

*There Is Always More than What We Perceive*

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*There Is Always More than What We Perceive*  
A thesis exhibition by Geneviève Wallen  
Master of Fine Art  
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OCAD University

ABSTRACT

*There Is Always More than What We Perceive* explored the ways in which contemporary black queer artists in Toronto engage issues of identity, race, sexuality, gender, and space. The selected artists—Michèle Pearson Clarke, Abdi Osman, and Natalie Wood—challenged the monolingual voice of black studies set by patriarchal and heteronormative ideologies. Their representations of black queer diasporic subjects present identities that exist in the interstices between normalized social categories. This exhibition project contributed to the decentralization of monolithic blackness and LGBTQ identity by asking: “Whose blackness? Whose queerness?” These queries were twofold; first they acknowledged the need to recognize the plurality of the black experience across geographical locations, and secondly, they cautioned viewers against black or queer universalism. The exhibition *There Is Always More than What We Perceive* rendered visible multiple intersections of personhood in order to enrich and expand discussions about blackness in Canada.

## Acknowledgements

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Finally I wish to extend my gratitude to the artists who took part in my thesis exhibition and the formulation of my thesis. Without them, *There Is Always More than We Perceive* would not have been possible.

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# INTRODUCTION

## Exhibition Premise

*What does it mean to understand queer other than as an extension of debates generated within the gay and lesbian communities—including more recent nuanced positionalities of transsexual, bisexual, and intersexual. Or as not applying to bodies that self-identify as same sex oriented in their desires but simply queering sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, gender, and thus identification in general. – Amelia Jones*

*There Is Always More than What We Perceive* explores the ways in which contemporary black queer artists in Toronto engage issues of identity, race, sexuality, gender, and space. The selected artists—Michèle Pearson Clarke, Abdi Osman, and Natalie Wood—push against the confinements of an imagined authentic blackness, which has been constructed around patriarchal and heteronormative ideologies. The act of *queering* all aspects related to one's process of identification—as suggested by the art historian Amelia Jones—brings forward a discursive context in which dominant articulations of an authentic black identity are substituted for a new kind of radicalism. Furthermore, as members of diasporic black communities, these artists' cultural positions encompass more than just fragments of a complex geography of blackness; they highlight identities that exist in the interstices between normalized social categories. The selected artworks unbind black identities and allow representational possibilities that enable understandings not based solely on being black or queer. *There Is Always More than What We Perceive* is an exhibition that renders visible multiple

intersections of personhood in order to enrich and expand discussions about blackness in Canada

### **Project brief**

In the context of my thesis work, it is important that I state my position as a black cisgender—meaning that my gender identity conforms to my assigned birth sex—and straight woman who deals with black diasporic queer issues. My research derives from a personal desire to debunk and understand black Canadian identities and experiences. The scope of my project is limited in terms of its geographical focus and community sample. However, the deliberate choice to investigate black diasporic queer identities from Toronto’s artistic community opens more doors than one might think. My interest is grounded in personal experience, not as a black queer individual, but as a black French Canadian who struggles within the confinements the ideology of “black respectability.”<sup>1</sup> I do not pretend that my experience is similar to any individuals who identify themselves as part of LGBTQ communities. Nonetheless, my desire to explore notions of blackness through different lenses comes from a yearning for a change in discourse about blackness both within and without black communities.

Academician and cultural critic Rinaldo Walcott demonstrates the ways in which

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<sup>1</sup> Black respectability is a social construct originating from the “New Negro” ideology. The “New Negro” was a project of racial uplift in response to the “Negro Problem” which was a racist discourse cultivated in the United-States after the Civil War. Black intellectuals encouraged the idea that each black person was responsible for the welfare of the whole race through their education, manners, and class. The black middle class from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> strived for recognition as models to be “better blacks” and thus be perceived as active members of the American society. See Michelle M. Wright, *Becoming Black; Creating Identity in the African Diaspora*. (US: Duke University Press, 2004), 70-84.



queer and diasporic studies have the potential to re-narrate black Canadian histories in his essay *Black Studies; Reading from a Queer Place in the Diaspora* (2005). The author suggests that new personal negotiations such as gender and sexuality can emerge from a position outside of the patriarchal historicity and that “queer studies can refuse to constitute that wounded identity that shaped black studies as an epistemological object.”<sup>2</sup> It is imperative to disrupt current viewpoints vacillating between wounded victim and resistor as a means to freely embrace pluralism as a viable vehicle for communal redefinition of blackness and its performativity.

### **Why Is Black Queerness Relevant?**

What does it mean to speak about blackness and queerness, and why is it relevant in Canada in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? This is an era in which reinforced multicultural policies and advocacy for a post-racial movement is at the door, a time when gay marriage and pride parades are legal and celebrated. My research contributes to the decentralization of monolithic understandings of blackness as well as LGBTQ identities. Through this exhibition I am asking: “whose blackness? Whose queerness?” These questions are twofold; first they acknowledge the need to recognize the plurality of the black experience across geographical locations, and secondly, they point out the necessity to approach queer studies with the same precautions as black studies. In other words, it is

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<sup>2</sup> Rinaldo, Walcott. “Outside in Black Studies: Reading from a Queer Place in the Diaspora.” in *Black Queer Studies: a Critical Anthology*, ed. Patrick E. Johnson and Mae Henderson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 97.

crucial to investigate these processes of identification outside of popular homogenizations. Since the focus of my research is under documented and under theorized in Canada (when comparing the body of literature relating to my subject with the volume generated by scholars from the USA and Britain), it underlines the critical importance of engaging questions about how sexuality and blackness play out in different locations and temporalities.

### **Why Toronto?**

In addition to culture, race, sexuality, and gender are contextualised and regulated through space. When speaking of representation, theorists David A. Bailey and Stuart Hall contend that surrounding discourse and environment greatly influence personal representational tactics. And, because “black” signifies a range of experiences, the act of portraying the self or a community is not just about decentering the subject(s) but actually about exploring the kaleidoscopic conditions of blackness.<sup>3</sup> Through my investigation of representational strategies employed by black queer artists based in Toronto, I not only situate the conversation locally but also internationally within a broader history of migration and cultural encounters.

Toronto’s diverse demography maps different immigration stories and spatial relationships. The lived experiences of its black diaspora subjects in

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<sup>3</sup> David A. Bailey and Stuart Hall. “The Vertigo of Displacement” in *The Photography Reader*, ed. Liz Wells,. (London and New York: Routledge, 2003),383.

Toronto differ on many levels from communities established in Vancouver, Montréal and Halifax. These differences are economic, historical, and cultural. In addition, scholars such as Michelle Wright and Anne-Marie Fortier investigated the various connections between urban spaces, gender, and sexuality. For instance, Fortier explains in her essay *Queer Diaspora* (2002) that within queer studies there is a noticeable focus on urban centres, because they are perceived as spaces that nurture a variety of sexual cultures; queer subjects are therefore labelled primarily as urban subjects.<sup>4</sup>

### **Situating the Black Canadian Identity**

Despite the continued conflation of Canadian black identities with African American identities, which Walcott characterizes as a “[perpetual] sense of conversion to African-American culture—there are fundamental differences between black experiences in the two countries.”<sup>5</sup> Some of the disparities found within the two cultures shed light on the role of blackness in the formation of each nation and the various waves of immigration of black peoples to Canada. The implementation of multiculturalism policies in Canada also complicates the state’s relationship with its black migrants. Multiculturalism as both policy and discourse permit historical amnesia by negating early settlements of black communities and

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<sup>4</sup> Anne-Marie, Fortier. “Queer Diaspora.” in *Handbook of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, eds. by Diane Richardson and Steven Seidman, (London: Sage Publication Ltd, 2002), 191.

<sup>5</sup> Rinaldo, Walcott. “Caribbean Pop Culture in Canada: Or, the impossibility of Belonging to the Nation.” *Small Axe* 9, no.1 (2001): 126.

the nation's discriminatory practices. The American historian Robin W. Winks denotes that:

when discrimination was manifest in Canada, many Canadians pointed the finger of blame at "American contamination", whether in 1860 or in 1960. [Black Canadians] thus played a role in the developing nature of the complex Canadian American cultural relationship, a symbolic function in which [they] stood for the superiority of Canadian institutions in the minds of many Canadians.<sup>6</sup>

The country's ambivalent position highlights the gaps within idealized national identity construction. Canada's myth of paternal righteousness towards its black migrants fostered a homogenized treatment of the black experience on its soil (as descendent of fugitive slaves or new migrants), overshadowing a long history of segregational practices, forced relocation, surveillance, and anti-black violence. Winks suggests that until the 1960's, there was little knowledge of the extent of discrimination practiced across Canada and the history of its black populations; I would argue that this is still the case.<sup>7</sup> The nation-state's arbitrary race-consciousness provides elbowroom for research engaging in multidimensional discourse on blackness.

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<sup>6</sup> Robin W. Winks. *The Blacks in Canada; A History*. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, (1997), 471.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

# PART 1

## Theoretical Research; Background/Context

*We've been arguing for decades about identity and authenticity and who's Black and who's not and I want to yell above the din-Truce! – Touré*

What does it mean to be black? How is blackness evaluated and how does it shape one's experience? My research does not attempt to give a straight and simplified answer, but seeks to acknowledge different kinds of performances of blackness and specifically, queer black performances as represented in the works of the artists in this exhibition. In order to give latitude and freedom, and to unbind black identities, curator Thelma Golden coined the term "post-black" with the artist Glenn Ligon in the late 1990's; this new race ideology inspired the exhibition *Freestyle* (2001) at the Harlem Studio Museum. For the purpose of the *Freestyle* exhibition, Thelma Golden's use of the term "post-black" acted as a catalyst to communicate a nascent movement in contemporary art at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Black artists who were born in the decades following the Civil Rights movement of 1950's and 1960's experienced race differently than their predecessors, experiences that influenced their desire to unhinge themselves from the traditional burden and meanings ascribed to blackness—and, by extension—to the black artist.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the principles behind the term "post-black" were deployed as a way to reposition blackness as something to be interrogated inside and

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<sup>8</sup> Paul C. Taylor. "Post-Black, Old Black" *African American Review* 41, no.4 (2008): 628.

outside of the art world. As the cultural critic Touré suggests, the concept of post-blackness epitomizes the end to narrow understandings of blackness, and allows for the transition from an “exhaustive Blackness to an expansive Blackness.”<sup>9</sup> The concept of an “expansive Blackness” opens metaphorical speech where a convergence of multiple consciousnesses becomes possible.

Racial essentialist ideologies within the U.S. black communities were deployed as a defense mechanism against white supremacy and cultural uprooting that resulted from transatlantic slavery. The conceptualisation of a new black history that would break free from American supremacist politics therefore arose from a desire for self-affirmation. Although liberation movements across black communities in the United States and other parts of the globe raised spirits, it produced narratives where the reproduction and consolidation of racial identity and progress were legitimized through a respectable heterosexuality. Indeed, it is through essentialized gender and racial ideologies that systems of strategic exclusions framed narratives surrounding blackness. Michelle Wright and Antje Schumann, editors of *Blackness and Sexualities*, claim that “black identities that were viewed as resistant to a black heterophallocentrism specifically--black feminists- black queers- were read as ‘Other’ to an authentic blackness (...).”<sup>10</sup> In

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<sup>9</sup> Touré. *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness? What It Means to Be Black*. (New York: Free Press, 2011), xviii.

<sup>10</sup> Michelle M. Wright and Antje Schumann. Introduction to *Blackness and Sexualities*, eds. by Michelle Wright and Antje Schumann, 9-13. (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publisher, 2007), 9.

fact, queerness has been negated within the construction of an “authentic” black self due to ignorant fictions defining homosexuality as “the white man’s disease” that came from European colonialism.

According to a pamphlet distributed by the Black Liberation Movement in 1981, homosexuality has the power to endanger the purity of the race and figures as a genocidal act since it does not contribute to the procreation of future “warriors for liberation.”<sup>11</sup> The discourse of the Black Liberation Movement was infused with deep Afrocentric sentiments and negated the contribution of the LGBTQ community’s agency in shaping African and African diaporic histories, and by extension, transnational narratives. Where post-black’s conceptual premise hits its limitations, the term diaspora broadens the discussion to include black historicity and geographies, while queerness ensures the inclusion of gender and sexuality in the conversation. In regard to visual literacy, I contend that in order to refashion the spectrum of an authentic black performance, it is important to examine art produced by black queer artists from diasporic communities. *There Is Always More than What We Perceive* is an exhibition project that aims to highlight multiple intersections in order to advance present conversations that destabilize present definitions of blackness in Canada and elsewhere

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<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Dollimore, “Desire and Difference.” *Race and the Subject of Masculinities*, eds. Harry Stecopoulos and Michael Uebel, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), 34. See Cheryl Clarke. “The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community.” *Home Girls: a Black Feminist Anthology*. Ed. Barbara Smith. (New York: Women of Color, 1983), 197-98.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Objectives & Contribution to the Advancement of Knowledge**

My curatorial research is interdisciplinary in scope and draws on contemporary social science literature on race, gender, sexuality, and diaspora; it is complemented by exhibition surveys, interviews with the artists, studio visits and art analysis. The literature informing my research is drawn from cultural studies, critical race theory, feminist and queer studies, and post-colonial theories. My research is based on the writings produced by American and Canadian writers, cultural critics, sociologists, art historians, and philosophers such as Dr. Michelle M. Wright, Dr. Rinaldo Walcott, Robin W. Winks, Touré, Dr. Paul C. Taylor, Dr. Bryant Keith Alexander, bell hooks, Dr. Katherine McKittrick, and Dr. Amy Abugo Ongiri. With this project I am concerned with producing relationships across disciplines of blackness and sexualities, as well as a space in which both politics and art come together, allowing the viewer to create new narratives and possibilities.

Since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, critical discourse around race, nation and identity by academicians of color have been a driving force behind the significant rise in interest in postcolonial theories and the insertion of queer and black studies in art. Canadian scholars, curators, and writers such as Dr. Andrea Fatona, Dr. Rinaldo Walcott, Pamela Edmonds, Dr. Charmaine Nelson, Dr. Alice Way Ming Jim and Dr. Njoki Nathani Wane have set the milestones for conscious archival



engagement that make visible the complex realities lived by individuals of African and Caribbean descents inside Canada's social fabric. However, the lack of documentation and critical engagement with the works of black Canadian artists underlines a simplistic treatment of the black experience and sensibilities. Given the complex history of anti-black violence in the United-States and Britain, the volume of literature produced by its African and Caribbean intellectuals constitutes the core of black diasporic studies. However, the study of global migration, notions of cultural hybridity, ethnicity, sexuality, and discourse on cultural heritage also shapes articulations of the black Canadian experience. Annexed to the African-American narrative within a global narrative on blackness, black Canadians are also somewhat invisible within the multicultural mosaic

### **Group Exhibition as a Method:**

When well-executed, group exhibitions allow common themes to emerge while maintaining the integrity of each artwork. Curator Ralph Rugoff argues that a "great" group show provides a meaningful environment that prompts the visitors' ability to appreciate the works on display while also complicating our encounter with each object.<sup>12</sup> The proximity and the nature of the works of Michèle Pearson Clarke, Abdi Osman, and Natalie Wood gave me the opportunity

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<sup>12</sup> Ralph Rugoff, "You Talking to Me? On Curating Group Shows that Give You a Chance to Join the Group" in *What Makes a Great Exhibition?*, edited by Paula Marincola, (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Exhibition Initiative, 2006), 44.

to open up a dialogue about the possibilities of black Canadian representational spaces in the gallery context. The selected artworks illustrate a web of connections underlining how the local is interconnected with the global. Furthermore, a group show not only showcases different perspectives but ensures a multivalent approach to my desired kaleidoscopic vision of blackness and its performances. The variety of media featured in the exhibition *There Is Always than What We Perceive*—film, photography, video, and performance— expand representational possibilities. Blackness, in the case of this exhibition, is rendered as one of many modes of collective and self-investigation. By developing a group show as a method for generating cultural dialogue, I hope that viewers will reconsider their understandings of black culture and the role of the black artists in a range of narratives.

### **Interviews:**

I interviewed the three artists featured in the exhibition in order to gain an understanding of their artistic intentions. An hour-long interview was conducted with each one of them. This process was helpful in contextualising the artworks throughout the writing process. The questionnaire focused on personal interpretations of notions of blackness and how these concepts shape the artists' respective practices. The aim of the interview was to encourage a reflective process in which the participants and I could engage in a dialogue that advanced the exhibition premise.

Since most of the written component of this thesis is drawn from multiple textual resources, I believe that including reflections from the artists adds nuance to the chosen theoretical frameworks. My goal is to produce and publish a post-exhibition catalogue that will not only act as a material archive of the show but as a document that can be used by curators and art historians. The catalogue will add to the limited array of art publications on black art production and contribute to discussion about black queer diasporic subjects in Canada.

**The selection of exhibition space as a strategy:**

To showcase this exhibition project at the OCADU Graduate Gallery granted me the opportunity to broaden as well as re-ignite a significant conversation on race and representation in the arts that started with Ebony Haynes's Master's thesis entitled *From Politics to Post, and Other Idioms in Contemporary Black Art* in 2012.<sup>13</sup> The conversation took on another inflection at the OCADU conference entitled, *The State of Blackness*, organized by Assistant Professor Andrea Fatona in February 2014.<sup>14</sup> Although these academic endeavours have proved crucial in terms of including black bodies within OCADU's academic production, they did not create a space for a material and visual accounts of blackness and its performances. These projects paved the way for the

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<sup>13</sup> Ebony Haynes was a candidate from the Criticism and Curatorial Practices program in 2011- 2012.

<sup>14</sup> The State of Blackness: From Production to Presentation was an interdisciplinary conference taking place at Harbourfront Centre on February 22, 2014 in association with OCAD University. The event brought together artists, curators, academics, students, and multiple publics to engage in dialogue and, in effect, problematize the histories, current situation, and the future state of black diasporic artistic practice and representation in Canada.

inclusion of black Canadian identities in the University's archive. Recording scholarly pursuits from black graduate students and faculty in the history of the OCADU's knowledge production ensures the ability of future generations to sustain and advance critical discourse about black identities. Nonetheless, displaying works by queer black diasporic subjects at OCADU highlights the value system regulating one's visibility within Toronto's art institutions. Exhibitions with themes related to blackness are mostly shown in alternative spaces i.e. artists-run centres, cultural centres, and university galleries.

## Literature Review

### Intersectionality:

Despite a number of criticisms directed towards its use in feminist scholarship, intersectionality's open-endedness helps bridge diasporic, queer, feminist, and race studies. Coined in 1989 by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality describes the ways in which oppressive ideologies and practices such as sexism, racism, homophobia, and classism are interconnected and inseparable when investigating marginality. When the term was first introduced into feminist theory, it was actually the black female body that was used as the prototypical intersectional subject.<sup>15</sup> Intersectionality illuminates the relationships between systems of oppression and the multiplicity of identities and locations that emerge out of institutionalized relationships of power. The feminist scholar Kathy Davis mentions in her essay *Intersectionality as Buzzword: A Sociological Perspective on What Makes A Feminist Theory Successful* (2008) that intersectionality can by definition be employed by any feminist scholar willing to use her own social location, whatever it may be, as an analytic resource rather than just an identity marker.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Kathy, Davis. "Intersectionality as a Buzzword: a Sociology of Science Perspective on What Makes a Feminist Theory Successful." *Feminist Theory* 9, no. 1 (2008): 68.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.,72

## Queer studies

Queer studies allows a multiperspectival approach that takes into account black performances falling outside of heterosexist narratives. Critical perspectives drawn from queer studies are a crucial component of my thesis, especially in relation to diaspora and black studies. Queer studies deconstruct and formulate complex aspects of post-modern and postcolonial forms of belonging by intervening in issues of time, geographies, identity, and embodiment. Author and Professor Anne-Marie Fortier contends that queerness and diaspora are used to host a decisive change of orientation away from primordial identities established alternatively by either nature or culture. Furthermore, in his essay entitled *Outside in Black Studies; Reading from a Queer Place in the Diaspora* (2005), Rinaldo Walcott claims that black diasporic queers have been interrupting and arresting the black studies project to produce a bevy of identifications, which confound and complicate local, national, and transnational desires, hopes, and disappointments of the post-Civil Rights and post Black Power era.<sup>17</sup> In another essay titled *Somewhere Out There; The New Black Queer Theory* (2007) Walcott suggests that black queers can engage historical legacies of racism, colonialism, and exclusionary citizenship, all while destabilizing black heteropatriarchy, without

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<sup>17</sup> Rinaldo, Walcott. "Outside in Black Studies: Reading from a Queer Place in the Diaspora." in *Black Queer Studies: a Critical Anthology*, ed. Patrick E. Johnson and Mae Henderson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 92.

having to situate its discourse against white heteronormativity.<sup>18</sup> Professor Amy Abugo Ongiri draws a parallel between the formations of unified black nationalist sentiments in the US, the construction of black hyper masculinity, and the consolidation of black gay identities in her article *We Are Family; Black Nationalism, Black Masculinity, and the Black Gay Cultural Imagination* (2007). Indeed, Ongiri argues that “[even though] gay liberation could be said to borrow liberally from the discourse and tactics of various Black Liberation movements including Black Power initiatives, it would also seem, historically, to seek to be free of certain deterministic traps of identity politics offering instead a diffuse articulation of both place and power.”<sup>19</sup> Therefore, through the investigation of self-representation and activist practices in the context of heterosexist discourse on North American black authenticity and queer historicity, Ongiri and Walcott underscore the imperative to recognize multiple articulations of blackness in all its histories. However, in their distinctive ways, the authors bring awareness about how, in certain instances, the black queer narrative borrows from Black Nationalist notions of belonging through the configurations of the nation, family, and community building, and that this overlap is necessary for broadening the scope about the history shaping each conversation. Although liberating, queer

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<sup>18</sup> Rinaldo, Walcott. “Somewhere Out There: The New Black Queer Theory.” in *Blackness and Sexualities*, eds Michelle Wright and Antje Schumann. (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publisher, 2007), 37.

<sup>19</sup> Amy Abugos, Ongiri, “We Are Family: Black Nationalism, Black Masculinity, and the Black Gay Cultural Imagination.” *College Literature* 24, no.1 (1997): 285.

studies can provide limited articulations of the self by relying on comparative politics or a queer universalism

## **Post-Blackness**

Post-black and post-blackness are concepts principally explored in the arts and the academia. Post-blackness was about freeing black artists from essentialized understandings of what “black art” should look like. Despite criticisms about the term post-black inside and outside of American black artistic communities, the term holds the capacity to reimagine definitions of blackness. Dr. Nana Adusei Poku asserts in her article *The Multiplicity of Multiplicities; Post-Black and its Intricacies* (2012) that post-black raises questions of power and positionalities, as race and racism have different articulations and regulations of black subjects depending on context and space.<sup>20</sup> Although the chosen artists do not position themselves as post-black artists, reading their artwork through this lens proves helpful for criticism that is unhinged from essentialist racial narratives. The concept of post-blackness allows the recognition of a kaleidoscopic reality where one has to grapple with the question of how to orient one’s self into the various options for black consciousness and the multifaceted organization of black life. Along the same lines, the American cultural critic Touré discusses at length in his book *Who’s Afraid of Post Blackness?* (2011)

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<sup>20</sup> Nana, Adusei-Poku. “The Multiplicity of Multiplicities-Post Black Art and Its Intricacies.” *Darkmatter*. Last modified November 29, 2012. <http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2012/11/29/the-multiplicity-of-multiplicities-%E2%80%93-post-black-art-and-its-intricacies/>



how post-blackness is a suggestive term which has the potential to “end the reign of a narrow and single notion of Blackness.”<sup>21</sup> He also notes that it does not mean that we are over blackness and its socio-political realities, but only beyond erroneous cultural myths attributed to black authenticity. The author brings together anecdotes, everyday observations and art criticism as a means to deconstruct a range of socio-cultural factors governing the present state of blackness and circumstances that cultivate illusory definitions of blackness both outside and inside black communities. Touré argues that:

the moment we shatter these artificial encumbrances of race- a stereotype from without or a rigid archetype from within, and feel the need to respond to it, is the moment we are improved, profoundly human, and therefore become the best Black people we can become.<sup>22</sup>

In response to Touré’s call for more flexible ways of racial expression, the philosopher Paul C. Taylor discusses post-blackness from the perspective of its institutionalisation within the arts and academia while commenting on contemporary racial dispositions. His close analysis of the potentiality of “posterizing” (a term coined in connection with postmodernism) blackness is an idea that has to be first instituted linguistically before intervening in cultural, temporal, and spatial realms. “[Thus], post-blackness is blackness emancipated from its historical burdens and empowered by self-knowledge—the knowledge that race-thinking has helped create the world with which critical race theory and

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<sup>21</sup> Touré. *Who’s Afraid of Post-Blackness? What It Means to Be Black*. (New York: Free Press, 2011), xvi.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 5

libratory notions of blackness have to contend.”<sup>23</sup> Like Nana Adusei Poku, Taylor engages with the freeing possibilities of post-blackness as a creative agent that allows critique of black culture. As long as the pervasive structures of racism are operative, the question of post-race and color-blindness are problematic and seem to obliterate current struggles. That said, the notion of post-blackness acts as a creative catalyst with which I situate visually and textually the premise of my thesis exhibition.

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<sup>23</sup> Paul C, Taylor. “Post-Black, Old Black” *African American Review* 41, no.4 (2008): 640.

## **An Overview of Earlier Exhibitions**

This section positions *There Is Always More than What We Perceive* within a genealogy of exhibitions that interrogate blackness, held in Toronto between 2005 and 2015. The length of this paper does not permit an in-depth account of how the contemporary condition fostered new exhibition premises for identity politics themed exhibitions. Nevertheless, the following list underscores an insatiable need from artists and curators to investigate all facets constituting Toronto's black experiences. These exhibitions generated alternative imageries that connected various realities ranging from local, national, and international perspectives.

*There Is Always More than What We Perceive* is informed by past and current art initiatives that put forward multi-layered and nuanced viewpoints to subvert the image of the black artist. However, the factor that sets this exhibition project apart from the ones cited below is the explicit positioning of queerness as a threshold from which blackness studies can truly be freed from the shackles of an imagined and cultivated authentic blackness. While post-blackness does not appear as a viable mode of self-construction in the present global socio-political and economic structures, it offers the necessary breathing room for collective enterprises of re-construction and re-definition.

***The Hero Project***

WARC Gallery

Artists: Sandra Brewster, Grace Channer, Camille Turner

Curated by: Natalie Wood

January 15 – February 12, 2005.

In *The Hero Project*, artists Sandra Brewster, Grace Channer and Camille Turner created interactive media art works that explore the notion of whether 21st century black Canadians still need well-defined heroes. In their works, the artists pose the questions: Is there still a need for Heroes amongst Black Canadians? What do they look like and what roles do they play? The artists expressed the need to portray black women as heroes resisting racism, sexism and erasure. They then proceeded to engage the theme from three different perspectives. While Brewster searched for the heroes within her community, Turner re-invented herself as her own hero, and Channer created animated heroes liberated in a fantasy universe.<sup>24</sup>

***I Represent***

Aspace Gallery

Artists: Michael Chambers, Stephen Fakiyesi, Dana Inkster, Dionne Simpson, Camille Turner, Syrus Marcus Ware

Curated by: Natalie Wood

January 13 - February 11, 2006

*I Represent* brought together six artists to exhibit works that enter into a dialogue about the desire, expectation and impact of contemporary black representation.

Featuring some of the most important emerging to senior Canadian artists

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<sup>24</sup> Natalie Wood, "The Hero Project", *Exhibition Archive, WARC gallery*, Accessed March 13, 2015  
<http://warc.net/v3/french/archivesdesexpositions/hero%20project/heroproject.html>

working in the area of cultural race politics, who variously embraced, critiqued, and struggled against the constraints of representation and its impact on their personal and professional lives. The artists are working in a range of media and practices tackling painful and personal subjects to ironic, irreverent, and reconstituted perspectives of history, identity and popular culture, and reflecting a complex diversity of cultural practice and expression.<sup>25</sup>

***Position as Desired; Exploring African Canadian Identity***

Royal Ontario Museum: Wilson Canadian Heritage Exhibition Room in the Sigmund Gallery of Canadiana  
26 photographic works from the Wedge Collection  
Curated by: Kenneth Montague  
October 2- March 27, 2010

*Position As Desired / Exploring African Canadian Identity: Photographs from the Wedge Collection* presented twenty-six photographic works from the Wedge Collection, ranging from rare vintage portraits of the first African immigrants to Canada to contemporary works by four emerging artists, documenting the experiences of African Canadians.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Natalie Wood, "I Represent", *Exhibition Archive, Aspace gallery*, Accessed March 13, 2015 <http://www.aspacegallery.org/index.php?m=programdetails&id=56>

<sup>26</sup> Kenneth Montague, "Position as Desired; Exploring African Canadian Identity", *Wedge Curatorial Projects*, Accessed March 13<sup>th</sup>, 2015. <http://www.wedgecuratorialprojects.org/work/position-as-desired-exploring-african-canadian-identity/>

***28 Days: Reimagining Black History Month***

Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

Artists: Leo Asemota, Radcliffe Bailey, Sonia Boyce, Sandra Brewster, Delio Delgado, Godfried Donkor, Denniston Ewan, Stephen Fakiyesi, Dana Inkster, Roshini Kempadoo, Wangechi Mutu, Keith Piper, Rob Pruitt, Dionne Simpson, Mickalene Thomas, Camille Turner, Nari Ward, and Carrie Mae Weems.

Curated by: Pamela Edmonds and Sally Frater. Presented by Third Space Art Projects

January 19- February 19, 2012

*28 Days* brought together a diverse range of works by Canadian, American, and English artists to explore the staging of Black History Month. This exhibition examined the confluence of history and memory and its relationship to contemporary art and representational space. Recent scepticism towards this annual celebration, sparked debates about the value of a designated month committed to the history of one particular race. While some artists refuse to show their work during Black History Month exhibitions as a political stance against the marginalization of their practices, others feel it is one of few opportunities they have to participate in the broader cultural landscape. At the current moment, in which the idea of “post-blackness” continues to be debated within contemporary art discourse, the ways in which the politics of representation are related to Black History Month is also in question, particularly within our increasingly globalized environment.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Pamela Edmonds. “28 Days: Reimagining Black History Month”, *Justina M. Barnicke Gallery*, Accessed March 13, 2015. <http://www.jmbgallery.ca/ExPast28Days.html>

***EXPOSED: Telling Our Stories Through Our Lens***

Nia Centre for the Arts/ Daniel Spectrum

Artists: Ebti Nabang, Mapela Uhindu-Gingala, Leilah Dhore, Candace Nyaomi, and Taejon Cupid.

Curated by: Letecia Rose

March 21- May 5, 2013

*Exposed: Telling Stories Through Our Lens* is an exhibition that featured emerging photographers from diverse backgrounds who came together to re-create and re-imagine the black imagery circulating in the media. Hosted by Daniel Spectrum in Regent Park, this group of young artists -- Ebti Nabang, Mapela Uhindu-Gingala, Leilah Dhore, Candace Nyaomi, and Taejon Cupid-- generated a space where alternative stories were made possible.<sup>28</sup>

***Face Value***

Gallery 1313

Artists: Jordan Clarke, Erika DeFreitas, Olivia McGilchrist

Curated by: Heidi Mckenzie

February 19- March 2, 2014

Influenced by the theorist Diana Taylor, the exhibition *Face Value* explored the complexities of mixed-race identities. The three artists featured in the exhibition engage in self-portraiture to narrate their experiences of being mixed race women of Caribbean/European descent. In the artists' work, the mask is the focal point of self-reflexive inquiry, one that questions and challenges essentialized racial stereotypes. The artists' use of masks— both literally and metaphorically acknowledge their identities in its complexity.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Aisha Wickham "EXPOSED: Telling Our Stories Through Our Lens", *Nia Centre for the Arts*, Accessed March 13, 2015. <http://www.niacentre.org/#!media-pressreleaseexposed/c1m8d>

<sup>29</sup> Mckenzie, Heidi, "Face Value", *Gallery 1313*, Accessed March 13, 2015.

***Exposed 2014***

Nia Center for the Arts

Artists: Johanna Brewster, Amefika “Afi” Browne, Jordan Clarke, Jessica Karuhanga, Bishara Mohamed, Gervais Kwabena Marley Nash, Chiedza Pasipanodya, Nadijah Robinson, and Amber Williams-King.

Curated: by Sandra Brewster,  
March 7 - March 22, 2014

This exhibition showcased the works of nine artists who are making their mark on the Toronto’s arts scene. Johanna Brewster, Amefika Afi” Brown, Jordan Clark, Jessica Karuhanga, Bishara Mohamed, Gervais Nash, Chiedza Pasipanodya, Nadijah Robinson, and Amber Williams-King produced multi-layered artworks exploring spiritual and representational issues. Through the guidance of curator Sandra Brewster, the collective’s main reoccurring theme focused on each artist’s perception of inner peace and balance.<sup>30</sup>

***Pictures from Paradise: A Survey of Contemporary Caribbean Photography***

Scotia Bank Contact Photography Festival: Shipping Containers behind The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery

Artists: Ewan Atkinson, Marvin Bartley, Terry Boddie, Holly Bynoe, James Cooper, Renee Cox, Gerard Gaskin, Abigail Hadeed, Gerard Hanson, Nadia Huggins, Marlon James, Roshini Kempadoo, O’Neil Lawrence, Ebony G. Patterson, Radcliffe Royce, Alex Smailes, Stacey Tyrell and Rodell Warner  
Curated by: Kenneth Montague.

May 1 - 25, 2014

***Pictures from Paradise: A Survey of Contemporary Caribbean***

*Photography* explored the complex social, racial, political, and physical

relationships and landscapes that exist within the Caribbean. Based on the 2012

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<http://g1313.org/2637/upcoming-exhibition-sample-2/>

<sup>30</sup> Mariama Barrie, “Press Release, Exposed 14”, *Nia Centres for the Arts*, Accessed March 13, 2015. <http://www.niacentre.org/#!press-releases-exposed-2014/c1azm>



book of the same name by Robert & Christopher Publishers, the exhibition was structured according to four photographic genres to examine the work of eighteen artists. “Tableau Vivant” depicted constructed scenarios, “Portraiture” challenged our understanding of the emotive subject, “The Documentary Image” celebrated the interrogative attitude of photographs, and “Transformed Media” hailed digital processes.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Kenneth Montague “Pictures from Paradise: A Survey of Contemporary Caribbean Photography” *Wedge Curatorial Project*, accessed March 13, 2015.  
<http://www.wedgecuratorialprojects.org/work/pictures-from-paradise-a-survey-of-contemporary-caribbean-photography/>

## PART 2

### Curatorial Essay

This chapter provides a close reading of the works featured in the exhibition.

While this analysis provides a framework in which each artwork interrupts essentialist readings of blackness, the selected works underscore how black identities are constituted by multiple, inextricable facets.

Michèle Pearson Clarke's short film *Black Men and Me* (2006) is an autobiographic work that not only recounts an overlooked component of black lesbian lives in Toronto, but also highlights other issues such as gender binaries and how they inform our understandings and perpetuation of the "feminine" and the "masculine." Through documenting her visit to a barber shop, a cultural and social site of masculine performance, Clarke subverts essentialist gender dynamics as well as exposes an "other" perspective on black masculinity. The film opens with a lighthearted funk track and shots of hair care products, clippers, brushes, and scissors. Then, 37 seconds into the film, Clarke makes a strong opening statement:

Straight White men never hit on me. They are not interested and they seem to get that I wouldn't be interested either or they call me 'bro' and throw me gang signs because they think I'm a man. Gay White men sometimes hit on me but most of the time it is because they think they are cruising a brother'. Straight Black men on the

other hand never make that mistake. They always know that I'm a woman.<sup>32</sup>

This remark has a twofold value: first, it highlights the recognition and misrecognition of Clarke's positionality as a masculine individual from her male counterparts, and second, it suggests that the notion of female masculinities has the power to shift how masculine identities are produced and reproduced. The artist also references inherent cultural differences between African and Caribbean and Western socio-cultural constructions regarding hair symbolism, which highly influences the viewer's reading of her gender expression. Clarke declared in an interview for the *Daily Xtra* (2007) that:

a shaved head on a woman means particular things for white people, and is often taken as a cue for having a particular sexuality. But there are many straight black women who shave their heads or have really short hair so when black men look at me, they don't automatically read me as queer.<sup>33</sup>

It is via a humoristic tone that Clarke sheds light on the fact that race, sexuality, and gender expression are read according to cultural standards. Seated in front of a mirror getting a haircut, she narrates in a reflective manner the complexities informing the peculiar relationship she has with straight black men—her first admirers. She explains that straight black men are the ones to see her as a woman; however, this is not the way she wishes to be seen by them. In fact, at a young age

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<sup>32</sup> *Black Men and Me*. Directed by Michèle Pearson Clarke. (Toronto: Trinity Square Video.2006).DVD

<sup>33</sup> Mike Vokins. "Inside Out Film Fest: Eyes on Toronto." *Daily Xtra*. Last modified May 10, 2007. <http://dailyxtra.com/toronto/arts-and-entertainment/inside-film-fest-eyes-toronto>

she wanted to be a boy and thought that she would grow up to be a black man. Despite the fact that Clarke perceives many similarities between her and “them,” she is aware of the barrier created by her biological sex. The artist states that “all men suffer from not being able to meet the ideals of masculinity that are constructed by our culture, but from the get-go I will never succeed at masculinity in that sense.”<sup>34</sup> Consequently, Clarke’s yearning for recognition as equally masculine highlights the conscious choice of the film’s location. Indeed, by documenting a day to day ritual within a gendered and symbolic cultural site, such as the barbershop, the artist inserts her body in a social circle in which she belongs.

The ethnographer and sociologist Bryant Keith Alexander investigates the social context of the African American barbershop as a site of cultural performance where a confluence of banal, ritualized gestures and “cultural currency”<sup>35</sup> take place. The concept of cultural currency delineates the circulation of information that is shared through community members; it is knowledge that adds to the collective ways of knowing; it orients and marks relationships. Alexander demonstrates in his scholarship that the exchanges in the local barbershop correlate with the re-crafting of black masculinity within the community.

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<sup>34</sup> Michèle Pearson Clarke (artist) in discussion with the author, February 17, 2015.

<sup>35</sup> Bryant Keith Alexander. “Fading, Twisting, and Weaving: An Interpretive Ethnography of the Black Barbershop as Cultural Space.” *Qualitative Inquiry* 9, no. 1 (2003): 120.

He states that:

(...) there is a certain construction of masculinity in Barbershop[s]. Unlike the stoic images of Black masculinity that we see on television; or the rough, mean, and /or aggressive images we see in film; or the violent, sexualized and sometimes ineffectual images that we are expected to take as real, the images of Black masculinity in the Barbershop are of smiling faces, brothers engaged in friendly exchanges, negotiating space and intention.<sup>36</sup>

Alexander's observations shed a new light on the ways in which Clarke's presence in the space of the barbershop contributes to re-imagining and re-fashioning black masculinity outside of the media. At the end of the film, the artist includes scenes featuring three customers to further the dialogue on masculinity and its performances. This strategic inclusion reinforces the idea that masculinity is an attribute that can be embodied in a number of ways. As Bettina Van Hoven and Katrin Hurschelman explain that "masculinity evokes images of maleness, yet they are by no means necessarily shared by men and can on the other hand, be adopted by or attributed to women."<sup>37</sup> The first man we see in the scene represents the archetype of the young, urban, straight black man wearing loose-fitted street clothes and assuming a relaxed posture. The second subject is a man dressed in casual fashion, seated cross-legged with a more feminine body language, making his gender performance and sexuality ambiguous to the viewer. The third male seems to be around thirteen years old; he wears a baggy T-shirt

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Bettina Van Hoven, Kathrin Horschelmann. Introduction to *Spaces of Masculinities*, ed. Bettina Van Hoven and Kathrin Horschelmann. (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), 25.

and jogging pants. He sits still and appears as if he is unsure about how to position himself—a symptom of his incomplete transition from boyhood to manhood. They all stare at the camera for a couple of seconds, and then they are filmed seated next to Clarke. Throughout this staged comparison session, the artist assumes very masculine seating positions: wide opened legs with crossed or widely spread arms. The artist and her subjects defy the viewer to look exclusively through the lens “male” or “female” categories. The film ends with the artist declaring that she finds comfort and security navigating the world as a queer black masculine person.

Like Michèle Clarke’s short film *Black Men and Me* (figure 1), Abdi Osman’s black and white photo series *Plantation Futures* (2015) invites the viewer to witness personal and social rituals. Through this series, Osman records mundane interactions reflecting the intersections of the public and the private that frame our daily lives. Along with filmmaking, photography (more specifically, vernacular photography) provided black diasporic communities with a tool of resistance, allowing the creation of spaces for self-expression that explore a variety of attitudes about race, class, gender, popular culture and the politics of representation. When speaking about the significance of black image production in the everyday—prior to and post racial integration eras in the USA—author and social activist bell hooks suggests that photography was more fascinating to black folks than other forms of image making. Hooks argues that the immediacy, accessibility, and pleasure of taking pictures were appealing factors in using photos to subvert white control of

black imagery.<sup>38</sup> Through bell hooks's analysis of photography and black life, one can understand the role of photography as a means to create new forms of identification and to destabilize the status quo.

*Plantation Futures* serves as a threshold to an alternative treatment of the Canadian black experience. Borrowed from an essay by Professor Katherine McKittrick, the title *Plantation Futures* simultaneously reflects on the past, present, and future, from a painful history and geography of dispossession to an unfolding narrative. McKittrick describes the concept of *Plantation Futures* as an explanation of geographies of marginalization and anti-black violence in a post-plantation and post-slave era. The author explains that although the plantation system is said to be non-existent today, traces of it can be seen in the prison industrial complex, the impoverishment of black folks and urban development projects.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, the term *plantation* also recalls a long pictorial tradition in which negative stereotypes were formed and perpetuated in dominant media. The word *futures*, however, permits the mind to wander beyond the aforementioned socio-political and economic realities, thus allowing an alternative discourse on the conditions of blackness. The photographic series *Plantation Futures* by its title sets new grounds for black subjects, thus removing essentialist approaches to race and fostering multiples positionalities and

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<sup>38</sup> bell, hook "In Our Glory." in *The Photography Reader*, ed by Liz Wells, (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 390-391.

<sup>39</sup> Katherine McKittrick. "Plantation Futures." *Small Axe* 17, no.3 (2013):2-5.

performances. Osman's photographs capture intimate moments in the daily life of his subjects and bring the private to the public, which in turn allows the sitter(s) to become more than an "othered" subject within a metanarrative. The artist describes his process as intervention in which he uses photography as a means to reinsert black bodies in certain spaces where people would not think they would find black bodies. He says, "I want people to look at my work and expand what they think of blackness or what constitutes blackness—to see blackness not as one thing but as a variety of things."<sup>40</sup> Each photograph captures a moment of self-definition and authority that makes visible representations of black diasporic social life in its complexities. Abdi Osman's series borrows from the vernacular aesthetic found in the family album. His aesthetic reminds the viewer of the ways in which the walls, night stands, and refrigerator doors on which personal snapshots are showcased function as "privately owned and curated spaces"<sup>41</sup> that are regularly passing under the scrutinizing eye of a family member, a friend or an acquaintance. Much like the visitors in one's home, viewers in the gallery space are invited to make meaning of what they see through their own experience and interpretations.

The first photograph entitled *I* from *Plantation Futures* (figure 2) depicts two women seated on a red leather couch in a living room. In the backdrop, we

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<sup>40</sup> Abdi Osman (artist) in discussion with the author, March 13, 2015

<sup>41</sup> bell hook. "In Our Glory." in *The Photography Reader*, ed by Liz Wells, (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 392.



can see framed pictures, a plant, and a door leading to a patio. The proximity of the sitters suggests that they have known each other for a while and are perhaps close friends. The individuals present themselves with simply but beautifully arranged hair and are wearing a contemporary version of traditional Sub-Saharan garments. Facing the camera, they execute stiff poses inspired by fashion magazines. The person on the left engages in a more playful manner with smiling eyes and a shy grin whereas the one on the right has a serious expression. The disparity in the subjects' performance underlines how the act of self-representation dominates the nature of the snapshot as an instance of self-affirmation. The difference in temperament or composure between the two friends is clear, despite their anonymity.

The photograph titled *II* (figure 3), presents the same individuals found in image *I*, plus another sitter. One could suggest that these photographs were taken on the same day because of the similarity of the environment and the recurrence of the dress of one of the subjects. In this instance, there are visible signs of dressing for the camera. Indeed, between pictures *I* and *II*, the sitter on the left wears a different dress and the one in the middle seems to have arrived later and has also decided to participate in the thrill of dressing up. However, if we scratch the surface, many questions regarding the act of dressing up for a photographic session invites further investigations. For example: what were the intentions behind the chosen apparel? Why did the subjects select traditional garments? What kind of intervention was made possible through the change of clothes? This

image does much more than solely depicting a fun reunion between old friends. The photographer David A. Bailey and the cultural critic Stuart Hall argue in a collaborative essay entitled *The Vertigo of Displacement* (2003) that “identities are floating entities whose meanings are not fixed and universally true at all times for all people.”<sup>42</sup> They also investigate how one’s selfhood is constructed through unconscious desires, fantasies, and memories. The image allows us to also see the subjects’ constructions of personhood through the performative act of dressing and the creation of the photographic self. However, photograph *II* captures a fleeting moment of unawareness, a split second before the realization of being photographed. The sitter at the far right appears to be the narrator with one hand close to her mouth as if she was gasping for air due to the anecdote’s comic nature. Drinks in hand, the subjects are laughing and looking at each other, creating an intimate circle that excludes the viewer. This photograph illustrates the power held by its sitters by subverting the act of studying the “other” and resisting simplistic interpretations. The viewer is thus confronted to the idea that a complete understanding of the captured moment is unattainable.

Photograph *III* (figure 4) captures a beautiful summer day where four friends execute a photo shoot at Queen’s Park, Toronto. Similar to a pop band poster arrangement, the two “lead singers” are seated on a bench whereas the two other members are standing up behind them. The ones in the foreground present

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<sup>42</sup> David A. Bailey and Stuart Hall. “The Vertigo of Displacement” in *The Photography Reader*, ed. Liz Wells, (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 383

themselves in a diva-like manner with their chests forward, legs crossed, chins up, glancing at a fictional audience in a daring way. Their knees are touching demonstrating a mutual desire to perform this act as a duo and thus both endorsing front-stage personalities. The individuals at the back look straight at the camera and perform with an awareness of their role as the supporting cast. The group dynamic is explicit; it looks as though their positions are indicative of their daily interactions. One could speculate that the two subjects on the bench do not always share the spotlight equally. Maybe this is why the person on the right takes up more space, appearing to push the other on the far left side. Perhaps, the way the scarf merely covers the subject's torso was a tactic to visually dethrone the other via the use of sex appeal. Multiple interpretations arise from this photograph, and interestingly enough—as in Michele Clarke short film, *Black Men and Me*—there is an implied redefinition of space and gendered performances. Photograph *III* presents an alternative femininity defined as feminine-masculine. The photo shoot does not reflect the usual hyper masculine representation of black male-bodied individuals; rather, it showcases effeminate and flamboyant personalities, blurring gender binaries.

Furthermore, the fact that this theatrical *mise en scène* is documented in Queen's Park, an urban green space, adds another layer to the photograph and brings back the idea of reinserting black bodies into unexpected scenarios and landscapes. Since there are no obvious cues to the location, this environment is only familiar to people seeing or engaging with this location on a daily basis.

Osman revealed during an interview that Queen's Park signifies a certain kind of space when it comes to queer life. He describes this location as not only being a place where students congregate during the summer time but as a cruising platform for gay men where outdoor nocturnal sexual encounters occur.<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, the presence of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario along with monuments of dignitaries populating the park highlights the ways in which race, gender, and sexuality are governed within public spaces and histories.

Photograph *IV* (figure 5) depicts five adults and a baby who are seated on a piece of fabric in High Park. Since there is no trace of food or beverages, we can assume that the group chose this location for the sole purpose of being photographed. At first glance, it looks like an intergenerational family picture, like the ones featured in living rooms alongside Christmas and graduation portraits of sisters, brothers, and cousins. Perhaps the sitters are long time friends, or possibly a mix of the two: friends and family. Maybe it is rare that they spend time together and this is why it seemed important to capture this specific moment. As with photograph *III*, this image acts as a space where multiple conclusions are possible. Osman believes that when documenting Canada's black diaspora, it is important to not only document the various ways in which black bodies circulate in the public sphere, but to also challenge negative narratives tying black communities to homophobia.<sup>44</sup> This photograph brings together queer, straight,

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<sup>43</sup> Abdi Osman (artist) in discussion with the author, March 13, 2015.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

and transsexual identities in the same space as a counter image to widely circulated ideas about black queers and transsexuals being automatically rejected by their communities.

*Plantation Futures* captures moments of the everyday, offering a glimpse of the potential of forms of identification and the making of collective memory. Osman states that “we can’t wait for somebody else to document us; we have to take it upon ourselves.”<sup>45</sup> When I look at this series, I cannot help but wonder how these images will be read if they are found in an archive 200 years from now. How will blackness and its performances be understood then?

Presented in a different fashion, but certainly as affecting as Abdi Osman’s work, Natalie Wood’s video performance *Banagram/Bakergram* (2013) also engages black historicity and space. Indeed, Wood re-activates the past in order to challenge the negation of lesbian narratives within public black discourse. The artist states that her practice draws a lot upon history and the research that I have done. The work that I am doing, the artworks that I am creating, and the kind of themes that I am exploring; it’s about having an impact now, but I feel like it is having an impact in the past.<sup>46</sup>

Wood highlights by her appropriation the movie *Princess Tam Tam* (1935), (which features Josephine Baker), that different kinds of social affiliations and

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Natalie Wood (artist) in discussion with the author, February 27, 2015.

desires can emerge through an alternative timeline. *Princess Tam Tam* becomes a platform on which the artist explores black womanhood as well as the counter-normative web of events that made Baker one of the most famous and venerated black female figures.

*Banagram/Bakergram* is a video performance with a participatory component. A video of 09:30 begins with a scene depicting Natalie Wood laying on a wooden floor covered with bananas. At first, we hear a soft drumming sound; then, the artist narrates the synopsis of a musical production envisioned by the renowned architect Le Corbusier. This musical wherein Josephine Baker is cast as a monkey evolving into a modern woman is the point of departure from which Wood investigates the representational politics regulating the black female subject. The narration is followed by Baker's "savage" dance featured in the film *Princess Tam Tam* (1935) which is played backward and then forward. Seated in the gallery space, her back facing the projection, the artist silently writes quotations—taken from the actress's biographies and interviews—onto fresh bananas (figure 6). These quotations are specific to the time when the star was politically active in the 1960's and the 1970's (figure 7). When the artist exhausts her list of quotations appearing on her worksheet, she distributes the bananas to members of the audience. Each person receiving a banana has to read its inscription out loud. This performance simultaneously bridges many intersections composing Baker's image, generating a conversation that integrates two distinct parts of the performer's life: her vocation as a cherished exotic and exuberant entertainer of the Parisian nightlife, and later

her role as an activist and mother of the “rainbow tribe.” Through the act of inscribing quotes from Baker’s days as an activist working against racial segregation and discrimination onto bananas, Wood demonstrates Baker’s mediation between the professional world in which she succeeded and her felt responsibilities towards racial advancement. As Anne Anlin Cheng notes, “the publicity of her political activities during World War II and the 1960’s acquires its piquancy often precisely because of its supposed contrast with her early, and shall we say, more wicked fame.”<sup>47</sup> The analysis of her agency in a racist and sexist environment has been investigated along with the fetishism of her body, and the ambiguous appreciation for her theatrical prowess and transnational stardom. Her story is a mythology of perseverance, resilience, scandals, heroism and political engagement. How, then, can we understand Baker’s identity as formed inside the contradiction between the spheres of entertainment and activism?

In 1926, Josephine Baker opened an act entitled *La Folie du Jour* with her infamous banana-skirt dance at the renowned cabaret Folies Bergère in Paris. Wearing no more than a miniskirt made out of 16 plush bananas, she mesmerized her Parisian public and solidified her public persona. This exotic outfit, with which she became associated throughout her career, conveys a complex network of racial and sexual politics that the black female subject navigates. Baker won the hearts of her audiences, black and white alike, with her charm, charisma and

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<sup>47</sup> Anne Anlin, Cheng. *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface*. (USA: Oxford University Press, 2010)  
<http://site.ebrary.com/lib/oculocad/detail.action?docID=10433776>

exotic performances. However, in order to consolidate her role as a spokesperson on the struggles of black diasporic peoples, especially women, parts of her life were suppressed. Professor Amy Abugo Ongiri discusses the notion of a unified and coherent black nation in America, in the article *We Are Family; Black Nationalism, Black Masculinity, and the Black Gay Cultural Imagination* (1997), where desires, particularly “wrongfully constructed desire” (homosexual desire, for example) threatened the dissolution of the very bonds of cultural and racial collectivity by relocating the personal, subjective body within the realm of the individual, thereby rendering it uncontrollable.<sup>48</sup> This desire to portray blackness as homogenous led to expunging Josephine Baker’s attraction to women from her public image. This act of obliteration brings to the fore questions regarding the dichotomy between the private and the public as well as acceptable and unacceptable erotic desires. Besides, African Americans’ pursuit for inclusive participation in the U.S.’s democratic system fostered the dissemination of racial propaganda where black women’s roles were limited to mothers, lovers, and assistants. Scholar Michelle Wright contends that the story of the nation is always and only the story of men, rendering the nation’s birth, its origins, its present, and its future wholly in the hands of men.<sup>49</sup> Doubly repudiated by patriarchy and colonialism, women were mostly silenced in the public realm.

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<sup>48</sup> Amy Abugos, Ongiri. “We Are Family: Black Nationalism, Black Masculinity, and the Black Gay Cultural Imagination.” *College Literature* 24, no.1 (1997): 282

<sup>49</sup> Michelle M. Wright, *Becoming Black; Creating Identity in the African Diaspora*. (US: Duke University Press, 2004), 138.



In the context of *Banagram/Bakergram*, Wood re-examines Josephine Baker's public image from feminist and queer perspectives. American scholars such as Elizabeth Ezra, Katherine Groo, and Anne Anlin Cheng have investigated Baker's life by employing feminist and postcolonial approaches. Natalie Wood's performance conveys, through the lens of a black Canadian queer artist, different ties with the entertainer's story. The web of new connections generated by a source outside of the American or French contexts creates a space where fiction and reality can serve as a threshold to new narratives.

However, this complicated narrative does not leave enough space to include this other perspective: Baker's queer life. Renowned for her appeal on and off stage and numerous marriages, Baker's name evokes glamour and sensuality. Nevertheless, Lester Strong mentions in his article *Josephine Baker's Hungry Heart* (2006) that "by age fifteen she was already participating in what would prove to be a lifelong string of affairs with other women. Yet she was always careful to hide these liaisons from her public."<sup>50</sup> One can deduce that Baker's strong desire to preserve a respectable heterosexuality was important to keep one's social privilege during her time. One could also argue that since the black female body was associated with sexual deviance, it was crucial to project an image of a certain sexual naiveté, a separation between the stage and her intimacy.

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<sup>50</sup> Lester, Strong. "Josephine Baker's Hungry Heart." *The Gay and Lesbian Review*. Last modified September 1, 2006. <http://www.glreview.org/article/article-959/>

Consequently, Baker's attraction to women has been removed from her public image for the consolidation of her capitalist and social goals.

Although her racial and geographical flexibility are key to trace the Baker phenomenon, celebrity and self-commodification, her sexual desires still remain silenced or treated as a rumor. By reflecting on her own reality as a queer woman, Wood addresses women's sexuality as a possible venue for gender and power subversion. Within multiple accounts, biographies, and films, Josephine Baker is portrayed as an eccentric and exceptional woman who broke cultural barriers by taking any opportunities that would free her from racial and gender determinism. However, her positionality remains strongly tied to a heterosexual, patriarchal, and racial essentialist narrative. All of the aforementioned factors are heightened in Natalie Wood's work since she uses pictorial elements referring to regimes of visibility, which in turn illustrate sites of struggle for recognition. Thus, the artist's video performance juxtaposes the invisibility of the black lesbian narrative in the arts and mass media against the negation of Josephine Baker's queer life as a means to explore the cultural criteria for evaluating a respected cultural icon.

The group exhibition *There Is Always than What We Perceive* presents works inviting viewers to reflect upon their understandings of the black Canadian experience. By exhibiting artistic production from black queer artists based in Toronto, this project opens discussions on the various facets shaping contemporary black life. *There Is Always than What We Perceive* has resonance in academia and in the curatorial field because of its interdisciplinary nature and the

relationships it creates across the discourses of blackness and sexuality. This exhibition generated a space in which both politics and art came together.

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## Figures



Figure 1  
Michèle Pearson Clarke  
*Black Men and Me*  
2006  
Film, 5:57 minutes  
Photo Credit: Emily Rourke, March 10, 2015





Figure 2  
Abdi Osman  
*I, Plantation Futures* series  
2015  
20 x 30 inches  
Courtesy of the artist



Figure 3  
Abdi Osman  
*II, Plantation Futures* series  
2015  
20 x 30 inches  
Courtesy of the artist



Figure 4  
Abdi Osman  
*III, Plantation Futures* series  
2015  
20 x 30 inches  
Courtesy of the artist



Figure 5  
Abdi Osman  
*IV, Plantation Futures* series  
2015  
20 x 30 inches  
Courtesy of the artist



Figure 6  
Natalie Wood  
*Banagram/Bakergram*  
2014  
Video/performance  
Open House, Nuit Rose  
Photo credit: Henry Chan  
Courtesy of the artist



Figure 7  
Natalie Wood  
*Banagram/Bakergram*  
2014  
Video/performance  
Open House, Nuit Rose  
Photo credit: Henry Chan  
Courtesy of the artist

## APPENDIX A

### Pictures of the Installation



*Banagram/Bakergram*

Natalie Wood

2015

Photo credit: Emily Rourke, March 6, 2015



Banagram/Bakergram

Natalie Wood

2015

Photo credit: Emily Rourke, March 6, 2015





*Banagram/Bakergram*

Natalie Wood

2015

Photo credit: Emily Rourke, March 6, 2015





*Plantation Futures Series*

Abdi Osman

2015

Credit: Emily Rourke, March 10, 2015



*IV, Plantation Futures Series*

Abdi Osman

2015

Credit: Emily Rourke, March 6, 2015



*Black Men and Me*  
Michèle Pearson Clarke  
2006  
Photo credit: Emily Rourke, March 6, 2015



*Black Men and Me*

Michèle Pearson Clarke

2015

Photo Credit: Brian Desrosiers-Tam, March 14, 2015





*Black Men and Me*  
Michèle Pearson Clarke  
2015

Photo Credit: Brian Desrosiers-Tam, March 14, 2015

## APPENDIX B

### Artists Biographies

#### **Michèle Pearson Clarke**

Michèle Pearson Clarke is a Trinidad-born artist who works in photography, film, video and installation. Using archival, performative and process-oriented strategies, her work explores queer and diasporic longing and loss. Recent exhibitions and screenings include *We Can't Compete: A Feminist Art Gallery Satellite Project*, at the University of Lethbridge Art Gallery (2014), Pleasure Dome's New Toronto Works (2014) and International Film Festival Rotterdam (2015). Currently, Clarke is a member of the Feminist Art Gallery board collective and the board of directors at Gallery 44, and she is pursuing an MFA in Documentary Media at Ryerson University.

#### **Abdi Osman:**

Abdi Osman is a Somali-Canadian multidisciplinary artist whose work focuses on questions of black masculinity as it intersects with Muslim and queer identities. Osman's video and photography work has been shown in Canada and internationally in both group and solo exhibitions. He holds an MFA in Documentary Media from Ryerson University, and B.A. in African Studies from the University of Toronto. Previous work has been supported by a grant from the Ontario Arts Council. His photographs are also in private collections and the Art



Bank of the Canada Council for the Arts. Some of his work was in the year-long group show *DiaporaArt: Strategy and Seduction by Canadian Artists from Culturally Diverse Communities* at Rideau Hall, Ottawa. Abdi was a 2010 artist-in-resident at the McColl Centre for Visual Arts in Charlotte North Carolina. Most recently in 2012, he was a fellow at The Interdisciplinary Center for Culture and Creativity (ICCC) at the University of Saskatchewan.

### **Natalie Wood**

Born and raised in Trinidad, Natalie obtained her studio training at the Ontario College of Art and Design and went on to complete an MA in Art Education at the University of Toronto in 2000. Her works have been presented nationally and internationally in several group exhibitions (Prefix Institute of Contemporary Art 2007), International Art Fairs (Artist Project Toronto 2010, Nuit Blanche 2007, Toronto Alternative Art Fair International, 2006,), and film and video festivals (the New York Mix Film and Video Festival, Inside Out, Images, Pleasure Dome and Mpenzi Film and Video festival where she won the Audience Choice Award in 2006). She has had solo shows at ASpace Gallery windows, Zsa Zsa Gallery and residencies at the Spadina Museum House and at the Caribbean Contemporary Art Centre 7, Trinidad. A recipient of numerous awards from the Toronto, Ontario and Canada Council for the Arts, she received the 2006 New Pioneers Award for contribution to the Arts in Toronto and was nominated for the 2006 K. M Hunter Interdisciplinary Arts Award for her web-based project *Kinlinks* which is online for viewing at [www.kinlinks.net](http://www.kinlinks.net)

## APPENDIX C

### Exhibition Report

The exhibition *There Is Always More than What We Perceive* was my first solo curatorial endeavor. My past experiences have consisted of collaborative projects for class assignments and curatorial initiative with EAHR (Ethnocultural Art Histories Research) a 100% student-run group at Concordia University. Although each opportunity taught me valuable lessons about curating, I never had to coordinate all aspects of planning an exhibition. It was very gratifying to see it all come together and to bring my ideas to life.

#### Recruiting the Artists

For the purpose of the exhibition, the selection of artists was based on the following criteria: the selected individuals had to be Toronto-based, black, queer, and producing innovative works related to identity politics. Four artists were contacted: Michèle Pearson Clarke, Abdi Osman, Syrus Marcus Ware, and Natalie Wood. An invitation was sent to each artist explaining the exhibition premise and the ways in which the chosen work responded to the curatorial vision. Fortunately, within a week, three of the artists accepted to take part in the project. Regrettably, Syrus Marcus Ware's triptych *Self- Portrait #5 with Cotton Balls* could not be secured, in spite of multiple attempts to connect with him.

However, this turn of events granted me the opportunity to explore and experiment with Natalie Wood's video performance *Banagram/Bakergram*.

### **Being a Curator is about Creative Problem Solving**

Several concerns related to space management and the presentation of the works arose during the course of planning the exhibition. For example, the fact that the artist Syrus Marcus Ware would not be part of the show created a dilemma and meant that either another artist had to be included at the last minute or the exhibition design had to shift completely. Due to time constraints, it was preferable to simply change the exhibition layout. One of the most challenging aspects of the curatorial process was to use the gallery space wisely and in its entirety.

Michèle Pearson Clarke's short film *Black Men and Me* has been only featured in film festivals; she therefore felt that within the gallery context it should be somewhat immersive. As a result, it was decided to project the work in the experimental media room. In addition, the video component from Natalie Wood's piece *Banagram/Bakergram* needed its own space—both works could not be in the same room. It was of great importance to respect each work's integrity and the artists' wishes. Thus, every artwork had to maintain its autonomy while creating a coherent dialogue when presented together.

Featuring *Black Men and Me* in the experimental media room posed a challenge due to its location. Whenever the room is utilized for a group

exhibition, there is a risk that the space is overlooked. It appears to be a recurrent issue in past exhibitions to ensure that audiences would circulate between the main gallery and the room, despite their proximity. Since the front façade of the experimental room is rarely exploited, I devised a spatial intervention by applying a stencil of a barbershop pole between the main gallery and the projection room. This initiative guaranteed an equal treatment of the works by drawing the public's attention to the other exhibition space.

The idea came from the work itself. Filmed in a barbershop, Clarke's film inspired the re-creation of a minimal version of its environment. The artist gave her permission to add accessories to her work and was very excited about the idea of presenting it in a different context. However, venturing in that direction was a sensitive affair since the objects should not override or alter the artwork—they ought to complement it.

A barbershop pole was acquired for the entrance of the experimental media room and a styling/cutting chair for the gallery space. The simulated waiting area, composed of a couple of chairs alongside a small table displaying Caribbean newspapers and a plant, generated the desired immersive environment. A mirror was mounted on the wall to face the projection, and under it, a plinth on which hair trimming accessories were placed. This created a visual conversation with the piece. The viewers were welcome to sit on the barbershop chair while viewing the film. It was interesting to see who would sit in the waiting area and who would intuitively sit on the barbershop chair.

*Banagram/Bakergram* has been presented on two occasions: Trinity Square in 2013 and the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of Sandra Brewster's Open House in September, 2014. Wood's piece was therefore to be re-imagined in order to present something new to the viewer. Since its performative element would only be featured at the opening night, traces of the performance would have to be produced and showcased for the remaining days of the exhibition. Three solutions were developed; first, the performance's original format was re-fashioned, meaning that instead of simply projecting the video on the wall and having Natalie performing in front of it, computer screens on plinths were arranged to create an enclosed and intimate stage. Since the artist preferred working close to the ground, one plinth was laid on its side. The variation of heights provided by the plinths generated various viewing angles. Second, the performance was filmed on the opening night and the footage was integrated as a part of the installation for the rest of the exhibit. Finally, some of the bananas on which the artist inscribed quotes were kept aside to slowly decompose in the gallery space, which added an olfactory element to the exhibition experience.

These new additions to the video/performance changed its dynamic while keeping its integrity. The performance became a decomposing piece which was heightened by a photographic record of the degradation of the bananas. Each day after gallery hours, I took a picture of their decomposition. With the permission of Natalie Wood, I was able to slightly disturb the lines between curator and artists by exploring what I would label as relational practices— which gave space for a

curatorial intervention that goes beyond arranging and creating a relationship between the works. I envisioned the daily photographic record of the bananas' decomposition as a sort of artistic performance. Every day after gallery hours, I would take a picture of the fruits slowly decaying on the plinth and print the caption in the morning after before opening the gallery. This process required a certain level of discipline and time management, which I have to admit, was not as easy as I thought. The reactions from the employees from the print shop on campus, when seeing me every day printing a single banana picture, gave me a particular perspective in my work. Especially, when they realized that the bananas were molding. It was interesting to gain a point of view from individuals who did not see the show and had no idea of the context in which inscribed rotting bananas could be relevant. All they knew is that it was weird and repulsive from day 5 to day 8. I perceived myself as a curator/performer by engaging in the making of the work and living traces in the gallery space.

The following day, a caption of the image was printed and placed in a frame. There were eight frames with numbered labels tracking the decomposition of the work. On the night of the opening the frames were empty, awakening the curiosity of the audience. There was an extended label explaining the process and its relevance to the curatorial premise. At first, the idea was to only keep the bananas on a plinth covered with plexiglass. However, the bananas left behind after the reception remained on floor next to the space where the performance occurred. To enhance the connection between the remaining bananas and the

video of the performance, the artist agreed to lend her worksheet with Josephine Baker's quotations for the rest of the exhibition. Thus, a multi-layered conversation was produced: the artifacts from the performance were in dialogue with the footage from the event and the video from the original piece. Surprisingly, the bananas on the gallery floor decomposed at a different pace than the ones on the plinth. The plexiglass kept the oxygen at a low level, so the darkening process was slow; interestingly, one banana became mouldy. The olfactory effect was omnipresent by the third day of the exhibition, and eventually spread beyond the main space.

Finally, when Abdi Osman was approached to be part of the exhibition, his photographic series *Older, Wiser, Stronger* was the one that interested me the most. This series is constituted of portraits of older black gay men in their homes, posing doing what they love or next to an object that they believe defines their personality. Overlooked aspects of black gay social life emerge in the image, showcasing a flourishing and aging community. Unfortunately, Osman was not ready to show this series. Consequently, a studio visit was scheduled in order to go through his archive and select another project. *Plantation Futures* (which is ongoing) sparked my interest.

The fear of having an empty gallery crept in despite the aforementioned problem solving. The front of the gallery was still inactive, while superficially furnishing the space is not an option. An exhibition by a fellow graduate student inspired the idea to dedicate wall space to comments and quotations. I painted two

chalkboards one functioned as an interactive comment section, and the other served to introduce the central theme of the exhibition via a quotation by the American cultural critic Touré. The application of the chalk paint echoed the use of blackboards in a scholastic environment rendering the importance of an educational tangent in curation.

### **Budget; Know Your Resources and Negotiate**

*There Is Always More than What We Perceive* was a self-funded project. The Graduate Gallery only provides a sponsorship of \$300 to assist with exhibition projects on campus, so creative DIY solutions, practical knowledge and other kind of sponsorships are important. The initial budget for the exhibition was \$2000, and this amount was based on an exhibition project for a class assignment in the first year of the program. Rigorous budgeting and use of the university's resources (such as the digital and photography centres) were helpful in minimizing costs.

### Framing the Abdi Osman's Photographs:

The framing of the photographic series *Plantation Futures* was very expensive and a great source of stress. Osman works in large format and I wanted to exhibit photographs that were 20 x 30 inches, so they would have their own presence in the gallery and balance Natalie Wood's installation. The cost to frame the work was exorbitant (\$800). The artist had a connection who offered to provide 20% off. However, it was still too expensive so Abdi and I put an application together for the Exhibition Assistance Program by the Ontario Council of the Arts which



was endorsed by Third Space Art Projects for black Canadian artists. What seemed to be a great opportunity to lift this financial weight off my shoulders did not provide the expected outcome—the artist did not receive the grant, therefore, a plan B was devised; professor Andrea Fatona put me in contact with another framing company, Akasha Arts Projects, which has in the past offered deals or sponsorships for exhibitions. Finally, the owners offered 25% off the framing job the burden but still not enough. However, a generous sponsorship of \$300 was provided for framing by the State of Blackness research funds. In the end, approximately 60% of the total cost was self-generated. All sponsors were credited on the exhibition's promotional material.

*Black Men and Me rental:*

Michèle Clarke's film *Black Men and Me* is distributed by the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre (CFDC). When the cost of the work rental was first discussed, the artist gave me an approximate fee of \$50 based on the rental for film festivals. However, this amount only covered one screening and did not apply to a gallery context. For the purpose of the exhibition, the film had to run for eight days. This resulted in a long negotiation process between myself and the CFDC, a conversation which later took place with the artist. The CFDC's last offer was \$200 (which included an artist fee). Therefore, the preferred option was to directly pay Michèle Clarke according to her contract, which stipulated an honorarium of \$250. The artist agreed to lend her copy of the film for the duration of the exhibition..

### Installation Accessories

After some research, it became apparent that it was better to buy a second hand styling and cutting chair rather than to rent it from a barbershop or salon. Thanks to Craigslist, I found an antiquarian selling a chair for \$107.30 HST included. In looking for the barbershop pole, an acquaintance recommended that I visit Addison Inc., an antique store that sells and rents movie props and plumbing accessories. I got a good bargain for a two week rental. The rest of the accessories were gathered on campus, thrift stores, and purchased at Dollarama.

### **Promotion; Generation 2.0**

Due to budget limitations, I took advantage of free options. Akimbo is a popular art distribution network, but relying on other platforms such as Facebook have proven to be very effective. The exhibition's Facebook event was shared among colleagues, friends and acquaintance as well as the artists' social networks, and social groups focusing on art and research relating to blackness. I used Instagram to post pictures of the installation and promotional material. OCAD faculty members and professional connections received individual e-invites. In addition, Blog T.O's event calendar featured the exhibition. . Blog T.O is one of the most popular online platforms for daily updates about Toronto music, film, arts, new places, restaurants and other happenings. Since this weblog targets an audience between 18 and 35 years old, it was an ideal venue to publicize the exhibition. The Graduate Studies office also helped to promote the show through the

Graduate Gallery's webpage, the Graduate students' blog and Twitter. Finally, the exhibition was featured in OCADU's event calendar. A small number of posters and post cards were printed as a measure to ensure a physical presence on OCAD University's campus and for archival purposes. In order to cut back on some of the costs, I designed all promotional materials. All emails and online promotion were done around two weeks before the opening.

## **Conclusion**

Since the installation required a lot of coordination, it took much longer than expected to complete the actual installation of the work. In addition, an email from the gallery monitor stating that he was not available to help in the gallery meant that I had to seek other assistance at the last minute. Fortunately, friends came through despite their busy schedules. Most of the planning was smooth, but an underestimation of the workload backfired on the last day. For instance, the event started at 6:30 pm, and at 6:40 pm the last label was placed on the wall. Overall, the reception was a success and had a great turnout. The gallery sitting was an enriching experience, since it provided an opportunity for dialogue and exchange. Although it is unusual for curators to monitor their exhibition, this exercise was greatly satisfying. The discussions that I had with visitors granted me the chance to engage lively conversations in which people would share their stories and impression of the work displayed. Being able to observe how the audience navigated the space and experienced the exhibition was also a privilege since these aspects became concrete and not just theoretical.