



Main Space



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What would the community think?
@gothshakira, Bonerkill, Kiera Boulton, Sofy Mesa
curated by Emily Gove
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What would the community think? is introduced by a large-scale, printed meme¹ by Montréal-based “high priestess of dank feminist memery”² @gothshakira. Following a now-ubiquitous format, an appropriated image of distraught former Disney star turned pop singer Selena Gomez is headlined by black text on a white background:

“when u agonize over apartment listings bc u don’t want to be complicit in gentrification by inserting urself in a traditionally working-class neighbourhood but still salivate at the thought of inhabiting a tastefully-decorated one-bedroom mere steps away from both a very positively yelp-reviewed gastropub and a new minimalist concept café”

For too many young people living in the city, an ambivalent statement like @gothshakira’s meme is decisively relatable. According to the Toronto Real Estate Board, the current average rental price for a one-bedroom apartment in downtown Toronto is \$1,662 per month,³ while the median annual income of low-income

¹ A humorous image, video, piece of text, etc. that is copied (often with slight variations) and proliferates rapidly by internet user sharing.

² Gerges, Merray, “GothShakira: Montreal’s High Priestess of Dank Feminist Memery,” *Canadian Art* online, June 14, 2016: <https://canadianart.ca/features/gothshakira-intersectional-feminist-memes/>

³ Commisso, Christina, “Rent prices among the casualties of hot housing markets,” *CTV News* online, April 29, 2016: <http://www.ctvnews.ca/business/rent-prices-among-the-casualties-of-hot-housing-markets-1.2878932>

earners is \$14,930,⁴ meaning very simply: there are a lot of people, majorly artists and students, who can't afford to live here, but do anyway.

The uneasy relationship between artists, developers and residents of gentrifying neighbourhoods is being addressed not only in Toronto, since it is a widely spread phenomenon in North America. Recently in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn, the Brooklyn Anti-Gentrification Network (BAN) demanded that the Brooklyn Museum cancel its hosting of the sixth annual Brooklyn Real Estate Summit. This event, reported by writer Alexis Clements for *Hyperallergic*, included a panel titled, "There goes the neighbourhood," in which speakers would give advice on "discovering undervalued properties with a more valuable future use... to yield untold—and sometimes unexpected—riches;" in other words, how to remove rent-regulated tenants and flip a residential building for profit.⁵ In South Bronx, activists protested the 2016 iteration of *No Commission*, a contemporary art fair presented in partnership with developer Somerset Group that included no Latino artists (in a neighbourhood populated by the highest percentage of Hispanic residents in New York State)⁶, and was described as "a sales tactic to provide street cred for rapacious developers."⁷ For further information about both protests and subsequent events/actions, please see artists of color bloc (aocbloc.org) and Arts & Labor (artsandlabor.org).

Back in Toronto, as the Museum of Contemporary Art Toronto_Canada announces a partnership with developer Castlepoint Numa and a plan for a new location on the first floors of a new condominium development on Sterling Road, artists renting

⁴ Toronto's Vital Signs Report 2015: <http://torontosvitalsigns.ca/main-sections/gap-between-rich-and-poor/>

⁵ Clements, Alexis, "In Brooklyn, a Forum Focuses the Fight Against Displacement," *Hyperallergic*, August 1, 2016: <http://hyperallergic.com/314973/in-brooklyn-a-forum-focuses-the-fight-against-displacement/>

⁶ South Bronx Environmental Health and Policy study, "Population Characteristics and Trends in the South Bronx": http://www.icisnyu.org/south_bronx/Demographics_001.html

⁷ Rodney, Seph, "Activists Protest Swizz Beatz' Art Fair in the Bronx," *Hyperallergic*, August 16, 2016: <http://hyperallergic.com/314973/in-brooklyn-a-forum-focuses-the-fight-against-displacement/>

studios in the area received 55% rent hikes with their lease renewals; and thus are preparing to move out.⁸ While the condominium complex set to house MOCA is not the only such development in the area, it's an immediate example of the cycle of 'urban renewal,' gentrification and displacement. Artists seeking low-cost housing and/or studio space move into neighbourhoods historically inhabited by racialized and/or low-income earning communities, and provide the required 'cultural cachet' to make the area desirable to populations with money to spend; no matter the form it ends up taking, gentrification "is fundamentally about the reconstruction of the city to serve middle- and upper-class interests."⁹ In her 2004 book, research psychiatrist Dr. Mindy Fullilove adapts the gardening concept of "root shock," or the "traumatic stress reaction to the destruction of all or part of one's emotional ecosystem."¹⁰ In the context of urban development, root shock disperses people and ruptures their community bonds. New condo developments facilitate "instant gentrification,"¹¹ by bulldozing existing structures and providing housing for sale to those who can afford it while displacing those who cannot.

In the widely-read 2004 book, *Cities and the Creative Class*, 'urban theorist' Richard Florida equates the 'success' of a city with the it's ability to attract and retain members of the "creative class" – creative professionals who work in various economic sectors and industries. Florida theorizes that regions most attractive to his creative class possess what he calls the "3Ts" of economic development: Technology, Talent and Tolerance. "Talent" is defined as those with a bachelor's degree or above,

⁸ Whyte, Murray, "Soaring rent threatens Sterling Road's creative vibe," *Toronto Star*, January 31, 2016:

<https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/visualarts/2016/01/31/some-sterling-road-artists-facing-steeper-rents-plan-to-move-on.html>

⁹ Atkinson, Rowland, and Bridge, Gary, *Gentrification in a Global Context: The new urban colonialism*. Routledge: London, 2005. p 20.

¹⁰ Fullilove, Dr. Mindy, *Root Shock: How Tearing Up City Neighbourhoods Hurts America, and What We Can Do About It*. New York: New Village Press, 2004, p 11.

¹¹ Slater, Tom, "Gentrification in Canada's Cities: From social mix to 'social tectonics'," in *Gentrification in a Global Context: The New Urban Colonialism*. London: Routledge, 2005, p 55.

and “Tolerance” defined as “openness, inclusiveness, and diversity to all ethnicities, races and walks of life.”¹² According to the National Centre for Education Statistics (NCES) of the United States, in 2009-10, 1,167,480 bachelor’s degrees were conferred to students identifying as white, while 540,004 were granted to students identifying as black, Hispanic, Asian and/or indigenous; this more than 2:1 racial gap increases with Masters and Doctorate degrees.¹³ Though Florida does not specifically address race within his definition of “Talent,” he also avoids mentioning systemic issues that prevent members of racialized communities from accessing higher education--such as high post-secondary tuition fees, or negative experiences with the public education system leading to lower secondary school graduation rates. Florida’s ‘talent’ pool is thus composed of a primarily white middle- and upper-class population. Regarding Tolerance and diversity, Florida explains that “Talent” (i.e. a group of primarily white, middle- and upper-class ‘creatives’) is attracted to the same places as “artists, musicians [and] gay people,”¹⁴ a.k.a. the outsider groups most likely to take advantage of ‘affordable’ rents in pre-gentrified neighbourhoods. In *homegrown: engaged cultural criticism*, critical theorist bell hooks likens this process to “colonization, post-colonial style”:

“...artists aren’t the only marginalized folks controlling real estate. Think about the colonizing role that wealthy white gay men have played in communities of colour; they’re often the first group to gentrify poor and working-class neighbourhoods...And it’s a double-bind, because some of these people could be allies. Some gay white men are proactive about racism, even while being entrepreneurial. But in the end, they take spaces, redo them, sell them for a certain amount of money, while the people who have been there are displaced. And in some cases, the people of colour who are there are perceived as enemies by white newcomers.”¹⁵

¹² Florida, Richard, *Cities and the Creative Class*. London: Routledge, 2005, p 10.

¹³ National Centre for Education Statistics, “Fast Facts: Degrees conferred by Sex and Race” <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=72>

¹⁴ Florida, p 10.

¹⁵ hooks, bell and Mesa-Bains, Amalia, *homegrown: engaged cultural criticism*. Cambridge: South End Press, p 67.

“Influenced by the sweet whispers of Richard Florida and his Creative Class,”¹⁶ Kiera Boulton’s *Truthrz* project takes the form of both research and performance. Using Florida’s concept of the Creative Class as a starting point, the project offers participants what Boulton calls, “gentrification acceptance therapy,” and “grief counseling for the myth of the Creative Class.”¹⁷ Through performative, satirical “truth-telling,” from a booth placed in sites undergoing the process of gentrification, Boulton addresses the level of denial towards notions of gentrification in our own communities, and aims to “motivate artists and community members to work and live in collaboration with one another.”¹⁸

While Florida argues that for a city to achieve economic growth, it must attract a population of the Creative Class, Boulton contends that this notion implies the absence of homegrown creativity, which devalues the talents, knowledge and efforts of the original population; newcomers, “who benefit from the work of the original members of the community raise property prices, [which leads to] financial strain on the community.”¹⁹ Dominant ideologies of progress, exemplified by Florida, often take the form of heralding economic growth while suppressing or silencing the marginalized. In comparison, *Truthrz* encourages young artists to examine their own complicity in the process of gentrification, and aims to remind residents of the importance of a neighbourhood’s shared consciousness.

Continuing on these themes of complicity and mindfulness, *Should I Stay or Should I Go?* a collaborative installation by 10-member²⁰ intergenerational and intersectional feminist-identified art collective Bonerkill, takes the form of a three-part critical thinking exercise. Visitors are first invited to choose and consume one of two

¹⁶ Boulton, Kiera, *Truth Booth* pamphlet, performance ephemera, 2015

¹⁷ Boulton, Kiera, “Art is the New Steal: Appropriating the Hamilton Landscape,” OCAD U thesis paper, 2016, p 2.

¹⁸ Boulton, p 2 & p 13.

¹⁹ Boulton, p 3.

²⁰ The current members of Bonerkill are: Kiera Boulton, Marilyn Fernandes, Ananda Gabo, Ana Guerra, Ashlee Harper, Shaista Latif, Sylvia Limbana, Pamila Matharu, Sofy Mesa and Annie Wong.

“Bonerkill Cultures,” bottles of flavoured kombucha brewed in collaboration with brewmaster/tea sommelier Carol Mark, the mother of collective member Ananda Gabo. In existence since the 1900s, the fizzy, fermented beverage made by fermenting tea with kombucha culture, has in recent years become associated with expensive juice bars and natural food stores owing to its oft-debated health benefits. To brew a batch of kombucha, one requires a rubbery, doughy mass called a ‘scoby’ (or Symbiotic Culture of Bacteria and Yeast)²¹, which acts as the living home for the bacteria and yeast that ferment tea into a tangy, fizzy concoction. Though scobys can be grown, they are often sourced or traded from other home brewers – Bonerkill’s scobys were donated by friends and fellow members of Toronto’s arts community Myung-Sun Kim and Su-Ying Lee. During the brewing process, the scoby must be cared for and ‘fed’ with sugar; scobys are also often referred to as kombucha ‘mothers’ and will grow ‘babies’ with each batch. The care and feeding of scobys during the brewing process can be likened to the transfer of knowledge, as it is passed down through generations. While consuming one of two custom kombucha flavours (*The March of Progress* or *The Burden of Craft*), the consumer is encouraged to consider their “complicit role in the current surge of the rapidly changing urban environ.” How are we, as artists and cultural labourers, situated within the established communities in which we currently work? How is “regeneration” and “prosperity” distributed?²² How does the displacement of communities through gentrification disrupt the generational transfer of cultural knowledge?

While considering these questions, the viewer may move on to the installation’s centerpiece, an abstracted interpretation of a City of Toronto development proposal, painted by artist Yan Wen Chang. In the piece (title), Chang has mimicked the 4’ x 4’ format and bolded headline of ubiquitous municipal informational posters, which, by law, must be posted publicly to inform communities that new development will be taking place. The text is appropriated from the actual development proposal for 99

²¹ Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SCOBY>

²² Bonerkill, *Should I Stay or Should I Go?*, 2016.

Sudbury, a 'social club' and gym located in Toronto's Queen West neighbourhood. Formerly an industrial warehouse, the club is located at a central point between Toronto's highly gentrified Queen West and Liberty Village areas. The artist has changed the now-charged "Development Proposal" headline to, "In loving memory," shifting the proposal's intention from anticipation to memorial, calling upon the viewer to consider their own feelings regarding new constructions; are we optimistic or worried about the future of our city?

The installation is completed with a large black obsidian healing stone, purchased from the Drake General Store. The viewer is asked to spend time with this volcanic stone, known for its qualities of psychic protection and consider an affirmation or meditation to reaffirm their commitment to "1) get rich or die tryin' (American rapper 50 cent) or 2) never selling out and staying real."²³ The stone was purchased at the Drake General Store, an adjunct to the Drake Hotel, a boutique-style hotel, incorporating community events, an expensive restaurant, café; all interwoven with contemporary art. The shop embodies the advent of the modern 'general store,' selling artisanal goods, fragrances, soaps and other sundries goes hand-in-hand with contemporary urban gentrification. The selection of products sold in this style of establishment recall the 'good old days' of hand-crafted, small-batch goods. The Drake's selective motifs of Canadiana like mounties and maple syrup, along with ambiguously spiritual sprays and oils, and an occasional cardboard tee-pee-shaped cat playhouse, mirrors research done by Australian geographer Wendy Shaw, who locates gentrification as a "celebration of whiteness and in its selective appropriation of history, a form of neo-colonialism that excludes competing legitimate voices in the history of many neighbourhoods now experiencing sudden upward social trajectories."²⁴ Many of these products detach spiritual items from their cultures, or present colonial narratives nostalgically, making them palatable and desirable to a

²³ Bonerkill 2016.

²⁴ Atkinson and Bridge, p 12.

primarily white, middle and upper- class consumer base, and in the process erasing indigenous and multicultural histories.

In the same vein as Bonerkill's installation, Sofy Mesa brings forward systematic erasure in public arenas through the appropriation of present cultural trends. In Mesa's ongoing *Episode* series, the artist transcribes portions of episodes of the E! network reality show, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians (KUWTK)* and re-stages them with friends and family in domestic locations (*Episodes 1 & 2* in apartments in Toronto's Regent Park neighbourhood, where Mesa lives currently, and *Episode 3* in her home town of Palomino, Colombia). For the unfamiliar, *KUWTK* follows the lives of wealthy sisters Kim, Kourtney and Khloé Kardashian, their half-sisters Kendall and Kylie Jenner, and 'momager'/matriarch Kris Jenner, and functions as "a perfect commercial for our products," according to the Kardashian sisters in their 2010 autobiographical book, *Kardashian Confidential*.²⁵ Incredibly popular among a diverse range of viewers, the show provides audiences with what author Jo Piazza describes as "aspirational intimacy"²⁶: alongside 'relatable' affairs such as complicated family dynamics and body image issues, we see family members discuss international endorsement deals, and which multi-million dollar lighting is best suited for a multi-million dollar home. For each *Episode*, Mesa has chosen specific moments to be acted out by her peers. In *Episode 1*, two young women playing Khloé and Kim discuss Khloé's anxiety about wearing a two-piece swimsuit (Kim: "Your body in a two-piece would literally be a sensation."). In *Episode 2*, the sisters, played by a group of Mesa's friends in a Regent Park apartment, discuss plastic surgery ("Lips aren't permanent!"), debate Khloé's ideal body weight ("I was wearing black because I was depressed!"), and read gossip blogs on their iPhones. The setting of Regent Park in *Episodes 1* and *2* is especially relevant within the context gentrifying Toronto; since 2009, Toronto Community Housing has been 'revitalizing' the neighbourhood,

²⁵ Kardashian, Kim, Kardashian, Khloé, and Kardashian, Kourtney, *Kardashian Confidential*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2010, p 214.

²⁶ Piazza, Jo, *Celebrity Inc: How Famous People Make Money*. New York: Open Road, 2011, p 102.

replacing buildings containing affordable housing units with mixed-income, mixed-use condominium and rental buildings.²⁷ Longtime Regent Park resident and community worker Sandra Costain points out, “we must remember that at one time the same buildings being bulldozed and criticized now were once considered the answer to the community’s problems. We can’t place too much hope in these buildings.”²⁸ In *Episode 3*, Kim and mother Kris, played by a real mother and daughter, tour Kim’s new house, portrayed by an abandoned concrete residential structure (“Views everywhere!” exclaims ‘Kris’ as she passes through a shelter-less room taken over by wild tropical plants). Rather than mimicking the characters they are playing, the ‘actors’ are asked to bring their own personality and background to each scenario. With *Episodes*, Mesa questions the ‘relatability’ of *KUWTK*. How does meaning change when these moments are appropriated and placed in a new context? What is it that we are aspiring to?

So, where do we go with this knowledge? The works in *What would the community think?* do not present concrete solutions, but rather ask questions about the ways in which those who have access to privilege might use it proactively and mindfully, to engage with issues of displacement and collaborate productively with communities and neighbourhoods. bell hooks writes, “Privilege is not in and of itself bad; what matters is what we do with privilege... Privilege does not have to be negative, but we have to share our resources and take direction about how to use our privilege in ways that empower those who lack it.”²⁹ As artists and institutions, how can we do better?

-Emily Gove

²⁷ Toronto Community Housing, Regent Park Revitalization Plan: <https://www.torontohousing.ca/regentpark>

²⁸ Pitter, Jay in conversation with Costain, Sandra, “Reconsidering Revitalization: The Case of Regent Park,” in *Subdivided: City-Building in an Age of Hyper Diversity*. Toronto: Coach House Press, 2016, p 184.

²⁹ hooks & Mesa-Bains, p 76