, Dalton-Lutale expands on the archetypal fairy tale world we all might know intrinsically. Through this moment, and the whole of the play, *i am entitled to rest* allows audiences to map their own experiences of loss and grief, through Dalton-Lutale's surreal poetics, reconnecting us with the child that at the heart of our emotions, longs for someone or something lost.

Media scholar Paula Hearsun's essay "Three Faces of Musical Motherhood in Death: Amy Winehouse, Whitney Houston and Donna Summer" investigates gendered representations of musical artists through their obituaries as published in the UK press, paying particular attention to how motherhood is portrayed. Of the deaths of the artists, Hearsun writes:

What emerges from the coverage of these three musicians, and the way motherhood is made central to discussions of their death, is that obituaries and the coverage of death are places where ideas about what constitutes 'good' and 'bad' motherhood are reinforced. These ideas are closely connected to the manner of death and perceived 'selfishness' or 'selflessness' of the deceased. Houston's manner of dying, for example, is framed as a selfish action-the linguistic converse of the 'selfless' mother. 'Accidental drowning' might be seen as a tragedy but when it was

¹¹⁰ "New Words Festival i am entitled to rest by Kalale Dalton-Lutale, Directed by Murdoch Schon"

the result of cocaine use, readers are positioned to see it as a choice made by Houston.¹¹¹

Houston was criticized throughout her career for her success with white audiences. When she was booed at the 1989 Soul Train Awards after the announcement of her nomination she reflected: “Sometimes it gets down to if you're not black enough for them, you know, or you're not R&B enough. You're very pop. The white audience has taken you away from them.”¹¹² By positioning Snow White—a marker of whiteness plucked from a tale where the battle between good and evil is fundamental—as a sort of conduit for Houston in *i am entitled to rest*, Dalton-Lutale exposes the duality¹¹³ and complexity of Houston; a Black mother and victim of respectability politics,¹¹⁴ heteronormativity, and societal anti-Black racism.

This binary of “good” and “bad” Black motherhood is also ruptured in bell hooks’ interview with the late American artist and activist Camille Billops. They discuss Billops’s autobiographical documentary *Finding Christina* (1991), which depicts Billops’ reunion with the daughter she had given up for adoption 20 years prior. Billops acknowledges how she appears cold in the film, and viewers told her she showed no remorse. hooks responds:

I think that is what makes it an incredibly radical feminist film, because you challenge all of the set assumptions about motherhood, about how a woman should feel about giving up a child. She should feel guilty. She should feel remorseful, and then we can understand.

111 Paula Hearsom, “Three Faces of Musical Motherhood in Death,” in *Death and the Rock Star*, ed. Barbara Lebrun and Catherine Strong (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2020), 131.

112 *Whitney*, directed by Kevin Macdonald (2018; Los Angeles, CA: Miramax.)

113 Doreen St. Félix further explores Houston’s duality in her review of the 2017 documentary *Whitney: Can I Be Me?* Doreen St. Félix, “The Two Voices of Whitney Houston,” *The New Yorker*, September 14, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-two-voices-of-whitney-houston>.

114 The term “politics of respectability” was coined by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* where she “specifically referred to African American’s promotion of temperance, cleanliness of person and property, thrift, polite manners, and sexual purity.” Paisley Jane Harris, “Gatekeeping and Remaking: The Politics of Respectability in African American Women’s History and Black Feminism.” *Journal of Women's History* 15, no. 1 (2003): 213.

But, in fact, you make it clear that you still feel that this is the best choice you could have made under the circumstances.¹¹⁵

By challenging hegemonic conceptions of motherhood, like Billops, Dalton-Lutale, in *i am entitled to rest*, invokes radical depictions of complex mother-child relationships. Characterizing Snow White as not only mother but human and flawed, while addressing the tragic story of Houston, Dalton-Lutale blends these two distinct archetypal mother figures to challenge racist, sexist ideologies that frame good and bad mother archetypes. In a world that is reminiscent of fairy-tale fantasy, *i am entitled to rest* communicates the subjective experience of reality.

Dalton-Lutale's autobiographical one-woman show *Crybaby* (2019) invites the viewer into her “archive” by sharing memories and projecting photographs and collages. She recounts the jealousy she felt when an ex-boyfriend and his new light-skinned girlfriend got an abortion, bonding with her father by begrudgingly watching Alejandro Jodorowsky’s *Holy Mountain*, masturbating to a Britney Spears poster and falling in love. She reflects on her Blackness: “It’s a different kind of black girl if she has a black Mom. It’s a different kind of black girl if she has a white Mom.”¹¹⁶ She shares her traumas: “I knew something was really wrong when I was on my Mother’s shoulders at St. Clair west sub-way station,”¹¹⁷ childhood fantasies of where she might live as a teenager, and what her future might look like, dispersed between poetic interludes of how to be a woman while frequenting public pools. She asks: “How can we be whole when a part of us is missing?”¹¹⁸ Calling the work an “amalgamation of so many personas,” she explains how the narrative of the play follows a chronological trajectory of her life “with the exception of

115 bell hooks, “Confession-Filming Family: An Interview with Artist and Filmmaker Camille Billops,” in *Reel to Real: Race, Class and Sex at the Movies* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1996), 185.

116 Kalale Dalton-Lutale, “Crybaby” (Unpublished theatrical script, 2019), 4.

117 Dalton-Lutale, “Crybaby”, 4.

118 Marc Duez, “Playwrights’ Workshop Montréal: Black Theatre Workshop Double Bill at the Montréal Arts Interculturels!,” Playwrights’ Workshop Montréal, December 13, 2019, <https://www.playwrights.ca/2019/11/12/double-bill-2019/>.

the mother concept, interspersed.” The final third act, a cumulative “dream,” is a reward to herself for coping with and disclosing details of past toxic relationships, memories of her mother, and childhood rituals to the audience in the first acts. As Van Morrison’s “Sweet Thing” plays in the final act, Dalton-Lutale collages an arrangement of transparent marigolds onto an overhead projector, sitting on a small wooden table.¹¹⁹



Figure 15: Kalale Dalton-Lutale, *Crybaby*, (2019)
Live performance documentation still

She recounts The Dream: In the backyard of her father’s home on Major Street in the Annex neighbourhood of Toronto. Kalale and her partner Ella cook, serve and sell a breakfast menu of a single item “The Classic: Fried Egg, Bacon and Good Potatoes”¹²⁰ The service has finished for the day, though folks still cruise, intrigued by the wares and the scene, complete with marigolds her father has grown, white wrought iron tables scattered with friends and their

¹¹⁹ I referenced documentation from the 2019 production performed at Montreal Arts intercultural Presented by Black Theatre Workshop and Playwrights Montreal. “Double Bill: Dark Red by: Willow Cioppa & Cry Baby by: Kalale Dalton-Lutale,” Quebec Writers Federation, 2019, <https://qwff.org/event/double-bill-dark-red-by-willow-cioppa-cry-baby-by-kalale-dalton-lutale/>.

¹²⁰ Dalton-Lutale, “Crybaby”, 22.

mojitos. She places her feet in Ella's lap, and tells the curious customers, apologetically, that they have sold out of everything. When Dalton-Lutale again returns us to her projected and neglected fantasies of a teenage home, or what she describes as the reality of a "random Portuguese girl," her imagined room is outfitted as a girl's bedroom in an early 2000s film. The room is described as complete with a pink quilt and a shoddy wardrobe, embellished with a fuzzy framed photo of a boyfriend.¹²¹ A portion of *Crybaby* focuses on of portrayals of Black women in media, and we return to Houston as tragic figure when Dalton-Lutale proclaims "How to be a famous Black Girl" a list beginning with Marie-Joseph Ang  lique and concluding with Whitney Houston. "That slave in the play where she burns down Montreal and she is hanged...that girl who's that popstar that got fucked up on drugs with her boyfriend and then she died and then her daughter died."¹²² Houston's daughter, Bobbi Kristina Brown died intoxicated, in a bathtub, three years after her mother. She was 22 years old.¹²³

Inviting the audience to enter her life by the way of her remixed archive of photographs, collaged and manipulated pop-cultural visual material and autobiographical source material, Dalton-Lutale generates tender, poetic theatrical work conjuring dreamscapes that implicate reality. Her vulnerable and surrealistic exploration of loss, adolescence, fantasy, Black biracialism, and familial relationships draws upon elements of performance art and theatre. Through the use of her body and the garments worn as material props, she transforms them before the audience's eyes, rendering them new. Her sweater becomes a full head of curls of that

121 Dalton-Lutale, "Crybaby", 9.

122 Dalton-Lutale, "Crybaby", 15.

123 Joseph Diaz, Susan Welsh, and Lauren Efron, "Bobby Brown Opens Up About Daughter Bobbi Kristina's Death," ABC News (ABC News Network, June 6, 2016), <https://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/bobby-brown-opens-daughter-bobbi-kristinas-death/story?id=39567972>.

imaginary, random girl in her tacky bedroom, whipped to and fro. While this imagined girl is not idealized; her lush mane might be, commenting on raced conceptions of beauty.

A work of endurance in her retellings of real and imaged events; no two performances are the same. By taking up Houston's and daughter Brown's stories again in *Crybaby* she weaves them amongst her own, presenting her audience with a nuanced, empathetic exploration of Black motherhood from the perspective of a daughter.

In the second act of *Crybaby*, a fantasy is projected, quite literally, onto an overhead projector. The audience laughs as she announces the title, "To all the boys I ever loved and my Mothers; every birthday I wish that you loved me like Drake,¹²⁴ or bacon"¹²⁵ and overlays a photo of her face, cropped close and sad, over a Degrassi era version of Drake, enveloping himself in a grey knit sweater.¹²⁶ Next, Dalton-Lutale's face is superimposed onto Simba from *The Lion King*, with Drake's face affixed to Mufasa's.



Figure 16: Kalale Dalton-Lutale, *Crybaby*, (2019)
Photo documentation of live performance
Photo by Andrée Lanthier

124 Aubrey Drake Graham AKA Drake is a Toronto born Black biracial artist, actor who made his break on the iconic Canadian television show *Degrassi: The Next Generation*. "Drake," The Canadian Encyclopedia, accessed April 1, 2021,

125 Kalale Dalton-Lutale, "Crybaby", 12.

126 The original photo depicts Drake's attempt at swaddling his *Degrassi: The Next Generation* co-star Lauren Collins. Lauren Collins, "Slightly*," Twitter (Twitter, December 23, 2020), https://twitter.com/Lauren_Collins/status/1341819844333871104.

She brags about how Drake loves her more; kisses her goodnight and rubs her back. “I am the girl in every Drake song. I am the girl with the phat booty. No one knows we’re dating ‘cause I have to keep it a secret. Or the paparazzi would be on my ass and so would Ri Ri and Nikki Minaj and JLo. And have you seen those three?”¹²⁷

Same City, Same Friends if You're Looking for Me

In our collective discussions, Dalton-Lutale speaks about how Drake’s music embodies her experience of her Toronto youth, coupled with her disdain for the American reading of the artist as appropriative. Speaking to those who read Drake as appropriative, Dalton-Lutale informs them of their decontextualized and misinformed stance “You don’t understand Canadian Blackness, therefore you don’t understand the references that are inherent to a Canadian Black experience, therefore, you don’t understand our experience as young Canadian Black people.”¹²⁸ This conversation began when I asked the artists if they see themselves fitting within readings of work as generational, and how they see themselves as distinct from previous generations. Cason Sharpe articulates that the work of the collective is distinct from other generations based on how the work speaks from the specificity of being “around the city.”¹²⁹

Discussions of Drake culturally appropriating Afro-Caribbean culture, Black British slang, reggae and dancehall music, and accusations of him being a “culture vulture” are rampant in think pieces, music journalism and cultural criticism when writers fail to consider and contextualize the Black Canadian diaspora. By comparing coverage of claims of Drake’s cultural

¹²⁷ Kalale Dalton-Lutale, “Crybaby”, 12.

¹²⁸ Kalale Dalton-Lutale. Toronto, November 28, 2020.

¹²⁹ Cason Sharpe. Toronto, November 28, 2020.

appropriation, there is a distinct difference in how Canadian journalists and American media sites present or respond to this stance.¹³⁰

By focusing on interpretations of these claims from Toronto-based writers who have an inherent understanding of the specificities of the city's cultural landscape, a nuanced understanding of Drake's influences can be gleaned. Sajae Elder writes "To understand Drake's proximity to reggae, and the islands in general, it's important to understand what growing up in Toronto is like."¹³¹ Journalist Bee Quammie writes "Due to similar trends of Caribbean and African migration to areas of Canada and the U.K., common threads between slang, sounds, and new cultural creations exist."¹³² The artists engage in a similar conversation regarding generational representation in the pop-cultural landscape that reflects races, classes and experiences similar to ours. Sharpe says "the only experiences that I could look to for some kind of analogous thing is *Skins*,¹³³ which is in the U.K. 'cause it was like, 'ok there are black people who randomly have white friends."¹³⁴ Dalton-Lutale elaborates, "Toronto functions in a very specific way that is similar to London, one that is dissimilar to New York, where we as people always have to befriend, know, interact, work with and be around to some extent, white

130 An exception is provided by the American writer Zander Tsadwa who maps Drake's relationship with Memphis, Toronto, Houston, Jamaica, Los Angeles, UK Rap and Afrobeats to complicate the claim of Drake as "Culture Vulture." Zander Tsadwa, "The Best Answer To The Question 'Is Drake a Culture Vulture?'," Across The Culture, January 31, 2020, <https://www.acrosstheculture.com/media/music/answer-drake-culture-vulture/>.

131 Sajae Elder, "Where Did Drake's 'Jamaican 'Accent Come From?'" BuzzFeed News (BuzzFeed News, July 28, 2016), <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/sajae/some-ting-borrowed>.

132 Bee Quammie, "People Accusing Drake of Appropriation Must Not Know Much about 'the 6,'" REVOLT (REVOLT, July 24, 2016), <https://www.revolt.tv/2016/7/24/20816765/people-accusing-drake-of-appropriation-must-not-know-much-about-the-6>.

133 *Skins* is a British dramatic comedy television series (2007-2013) that follows the lives of teenagers in Bristol. It features multi-racial, multi-classed characters and controversial story lines. Rebecca Nicholson, "10 Years of Skins: the Show That Revealed the Explicit Truth about Teenage Life," The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, January 25, 2017), <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2017/jan/25/skins-tv-teenage-life-truth-10-years-on>.

134 Cason Sharpe in discussion with the author, Madelyne Beckles and Kalale Dalton-Lutale. Toronto, November 28, 2020.

people.”¹³⁵ Using Drake as a foil signals a larger millennial, cultural conversation at play, in which Drake, in particular, opens the door for pop culture to act as a site in which one can work out identity, in a way that unapologetically rejects any imposed hierarchies of art and culture.

While previously dismissed by Boulton as apolitical, we can read Drake’s representation of a Canadian Blackness and mixed race-ness as inherently political. Drake’s expression of site-specificity in his music, and his identity and entry point as a millennial who grew up in the city of Toronto, speaks largely to an intersectional and generational experience of being Black and biracial. His mix of ethnicities and influences form his identity as different from the Black American experience. Instead, Drake’s intentional use of Caribbean slang indicates his identification with a diasporic Caribbean, multicultural community that informs his Black and biracial, Canadian identity.

Dalton-Lutale’s affinity for Drake illuminates a larger shared experience of being Black and biracial and growing up in Toronto. Her work and perspective concerning her experience of youth in Toronto stands in contrast to the ways in which American Blackness overrules perceptions of Blackness by way of the popular American culture Canadians receive, which informs a collective and singular perception of Blackness. As previous generations have not widely articulated these distinctions in understandings of popular Black Canadian culture, with Dalton-Lutale as well all the artists in question, the distinction and complexity of experience are inherent in their works through a shared generational understanding.

Dalton-Lutale’s writings and work as a theatre artist use the formal qualities of performance art, surrealism, autobiography, and poetry to map out her stories and explore Black critical framings of popular culture and autobiography. What transpires in both *i am entitled to*

¹³⁵ Kalale Dalton-Lutale. Toronto, November 28, 2020.

rest, *Crybaby*, and the whole of her oeuvre, are analogies for how she's come to terms with an acceptance of her mother-daughter relationship and the complexity of being a Black and biracial woman, and a Black and biracial daughter.

Cason Sharpe

Cason Sharpe is a queer, Black biracial writer of fiction, autobiography, and criticism. Sharpe's writing has appeared in *C Magazine*, *Canadian Art* magazine, *Queer Codes: A Journal of Art History*, *Public Parking*, *GUTS Canadian Feminist Magazine*, and the anthology of Black Canadian writing, *Black Writers Matter*. His first collection of stories, *Our Lady of Perpetual Realness and Other Stories*, was released by Metatron Press in 2017 and he is currently working on a second book. Sharpe is co-host of the podcast *Two Hungry Children* and holds a BA from Concordia University in Political Science, Creative Writing, and Sexuality Studies. Sharpe's fiction, personal essays, and criticism investigate race, class, film, popular culture, and contemporary art, and frequently centers the cities of Toronto and Montreal.

Cason's father and my father were friends, both jazz musicians originally from the United States. After the destruction and removal of monuments dedicated to Civil War "heroes" in protests against George Floyd's death and in support of Black Lives Matter in the summer of 2020, Sharpe and I contemplated the construction of a monument modelled on the two of us, garbed in bohemian attire, hi-fiving as a tribute to our draft-dodging fathers.¹³⁶ Cason and I grew up in similar contexts, share similar class dynamics and are currently neighbours.

Cason Sharpe's writing accesses shame, queerness, class, race, Blackness, and his Black biracial identity in ways that centre the city both as a conceptual theme and with specificity and pride for Toronto. Somebody cut this kid a key to the city. Drawing from personal experiences

¹³⁶ It has been brought to my attention that this monument was originally the conception of our friend, the comedian Drew Picklyk.

and ingenuities of invented characters in spaces he knows and chronicles so well, the author provides his reader with nuanced discussions on race, class, gender, sexuality that accurately and meaningfully reflect an intersectional political perspective and experience.

Vivid Queer Realities

Cason Sharpe's book *Our Lady of Perpetual Realness and Other Stories* (OLOPR) contains six hilarious and tender stories that chronicle the lives, sexual escapades and mundanities of intelligent code-switching, thrill-seeking, broke young, queer men of colour.

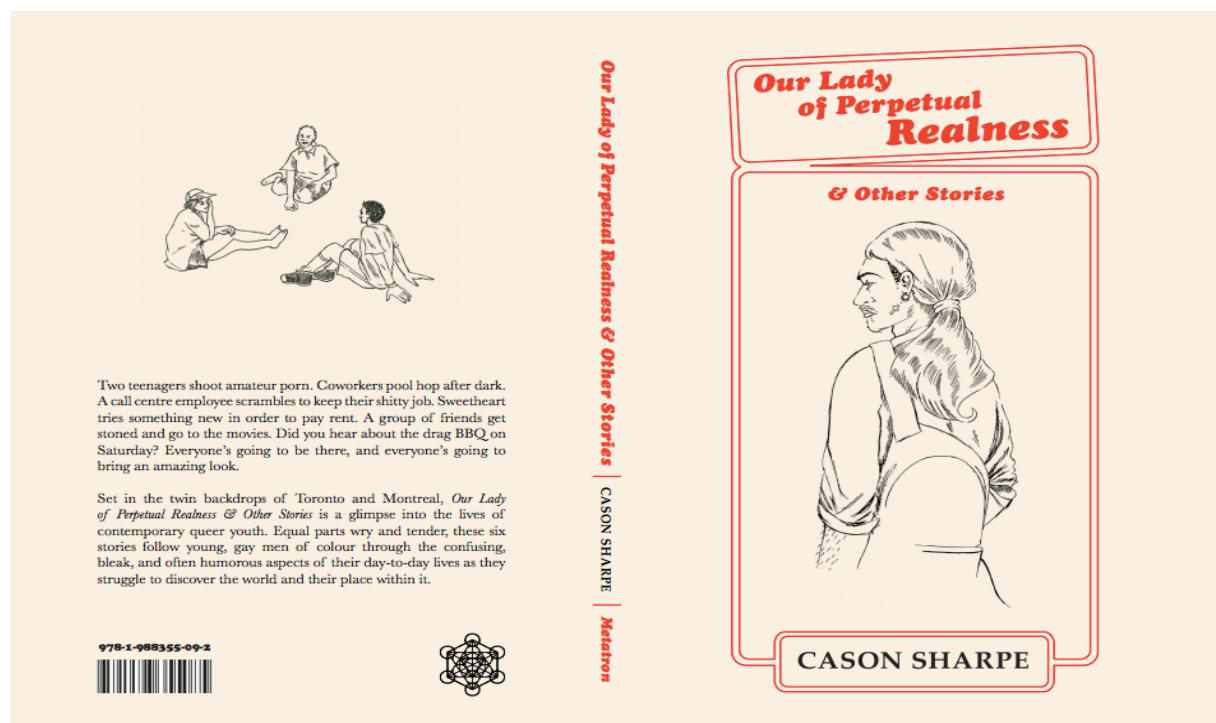


Figure 17 Cason Sharpe, *Our Lady of Perpetual Realness and Other Stories*, Metatron Press, (2017)
Front and back book cover illustrations by Fraser Wrighte. Courtesy of the publisher Metatron Press.

The stories feature characters who clock microaggressions from cashiers, perform spot-on reads of privileged art kids and punks, receive missed calls from the National Student Loans

Center, take cigarette breaks, and vie after relatively attainable, classed and clouty¹³⁷ gigs, written with particular downtown energy.¹³⁸ *OLOPR* encapsulates a bittersweet, experimental time; an in-between-ness, providing readers with a melancholic performance of feels. Occasionally with reckless hedonism, the characters share an internalized self-consciousness; the embarrassment of an early 20s existence that only wears off in good time, like still getting nervous at the LCBO¹³⁹ even after reaching legal age. While the characters in *OLOPR* are surrounded by friends, acquaintances, and coworkers, we glean most from them when we find them meditatively alone.

Montreal and Toronto function as “twin backdrops”¹⁴⁰ throughout the collection of stories and Sharpe’s portrayal of the cities are vivid and real.¹⁴¹ In an interview for PRISM International magazine, Sharpe expresses that his voice was “created by the landscapes” of the cities.¹⁴² His investment in the city takes precedence outside of his work, for, in response to an invitation to some one-day, rural communally living, he told me he would die on a TTC streetcar.

137 Clout: “power and influence” “Clout,” clout_1 noun - Definition, pictures, pronunciation and usage notes Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary at OxfordLearnersDictionaries.com, accessed April 27, 2021, https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/clout_1?q=clout.

See also: Migos, “Offset - Clout Ft. Cardi B (Official Video),” YouTube (YouTube, April 17, 2019), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mt2zsvkKKo>.

138 Sharpe recently tweeted “Sorry for Being so Aggro about My Toronto Kid Bullshit, It's Truly All I Have” Lil Ms Springfield, “Sorry for Being so Aggro about My Toronto Kid Bullshit, It's Truly All I Have,” Twitter (Twitter, March 30, 2021), <https://twitter.com/casonsharpe/status/1376930932381343750>.

139 The Liquor Control Board of Ontario, AKA LCBO, AKA Lick-bow, AKA LC is a government operated liquor retailer.

140 “Our Lady of Perpetual Realness,” Metatron Press, 2017, <https://www.metatron.press/work/our-lady-of-perpetual-realness-and-other-stories/>.

141 I have lived in the Church and Wellesley Village for over ten years. I now live two doors down from Cason; inviting him back into the landscape that he so graphically captured in stories in from *Our Lady of Perpetual Realness and Other Stories*.

142 Kyla Jamieson, “Get to Know: Cason Sharpe,” PRISM international, January 18, 2018, <https://prismmagazine.ca/2018/01/18/get-to-know-cason-sharpe/>.



Figure 18 Photograph of Cason Sharpe, (2016) photo by Delilah Rosier

British scholar Emma Cleary writes about how the New York City skyline is discernible in much of James Baldwin's work, regardless of the work's intended setting.¹⁴³ In our discussions, Beckles describes the vividness with which Sharpe describes his spaces. "Your anecdotes in your work make me have different associations to Toronto. Your articulations of it take precedence over my own memory sometimes, and I realize, oh I'm thinking of this how you described this."¹⁴⁴

143 Emma Cleary, "Here Be Dragons" The Tyranny of the Cityscape in James Baldwin's Intimate Cartographies." *James Baldwin Review* 1 (2015), 2.doi: <https://doi.org/10.7227/JBR.1.5>

144 Madelyne Beckles, Toronto, November 28, 2020.

The fifth story of *OLOPR*, “The Coming Attractions,” details a group of stoned friends at a movie theatre. The protagonist fantasizes about endless overpriced popcorn, and the entire city of Montreal is encapsulated in a dream:

You were the sky. From that vantage point you could see that Montreal was an island. You always knew it was but you never really took it in. You could see St. Laurent as a thin straight line, from Chinatown all the way up to Chabanel and then beyond, to parts of the city you’ve never explored. You saw your old apartment in St. Henri, the vegan restaurant where you wash dishes, your current apartment on the western edge of the Plateau, that dep you like. You saw groups of friends hanging out, in living rooms in the winter and rooftops in the summer, at vernissages and house shows. You were everywhere, the centre of everything and yet totally diffuse. It was the city as you knew it but also another place entirely, the people both familiar and strange, the buildings pink and blue and puffy like marshmallows. You saw men. So many men. In parks and bathrooms and alleyways, behind the graveyard on top of the mountain. You saw a movie theatre full of men. Rows and rows of them, watching a movie that was all fuzzy and without audio, like there was something wrong with the projector. It’s common knowledge that men from Montreal make the best lovers, bad teeth and bad jobs but they sure knew how to please a boy and now you were one of them, in the plush seats of the movie theatre eating your popcorn. You were the sky and a red swallow flew through you. You didn’t want the dream to end but you knew that it would and it did.¹⁴⁵

Sharpe’s spaces are set in those he is most familiar with and laden with references that only one who is familiar with the city and subcultural scene he references can comprehend, offering a mystique to readers and rendering them all the more enjoyable for those who know; to feel seen, reflected. His writing in this passage from “The Coming Attractions,” poetically melds the Montreal landscape to illustrate the narrator’s queer sexual awakening, listing low-key hook-ups on the fringes of public spaces, speaking to a common everyday reality of queer life. With a melancholic yet tender tone, Sharpe’s narrator recounts with hindsight both the sweet youthful freedom and the oppressive reality of navigating sex and life as a young queer man of colour. The precariousness of work, lack of financial security and inability to host a lover, as Sharpe

145 Cason Sharpe, “The Coming Attractions,” in *Our Lady of Perpetual Realness and Other Stories* (Montreal, QB: Metatron, 2017), 53-54.

details in this story offers an out-of-body experience of clarity to young queer readers who face familiar circumstances.

I'm a Sinner. I'm a Saint. I Do Not Feel Ashamed.

In Sharpe's Prism International interview, he claims "A lot of my work, both fiction and non-fiction, feels like a method of shame-management. I think it's a queer thing."¹⁴⁶ Sharpe's writing hits on these cycles of shame; his documentation and telling of intimacy, place, and the body that inhabits all of it. On Queer Performativity, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes, "Shame, it might finally be said, transformational shame, *is performance*."¹⁴⁷ Sharpe's piece¹⁴⁸ *OK* (2016), details what acceptable behaviour of a Montreal Summer might look like, including having a "dirtbag" boyfriend with no trash can in his apartment, who brings weed but no water to beach excursions, and who tells you things like "it's not always about race, you know."¹⁴⁹ Sharpe reassures his reader that it's ok to be a psycho in the summer, to blow most of your paychecks from shit gigs in a night out; to buy drugs, smokes, and take-out despite reluctant loans from sisters. He ends us with "All of that was OK in the summer and the summer is OK with endings. The Summer is always ending."¹⁵⁰ Mindful of the now but also its end; partying hard, hard up, broke, bothered. Cycling. By articulating and accepting the choice to date a mediocre, racist boyfriend and the pursuit of a hedonistic summer, Sharpe uses self-reflexive humour to seasonally renounce shame, through a queer aptitude for shame management as the product of survival, and, through transformational performance, renders it all OK.

146 Kyla Jamieson, "Get to Know: Cason Sharpe," PRISM international, January 18, 2018, <https://prismmagazine.ca/2018/01/18/get-to-know-cason-sharpe/>.

147 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Shame, Theatricality, and Queer Performativity: Henry James's *The Art of the Novel*," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 38.

148 Near the completion my writing, Sharpe tells me that he submitted "OK" as fiction, but it was published under non-fiction.

149 Cason Sharpe, "OK" *The Void Magazine*, Volume 14, Issue 1 "Strangers" (2016):6.

150 Cason Sharpe, "OK", 7.

Sharpe punctuates his collection's themes of queer love and loss and the complex realities queer men of colour face in the title story, "Our Lady of Perpetual Realness,"¹⁵¹ which opens with a hangover and follows a seemingly autobiographical night-out of heading to a drag barbeque, followed by a visit to a village bar. The story uses the names of real-life friends of ours (forgive me this time and allow me a biographical reading). Later in the night, he warns his accomplices, "I tend to go rogue in village bars."¹⁵² He texts Madelyne that he loves her, and the narrator questions:

This is only a week after the mass shooting at Pulse Nightclub in Orlando. Forty-nine people died. This is after years of violent attacks against trans women and black men. It's why we're all so tired, at least in part. It creates an extra layer of fatigue: Where do we go to dance fucked up all night long and not die? Where do we go to get laid and not die?¹⁵³

The nuanced racist, homophobic, and transphobic micro-aggressions that are part of the fabric of the world Sharpe's characters inhabit are stated more specifically by Sharpe's narrator here, speaking to survival and grappling with the reality of violent forms of oppression grounded in real-life tragedy.

The Makings of Sharpe's Voice

Sharpe experienced a revelation after he gained some critical distance after the publication of *OLOPR* regarding the conflation between fictitious characters being mistaken for the author's biography. "This was thinly veiled autobiography that I wasn't ready to get into yet. It was the same performative lens, where you have to use a character."¹⁵⁴ He maintains and differentiates a shift in his work, "this kind of 'I don't give a fuck' voice that I think I had in a lot of early stuff,

151 My partner and dear friend of Cason, Fraser Wrighte provided the illustrations for the front and back covers of the book. The front cover depicts the main character of this story, complete with dangling cross earring, wig and backpack.

152 Cason Sharpe, "Our Lady of Perpetual Realness," in *Our Lady of Perpetual Realness and Other Stories* (Montreal, QB: Metatron, 2017), 57.

153 Cason Sharpe, "Our Lady of Perpetual Realness," in *Our Lady of Perpetual Realness and Other Stories* (Montreal, QB: Metatron, 2017), 64-65.

154 Cason Sharpe. Toronto, November 28, 2020.

and I'm just shedding that, and being like, ok, I don't need to lean on this voice as a crutch anymore." Sharpe speaks about the emulation and adherence to the tropes all as part of a performance, and the ways in which he disrupts performative tropes and voice in his work "the pompous faggot, loner, flaneur... it's all part of the performance, which is, like,¹⁵⁵ James Joyce and Baldwin, and I think I've been accessing that but not realizing, and then, what I think makes the voice interesting, is that I'm this young Black kid from the ghetto who's using this kind of voice."

Reviewers of *OLOPR* twice direct their readers to Sharpe's personal essay "A Year and Change"¹⁵⁶ where Sharpe discloses details of his historical poverty, debt and anxieties that arise from operating in social circles where these class dynamics are not shared.

Sharpe notes in an interview with Metatron press that he finds "biographical readings of my work reductive, or lazy, or reflective of a voyeuristic/fetishistic desire to consume me (my Blackness, my poorness, my queerness) rather than engage with the work itself."¹⁵⁷ When asked about these reductive readings, he maintains, "it's when it's not taken as art and it's taken as an educational tool, or didactic, when I didn't make a didactic piece of work, but it's being understood didactically."¹⁵⁸

Sharpe's revelation towards his work as thinly veiled autobiography, and his rejection of readings of his work as a didactic of a particular kind of Black, queer and poor experience is important to differentiate from a more nuanced understanding of how his experiences shape and

155 I made minimal edits to Cason's statements as when asked about his favorite word in an interview with Kyla Jamieson for PRISM international, Sharpe noted that he likes "ubiquitous words—"like," "really," "just," "thing," "stuff" etc.—words you use all the time without realizing it" and compares them to "little weeds" that "end up punctuating speech whether you like it or not." Kyla Jamieson, "Get to Know: Cason Sharpe," PRISM international, January 18, 2018, <https://prismmagazine.ca/2018/01/18/get-to-know-cason-sharpe/>.

156 Cason Sharpe, "A Year and Change," GUTS, September 27, 2017, <http://gutsmagazine.ca/a-year-and-change/>.

157 "ÄLPÄ ' The ÄLPÄ Interview," ÄLPÄ, accessed March 3, 2021, <http://www.metatron.press/alpha/work/cason-sharpe/>.

158 Cason Sharpe. Toronto, November 28, 2020.

inform his voice and his subject matter as a writer. The specific intersections of queerness, Blackness and growing up in downtown Toronto are explored in his short, autobiographical story “One for the Faeries of Alexandra Park” (2018). Sharpe offers his reader a historical scope of where he grew up, a space that is no longer there. “...they’re calling it revitalization, which is a fancy way of saying death.”¹⁵⁹

Commemorating and eulogizing Alexandra Park AKA PO,¹⁶⁰ Sharpe shares interactions he had with the young, Black, queer men of the community:

We were all lithe, interior, and soft, devoid of the hard, macho bravado expected from boys in the hood. There was just an energy that existed between us even though we barely spoke, a kind of electricity when we passed each other on the street that was thrilling but not necessarily sexual. It was the small nod of someone else who gets it.¹⁶¹

Despite this unspoken nod of camaraderie, Sharpe goes on in his writing to indicate the kind of circumstantial and educational privilege he had in accessing predominantly white public alternative schools and arts education that fostered his intellectual curiosity, which other children in the PO could not access.¹⁶²

Existing in these differing class and race realities, Sharpe expresses a sense of alienation and parallels this with the life his father lived in Toronto as an outsider who grew up in Chicago’s South Side, (where Kanye is from, Sharpe remarks). Of his father:

I think about his life in Toronto, how he didn’t have the same Caribbean or African roots as most of his friends-his slang was different, his food was different-or the way he’d get angry and flustered when white people talked down to him in that singsong tone that’s somehow both polite and patronizing, and so emblematic of living in Canada.¹⁶³ ...My dad wasn’t

159 Cason Sharpe, “One for the Faeries of Alexandra Park.” Essay in *PRISM International*, 56.2, (Winter 2018), 77.

160 “PO” is a Neighborhood of Toronto officially called Alexandra Park. It is referred to as “PO” after the Project Originals, a gang that began there in the 1980s. Sharpe, Cason Sharpe, “One for the Faeries of Alexandra Park.” *PRISM International*, 56.2, (Winter 2018), 77.

161 Cason Sharpe, “One for the Faeries of Alexandra Park.” Essay in *PRISM International*, 56.2, (Winter 2018), 81.

162 Cason Sharpe, “One for the Faeries of Alexandra Park.” 81.

163 Cason Sharpe, “One for the Faeries of Alexandra Park.” 82.

queer but a faerie still in his own way: gentle, small existing both inside and outside of his context, and playing his cards the best way he knew how.¹⁶⁴

With regard to his intersecting experiences and the experience of the collective, Sharpe speaks about how this multiplicity becomes difficult for a white audience, and we return to Drake as an example to illustrate how ingrained understandings of access and hierarchies of class are imposed and overridden by race:

I think we got this a lot in our work because people are confused because we're talking about things on different class and racial lines, and they're like, well how can one person possibly understand the ghetto but also understand going to someone's mansion to swim in a pool or whatever. So, to a white audience, they're like, well, I don't get it, how could that character do both or experience both? And Drake articulates this thing perfectly where he moves between them. He was a Jewish child star, but also because he was Black in Toronto, he had an experience of what I would consider a classed, Black downtown experience.¹⁶⁵

Media studies scholar Amara Pope investigates popular musical artists' use of music videos for the creation of what she calls "marketable, hybrid identities" through close readings of Drake's music videos.¹⁶⁶ The Toronto-born artists discuss the notion of an inherited understanding of American Blackness. Dalton-Lutale recounts how she has "inherited American Blackness, and needs to remind herself how it is inapplicable to her circumstance, to which Sharpe responds, "it makes making work so much more difficult and fraught because, you know for a long time I was like, oh I guess I should make these *Boyz N The Hood* stories about growing up in PO, but I don't really have that experience, cause I went to some hippie-dippie school, and I wasn't that cliché of it."¹⁶⁷

164 Cason Sharpe, "One for the Faeries of Alexandra Park." 82-83.

165 Cason Sharpe. Toronto, November 28, 2020.

166 Amara Pope, "Musical Artists Capitalizing on Hybrid Identities: A Case Study of Drake the "Authentic" "Black" "Canadian" "Rapper." Stream 9 (2016), 1.

167 Cason Sharpe. Toronto, November 28, 2020.

Sharpe's articulation of his hybrid identity invites a disidentifactory reading of his work.

Sharpe, in our discussion, continues:

I think positioning your work in relation to race is a double edge sword because you want to claim it because it is who I am, I am Black, but I also have this proximity to whiteness. I am mixed, and it's also one of those things where is suddenly my work going to be co-opted as part of this tokenistic art institutional machine? If I talk about race still in my work but I don't explicitly state that, maybe it's a way to circumvent that and be like, 'I don't talk about Blackness, but I do talk about Blackness if you know.'¹⁶⁸

Here, Sharpe expresses his frustration of the racist, fetishistic practices of arts institutions. In turn, he subverts such practices by generating work that demands participating in a process of decoding as a means of subverting and rejecting the reduction of work into didactic and simplistic forms as a means of meeting diversity quotas.

Sharpe's recent lecture "Slash & Lenny" delivered virtually as a speaker for the spring 2021 edition of Trampoline Hall, discusses Black biracial pop cultural icons American singer-songwriter Lenny Kravitz and the English American guitarist Saul Hudson AKA Slash.

Disrupting the fictional stereotype of the "Tragic Mulatto," he frames them as figures who are neither tragic nor heroic. In his lecture, Sharpe speaks about his biracialism: "It is an honour to be a part of two different cultures to create something new and larger than the sum of its parts."¹⁶⁹ While discussing the men's styles, he mentions how Slash's mother was a Black fashion designer. Speaking to possible readings of Slash's iconic hat, he proposes it as either a "Symbol of mixed-race semiotic dexterity" or as a "symbol of a Beverly Hills brat," as the guitar player stole it from a high-end boutique and embellished it himself.

¹⁶⁸ Cason Sharpe. Toronto, November 28, 2020.

¹⁶⁹ "Trampoline Hall List of Lecturers," Trampoline Hall List of Lecturers, accessed March 19, 2021, http://www.trampolinehall.net/lecturelist/past_lecturers.html.

This kind of culturally hybrid expression of mixed-race ingenuity is exemplary of the codes of disidentification, creating something new of the dominant culture by marginalized artists. Simultaneously, is it also a matter of proximity to whiteness and privilege - both access to white culture and a kind of rich kid attitude that speaks to Slash's experience? It is this unresolved ambiguity that Sharpe embraces as a potential for better understanding and exploring the circumstance of identity. This is the critical vocabulary that all the artists in this paper have developed, which shares a commitment to better understanding the complexities of their experiences and their practices.

Returning to the mediative moments that reoccur in Sharpe's stories, this ambiguity is felt in the contemplative and unresolved, expressing freedom in the tender acceptance of a complicated reality. After detailing the tragedies of the Orlando nightclub Massacre and what it means for the safety of queer and racialized people, the title story of *OLOPR* ends with our character, neither heroically nor tragically feeling himself, half dragged and solo, heel-toeing home at 4 am. "One for the Faeries of Alexandra Park" ends with a solo walk as well; he pays his respects.

I stood on the sidewalk and looked at my dad's old apartment building from across the street. The building had a new exterior paint job and the lobby had been renovated but the skeleton looked the same from a distance. I could even spot my dad's apartment, four floors up, second balcony on the right. A light shone through the window but I couldn't tell if anyone was home.¹⁷⁰

In his fictional and autobiographical writing, Sharpe offers personal, poetic, tender moments of both solitude and socialization that center the city. Sharpe's writing takes up race, class,

¹⁷⁰ Cason Sharpe, "One for the Faeries of Alexandra Park." Essay in *PRISM International*, 56.2, (Winter 2018), 83.

sexuality and though an accessible lens that forefronts intersectional experiences and youthful melancholy.

Conclusion

By employing an autoethnographic method to explore the relationships, cultural production, and identities of the artists profiled in this paper, and by discovering, and then teasing out the threads that align the works and intentions of these artists, I make a case for the ways in which they create personal work that is inherently political. I point to my own positionality as friend in the context of this project and provide an understanding of how I have come to be a part of this community and how my politics, friendships and experiences as a white cis-gendered woman and ally have led me to this line of inquiry.

A discussion of the artists within critical, theoretical, and community contexts allows me to draw parallels between their use of persona, parody, camp, and satire, that draws upon the intersection of popular culture and autobiography to exemplify how the artists' works share thematic concerns and stylistic influences. They build on existing frameworks to produce new knowledge that centres their Black biracial identities, intersectional experiences, and queer political sensibilities through a shared, generational voice and their own unique respective practices.

To Acknowledge Boulton, Beckles, Dalton-Lutale and Sharpe's identities as Black biracial allows for a nuanced discussion on their identities in proximity to Blackness and whiteness and how this articulation manifests and contributes to their political and artistic perspectives.

Collective discussions integrated into this paper reveal instances of transformation and growth regarding their voices, approaches, and understandings of race, class, and gender enrich the analysis and the positioning of this project as a living archive. This multifaceted archive,

which is populated with my own and the artists' words, and those of theorists writing in the fields of Black critical thought, feminism, queerness, class consciousness, and intersectionality provides a glimpse into how the artists work, what inspires them, and what the reach of their work is.

By integrating our collective discussions into close readings of work, I analyse, and assess their methods, intensions, inspirations, passions, and politics by way of intimacy, honesty, and trust, and explore how the artists have made an impactful contribution to the Canadian art landscape, rooted in a distinctly intersectional, Canadian experience.

Examining the artists' works individually, I relay how their practices each draw on personal experiences and individual perspectives to explore nuanced identity formations. Boul't's live and video-based performances and persona implicate her positionality and that of her viewers to open intersectional and intergenerational dialogues on accountability, activism, privilege, and self-reflexivity. Similarly, Beckles' live and video based performances critique and parody feminist theory, particularly white feminism, and its co-opted resurgence in popular culture. Through the use of her body, she also pays homage to foundational black feminist texts, subverts and takes up racist stereotypical gendered depictions of Blackness. Dalton-Lutale's theatre works cross disciplinary boundaries between performance art and theatre, blending surrealism, fantasy and personal history to illuminate the complexities of Black biracialism, family, motherhood and daughterhood, referencing both specific intersectional experiences and popular culture and how these narratives interact. Sharpe's nonfiction creative writing practice and the characters who populate his fictional stories, navigate class, race, sexuality and queerness. Centering the concept of the city, Sharpe has a particular interest in the intersectional contexts the city can provide which he explores in his writing through a tender, percpective and humorous voice.

The complex ways in which the artists present work concerning their lived experiences and scholarly discourse centre that which concerns the everyday; generating hilarious, relatable yet critical works that are laden with multiplicities in their readings and what audiences and readers might glean.

As a contribution to an archive, I would like to think that this piece of writing is highly specific but broad in its reach and impact. The artists employ a variety of media, their work comments on an inherently intersectional Canadian experience that can be read by various audiences across popular, academic, and activist circles.

Boult's work concerning, critiquing, and borrowing from popular culture resonates with any well-versed viewers of reality tv, as well as activists dedicated to social justice. Beckles' work speaks to the feminist scholar, Black women, and the sensibilities of art-curious femme youth everywhere through her aesthetic sensibilities. Dalton-Lutale's work comments on a particular experience of race and gender, in a particular place and time, but her exploration of the home and childhood are universal. Sharpe's work can speak to young queers of colour, and to anyone working a shit job in need of a good time.

While I have been friends with these artists for many years, I have learned so much about their practices, their selves-and about myself. Using autoethnography and acknowledging the vulnerability it entails has allowed me to write about my experiences for the first time in a way that has felt important. I write this with a sense of urgency as what is at stake here is the parsing out of identity categories in ways that are unique and seemingly immeasurable.

In her book *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representation* (2006) bell hooks writes, "though I see it all connected, each piece has a different take on culture and reality. Polyphonic, it combines the many voices I speak-academic talk, standard English, vernacular patois, the

language of the street.”¹⁷¹ While the community that I write about and am a part of speaks in different tongues that those hooks does, we create, integrate, borrow and bastardize language in ways we see fit to express ourselves. Therefore, this document is also an achieve of nomenclature¹⁷² where we are asserting/inserting our/the language into the archive.

As stated in the introduction of this paper, I see this as an ongoing project. I excitedly anticipate new work and collaborations from the artists, notably the reprise of Sharpe and Dalton-Lutale’s podcast *Two Hungry Children* that will take a localized approach, looking to themes of memory, place, space and the history of Toronto, Sharpe’s new book of “experimental criticism in the form of epistolary nonfiction,”¹⁷³ Dalton-Lutale’s new play that examines the home; witnessing new, live performance work by Boulton that centers her home and relationship to Hamilton, the collaborative exhibition by Beckles and myself, and learning about Beckles’ current endeavours in nutrition which concern the body; her body.

During my graduate studies at OCAD U, I took a Postcolonial Issues in Visual Culture course with Professor Doctor Dot Tuer, where she urged us to write about our community, about our contemporaries and our peers, stating that it is upon us to record, archive, speak about and to

171 bell hooks, “Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representation,” in *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representation* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), pp. 1-8, 8.

172 Writing this work was an interesting exercise in learning about language. As you, my footnote reader might have noticed, I offer explanations and definitions of many terms used throughout this document, often ones that have roots in popular culture or subculture. It allowed me to meditate on how words, terms and language is considered to be inherently understood or assumed. Granted, my writing style can be coded and strangely poetic for which my secrecy and French immersion elementary school education is to blame. As a student in Allyson Mitchell’s Queer Affect Theory: Public Feelings and Queer/Feminist Cultural Production course at York University in 2017, she encouraged her students to read theory as one would read poetry. I return to this often in my reading and writing. When discussing the defining of terms in this work with Kalale Dalton-Lutale, she would often ask, what would people do when they didn’t understand Shakespearian language? All this is to say, I wanted to take this opportunity to admit that I did not know what “nomenclature” meant when my brilliant advisors encouraged me to write about it. I found myself too embarrassed to ask, and too nervous to discreetly Google it. So, if you find yourself in a similar predicament, allow me.

“Nomenclature” Noun: 1. A set or system of names or terms, as those used in a particular science or art, by an individual or community, etc. 2. The names or terms comprising a set or system. “Nomenclature,” Dictionary.com (Dictionary.com), accessed April 28, 2021, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/nomenclature>.

173 “Hot Takes: Cason Sharpe & Faith Arkorful,” Art Gallery of Ontario, 2020, <https://ago.ca/events/hot-takes-cason-sharpe-faith-arkorful>.

the generation and local communities in which we find ourselves. This call to action stayed with me and greatly influenced my decision to embark on this research by looking at and into my immediate community. I hope that this work will continue to be generated by those who find themselves in communities of artists and friends whose friendship, politics and work inspire them as mine have.

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