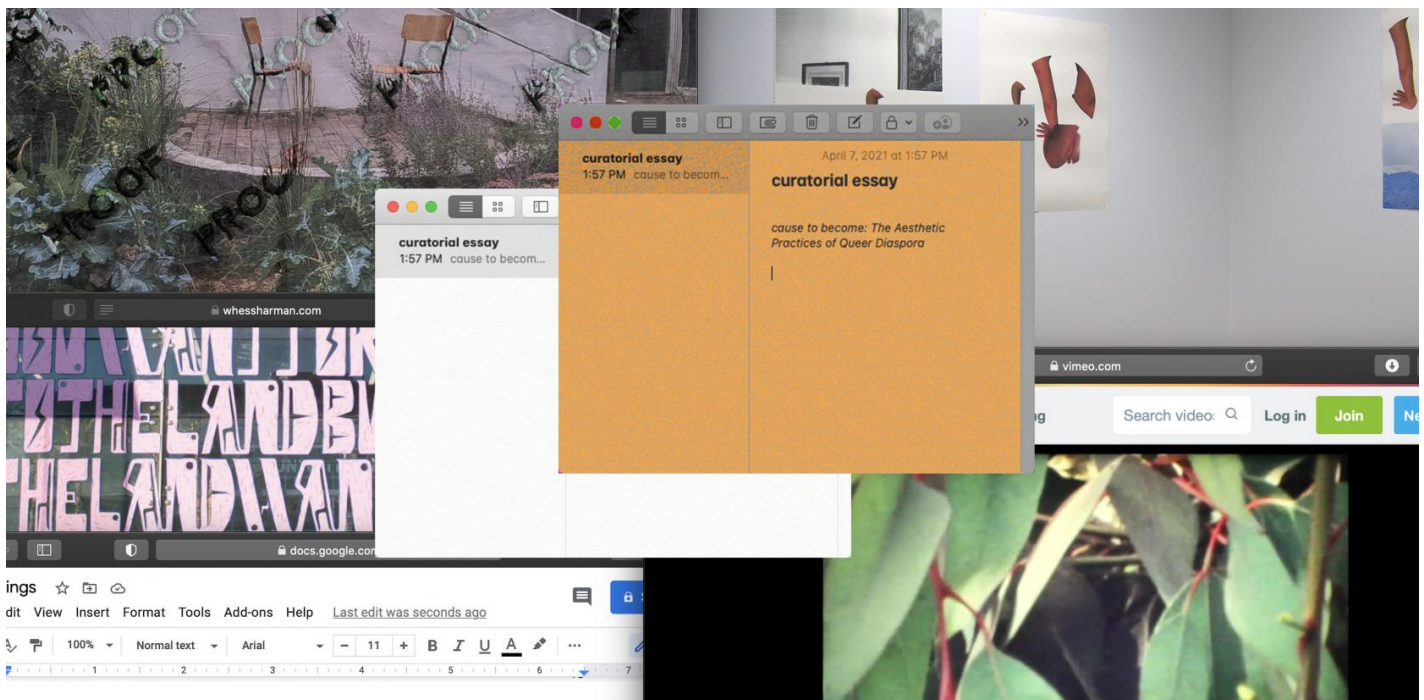




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cause to become: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora



By Christina Hajjar, curator of *cause to become*

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School of Art Gallery, University of Manitoba

Everyday I contend with a sense of disorientation as I struggle with anxiety, indecision, and a relentless thirst for wholeness. Understanding myself within queer diaspora and forming affinities and affiliations with other queer diasporic artists and thinkers allows for alternative

roots to form, where I may embrace liminality, longing, and sentimentality as generous, invaluable sites for becoming. Recently my friend and mentor Nasrin Himada recommended Gayatri Gopinath's book, *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora*, and I was immediately struck by the framing of aesthetic practices over aesthetic forms because of the value I place on feminist process.¹ Gopinath's affirmation of nonnormative life paths and theorizing around "states of suspension" was generative for me in conceptualizing the group exhibition, *cause to become*.

To "cause to become" is to render. Turning towards process opens the door for a heightened engagement and contextualization of aesthetic practices. Queer diaspora draws from multiple sites of experience where memory, repetition, and defiance are utilized to make way for alternative spatial and temporal orientations. Gopinath writes about how the aesthetic practices of queer diaspora impact our sense of space, place, and time—disorienting and reorienting us, shifting what we see and how we see it, and enabling what she describes as "new forms of affiliation and relationality."² In *cause to become*, artists Whess Harman, Mariana Muñoz Gomez, Florence Yee, and Hagere Selam (shimby) Zegeye-Gebrehiwot demonstrate the value in remembering, imagining, or anticipating home or place, and constructing alternative modes for becoming.

Gopinath describes the space of in-betweenness as a state of "productive suspension"—not a stuck place—but one that is generative and active in challenging heteronormativity, homonormativity, gay and immigrant respectability, and the Canadian/American dream.³ Recognizing that these aspirations are superficial, restrictive, and oppressive, how might identity and art work to liberate us? Witnessing artwork by others with a different experience of diaspora, racialization, queerness, and transness brings me into a consideration for our convergences and divergences, but also into a reflective gleaning for the artistic sensibilities, philosophical inquiries, and creative methodologies at hand.

Just as Gopinath describes her book as entailing "multiple layers of queer curation," I understand my curatorial vision to be one that is interested in the varying intersections, layers, and methods of reading an artwork.⁴ Through *Unruly Visions*, I became motivated to curate through a consideration of artistic process and methodology, as opposed to crafting a more distinct thematic grouping. This framework opens the potential for transcultural exchanges and dialogues, where queer diaspora, in its overlaps and its multiplicities, may nurture intimate relations and creative defiance through autobiographical aesthetics.

Artists working from queer diaspora know that societal change is slow. It's one of the reasons to have a creative practice; art-making is an act of agency in a world that tries to strip you and your communities of your power. In *cause to become*, Whess Harman embraces slowness

and stubbornness through their work *skipping stones*—a pink vinyl text fragment that reads: “A STONE BLOOMING IN THE STOMACH. YESTERDAY SMEARED ACROSS MY MOUTH.” They have illustrated their own typography in a style resonant of Indigenous formline design and graffiti, meshing the words together and making it purposely difficult to read.⁵ Harman evokes a sense of time through the growth metaphor of “blooming” and the implied history of “yesterday.” When I spoke with Harman about their intentions, they referred to an idea of sticky sweet nostalgia and the fantasy of home in the brightest way, with a hunger for the past, and an ungraspable, unknowable future.⁶ What does it mean to carry the weight of home within the body and smeared across the mouth? Poet Sanna Wani writes:

*Steadier ways to move through the world and we are learning them. A way to touch your own body. A touch that says, Dig deeper. There, in the ground, there is our memory. I am near enough my roots. Time is my friend. Tomorrow is a place we are together.*⁷

These words, along with Harman’s work illuminate the ways in which home and memory are embodied, relational experiences, and consumption is both permanent and fleeting.

Also interested in conveying a sense of time, Mariana Muñoz Gomez presents a set of CMYK screenprints that use embodied movement and place to suspend us in an unknowable landscape. The screenprints, titled *Recorrer, to wander* utilize a process of image-making that involves separating layers of colour in order to build up an image with cyan, magenta, yellow, and black. Muñoz Gomez purposely prints them with a slight misalignment that evokes the idea of “colouring outside the lines.” This subtle defiance is complemented with Muñoz Gomez’s depiction of their own body, which is only represented in fragments—limbs moving across undecipherable space, towards the final print of magenta clouds. When Muñoz Gomez told me that this photograph was captured from the airplane window on the way home to Mexico several years ago, I understood this gesture even more through Gopinath’s theorizing on states of suspension and disorientation.⁸ Gopinath writes that “all transitional spaces of liminality, movement, and crossing [are] necessarily fraught sites of contest around national and communal belonging and unbelonging.”⁹ What first appears as a movement toward a dreamlike fantasy of memory becomes further complicated through underlying politics of nationalism and land. The way Muñoz Gomez purposefully prints off register and withholds a fuller sense of place and body leads us to Gopinath’s statement that the task becomes about learning to dwell in this state of suspension and disorientation.¹⁰

Florence Yee’s work is similarly concerned with the construction of an image, which they use to address dwelling and everyday spaces. Yee embroiders a “proof” watermark on their two textile pieces—photographs printed on cotton voile—titled *PROOF—Chinatown Anti-Displacement Garden* and *PROOF—Bedroom in Scarborough*. Both works speak to

commodification; one with gentrification (through the image of the garden), and one with queer identity (through the image of Yee and their partner's feet in bed). The Chinatown Anti-Displacement Garden in Tkaronto/Toronto is a public space and venue that Yee is involved with—a reclamatory gesture that also acknowledges stolen land. Yee explains that the watermark interrupts the commodification of the space through a defiance in ownership or finality.¹¹ Within the context of the exhibition, the watermark takes on a literal symbolism for the meaning of *cause to become*, since proofs are generally prototypes of a future “true” image. However in this context, what is becoming? The future of Chinatown and the future of queer liberation is evidently impacted by our actions today and our active participation in spaces and movements. Yee's work reminds me of the everyday spaces we inhabit and the ways in which we grow into ourselves and our relations through painstaking labour and rituals of care. Consider Yee's labour of creating the watermarks: one might immediately think of the patience and repetitive, durational aspect of embroidery. However, I also think of restlessness, preoccupation, and the impulse for hands to busy themselves. When I spoke with Yee about this, they expressed complicated feelings about their productivity and investment with work, as well as the ties between sewing, their family, and Cantonese diaspora.¹² Their unease highlights how racialized labour is exploited through capitalism on an ongoing basis, and how Chinatown and Scarborough hold these histories while also being sites for potential disruption. Yee's textiles offer a framework through which to trouble and embrace labour, lineage, and community.

Hagere Selam (shimby) Zegeye-Gebrehiwot's film, *Diaspora Ethiopia* works to present a carefully weaved emotional landscape that glitches and sparkles. The ten minute experimental film is shot on Super 8mm film throughout Ethiopia in Addis Ababa, Harrar, and Combolcha.¹³ Some scenes appear orange-tinted, indicating some film negatives have been left in a negative state.¹⁴ The images are not always discernible and the Amharic audio is not captioned. The untranslatability of the language becomes a barrier for me, but one that is generative in forming other associations and affiliations with the work. I tune into the images of doorways, windows, flowers, plants, fire, smoke, a wood oven, a large outdoor gathering, and the soothing sound of the narration. In one scene, we look out the window of a moving vehicle—a gesture reminiscent of daydreaming, reflection, and emotional introspection. Seeing this, with no intimate connection to Ethiopian landscape, my heart still stirs at the feeling of liminality, lush greens, and warm somber orange. *Diaspora Ethiopia* carries an emotional potency which provides an openness for connection through the cadence of visual and spoken language. Zegeye-Gebrehiwot engages the memory of their first visit to Ethiopia and communicates abundance, loss, religion, and a sense of being within but also apart. The film inevitably nurtures multiplicities of being and connecting, where landscape, language, and ritual invite the possibility for intimate relations and cross-cultural identification.

Art-making and art engagement train us to shift our view, just as they show us who we are and what moves us. Through art we become more self-determined and creatively defiant. We train and retrain our gaze; we learn and unlearn our knowledge systems; we reach across other hearts, spaces, and temporalities; we build another world. Gopinath writes that “queer desire, relationality, and identification function as a kind of propulsive force that throws one off a normative life course and into a different trajectory that is in fact open-ended, with no fixed itinerary or ending.”¹⁵ It is clear that the abundance of queer diasporic living is one that thrives on process, praxis, and openness. We see this through the threads in Yee’s works, the time travel in Harman’s and Muñoz Gomez’s works, and the cinematography in Zegeye-Gebrehiwot’s work. The artists utilize suspension and disorientation to practice, model, and extend alternative modes of being and becoming. My identification with queer diaspora becomes increasingly grounded and renewed by witnessing others and participating in constellations of change and joint struggle. To cause to become is to carve out our own futures, because there is a great lack of stable models to emulate or want to strive for. Like our identities, our sense of future is envisioned in fragments. In the face of ongoing disorientation and destabilization, our greatest strength is to learn how to dwell here together.

Edited by Noor Bhangu and Blair Fornwald.

Christina Hajjar thanks Nasrin Himada and Noor Bhangu for their conversations on *Unruly Visions*, which informed the exhibition and this essay.

cause to become

Footnotes

Bibliography

Biographies

Christina Hajjar is a queer femme first-generation Lebanese-Canadian artist, writer, and cultural worker based on Treaty 1 Territory in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Her artistic and curatorial interests consider domesticity, labour, and place through diaspora, body archives, and cultural iconography. She is a 2020 PLATFORM Photography Award winner, co-founder of *Carnation Zine*, and creator of *Diaspora Daughter*, *Diaspora Dyke* zine. Hajjar is a 2020-2021 recipient of the Foundation Mentorship Program at Mentoring Artists for Women's Art, and a 2020-2021 curatorial assistant at the School of Art Gallery, University of Manitoba. Learn more at @garbagebagprincess and <https://christinahajjar.com/> .

Whess Harman is Carrier Wit'at, and currently lives and works on the territories of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh as an artist as well as a Curator for grunt gallery. Their multidisciplinary practice includes beading, illustration, text, and poetry. As a mixed-race, trans/non-binary artist they work to find their way through anxiety and queer melancholy with humour and a carefully mediated cynicism that the galleries go hog wild for.

Mariana Muñoz Gomez is a Latinx artist, writer, curator, and settler of colour based on Treaty 1 Territory in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Their work is concerned with language, place, identity, diaspora, and displacement within post- and settler colonial contexts. Her lens-based practice involves a variety of media including text works, screenprints, and photography. Mariana works collaboratively with a number of collectives including *Carnation Zine* and *window winnipeg*.

Florence Yee is a Cantonese-struggling visual artist based in Tkaronto/Toronto and Tiohtià:ke/Montreal whose practice focuses on the intimacy of doubt through text-based art, sculpture, and textile installation. They are currently the Co-Director of Tea Base, a grassroots collective in Tkaronto's Chinatown. They obtained a BFA from Concordia University and an MFA from OCAD U.

Hagere Selam (shimby) Zegeye-Gebrehiwot is an artist and administrator who currently works and resides between Treaty 1 and Treaty 4 territories. They have received funding from municipal, provincial and national arts councils as well as awards from local and transnational arts organizations. Their practice engages with themes of place and it's abstraction from a diasporic, queer and feminist perspective. Currently, they are the Executive Director at the Saskatchewan Filmpool, Co-Director of WNDX Festival of Moving Image and guest editor of the forthcoming *Art&Wonder* publication.



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