

For We Are The Children of The Sun

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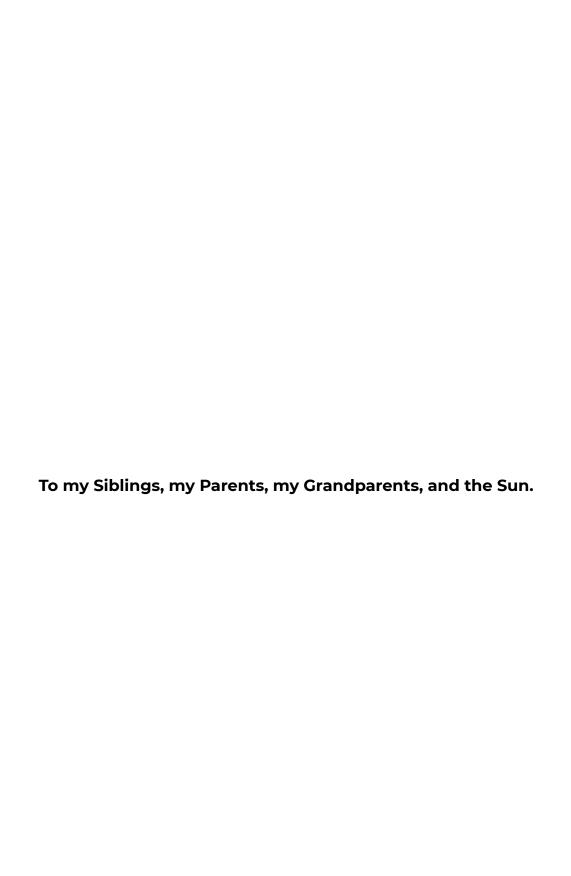
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ABSTRACT

For We Are the Children of The Sun is a thesis project which aims to utilize abstraction and non-figuration as methods of representation for Black Women on Turtle Island. Through a personal contemplation of identity and ancestry, symbols such as hair and the Sun function as connectors to the African diaspora, and its many manifestations of Blackness. The project also considers what it means to be making on Turtle Island: a place built on colonial genocide and where covert systems of oppression and manifestations of racism negate the national proclamation of diversity. The thesis project examines and refutes what it means to be 'Canadian', and rather turns to a diasporic community which extends past the borders of land. The objective is to reimagine representation for the Black Woman, and to center resilience and community as primary concerns, through a collaboration with the Sun.

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Cultural identity [...] is a matter of "becoming" as well as "being". It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous "'play"' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in mere "'recovery"' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.

- Stuart Hall

Ancestry

I am a stolen² body³, living on stolen lands.

I am writing this as I pursue my graduate degree, and live in Vancouver - the traditional and ancestral unceded territories of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh people. I acknowledge, am critical of and am working through my complicated relationship with being a settler. I acknowledge that I am an uninvited guest on this land; this land which is stolen, this land which has been established and rests upon a history of genocide and a history of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy (hooks).

I also know that I have a profound connection to the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island⁴, which has been forged through a shared empathy for forced subjecthood, and a mutual understanding for the work to be done in the face of continued colonial violence. I stand in solidarity and as an accomplice with my Indigenous brothers and sisters. The duty to decolonize these lands, our minds, and our lives is a cumulative project.

I am in the process of getting to know my ancestry - my heritage. I am learning to acknowledge my privilege, and lack thereof. I am learning to pay tribute to the people who came before me, in everything that I do.

² The stolen body was not mine directly, however through systemic and historic manifestations and recalling of the stealing of my ancestors bodies, I too am part of the conversation. I too am seen through the lens of slavery. I carry my ancestors with me, on my skin, and I do it with love and pride.

³ In my practice, I often refer to myself, and often to others, as bodies rather than people. This choice of language is intentional, as it signifies and represents for me an engagement which is with the outer parts of ourselves, first. Blackness is not a characteristic I can erase. It is not a characteristic or a trait I can choose to perform visually. I am outwardly Black every day of my life, before I make my choices about what my expression of Blackness looks like. See entry on *Black* for more.

⁴ See entry on *'Canadian'*.

My ancestry is defined by intersectional experiences of both extreme situational privilege, and immeasurable wrongs. I am a first and a half generation middle class 'Canadian'⁵. I am a Black Woman of Jamaican, Sub Saharan African, British and Scandanavian descent. I am a Black Woman of the African Diaspora. I am cis gendered, able bodied, and have strong familial connections.

My mother immigrated from Jamaica when she was eleven with her twin sister. My grandma, who arrived on Turtle Island before her children, worked as a nanny to put herself through nursing school, and to support her kin. Her love for her family and community is unmatched. Her children lived a happy childhood. My mother radiates love and warmth like the Sun.

My father's father came to Turtle Island from Jamaica when he was twenty-four to go to University. He fought to make space for himself. He was a teacher, a principal, a director of a school board. He also raced cars on ice.

My father is an elementary school teacher who works daily to dismantle systemic racism and who is at the forefront of broadening discussions about privilege and equality in his classroom. His beautiful mother, my grandmother, was a teacher, is a master weaver, and is the epitome of happiness and grace.

My history is much more complex than I could ever imagine. It has travelled continents, it has survived wicked seas and horrific people. My ancestry tells me that I come from a resilient people and from a connected people. I come from a people who's history has never been fixed, and whose identity could never be contained.

The aesthetic practices with which the work in this paper engage, reference my complex ancestry. These aesthetics, as a reflection of ancestry, are immalleable,

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⁵ See entry on 'Canadian'.

they are hard, they are soft, they are fragile. They require great strength to muster, to make, to move. They have agency⁶ over their performance⁷. The aesthetics, the materials, and the works themselves are unsettled as they engage with and change with the Sun⁸. They melt and they glow and they dance in the light. The complexity with which the work and it's aesthetics imitate and call upon ancestry requires and makes reference to space for change, for progress, and for difference.

For these reasons, I am considerate of how a community⁹ that engages with a history of erasure, can assert agency over and through our own visual representation. Using abstraction and non-figuration, is it possible to complicate representation and challenge the binaries of visibility and invisibility? More specifically, can the use of abstraction enable the representation of resilience, and the subversion of the tropes of representation for Black Women of the diaspora?

Art

To make this thesis work, abstraction is used as the main stylistic tool of production. The reason for this use, is that abstraction can simultaneously provide representation and visibility¹⁰, while avoiding the tropes of stereotypical

⁶ As I create, I am engaging with a particular definition of *agency*. I use it as a synonym for determinism and choice, in the context of BIMPOC bodies representing themselves in a way that they (we) see fit. See entry on *Hair* for more.

BIMPOC - Black, Indigenous, Mixed Race, People of Colour.

This acronym first appeared as *People of Colour (POC)* in US legislature signed in 1807 to abolish slavery. The law stated that no "negro, mulatto, or person of colour" could be imported - as if product - in to the United-States with the purpose of being forced in to slavery. In its broader sense, POC referred to people who had any Black ancestry in their lineage.

⁷ Performance is used to reference an enactment of an action. The works themselves are performing resilience, they are performing representation through abstraction, and they are performing agency. By extension and through the use of symbols, they are also performing culture.

⁸ See entry on *Sun*.

⁹ I consider my perception of *community* to be extendable to the entire BIMPOC acronym. A form of collectivism is generated and fueled by being able to identify with one another's intersectional experience of systemic and intergenerational erasure. I am an accomplice to those who are also fighting for equality and representation. See entry on *Sun* for more.

¹⁰ See entry on *Visibility*.

characterization. In *Abstractionist aesthetics: artistic form and social critique in African American culture*, literary scholar and cultural critic Philip Brian Harper assesses the value of abstraction for Black communities of the Diaspora. He writes:

"Abstractionism [...] entails the resolute awareness that even the most realistic representation is precisely a representation, and that as such it necessarily exists at a distance from the social reality it is conventionally understood to reflect. In other words, abstractionist aesthetics crucially recognizes that any artwork whatsoever is definitionally abstract in relation to the world in which it emerges, regardless of whether or not it features the non-referentiality typically understood to constitute aesthetic abstraction per se. An abstractionist artwork, by extension, is one that emphasizes its own distance from reality by calling attention to its constructed character—even if it also enacts real-world reference—rather than striving to dissemble that constructedness in the service of the maximum verisimilitude so highly prized within the realist framework just sketched. In thus disrupting the easy correspondence between itself and its evident referent, the abstractionist work invites us to question the "naturalness" not only of the aesthetic representation but also of the social facts to which it alludes, thereby opening them to active and potentially salutary revision." (Harper, 2)

The value of abstraction sits, not only in the distance from stereotypes, but also in the visual distance from reality. Here, there is space for criticality, as well as space to challenge what is expected from the Black body in terms of visual reference and consequent art production. In other words, the maker is situated through abstractionism - and in the case of this thesis work, non-figuration - in a space for imagination which sits outside of the referencial and the depictive.

It creates an alternative space for representation.

The first thesis work is *Untitled* (2018). The work measures 6'8" × 3'8", and sits on the wall at a variable 2' from the ground. The CNC wooden cutout is a sculptural piece which depicts a Black Woman's bust rendered as a silhouette - identifiable by the curl of her hair, and the contour of one of her breasts. The defined edges of her jaw suggest a gaze that is at once challenging and dismissive. The black painted silhouette is poised in contrast to the white walls, as the rough edges of her being

are defined by a yellow glow of light - created by an LED strip fastened to the back of the work. The light she emanates carries references to both fire and sunlight.

The work was created as I explored the concepts of Blackness and its most common references. The starkness of the flat black finish calls upon both the connotative and denotative symbology¹¹ of the word "Black" as a means of engaging the viewer in critical viewership - one which calls for a metacognitive process through which we question our own understanding of visual references and consequent representation. In this case, I am asking the viewer to engage with their understanding of Blackness in relation to the female form. I am asking of the viewer to engage in this questioning while being an accomplice to a racialized gaze of the subject in front of them. Silhouette work has been a tool for representation for centuries. It was used on Roman coinage, it was also a "cheap" form of portraiture in the 18th and 19th century; it meant that the subject being represented didn't need to sit for hours. The figure in *Untitled* is most reminiscent of artist Kara Walker's work, in which she employs silhouettes as a means of recalling histories which have been erased, ignored, subdued, and repressed. Her creations often take the form of landscapes - horizontal storylines which elaborate

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¹¹ Connotative symbology: Void, absence, infinity, darkness, erasure, etc. Denotative symbology: Black body (race), black colour (shade), absence of light/ of colour, etc.

¹² The racialized gaze is that which attributes value and meaning to the colour of skin as a means of describing racial identity.

 $^{^{13}}$ I am engaging with the term 'subject' as a reference to an individual who could represent a community - as reference to who is being looked at. In this case, both the Woman represented and the viewer are being looked at. I would not call this exchange reciprocal, but rather a challenging 'subjecthood' which traditionally would reference being looked at - towards the objectification of the body, particularly in cases of representation of the Black Woman. In his book Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices, Stuart Hall considers the complexity of identity and the ways through which visualisation are extensions of, in particular, the racialized gaze. He posits that through the "complexities and ambivalences of representation itself" the maker can contest racialization (Hall, 274). He goes on to write that this use of representation "makes elaborate play with 'looking', hoping by its very attention, to 'make it strange' - that is to defamiliarize it". While Hall's context was the erotic, and while the work calls upon erotics, it is not the particular vein through which I consider this study relevant. With *Untitled*, there is a push to defamiliarize, to recontextualize, and to be critical of the racialized gaze. The intent is to subvert representation, and consequently subvert the gaze by employing representation which in turn subverts stereotypes. Abstraction, when used to represent the body, can employ the same strategies of defamiliarization to challenge the gaze.



Fig. 1. Rebecca Bair, *Untitled*, 2018. Painted MDF and LED Backlight, 6'8" × 3'8".

narratives of the often violent and hypersexualized Black slave experience. In the case of *Untitled*, the use of light to contrast with the darkness of the silhouette represents a force and a presence - one which is being emitted from the silhouette itself. It alludes to a force which is hers to share, and which itself references strength and resilience. The abstraction functions to disassociate the representation from a singular person or experience, to the broader representation of the Black Woman. Within this same experience, there can be a further questioning of what we understand as stereotypes of Black Women.

Collaboration With The Sun (2019) begins to explore the possibilities of abstraction as a form of representation. It is the first of the three works which has an active and symbolic representation of cultural connection with the Sun, departing from references or identifiable parts of the Black Body.

The shea butter¹⁴ and charcoal drawing sits on a 48" by 72" piece of plexiglass. It began as a circular drawing of mixed shea butter and charcoal - the butter representative of a cultural practice of self care, and of the homeland¹⁵. The charcoal functions as a medium through which 'blackness' can be achieved as both an attractor of heat and light, and consequently as a representation of 'Black Bodies' - melanized skin which is the result of thousands of years of receiving and translating rays of the Sun in to melanin. The circular motif of application was an act of mirroring or imitating the Sun, and symbolically its silhouette. The work was created

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¹⁴ Shea butter is a fatty acid based substance derived from the Shea Nut which grows in Sub-Saharan Africa - commercial exportation being primarily derived from West African countries. It is used as a softening and healing agent for both skin and hair, targeting dryness and conditioning. The fatty acid, rendered as an oil or buttery substance, is applied directly to the skin or hair and used as a treatment which is mostly absorbed. However, what isn't absorbed remains on the surface - a glistening outer layer which finds its way onto everything that I touch, own and wear.

¹⁵ Homeland refers to the African continent as per the description offered by Thomas Turino in *Introduction: Identity and the Arts in Diaspora Communities.* The homeland is determined "as the basis of group identification, social action, and cultural practice" (5). In this case, Shea butter takes on the representation of the homeland as an identifiable cultural practice. This type of cultural reference functions as a connection to community and by extension to the diaspora. Similarly to the Sun, Shea butter functions as a form of abstraction through which the diaspora can identify as *We* (see entry on *We* for more).

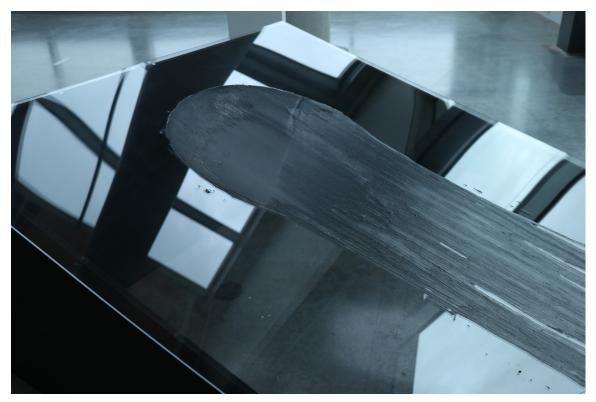


Fig. 2. Rebecca Bair, *Collaboration with the Sun*, 2019. Shea Butter and Charcoal drawing on Plexiglass, 48" x 72".



Fig. 3. Rebecca Bair, *Collaboration with the Sun* (Detail), 2019. Shea Butter and Charcoal drawing on Plexiglass, 48" x 72".

in a large window that is positioned to receive a regular amount of Sunlight on a daily basis. While the work was drawn with bare hands, the Sun would melt and shift the applied shea and charcoal combination. The layers of the circle were re-applied on multiple occasions, and the Sun responded every time. It was a call and response, where I called upon the Suns collaboration, and it called upon my drawing. The result is a dripping and flowing of ravine like patterns which join and split as they run down their plexiglass support.

The third work this paper aims to substantiate, is *Reach & Coil* (2019-present). The photograph measures approximately 16' long by 41" tall. The landscape oriented



Fig. 4. Rebecca Bair, Reach & Coil, 2019-Present. Inkjet on Tyvek, 41" ×192".

image is comprised of three identifiable parts: two clusters of dense and curly brown hair which are illuminated by Sunlight, separated by a long section of blue¹⁶. The size of the image departs from the recognisable, as the identifiable hair

¹⁶ The blue colour in the image is a mix of Azure and Ocean Blue.

becomes monumental coils. The flat, printed photograph lacks physical depth, which is contrasted by the depth of field in the actual image - the curls and coils only fully rendered in certain areas, whereas the other spaces are abstracted by an encompassing blur. The layering in these spaces and of the different qualitative sections create together an image which imitates a physical depth within the confines of the photograph itself. As a full experience, it is suggested by the size of the work that the viewer walk the distance of the print, and find these spaces in which the hair is prominent; spaces in which the hair caught the light, and dances with it as if a natural partner or adornment. The work occupies space, and recreates the experience of subjecthood as seen in *Untitled* (2018) by making visible and denouncing the expected dynamics of racialized representation. The portrayal evokes visibility, engages with the symbology of hair, and speaks to Blackness in relation to the Sun¹⁷.

В

Black

I will always spell *Black* with a capital 'B' when I am considering the melanized body. It is my practice because I see it as a form of respect¹⁸. Blackness cannot be contained. Blackness cannot be made small. Blackness cannot be erased. I have been taught that Blackness is about community, it is about connection, and it is about whatever we, as Black people, want it to be. My Blackness is Big, it is Bold, it is Broad. This research sits within a pre-existing context of race relations which is considered and substantiated far beyond the boundaries of our Canadian borders.

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¹⁷ See entry on *Sun*.

¹⁸ The use of capital letters is a consistent strategy throughout this thesis paper. While others may have opposing approaches to capitalisation (such as bell hooks), my practice is to make large all that requires respect and that which is in reference to my ancestors. In this written work, *Black*, *Sun*, *Woman*, are but a few examples of words that require capitalisation.

With this practice, I hope to provide and broaden the ways through which we engage with identity and race politics. Writers and scholars who have addressed the subject of representation through the lens of identity politics include Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Stuart Hall and James Baldwin. Artists who have engaged with the same representational inquiry are Zanele Muholi, Renee Cox, Farrah Riley and Glenn Ligon. They all, in one form or another, take up the subject of Black identity through visual forms. Black Canadian Female artists like Deanna Bowen, Karin Jones, Chantal Gibson and Camille Turner use their work to negotiate the history of erasure and objectification of the Black Woman's Body, particularly in a Canadian context.

The three works that are the basis of this thesis project engage with the symbology of hair as a means of disrupting our understanding of history, of representation and of identity. They are all made on Turtle Island, particularly on the Unceded and Ancestral territories of the Squamish, Musqueam and Tsleil- Waututh people. They work to denounce a history of Black erasure by representing existence on these lands, and beyond. This representation is not meant to further erase or denounce the traditional sovereignty of the people to whom the land truly belongs, but rather is a representation of a current reality which remains underrepresented and underacknowledged. They use a symbolic language of Blackness and of abstraction, most directly in relation to hair, as a means of placing the Black body at the forefront of discussions about choice¹⁹, about history, about diaspora and about representation. The reality is that the supposedly emblematic characteristics²⁰ of equity, diversity and inclusion still exist within an all encompassing system of oppression of BIMPOC bodies, on Turtle Island. In fact, the notions of diversity and

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¹⁹ My work functions as a medium through which Black Women can make choices about hair, and more broadly make choices about how we represent ourselves. See entry on *Hair* for more.

²⁰ These characteristics (diversity, inclusion, and equity) are at least in part overshadowed by their connotative reference to whiteness. While it is undeniable that whiteness is the base of what is considered to be 'Canadian', the work that diversity, inclusion, and equity are trying to achieve is synonymous with the idea that any "difference" is considered an addition to whiteness, rather than an independent entity. BIMPOCs are not seen as sitting at the same table as whites, but are rather considered to be sitting at the table that whites moderate - reinforcing hierarchical structures of power and representation with regards to 'Canadian' identity. See entry on 'Canadian' for more.

inclusion suggest or imply cultural neutrality - one which is representative of all in equal ways. In her essay titled "Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference", Audre Lorde proclaims that capitalism actually thrives on the "Institutional rejection of difference" - furthering the dangers of the illusion of diversity. She explains that it is not the differences between people that are separatist, it is "rather our refusal to recognise those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behaviour and expectation." (115) To be Black is to understand that there is no singularity to identity. There is a profound - even if often colorist²¹ - understanding that Blackness is beautiful, that it is diverse and that it is pluralistic. As an extension, within these works I am considering difference and individuality - my own individuality - as a means of reinforcing and performing, through visual representation, the complexity and significance of intersectionality²². In her essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House", Lorde writes on the complexity of being an individual as a way to find common place. She states:

Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference; those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older, know that *survival* is not an academic skill. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures, in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. (95)

The power that comes as a result of sharing qualities and experiences with others can never be diminished. However, individuality means that no two people can be

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²¹ Colorism alludes to preferential treatment for those who adhere to the white Euro-American standards of beauty - creating in turn discrimination against those who do not share those features.

²² Kimberlé Crenshaw describes the theory of intersectionality as our different social identities (race, gender, sexuality, class, etc) as contributors to our experience of systemic oppression, or to our experience of privilege. In my case, my intersectionality can be understood by means of my positionality - that being of a Black middle class heteronormative Woman, who has no physical limitations, who is cis gendered and has no dependants. The identities that I have failed to include in this statement are my *Blind Spots* as described by Lisa Gunderson (Ph.D.), and are the identities I will continue to work to make more prevalent in my consideration of intersectional experiences that are different than my own.

the same, and no two people could be generalised into one singular experience. Neutrality, and consequently diversity when paired with inclusivity, are inaccurate societal fabrications²³. Diversity through the lens of individuality for the sake of recognizing and empowering difference, is where the true value lies, and is the most evident manifestation of the diaspora. Blackness and its many manifestations, representations and declarations are thus the elements which construct and define the diaspora. Abstraction, as a result, is a medium that can function as a way to represent Blackness because it isn't about individual specificity, but rather opens up possibilities about identification, about difference, and about diasporic culture.

C

'Canadian'

I am a 'Canadian'. That is because I was born and raised on this land that most people call 'Canada'. However, as I strive to decolonize my mind, my tongue, and my art practice, I will call it *Turtle Island*²⁴ as per the many oral histories of Indigenous peoples of North America to whom the land really belongs.

I am conscious of my identity - that which my passport, driver's license, health card, and all official documents confirm - however I am constantly confronted with the fact that I am a first and a half generation uninvited guest²⁵. Canadian artist Camille Turner, on the other hand, takes a powerful approach to proclaiming belonging and citizenship on this land. With her persona *Miss Canadiana* (2002-present), Turner

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²³ See entry on 'Canadian' for more.

²⁴ Turtle Island had different references depending on the oral history. It can mean the Earth, it can mean North America, it can mean the United-States, and it can mean 'Canada'. I am humbly acknowledging the Indigenous oral histories which associate Turtle Island with the Western identification of 'Canada'.

²⁵ My father is a first generation 'Canadian', and my mother immigrated to Turtle Island when she was 12. As their cross section, I have decided that I am first and a half generation. I am an uninvited guest on the traditional and ancestral territories of more than 630 indigenous communities. I am thus a first and a half generation uninvited guest, unlike those who have longer inhabited and invaded the unceded land we live on.

"points to the contradiction of the Canadian mythology. [Her] body, as a representative of Canadian heritage, is surprising only because Blackness is perceived as foreign in Canada." (Turner). With this work, Turner is challenging and making a point about being a Black Woman on Turtle Island. The image itself is not one which is common, and in fact functions as a quasi-fictionional and maybe futuristic possibility, and simultaneously a critique.



Fig. 5. Camille Turner, Hometown Queen from Miss Canadiana Series, 2002 - Present.

As a viewer, I question why this representation is so shocking to me, which in turn makes me question structures of representation and of beauty standards, as well as the systemic racism which infiltrates and informs Black Women's exclusion from each of those spaces. Born in Kingston, Jamaica, Turner is challenging narratives of Blackness and belonging, while accentuating and symbolically representing the strength of the diaspora. While she is not born on Turtle Island, she is bringing forth and making evident the complicated conversations about diversity, difference and representation which exist on this land.

My family and my ancestors, like those of Turner, don't have real roots here. It makes me think about all of the people who I may be connected to, without even knowing it²⁶. I acknowledge too that my work is being made on this land. My work, and it's origins, are primarily 'Canadian'. However, I strive to extend past the limitations of borders through the thematic of identity politics with a focused consideration of the Black Woman's experience, by means of references made that enable a connection to the different corners of Turtle Island, and again, beyond. I choose my material²⁷ for their references and the richness with which they compliment the Black Woman's body. I consider the ways in which we take care of ourselves - the ways in which the Black Woman expresses her protection and control over her own body, hair and general existence. The materials used are imported, or are taken directly from my body, neither of which are native to these lands. This concept is furthered through non-figuration and abstraction to capacitate representation and connection as well as to speak to a broader community which extends beyond this land. It is through the use of hair, and Sun, that an experience which is mine, and which is that of my diasporic community, can be represented. It is an experience which cannot be described as solely 'Canadian'.

Himani Bennerji, a philosopher, writer, and professor of sociology at York University, contributed to *Canadian Cultural Studies: A Reader* with an essay entitled "On the Dark Side of the Nation: Politics of Multiculturalism and the State of Canada". Her essay elaborated the binary structure of 'Canadian' society - being divided between English and French colonial powers. She writes that "[...] at the same moment that difference is ideologically evoked it is also neutralized, as though the issue of difference were the same as that of diversity of cultures and identities, rather than those of racism and colonial ethnocentrism - as though our different cultures were on par or could negotiate with the two dominant ones!" (328) Bannerji posits that diversity and difference are actually relative characteristics within the 'Canadian' landscape which consequently reinforce hierarchical structures and imbue those who exist outside the binary as being the generalised 'other'. It is a false

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²⁶ See entry on *Sun*.

²⁷ Materials such as shea butter and hair.

construction which actually serves to support colonialism. For these reasons, my work exists beyond the structural binaries of Turtle Island, and extend to integrate the characteristics of the diaspora - which exist here in hybridised ways, but exists elsewhere, as well²⁸. In other words, Blackness in the diaspora is not singular. Blackness on Turtle Island is not singular. Blackness exists in distinct and diverse ways which change and transform within or as expressed rebellion to social, political, economic, cultural contexts. I am, and my work is in conversation with this multiverse of experiences.

G

Glossary

"In this case, the glossary appears without its host— perhaps because it has gone missing, or it has been buried alive, or because it is still being written. Maybe I ate it." (Tuck and Ree, 2)

This paper is the result of the theoretical and methodological approach used in, and revolving around three artworks. The glossary serves as a series of terms, ideas and concepts with which the works engage, both in their experiential making²⁹ and physical existence. These terms emerged through the making process as unifying and encompassing manifestations of how abstraction can function as a connector to the diaspora.

"A Glossary of Haunting" by Eve Tuck and C. Ree outlines, through a primarily indigenous perspective, the fact that Turtle Island will forever be haunted by the atrocities that have made its current condition possible. The authors speak of legacy, and of ancestry³⁰. With both this written work, and my material practice, I am connecting to my ancestry, acknowledging the complex history that made it

²⁸ See entry on *Sun*.

²⁹ See entry on *Knowledge*.

³⁰ See entry on *Ancestry*.

possible for me to be here, and using the Sun as a symbolic representation of their existence at one point in time, and forever through the African Diaspora. My ancestors exist as my skin, and through the melanised body.

Ta-Nehisi Coates is a journalist, author, professor of literature, and one of the most engaged social critics of our time. He recently published a book entitled *The Water Dancer* in which memory is the superpower of his main character in the fictional novel. In one of the Phil Lind Initiative *Thinking While Black* moderated discussions at UBC, Coates explains that he imbued the character with this power because "[...] Black people [in America] don't have the luxury of forgetting [...]" (30:39). Memory of the horror, and I will argue memory of incredible strength and resilience lives in and on us forever.

The body which is meant to accompany this glossary are the artworks which it serves to support. Both are to be digested³¹.

Н

Hair

I will choose.

No, you do not have a say.
I understand that is confusing.
You weren't taught this way.

I will show my face. You will have to see.

It is written on my skin. The Sun chose my family and me.

-

³¹ Interpreted, contemplated, pondered, considered, studied, and then left alone.

I am a Black Woman, I don't have the choice to change that³² and I have no way of hiding it. I do, however, get to choose how I express my understanding of it. My understanding is informed by my family and cultural teachings - the things I learned in my home, and through my formative spaces. The things that were taught to me in those spaces do not adhere to the stereotypes of representation of the Black body. I could, however, adhere to them if I wanted to. I do not have to show my body or give you access to my sexuality, but I can if I choose to. I do not have to straighten my hair, or wear a weave, or braid my hair, or leave it curly for that matter. I can do with it what I want.

One of the greatest and most characteristic representations of individuality and collectivity in communities of Black Women is that of hair. In the 1960s during the "Black is Beautiful" and Civil Rights movements, hair was used as a symbol of outward rebellion in the form of pride. Despite attempts to neutralise self-representation, Black people wore their hair as they wanted, as a manifestation of culture and identity. That being said, the multigenerational experience of our hair supposedly reflecting the lower class is one that is still engrained in systemic regulatory systems around the world. Prejudice infiltrates both the professional and personal lives of Black Women, who embrace and celebrate the possibility of choice when it comes to our hair. Leading scholars like Audre Lorde address the inherent racism which exists in covert and overt attempts to "manage" and "tame" Black Women's hair. Lorde tells the story of this kind of experience in "Is Your Hair Still Political" written in 1990, where she elaborates a discriminatory experience which involved a security guard and her dreadlocks. Similarly, the time a woman I did not know called my hair "cute" and reached out to touch me is not an experience that is unique to me or to that moment in time, but rather is one that has been and is still experienced by Black Women on Turtle Island, and around the world, on a daily basis. It is a means through which, again, the Black Woman is objectified - classified as a 'touchable' or 'manipulatable' commodity.

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³² AND I WOULD NEVER WANT TO.

Chantal Gibson, considers hair as a subject through which identity can be demonstrated and reintegrated into history, in a critical way. With works like Braided Book (2011), Gibson is directly intervening with historical education, and misinformation. She writes "[t]hese works challenge the ideas and ideologies embedded in the texts, reinterpret master narratives, and create new possibilities for reading and writing history." (Gibson) She

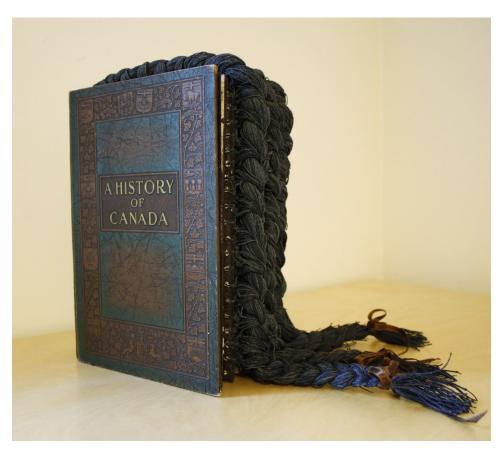


Fig.6. Chantal Gibson, Braided Book, 2011. Mixed media altered text. A History of Canada, 1935.

works to address, through the embellishment of Canadian history books with braided hair³³, the explicit erasure of the Black body from Canadian history, and evaluates the complicated relationship Black bodies have to this land. Her work is of particular importance because in Canada we live under veils of assumed notions of

³³ The braids are made of thread, however they reference Black hair.

cultural diversity, 'inclusion' and equity³⁴. My large photographic work, *Reach & Coil* (2019) most explicitly addresses hair and choice. The work uses the connotative meaning of the Sun and of hair as subjects that reference identity through layers, refraction and intangibility, demonstrating a choice of representation. It alludes to the Black Body, through a choice of hair as a stand-in for more stereotypical visualisations.

I

Identity

I am finding myself.

Installation

I will take up space.³⁵

Κ

Knowledge

When describing his premise and consideration of embodiment in his book Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body, cultural historian, theorist and scholar Harvey Young explains that:

It is about how similar experiences of the body repeat within the lives of black folk and how select individuals have employed expressive forms to relay their stories and life lessons to largely unimagined future audiences. While the artistic framing affects the manner with which we encounter the black body depicted within it, its particularities are introduced primarily to reveal a new way of engaging with or encountering the embodied experience of its creator and/or featured protagonist(s). (6)

³⁴ See entry on 'Canadian'.

³⁵ My work calls upon scale and the occupation of space as a manifestation of visibility. See entry on *Visibility* for more.

My process of making and researching is embodied. It is a product of viscerality - that which I feel intensely. It is my experience on the street, my experience in a store, my experience sitting home alone. It is also that which has been communicated to me through oral and written histories. It is the experience of my grandmother, my mother, my sister, my cousin, my friend.

It is born from sharing.

It is born from a sharing with theories and knowledge that make me move, and smile, and quiver, and cry. It is the sharing with artists who are offering representation to the underrepresented³⁶; those who are being vulnerable and generous with their own representation. I feel my work, both materially and experientially. I feel it as I pose in front of the camera. I feel it as I contort myself and perform. I feel it as I move the giant piece of plexiglass into the window. I feel it as I draw with shea butter and charcoal - and as it melts in my hands. I feel it as I document my movement through space. I feel it as I dance in the Sun.

My knowledge is embodied. It is that which is taught to me, culturally. It is that which I feel and know, innately. It is that which I share, carefully.

Ν

Names

Martine Syms, Sondra Perry, Aboubakar Fofana, Stan Douglas, James Baldwin, Fred Motn, Ta-Nehisi Coates, bell hooks, Toni Morrison, Angela Davis, Maya Angelou, Adrian Piper, Carrie-Mae Weems, Kara Walker, Renee Cox, Lorna Simpson, Kerry James-Marshall, Kent Monkman, Dana Claxton, Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Mickalene Thomas, Claudia Rankine, Latoya Ruby Fraser, Barkley L. Hendricks, Charles White, Rashid Johnson, Kameelah Janan Rasheed, Abigail Deville, Rebecca Belmore, Mimi

³⁶ See entry on *Names*.

Gellman, Angelica Dass, Fred Wilson, Kapwani Kiwanga, Alicia Henry, Brian Jungen, CLR James, Stuart Hall, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Audre Lorde, Zanele Muholi, Renee Cox, Farrah Riley, Glenn Ligon, Deanna Bowen, Karin Jones, Chantal Gibson, Camille Turner, Amoako Boafo, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Toyin Ojih Odutola, Hank Willis Thomas, Christopher Myers, Barkley L. Hendricks, Malick Sidibé, Meleko Mokgosi, Uthman Wahaab, Kehinde Wiley, Aida Muluneh, Prince Gyasi, Tawny Chatmon, Song Dahae, Lina Iris Viktor, Titus Kaphar, Wangechi Mutu, Doreen Garner, Frida Orupabo, Harmonia Rosales, Mindy Yan Miller.

S

Sun

In your likeness, I wonder How you embodied

resilience

Through the sobbing

of the sky

And the shudder

of the sea

When I cannot live a day

Without

vour

Shining light cast down on me

In this thesis project, the Sun represents more than just a star. I call upon its gravitational forces, the way it is a connector. Its symbology; that of circularity and light are motifs that are recurring in my work. The symbols represent a direct relationship to the Sun, but they also call upon and suggest continuity, wholeness and connection.

The silhouette work, *Untitled* (2018), references in many ways planetary imagery - but most clearly its use of light is a mirroring of the light emitted by the Sun; as if to correlate the Black Woman's existence with that of light and power. It shines from

the silhouette, caressing and adorning its outer contour, working together to present and proclaim presence.

The Shea Butter and charcoal used in *Collaboration with the Sun* (2019) requires the Sun to be present for it to perform - for it to shift, and melt and collaborate with me as the maker. It engages directly with the heat and rays emitted from the Sun. Rather than pretending to emit light, it remembers and traces how the Sun was once there, in it's making. The ravines and streams of material which run down the plexiglass support are evidence of time passed, and of ongoing change. While the Shea Butter congeals in the cold, it remembers and signals a possibility for change; it suggests malleability.

Reach & Coil (2019) relies on the presence of the Sun for the actual photograph to be taken. It not only requires the Sun's light to take the photograph, but the hair in the image engages with the light, as if they were meant to dance together. They require the others' presence to denounce each other's absence. In other words, the backlit hair would disappear in most other circumstances - it would present as a black entity devoid of detail floating in a blue space. However, as the Sun refracts on the distinguishably Black hair, both are made identifiable contributors to the image. The hair refracts the Sun, and the Sun reflects off of the hair. Similarly, the evidence of my ancestors having been exists on my skin. The Sun, and the light it emits, engage with and transform the works in question. While I am calling upon better known connotative symbols, I also use the Sun as a representation of my Ancestry - those I do not know, and will never know. The Sun is always there, even when hidden, and is the source of life. It is the creator of the melanised body.

This practice also engages with the concept of community which can be situated in the study of 'diaspora' elaborated in *Identity and the Arts in Diaspora Communities*. Within the introduction, Thomas Turino, an ethnomusicologist and author, writes that diasporic communities are "social formations based on subjectively recognized and objectively articulated cultural similarities" and that they "depend on expressive

cultural practices for their very existence; this is all the more crucial for dispersed diaspora communities since geographical location does not function as boundary." (Turino, 4) Creating community through the identification of similarities within individual intersectional experiences is a practice which I know as being that of the diaspora, and consequently that of being Black - a practice which has created experiences of closeness for me many times before. Knowing the dangers of generalization, and being wary of the tropes of the single story³⁷ there is a power in collectivising as the *Children Of The Sun*, a concept which underpins these projects.

The idea was developed through the study of the work of Zora Neale Hurston who is an Alabama born African-American writer and anthropologist whose writing helped document and elaborate the racial discrimination and struggles of the American South in the early 20th century. She wrote books such as *Their Eyes Are Watching God* (1937), and essays such as "Characteristics of Negro Expression" (1934) in which she deciphers the complex nature of Black linguistics and expression, and negates the assumption that Black art lacked creativity - that is was simply the result of mimicry. When speaking of sentence structures and the embellishment which defined African-American English in the 1930's, she posits that "[t]he stark, trimmed phrases of the Occident seem[ed] too bare for the voluptuous child of the sun³⁸" (Hurston, 1148), symbolically uncovering and empowering the Black Body as a dynamic source of creation, of light, of energy and of beauty. The concept of *The Children Of The Sun* is an ode to Hurston - it is an ode to Black resilience, creativity and diasporic community.

The suggested collectivism is not a way of removing individuality, but rather enacts, as acronyms such as BIMPOC do, a sense of togetherness and the possibility to find

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³⁷ Nigerian Author and activist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie postulates that "[t]he single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story." (TEDGlobal) The single story is negated in this interpretation of the diaspora, and through the use of abstraction, as both call upon diverse, different, and plural interpretations.

³⁸ See entry on *Sun*.

ourselves within it, if we so choose. The phrase itself is directed primarily at my family, and my ancestors. It is a tribute to them and their beautiful and undeniably painful existence. It is a way to connect myself to the family I don't know, to the incredible humans I will never have the privilege of knowing. Yet, I am with them, through the Sun. Our experiences of the Sun will be and have been different, and our bodies literal translation will and has looked different. But I know that through the Sun, I am connected to Melanin. I am connected to my fellow Children Of The Sun.

V

Visibility

All too often, in the media and historical accounts, the Black Woman's body is depicted as that of a victim - that which is abused, brutalized, and subject to another power. The Black Woman's body is hypersexualized and objectified - made out to be a commodity for the privileged majority³⁹. Ironically, despite these ever-present visualizations, the Black Woman's body is made invisible and removed from discussions relating to empowerment and agency; removed from narratives of representation, as a means to maintain hierarchical structures of oppression and isolation. Robyn Maynard, a Black activist, writer and educator, corroborates this erasure and places it in the history of Turtle Island. In *Policing Black Lives: State* Violence in Canada from Slavery to the Present, she makes the point that invisibility "has not protected Black communities in Canada". Instead, Maynard writes that "Black lives in Canada have been exposed to structural violence that has been tacitly or explicitly condoned by multiple state-funded institutions" (4). She explains that this violence can be traced back to the transatlantic slavetrade; situating racialized violence and erasure in time and place as an ongoing and historical practice on Turtle Island. Consequently, the binaries of hypervisibility and visibility complicate strategies for representation, as they have to be negotiated

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³⁹ The white majority - colonialists.

and balanced to avoid falling into the very stereotypes and systems that maintain and substantiate those same binaries. The significance of this thesis project is that it acts as a means to create a sense of agency for the representation of BIMPOC bodies, by BIMPOC bodies. I consider how these identities engage with the landscape and environment in which they exist - how presence is and can be reinforced by means of abstraction. The works that make up this thesis project utilize scale as a way to further disclaim invisibility. They are enlarged versions of the original subject matter as a way to change how we engage and think about Blackness. The works take up space⁴⁰; they are hard to avoid and impossible to ignore. They are challenging and they are monumental. I consider how my Black 'Canadian' Woman's body engages with a history of place, from which it has been systematically removed, and revisualises presence through the physicality of land and by means of collaboration with the Sun.

W

We

We Are The Children of The Sun.

⁴⁰ See entry on *Installation*.

Sky Light, A Beginning

Sky Light (2020) is a proposed photo installation which measures 13' x 20', and is suspended 10' above, and parallel to the ground. The work consists of a single digital photograph of curled hair illuminated by and refracting the Sunlight. Divided into 4 tyvek panels, their reassembly recreates the original whole. The installation is meant to be suspended in a space which engages with an abundance of natural light, as the tyvek has a variation of opacities which allow for the Sun to travel through the image in certain areas.

Sky Light is first and foremost a photograph. My work beyond this project is often if not always influenced by my photographic practice, and thus results in a hybridisation of mediums; for example, photography and sculpture or photography and mark making techniques. Photography enables the capturing of a moment, a sliver of an experience, a flash of time. Sky Light, like Reach & Coil (2019), begins to negotiate what it might mean to prolong the viewing experience of a photograph and to imbue it with physical time. It suggests that if we change the ways in which we look and engage with an image - a tilting of our horizon line, a change of relational size dynamics - we are asking for a different kind of viewership and consequently a different engagement with the subject matter. The goal of this installation is to encourage time spent with the work which is not solely based on interest in the actual photograph, but rather resides in an altered relationship to scale, as well as an altered relationship to that which abstracts, changes and visualises permutations of what we consider "normal", through time.

Sky Light is meant to be sat with as to bear witness to the fractional changes which are determined by the Sun - it's travel through space and through time, as well as its relationship to the photographed hair. The relationship that the Sun has with me and with the work itself is that of a collaborator - we are in this together. The space in which the work is meant to be installed is a space which the Sun has occupied -

as space which is distinctly altered by the Sun's presence. With *Sky Light*, but also in my general practice, my desire is to be able to answer the call of the Sun and it's expressed desire to make, to alter and to shift. I can then create an installation which allows for the Sun to respond again - it answers by shifting and changing the installation's performance, hence changing the viewers experience on any given day, at any given time.

Through this process, it has been made clear to me that I, as co-maker, must relinquish control. I am relinquishing control to the Sun, but also to that which we each bring to the work - the ways in which the different stages of the installation draw on our subjectivities, as well as our commonalities. My intention is to create a space which encourages belonging for BIMPOC bodies, and metacognition for others; a space to reflect on our taken for granted relationship to the representation of Blackness. While my intentions are built into the collaborative nature of my projects, I accept and am drawn to the different meanings with which viewers imbue them. That being said, my work will always be for the Children of The Sun.

Sky Light (2020) - Digital Maquette

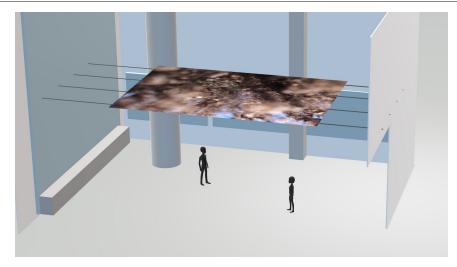


Fig 7. Rebecca Bair, Sky Light (Digital Maquette 1), 2020. Mixed media installation, 13' x 20'.

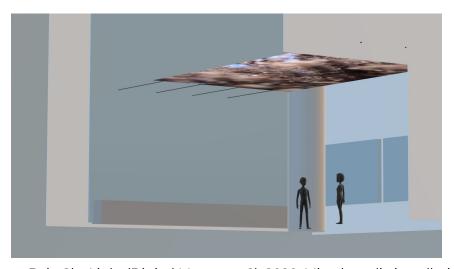


Fig 8. Rebecca Bair, Sky Light (Digital Maquette 2), 2020. Mixed media installation, 13' x 20'.

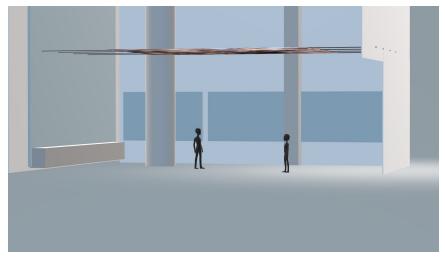


Fig 9. Rebecca Bair, Sky Light (Digital Maquette 3), 2020. Mixed media installation, 13' x 20'.

Reflections on a Sky Light

Sky Light is infinite - there are no limits. It is not over, it is not complete.

Sky Light is bigger than me - it stands taller, I walk it's distance, it floats above.

Sky Light is more than me - it is space, it is here, it is there, it is time.

Sky Light is that which I bring, you bring, they bring.

Sky Light is being there, it is being with it.

Sky Light is being with each other, it is being with our selves.

Sky Light is that which unfolds before us, that which exists within us.

Sky Light exists on the page, in the footnotes, in the space in between. It exists in the pauses, in the double takes, in the new beginnings.

Sky Light is reciprocal - I make it, you make it, it changes me, it shifts in you.

Sky Light is the work done, the work to be done, the work to be undone.

Sky Light is by the Children of The Sun. Sky Light is about the Children of The Sun. Sky Light is for The Children of The Sun.

For We Are The Children of The Sun.

This marks the culmination of this thesis project. It has yet to dance in the light of the Sun.	

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