

“Heartbreak captures at least a little of those of injuriously loving emulations of what it means to be Black and human within the context of white supremacy. Heartbreak works with and in excess of the bio-mythological heart, the hollow muscular organ and its narratives of affectively variegated tenderness and loss. Heartbreak represents the vibrating echoes of our collective plantocratic historical pasts in the present. Heartbreak elucidates how the violence of racial capitalism inaccurately reproduces black life. Heartbreak busts apart. Heartbreak is feeling outside of oneself. Heartbreak is the demand to feel outside of ones’ individuated self. Heart//////break cannot be recuperated. Heartbreak fails the heartbroken. Heartbreak waits. It sounds. It envelopes us like the thumping bass of the TR-808.” “What do we learn from and about each other in these moments of heartbreak and love? What do we pass on, what do we keep to ourselves in order to practice black livingness in a world that refuses black life? How do we tell each other this feeling might be or is forever? Do we tell each other heartbreak won't be forever? Is pain forever?”

–Katherine McKittrick & Alexander G. Weheliye, 808s & Heartbreak

RHUBABA PODCAST EPISODE #5
</3 a conversation with Camara Taylor

KHADEA: Hi, it's Khadea. I'm here with Laura, Natasha from the committee and Ray who we're chatting to today. Thanks, Ray, for joining us for this podcast conversation.

CAMARA: Thank you for having me, it's really nice to be here, digitally.

[0:01:35]

LAURA: Could you tell us a little bit about some of the projects that you have been working on right now?

CAMARA: I just finished a commission for the Gallery of Modern Art in Glasgow for a show they have on at the moment called *Domestic Bliss*, which was a strange and long commission but I ended up making some engraved Zippo lighters for them based on a poem by a Scottish diarist called James Boswell who wrote this really, really long poem called *No Abolition of Slavery; or the Universal Love of Empire* [sic]. It is this incredibly long poem talking about why abolitionists are silly and why he hates

them and why slavery should continue. That was actually kind of fun because I was struggling with the commission a lot in terms of being a Black artist invited in to make some sort of intervention or sort of 'round off' this show by being a person to make this contemporary intervention or rupture into the space, and point to these histories which they maybe don't have any contemporary artist works that point to, specifically with the museum being the previous home of a tobacco lord.

I was talking with the curator about the pressures of that, or how I wanted to negate that or have the project be useful for me and work in ways for me and move around that impulse or framing where then I'm just giving my hot take on a thing. So using this guy's words to just be like, "This is your history," and "This is what this guy said, and I think it's kind of funny that he had this much energy to write this," I can't overestimate—the poem is really, really long; it's really, really long!

So, I just finished that and I'm on residency right now at Market Gallery trying to make a film about nostalgia, or about heartbreak, but with nostalgia. I've just been trying to figure out how to turn research into practice or into a work or outcome which is my ongoing struggle forever and ever and ever. Trying to force these ideas into then something aesthetically pleasing or that does something. I might just read the description of the film because I was having a chat with my friend the other day and one of the difficulties with finishing the film is trying to write the script when actually maybe my proposal for the film was everything I had to say?

My application text was, "Pining. As in to suffer in mental and physical decline, especially because of a broken heart. I want the chance to make a film about nostalgia, false imaginings of a Britain before us. Turning with, to and away from 'the desires, anxieties, pleasures, appetites, revulsions and phobias' that produce nostalgia and are currently structuring our lives and what's to come. Love, loss,

sickness and heartbreak, something heavy but light, funny and perhaps a little sexy-rude even. A collage of images, still and moving, held together by an anxious narrator. Mad, oblique and unreliable, pining for something liveable.”

I really like the text, I just don't know how to consolidate a film that does all that stuff! But I'm still working on it and I have lots of footage now. My favourite piece of footage for it is a two-and-a-half-minute video of me queefing. I live alone and obviously for the past six months I've had a lot of time on my hands, I've been having lots of baths and I guess one day in July I realised that if I was in the bath long enough splashing about when I got out the bath I could force myself to queef a lot, and made a video of that which will probably feature in this film—which is also why this film will probably not be available to watch digitally (laughs). I'm going to stop talking now!

[0:06:43]

KHADEA: In our chat before it felt like you were critically observing these internet platforms such as YouTube. I was thinking, how did they relate to your research and maybe you would like to talk about the colonial nostalgia that's present in the comment sections and forums that you encounter?

CAMARA: I was thinking about this a lot because I've also spent the past six months on YouTube and in Reddit forums as part of research. I keep on saying half-jokingly/half-not that YouTube comments space and Reddit is where knowledge happens, for better or worse. It's an interesting space to navigate because I guess what I'm looking at is quite often abhorrent in ways. But I also find a lot of it funny or something? And watch these debates play out between strangers. I'm thinking about how I grew up on Tumblr and spaces like that and how actually curated that space was and a lot of my engagement with artists and ideas and politics—a lot of my first introductions were through Tumblr, and how I ended up meeting lots of

Black artists and artists of colour. YouTube and Reddit are really different to that. My friend calls Twitter 'like a pub.' And I think YouTube and YouTube comments, it happens in the same way, I guess in ways it's a more public forum.

I started diving deep into it because two years ago I started searching, just to see what would come up when you'd type in "Black Scottish." The results have changed now because people are talking about Black people in Scotland a bit more, like the BBC Social are doing their BBC Social things. But at that time one of the main things that came up was this video called "The Black Scottish" which was this homemade video detailing Black figures from Scottish history. I found it interesting because lots of what was mentioned were people I had encountered in my own research, primarily through a PHD that June Evans wrote called *Africans/Caribbeans in Scotland: A Socio-Geographical Study*, which was a PHD thesis submitted to the University of Edinburgh in 1997. What was particularly interesting to me about this video was that the YouTube channel that it was on is called "Divine Truth 1" and every other video is pretty much about lizard people and these levels of conspiracy, and lots of videos of glitches and news reports which shows that x-person is some sort of overlord.

I'm curious about how Black Scottish people fit into this sort of conspiracy narrative or how amongst all of these quite common and also violent conspiracies which all go to really violent places—most often rampant antisemitism—how this video sits amongst that. And the recurring idea that there are no Black people in Scotland, which we obviously know is not true, but is this enduring idea that just circulates and circulates and circulates. Watching, then, the comments section of this video playing out this thing where some people are like, "I went to Edinburgh in 2011 and I didn't see a single black person," and then someone else being like, "There were Black people on Hadrian's Wall!"

I went back to the video recently and someone—a white Glaswegian woman—was talking about how there wasn't any Black people in Glasgow and they just appeared in 2014! And then now during lockdown they've appeared again and what is happening? Where are these people coming from? It's this panic. And then this well-meaning liberal-type person got in and was like, “But actually in the census...there are Black people.” I just find it interesting because the debates or the structures of the arguments and back-and-forth are very similar to academia, these other spaces, it's just that people are saying things differently. It's a sort of more generative space for me to be looking at because it's a bit more playful.

I remember in this one Reddit forum about the creation of Glasgow they were something like, “They built Glasgow and it was all squiggly so it fell into the swamp and so they built it back up again.” I don't know where that came from but it just sent me on a long trail of thought because at that point in time I was researching urban soil geo-chemistry and trying to put together this piece of text which connected the de-silting of the Clyde to make way so ships could go further up the Clyde—sort of connect that remnant of the time, removing all this silt from the Clyde in the 17th and 18th centuries and connecting that all the way through to the “Glasgow’s Miles Better” campaign and the sandblasting of tenements to remove the blackened build-up of a century of industrial-ness, industrial stuff. These sorts of spaces of wondering or imagining, or just strange little things that people say and taking them to other conclusions or following them? They are like little thought experiments.

One of the people I quite often refer to in my research is a scholar and curator and writer called Kemi Adeyemi who writes around a number of things but talks about ‘affective angularities’ and the ‘politics of the lean’ and has this article that I really like, I can't remember the full name of it but in one of the lectures she presents on it she talks about starting with the research being sort of a thought experiment, to

watching police officers being like, “Oh, we didn't kill these people because they're Black,” and so being like, if I were to take that as true, if you're not killing people because they're Black then what is it? Is it the way that we walk? Is it the lean? And so then talks about the angles of man and then everything that falls after this and angularities; then talks about affect and movement performance practices—I'm going way over here now. I don't know, it's fun to play and I spend a lot of time alone and so having these little chuckles and giggles with myself. And sometimes I'm like, “Oh gosh, if I'm following these threads, am I just going to come out of this like a weird troll person?”

[0:15:26]

KHADEA: That's really interesting because I also find myself laughing, but also with concern, like laughing out of concern sometimes within these comment sections. To follow up on that question, how do you explore the emotional impact of incorrect and disillusioned recordings of history that just exist online and will continue to exist unless these platforms find a way of filtering that out, so my question is about the impact of coming face-to-face to false narratives.

CAMARA: I would say my way of negotiating or interacting with them or dealing with the emotional impact isn't necessarily healthy, it's very like, “ha-ha-ha-ha-ha,” a sort of dismissive laugh or an eye-roll or a performed ambivalence or like dis-interest. Things which I or we would see as weird, wrong, violent, just missing the point completely, and then things that other people would think of as conspiracies, but they are actually true. Yes, these things happened, the state did do this, the state did do that. And so I guess looking at madness also and the effects of these things on mental health but how you can be called ‘mad’ for what we would see as denying thoughts—that as a way of dismissing those things.

I came across this old medical term called 'drapetomania'—it's not a thing and has been discounted as a thing many decades ago, but it was this American 19th century doctor who came up with this diagnosis of drapetomania as a mental illness which causes Black slaves to run away. I was interested in that because obviously this isn't an idea that is upheld anymore but I was thinking of the mental leaps that you have to do to be like, "These enslaved people are running away because they have a mental illness," as opposed to running away for freedom and to have a life!

I just find it all very 'funny'—and I use 'funny' in the same way that when sometimes you can't put your finger on something or when you are coming up against something that's annoying or violent or x, y or z, rather than engaging in a discussion with someone about that thing, you're just like "Oh, that's interesting!" I think I spend a lot of time being like, "Oh, that's interesting," as a way of being like, "Mm, we're not going to have this conversation right now..." I do that or I'm just screaming at my laptop screen being like, "This is just not true!" So, yeah, not healthy coping mechanisms, but I'm on a journey.

KHADEA: It's a really hard space to navigate when you want to interact but it's not really something that you can even take seriously, so the humour kind of comes up but you also feel like, no, there is no humour, it's just a survival tool.

[0:19:40]

NATASHA: There is definitely a level of detachment you need to have as a Black artist and sometimes when you're doing your research and you're making your work—at least I find I need to have some level of being like, ok, I'm looking at this, this is horrible but I'm trying to look at this from a way of like ok, so I can turn this into something or look at this or think about it in a way that's less impactful to my own self.

CAMARA: Yeah, definitely.

I think in my practice, as much as I'm looking at these arguments or conversations playing out online, I also spend a lot of time looking for people and small moments of resistance or joy and taking those tiny footnotes and passages to their furthest spaces. I always mention this person Cornelius Johnston who was a Black sailor who we know about because he was arrested—in, I want to say 1919? — for organising an illegal dancehall for coloured peoples in the Gorbals. I always return to that newspaper clipping story because pushing past the fact that we know about him through the record of his arrest, thinking about the fact that there was a private members' club for black people to dance in Glasgow, in the Gorbals in 1919. If you think about them, what the conditions are that necessitate a space like that? And it's a members' club so it's probably people paying membership and for that to have been a viable venture for Cornelius Johnston...and there are a certain amount of people that you can assume to have been in the city, so you're like, "Ok, if there are all these people..." In my head I'm like, "Let's make it a queer club. It was a Black queer club in the Gorbals in 1919, I'm just going to go with that." That is neither here nor there but there is a lot of work or fun to be had with taking things in those direction. I guess it's my small way of thinking through, sometimes becoming desensitised to things and trying not to work with trauma images and things like this but also trying to work against noticing compassion fatigue.

I realised that I was very bored—bored isn't quite the thing, but I realised I was tired of hearing the recounting of the 'where do you come from?' story, and so then have a negative reaction to it even though the problem isn't people's need to share that experience, it's the fact that that experience keeps happening and what that tells of a wider society. I guess because I work in institutions a lot and I'm also interacting with lots of students and young students of colour and trying to remember and hold on to what that felt like so that I can hold and validate their

experiences rather than just being like, “Ah, in a few years you won't care about this thing anymore.”

[0:23:32]

LAURA: When we were talking before you were talking about these tropes that you get, these false welcoming narratives. When you were talking before in your research about how there are these betrayals and heartbreaks and nostalgia about this idea that people are being welcomed when actually, they are just another example of a false imagination.

CAMARA: We were talking about that specifically in relation to Windrush because as part of looking at myths and these conspiracies, I've also been interested in the myths or ideas or narratives that we tell ourselves that also are quite true although are maybe not as cut-and-dry—things that become popular narratives. The first example...I was talking to my grandma, it was me and my mum and my grandma, and we were talking about Windrush and my grandma was trying to decide whether or not she was the Windrush generation or not, in terms of where you put it...Mum was asking her about stuff and mum was like, “Do you remember about the ‘No dogs, no Blacks, no Irish’ signs?” Grandma was like, “I remember ‘no Blacks and no Irish’ but I'm not sure about that ‘no dogs’ thing. That's a myth because the English love dogs.” And we laughed. I was just thinking about that; probably there were signs that said, 'no Blacks, no dogs, no Irish' but I'm just thinking about how my grandma's remembering and experience of that time is quite different to that canonical signage.

And with the Windrush scandal, when we were talking about that, she was talking a lot about how she was frustrated with the reporting in terms of it being, “The reason why this is such a great betrayal is because this group of people were invited here.” And she was talking about how that's just not true; “No! We weren't

invited, we weren't welcomed, it's terrible." She always talks about how she never wanted to come to this country, she hates this country, and she is still in this country.

At the beginning of lockdown, I was reading *Bordering Britain* by Nadine El-Enany which details that. I'm sure other people have written about it before, but her book was the first time coming across as counter to that myth in text which was good. She basically details that people were not welcomed, that the U.K. government tried their very best to dissuade people from coming. Basically the 1948 law which allowed subjects of the Commonwealth to travel to the U.K. was implemented, pretty much, just to shore up imperial power and create British "empiric unity." But people from the colonies actually coming to the "mother country" was just an unintended consequence or fall out and seeing this pattern at the precipice of it. Because there were labour shortages following the war the British government did all they could to fill those labour gaps before people from the colonies had come, lots of European migrants used to fill those labour gaps. The government tried to put pressure on colonial governments to encourage people in the colonies to stay put and not travel to Britain. They discouraged the NHS from hiring people. And then, obviously, once people were here, nothing about Britain was welcoming or friendly or nice. It's been many years, we know that it's not nice, to say the least.

I'm working with that history at the moment because in the book *Bordering Britain* Nadine puts it very well, but how thinking of the Windrush scandal as this great betrayal creates this idea that obfuscates the realities of British colonial and imperial power—then and now. And sort of creates these notions of good immigrants and not; or people who have a right to be here and thus those who don't; which is dangerous, always. Forever floating around Twitter was the David Lammy clip, and I was interested in how being of descended from that generation or just being a Black or mixed race person in the U.K., how we can buy into

narratives that ultimately only serve to oppress us and people like us. I guess I'm most interested in the lies a country tells about itself, but then also the ways in which we can buy into those and unwittingly uphold them.

I sometimes wonder about the identification of Black British, for example. Some people don't identify as Black British, some people are like, "I'm Black in Britain," or follow with a particular locality. But the dominant structure of Black British as a counter to Black English, even if you're able to identify with Englishness, but then that means that in general 'Britain' becomes 'England' always. And what the category of Black British does to reify Britain as a contract and uphold Westminster's power in relation to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. That's just an ongoing thought that I have because I think about it through living in Scotland and being pro-independence, and so already dis-identifying with Britishness but then also being like, "I'm very English." Or there's nothing like living in Glasgow to make you aware of how you definitely, definitely grew up in England.

[0:31:39]

NATASHA: I was going to ask you about the different aspects of your practice as an artist, researcher, writer, curator and anything else you identify with; how do they interact with each other? Or maybe you don't see them as different? You mentioned a bit earlier about how to turn research into the work or that relationship, I'm interested your approaches to the various aspects and how they relate or aren't related?

CAMARA: I guess it's complicated or ongoing. I'm always moving back and forth on this swing between identifying along these very specific categories or being like, "I'm just an artist" and therefore that encapsulates curating or researching and writing. For a while I didn't identify as a curator even though I was ostensibly curating things, just because of the weight and history of that term/word and also being an artist and

like, "I don't like curators." But then I don't like a particular type of curator and I think as more and more people are playing with curation and the word 'curator' or thinking about it and doing it differently and either stepping away from the work or pushing it to more generative limits or excesses, I felt more enabled to identify with curating. With curating specifically, I found it quite hard because I started programming and curating and putting on projects from the space of frustration, or a desire to be in community.

The first project I did was a zine and that was just me being very isolated in my situation at the time and also being quite shy and didn't know how to message people on Tumblr and be like, "Hi, we don't know each other but we follow each other and maybe we should talk." So, instead I was like, "Hi, we don't know each other, do you want to be in this zine?" And then I joined the committee at Transmission where all of the curating and programming was born out of either a desire to connect with people or just a frustration with the wider scene where there are a lot of shit hot artists that are doing great work and none of these spaces are paying attention to these practices, and I have a bit of access now so let's get some shit done! But it wasn't a choice or a thought process of, "I want to be a curator, I want to programme stuff." And "artist" is always hard, I find exhibitions difficult because I don't like being public or I also have poor time management skills and the pressures of exhibiting and that public-ness I find really difficult and how to translate ideas. I think as soon as I was accepted that I was a curator, I then went through this phase of being like, "Er, but art!" or, "I want to make art!"

I was talking to my friend, we were having dinner and I was talking about a residency, and they were like, "Oh, you're curating something?" and I was like, "No, I'm doing it as an artist." And they were like, "You're an artist also? I didn't realise you made work!" And I was like "Fuck!" or like, "Yeah, I make work, I mean I don't make work, but I think about making work all the time."

I think I move in between all these things. Now I have a really long list of things which I put after each thing because it's hard to know where I am with things, but also as soon as I set in, "I'm a curator" then the only things I was invited to do were 'curatorial.' And I was like, "I would like to make some art." So now I'm being allowed to make art—"allowed to make art? that's a weird way of putting it—but I really don't work on art things unless I've been asked to do something because I'm v anti work and art has become work. Maybe that's a bad thing to say but I'm not a person who's sitting in my house working on things for the joy of it. I do enjoy it but if I have free time then I like watching Netflix, I'm not making art. Writing is funny because there's always been text in my works but always hidden because I'm scared of letting words stand alone. And then my friend Sulāiman was like, "You're a writer." And I was like, "I guess I'm a writer, maybe? Or I will be a writer..." And then they were like, "You're a writer." And now I'm being, "I'm a writer" so that then the writing comes. I think identification as a writer is the first identification that I've been doing in advance of writing lots, or being comfortable with it as a sort of manifesting of that space; which maybe sounds corny but is sort of like, 'if you say you are a thing then you are a thing.'

[0:37:44]

LAURA: I think it's really interesting because I think a lot of people are juggling a lot of different elements of practices and some of them are work as well, like paid work. A lot of your projects that I first came across were around this idea of refusal. I find that a really interesting concept both artistically and politically. I guess what happens in the art world or the art sphere almost feels like one way of doing that kind of work, but then how do you feel like it transcends from the art world into real life or can it, really?

CAMARA: I find it a difficult question to answer because my opinion shifts constantly because the art world is not separate from the world. All of the horrors and inequalities are translated. I'm not just a person in the art world, I'm a person who's in the world, so it's one and the same.

But then it's sort of funny...when March happened, when we went into lockdown, I had this moment of being like, "Why are we doing art?" or, "Art is stupid, it doesn't do anything, it doesn't mean anything and this is stupid." And then was like no, if you have an expansive idea about what art is then its possibilities and what it can do are endless and important for the world and imagining better worlds. The thing that I think of when I think, "This is stupid and why are we doing this?" is actually a very large part of the contemporary art world but a very small part of the world and how people live their lives and interact with art. I always think about a book, maybe it's *Passion: Blackwomen's Creativity*, but in that book—if I'm remembering correctly—the definitions of art are very expansive and included a conversation with a woman tending to her garden and things like this. It's complicated.

I've been thinking about refusal and trying to embody or practice that, and say no. It's one thing to have the idea of, for example, only working to contract or being like, "Whatever I put into this space is enough"—not extending yourself beyond your emotional and physical limits, and another thing to actually practice that because you get like, "Oh, people will see this and what will they think?" and letting go of that because I think working in art is my job now, it's how I make my money. It's nice to be able to pay my bills through this sphere but then I have to approach it as work and obviously I still do bits and pieces of the side which are pure joy. I went into art school because of a pure—like many people—just a love of art and was like, "Wow, this is amazing and great." And then art school and then the "contemporary art world" really knock that out of you...which is good, that's like growing up, I guess.

I watch a lot of television, even as a kid my parents used to call me 'T.V. Queen' and it hasn't let up and I don't have any quality controls in place in terms of what I watch, and I guess I've been watching even more stuff during this period of time and create rules for myself where I'm like, "You can't watch anymore T.V. series because you don't know how to not binge-watch things," and "You can't watch anything 'good' either because you haven't got the mental space." I spent one weekend just watching filmic adaptations of Nicholas Sparks novels which was a really weird few days but also quite enjoyable.

I'm rambling, but my friend was talking about how lots of people were having panics over everything but one thing that comes up in conversation is like, "Maybe we should all transition to working in film and television because Scottish Screen industry has funding," and "People are paid properly in that industry." Or maybe not being in that industry, we have this idea that in the screen sector it's gruelling and horrific, but you get more money at the end of it. I've mostly—not for any political reasons—have just been like, "No, art's my friend." So, if I'm ever like, "Maybe I'll do this training to go into screen industries," remind me to say no because I love television and if I were to work in television it would ruin one of the last spaces of retreat that I have left.

Sometimes art can be that space of retreat; it is really nice going to a show or to an event that you have nothing to do with, that's nice. I just had lots of experience when I was younger, particularly with Transmission where I was burnt out all of the time; you lost the capacity to enjoy or have a clear view of what we had done or what we had created and you would think back to that time and we were just on the brink of, or already collapsed and running on nothing. And that sort of disconnect of how through not having structure or ways of saying no or working beyond your limits means that you can be in a room with a bunch of people and having a completely different experience to them.

If lockdown hadn't have happened, if the pandemic hadn't have happened I would have had a breakdown because I always have a March/April/May breakdown, I realised, because it becomes this bottleneck in terms of stuff. I remember in January I was looking April and being like, if you don't figure out a timeline for this stuff you're going to do that thing you do where you crash off the face of the earth and are out for the count for three or four weeks and you don't have a job where you have statutory sick leave, which is also a tiny amount of money but it was really useful when I had jobs which gave me that. And then the pandemic happened so everything got cancelled and I was having other types of breakdowns—because, you know, the pandemic, people are dying, there's loss everywhere, everything else was compounding on top of that—but I didn't have the body-tired plus mental breakdown. Thinking about the relief of that and then spending the following six months feeling like, “Maybe we don't do burn-out!” That's an easy thing to say and a harder thing to do. I'm looking at my schedule now being like, “hmm, remember those lessons about slowness and reducing productivity or doing away with productivity and all those like memes and posts you were sharing on Instagram, when are you going to start practicing that”

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KHADEA: I also feel like I'm not in the position where I can sometimes choose slowness, or productivity.

CAMARA: Yeah. Your material conditions either enable a 'no' or slowness or they don't. But when a no is not possible, how groups of community could enable a no for a person? Now I am able to say no more because my material needs are met at a baseline through the two/three days a week I do at the CCA so I'm more enabled to say no to things if I don't have high enough capacity. And thinking about how the only times before that that I felt able to say no is because I had people who

showed up for me and were either supporting me to say no or convince me to say no. And even just now because I have a bit of something, I am more able to push back on institutions being weird and bullshit, which hopefully means that other people don't have to.

Transcript by Collective Text, info@collectivetext.org