Like any child of Caribbean parents, sucking my teeth was something I came by naturally. Socialized perhaps by osmosis, I learned what circumstances called for such a response and to whom I dared never respond that way. Otherwise known as “kissing teeth” (or “chups,” “steups,” and “stchoops,” which mimic the noise the gesture produces), the sound—a tongue pressed against teeth behind separating pursed lips through which a sharp stream of air is sucked—reproduces a hiss similar to, but far more critical than, the slow opening of a carbonated drink in a plastic bottle. Sucking teeth is the sonic gesture of struggle and defiance. Of flippant frustration, hence its often requisite concealing. An open proclamation of exasperation and reluctant restraint. When brave, it is a direct challenge. An oral archive that draws on its West African routes and diasporic dispersal, thinly veiled but opaque enough to persist through centuries of genocide and ethnic cleansing. A dialectical song of subalternity and outer-worldly survival. Potentially anthemic.

Michèle Pearson Clarke’s *Suck Teeth Compositions (After Rashaad Newsome)* has woven this oral and aural revolt into a chorus of provocations. Inspired by Rashaad Newsome’s *Shade Compositions* (2005-present), in which the artist renders Black women and gay men’s paralinguistic gestures into orchestral comments on questions of identity and agency, Clarke’s Suck Teeth taunts the Canadian nation-state and its gaggle of anti-Black cultural institutions with a large scale three-channel video installation documenting the very Black presence they have so ardently sought to absent (to borrow from Rinaldo Walcott).

First showcased as a part of the travelling exhibition, *Here We Are Here: Black Canadian Contemporary Art*, the work emerges from and responds to the question: “What is the Black Canadian presence and history in our country?” *Suck Teeth* intervenes with audible and visual irritation, iteratively expressed individually and in unison, sequentially and all at once. Clarke’s repositioning of this long-existing oral gesture within a new context decidedly speaks to a people and a history that Canada has made invisible—or hypervisible—for the purposes of racial discrimination, state violence, and strategic positioning as an exceptional example of “Black excellence.” Following a familiar thematic that now spans her work—see *All That’s Left Unsaid* (2014) and *Parade of Champions* (2015)—Clarke utilizes rhythm and repetition to blend soundscapes into language that, in all cases, provide an essential comment on the insufficiency of words.

In “Interview with an Empire,” from her most recent offering *Bla_k: Essays and Interviews*, M. NourbeSe Philip writes of her “profound distrust of language” (54). A distrust born of an intimate understanding of the world-forming work of language, its colonial origins and uses, its insufficiencies, its bankruptcy. Philip explains,
“After all, this was a language that the European forced upon the African in the New World. So that the exploitative plantation machine could be more efficiently run. It was a language of commands, orders, punishments. This language—english in my case, but it applies to all the languages of those European countries involved in the colonialist project—was never intended or developed with me or my kind in mind. It spoke of my non-being. It encapsulated my chattel status. And irony of all ironies, it is the only language in which I can now function.” (55)

Looking for a way out—or better yet, through—Philip calls for the transformation of language through ‘decontamination.’ Philip demonstrates this most notably in Zong!, her seminal work that revisits the text from the legal ruling on the 1781 Zong ship massacre. The ship’s captain ordered 150 enslaved Africans be thrown overboard in a quest to collect insurance monies—the court found in his favour—and Philip deconstructs the text from the ruling by breaking down words into distinct entities that call forth new meanings through sound, when read aloud, or sight, with their non-linear placement on the page. The process ruptures sign, signifier, and signified, looking for exposure in the breaks and spaces. This exposure links past and present, and like Suck Teeth, makes way for language unsurrendered.

To understand Suck Teeth is to understand the silencing of Black Canadians. When we speak, we are not heard. Clarke’s intervention and Philip’s reflections raise Gayatri Spivak’s question: “Can the subaltern speak?” When viewing Suck Teeth, one must also ask: “Can I hear?”

– Nataleah Hunter-Young

Further Reading


Biographies

Michèle Pearson Clarke is a Trinidad-born artist, writer and educator who works in photography, film, video and installation. Using archival, performative and process-oriented strategies, her work explores the personal and political possibilities afforded by considering experiences of emotions related to longing and loss. Her work has been featured in exhibitions and screenings at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia (2019), LagosPhoto Festival (2018), Gallery 44 Centre for Contemporary Art (2018), Le Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal (2018), ltd los angeles (2018), and Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago (2016). Based in Toronto, Clarke holds an MSW from the University of Toronto, and in 2015 she received her MFA in Documentary Media Studies from Ryerson University, where she is currently a contract lecturer. Most recently, Clarke has been awarded the Toronto Friends of the Visual Arts 2019 Finalist Artist Prize, and she has been appointed to serve a three-year term as the second Photo Laureate for the City of Toronto.

Nataleah Hunter-Young is a film programmer, writer, and PhD Candidate in Communication and Culture at Ryerson and York Universities. She has supported festival programming for the Toronto International Film Festival, the Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival, and the Durban International Film Festival in South Africa. In 2019, Nataleah became a Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foudation Scholar which will support her ongoing doctoral research on late representations of mediated police brutality in contemporary art. She was born and raised in community.

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Suck Teeth Compositions (After Rashaad Newsome) by Michèle Pearson Clarke will be on view at The New Gallery Main Space (208 Centre Street SE) until October 26, 2019.