

Pause. Release.

by Kelsey Adams



Suck Teeth Compositions (After Rashaad Newsome)

Kelsey Adams on a work by Michèle Pearson Clarke

My mother kisses her teeth (as us Jamaicans say it) whenever she's frustrated. I grew up hearing her suck her teeth at me and my younger brother whenever we needed to be reprimanded, chastised, cautioned. I grew up hearing her suck her teeth when teachers misunderstood us and belittled our intelligence. I grew up hearing her suck her teeth when she had to bite her tongue in the face of white authority, for fear of saying what she really felt.

Sucking teeth or kiss teeth or steups or chups—the name varies throughout the Caribbean—is a primal, innately non-verbal gesture that speaks for the exasperated, vexed or irritated. It's also a coping mechanism. As a child of the Caribbean—and by extent of the human trafficking that brought my ancestors to the land known as Jamaica—West African diasporas, it's a coping mechanism I know well.

It's an oral gesture of hopelessness and desperation but also resilience. It says "I'll fight this battle another day, today I am too tired."

Recently, when I've heard my mother kiss her teeth, it's been when she puts her phone down after reading something about

another police officer who hasn't been charged with the murder of a Black person. Perhaps, it's after she turns off the news coverage reporting the wealthiest billionaires in the world becoming richer during a global pandemic. The weight of what she feels but cannot verbalize hangs in that small sucking of air between her front teeth, lips slightly pursed, ending in a scowl.

In Suck Teeth Compositions (After Rashaad Newsome), Michèle Pearson Clarke embodies the discomfort that sits in the body, the kind that needs a release. In a three-channel video and audio choral symphony, her 17 subjects fidget, twitch, stretch, grimace and suck their teeth. They are not at ease, ease is not a privilege available to them as Black Canadians living in Toronto.

The deeply ancestral gestures, gaits, and mannerisms are indicative of a connection that has been ripped from us, erased, and fragmented across the Atlantic and the Caribbean Sea. The non-verbal markers of heritage that are carried deep in the bones. There are things that language cannot express.



Installation at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, June 1 – October 27, 2019. Photo by Steve Farmer.

Suck Teeth Compositions was first exhibited in 2018 at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) and has had several other iterations since. At the ROM, as part of a group show titled *Here We Are Here: Black Canadian Contemporary Art*, the exhibition was wedged between two permanent galleries. If patrons wanted to see the European galleries, *Here We Are Here* was the only conduit through. To see the work of the European "masters," one had to confront the work of artists on the

periphery—the work in conversation with a colonial institution such as the ROM.

It may be uncouth to quote oneself, but two years later, I still feel what I wrote for *Canadian Art* magazine succinctly gets to the crux of what this work brings to light:

"To live in Canada as a Black person is to live at the intersection of several anxieties. Subtle and overt racism pervades the Black experience in this country but is frequently

belittled as less abrasive than its southern counterpart. Meanwhile, we're overshadowed by that monolithic American idea of Blackness. Black Canadian histories and cultural contributions are nearly absent within the national imaginary, and this volatile mixture of racism and erasure impacts our daily existence and influences our artistic practices."

It's enough to make you want to suck your teeth.

Outside of the context of a group exhibition, it's easier to see the work in conversation with the work of New York-based artist Rashaad Newsome and his *Shade Compositions*. An ongoing performance series that the artist began in 2005, *Shade Compositions* is an exploration of racialized identity and queerness through oral gestures. Newsome casts local performers from whichever city he is showing the work in at the time, and conducts and choreographs the performers in a symphony of guttural sounds, nervous tics and defiant phrases. It's all done live and in a 2012 iteration at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, his visibility as conductor makes him part of the performance as the queer women of colour, queer men of colour, and straight women of colour on stage. There is irritation in their body language, in their cut eyes, in the flick of their wrists.

Newsome is particularly interested in "Black Vernacular English" and its many permutations throughout different predominantly Black urban communities across the United States. It is a language that has recently been adopted by the dominant culture, as Black culture's hypervisibility proliferates across the Internet and social media. In Newsome's work, refrains of "Werk!" or "Stop playin'" build as the performers snap and kiki on stage. Clarke's video operates a bit differently. She posits that much of this community vernacular is non-verbal. She is also working with an entirely different community—the Afro-Caribbean-Canadian community has different sets of codes and social cues than our neighbours to the south.

Her direction happens entirely off screen and part of her artmaking involves building the chorus by splicing and editing the videos of her subjects together. At times, the audio and the movements don't line up perfectly. Where Newsome is clearly orchestrating a performance with makeup and colour-coded costuming, Clarke's subjects stand against a white backdrop, vulnerable and uneasy, shifting. Sucking their teeth all the while. As the choral symphony swells, crescendos and breaks, it can be unnerving, familiar and comforting to hear, all at once.

But think, how unnerving it is to be Black and Canadian on this land, in this place that positions both those identities as antithetical. To be Black and Canadian is to be rendered invisible in many ways, historically and contemporarily.

What are the tensions embedded into the sinew of Black Canadians? The erasure of Black Canadian history, the constant othering, the unbelonging, the subsumption into American Blackness, the violence at the hands of the state, the

microaggressions, the particular subset of nice Canadian racism that suffocates and binds, the feeling of yelling into a void that echoes everything back at you.

With every movement these tensions expand through the body, they constrict the muscles, they suppress joy.

Suck your teeth.

Pause.

Release.

Suck Teeth Compositions
(After Rashaad Newsome)

October 10 – November 21, 2020
Forest City Gallery, London, ON



Kelsey Adams is an arts and culture writer from Toronto. Her writing explores the intersection of art, music and film, with a focus on the work of marginalized creators. A former *Canadian Art* editorial resident and current staff writer at NOW Magazine covering arts and culture, she has also written for The Globe and Mail, The Toronto Star, CBC Arts, *The FADER*, and *C Mag*.