



**CURATORIAL ESSAY**  
**A KIND OF RETURN**  
**ALYSSA FEARON**

**WITH INTERVIEWS WITH BISHARA ELMİ & LUTHER KONADU**



Luther Konadu, *Figure as Index*, 2018.

*A Kind of Return* brings together projects by Bishara Elmi and Luther Konadu to offer nuanced reflections on interpersonal relationships within Black communities. Winnipeg-based photographer Luther Konadu takes self-portraits and photographs of close friends and loved ones. The resulting images present the subjects on their own terms and challenge dehumanizing representations that have long been associated with the Black body in photography. Toronto-based artist Bishara Elmi addresses the tension between displacement and belonging within relationships, particularly as it relates to the Black queer and trans experience. Using fabric and still images, Bishara's work argues that the experience of exile and marginalization can occur within the context of an interpersonal relationship, not just from a physical location. At their core, both projects ask: What role can relationships serve for those living in oppressed conditions? How do those individuals find each other and build community? Elmi and Konadu explore their truths of what this means culturally and systemically, while complicating stereotypical and narrow representations of Black communities.

All of Luther Konadu's photographs are part of one work, titled *Figure as Index*, or more specifically, his photographs are fragments of this one work. In the photographs, Konadu's friends, family members, and others who form the artist's

community in Winnipeg, sit for the camera. All of the photographs are in black and white, and while most of the photographs are group shots of five or more individuals, some are also self-portraits of the artist himself. Each subject stares back at the camera, usually with an expressionless, deadpan gaze. There is nothing distinct about what the individuals are wearing (though clearly still contemporary clothing), but part of the intrigue of the photographs is the ordinariness of the subjects. The subjects are all younger people likely in their 20s, part of the generation that has grown up with an abundance of images and visuals in mainstream and social media, where portrayals of Black communities range from Black pain to Black excellence.

In 2017, artist and writer Hannah Black wrote an open letter to the Whitney Biennial to remove Dana Schutz's painting *Open Casket*, with a recommendation to destroy it and not allow it to enter any market or museum.<sup>1</sup> The painting depicts the disfigured corpse of Emmett Till, a young African-American boy who was lynched in Mississippi in 1955. In the letter, Hannah Black goes on to further point out that the practice of depicting Black pain and suffering for profit and fun has been normalized for a long time. The article raises important questions about the representation of Black communities and the ethics of who is given a platform to show this kind



Luther Konadu, *Figure as Index*, 2018.

of work, and why. As such, when Black artists and photographers take control over how their communities are seen and represented, what kind of work do we then see? The photographs of Konadu's *Figure as Index* exist within this larger global context of images and representations of Black communities, but in Konadu's photographs, the depictions are neither sensational nor raw; instead they are personal, intimate, and at times ordinary.

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### ***An Interview with Luther Konadu***

**Alyssa Fearon (AF):** When we talk about representations of Black people, I find there is a tendency to show extremes: either we must all be criminals, or we must be perfect, high-achieving individuals at all times (and be like the Obamas, for example). Neither leaves much room for nuance or reality. Can you tell me about your photographs and the ways in which they address these kinds of representations?

**Luther Konadu (LK):** A lot of the individuals I shoot often tell me how there's nothing happening in my photographs. Some see the sparseness of it as being vulnerable, some like it because they don't have to be doing too much out of the ordinary that puts any unwanted attention on them. They can just be. At this point, I don't

know if the way my photos are and the choices I make are just a natural inclination or if it's intentional. But I like to think it's both. I'm very much intuitively inclined towards the uneventful, but there are touches of performativity to the humdrum-ness in the images. And that certainly can be attributed to wanting to see something else outside of those extreme depictions you mentioned.

**AF:** What are the connections to archiving and documentary work and the work that you are doing?

**LK:** I work through piles of photographs I've been gathering by imaging myself and the same group of people over last couple years. I see that pile as my own personal archive — made from my own discretion.

**AF:** There is a sense of self-determination in the expressions of the subjects in your portraits. Can you tell me about why you're compelled to do this kind of work, and why now?

**LK:** Self-determination first came out of being the most available figure to image. I rely on myself for my own depiction as opposed to leaving it up to someone else. I think I've grown to know the agency in this self-reliance and the possibilities that can come out of it. I also think having access to the right tools allows for the determination of



*What  
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Luther Konadu, *Figure as Index*, 2018.

one's own narrative. In my case, it is the camera. Cameras and other imaging technologies are accessible now more than ever, so it makes it easier to take charge of how you want to appear in the world.

**AF:** Given the fraught history of how Black communities have been represented in photography, how does your work address this history? Does it? And how do you want your work to affect that history? What kind of legacy do you hope your work might offer?

**LK:** History will always favour those who write it and so, by making the work I make, and being in the body that I am in, I'm already making room for myself and my close community within a history that has always preferred to see those like us as mere supplements.

**AF:** When I look at your work, I think about the importance of family – choosing our families and redefining what we mean by “family.” Redefining what we mean by the “Black family” can potentially be a radical act. Is there a level of activism in the act of photographing Black communities?

**LK:** I'd like to stay away from the word “activism.” At least, I won't let it come out of my mouth in relation to my work. What I do is super micro. Sometimes I think making art is so

inconsequential towards the realities we live through. But I can only hope that whatever I make will have some broader positive implication. There's a lot of current conversations about family-creation beyond biology because biology is so limiting in making any sense of one's identity. I think I'm interested in those same conversations. There's something very beautiful about people with a shared collective history finding each other while living in a foreign place. Or finding people, who in some way, are from the same place as you. I think that's what people mean when they use the word ‘solidarity.’

**AF:** Can you tell me about your process and how you go about choosing the subjects for your photographs? And how the scene will look?

**LK:** The individuals in my photographs are just people I know i.e. friends, roommates, former coworkers, their friends, their siblings, their schoolmate, etc. Even if I'm meeting someone for the first time, they likely know someone I know or someone I've previously photographed. I don't think I've photographed a complete stranger. I typically photograph indoors, likely whatever space I have for a studio. I often don't know what I've shot until I go back and look through the photographs. I like to let things happen as they may, although I don't randomly shoot.



Bishara Elmi, *Laurie and Dee*, from the series *The Space Between Us*, 2019.

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For *The Space Between Us*, Bishara Elmi organized a photo shoot of individuals who responded to an open call for participants who identified as Black, trans and queer. The two-day shoot took place in March 2019 at the University of Toronto Scarborough campus. Participants' solo portraits are installed in pairs and arranged in such a way that the gazes of the subjects meet, despite having been photographed separately. The closeness of the photographs suggests an intimate connection between the paired subjects, but the separate framing results in an uneasy distance between the two. For the installation *Toronto Wards 1-25*, samples of dirt from each of Toronto's wards were collected and placed into individual glass jars. *Salt of the Earth* is comprised of a series of sculptures of a full tea set, cast out of dirt. Elmi's practice often deals with questions of exile and displacement within the context of people moving across land and borders, and past work has explored systems and policies that were designed to restrict people's movement across land and access to it. However, with Elmi's work in *A Kind of Return*, the notions of exile and displacement apply to interpersonal relationships, rather than geographic borders, and it is argued that the experience of exile can also be felt within this context. In other words, disenfranchisement from one's own community can occur too.

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### ***An Interview with Bishara Elmi***

**Alyssa Fearon (AF):** I thought I would open up our conversation by asking a few questions about the materials you use and how you came to create the kind of art you do. Can you tell me about your fascination with dirt and why it seems to be a running theme throughout your practice?

**Bishara Elmi (BE):** Dirt is a very loaded [in meaning] material. A lot of the time we don't see it as that. It's also one of the most abundant resources in the world. Dirt also makes up borders, nations, and countries; we also eat [food from] it. We live off of it and we go back into it when we die. And there is the belief in Abrahamic religions that we are [made] of dirt. It's loaded in meaning in those ways. My fascination with dirt started when I was a kid in Somalia and my uncle would teach me the English alphabet. He would take a stick and scratch the alphabet into sand. Also, as a child when I first came to Canada as a refugee, I used to sometimes eat dirt. I think I was lacking in trace minerals. It's common for kids to eat dirt, but there's something about that act of internalizing Canada literally. More recently, I got into gardening and it helps my mental health. Dirt is incredibly healing.



Bishara Elmi, detail, *Toronto Wards 1-25*, 2019.

**AF:** I know that your practice generally deals with concepts of exile, for this project you deal with those concepts as they relate to personal relationships. Can you tell me about your approach to dealing with those themes in this work?

**BE:** Katherine McKittrick [in *Demonic Grounds*] talks a lot about space and place, and for me that's something that is to be considered and similar to what I want to say. I have multiple definitions of [the word] exile: exile as a social condition, exile as a barring in ways that makes a subject or group of subjects second class citizens; also queerness is an exile, [so is] trans-ness, Blackness, and the African diaspora is an exile too. Within the African diaspora, Black queer trans-ness is also an exile. Not that Black people are more homophobic than other groups, but it's that we have all internalized the White supremacist, cis-hetero patriarchal default. Definitely an othering happens. I also consider disability and mental illness an exile. You are in a society, but simultaneously not. You exist within this space, but you're also excluded from those places.

**AF:** d'bi.young did an interview called "we tellin' stories yo" and she makes a link between the construct of gender and storytelling (i.e. the stories we tell, the stories we believe, and the stories we've been told).<sup>2</sup> I'm interested in this

link in your project as well. How does your project challenge the stories that impact our bodies, our genders, sexualities, and the ways in which we relate to each other within Black communities? Maybe begin by sharing why you felt it was important to highlight the Black trans and queer community in this project.

**BE:** I have similar ideas to d'bi. The whole world is ideas and stories. Capitalism, White supremacy, patriarchy – these all started out as stories. And then other people bought into them, or if they didn't they were killed or oppressed. And then the ones who agreed on those stories put systems in place to make those stories solid. And so we all tell stories. We tell systemic stories, but we also tell personal ones. It was important to locate this within my practice and the theme – I always locate exile within the context of relationships. It's important to tell this specific story of Black trans and queer [relationships], in order to talk about how we create community with each other across the African diaspora.

**AF:** Going back to the idea of relationships, I started out thinking about this show with only considering families and relationships as sources of positivity in our lives – which they can be, but the reality is that these relationships can also be estranged or fraught. Your project speaks to this reality in a poetic and nuanced way. How does



Bishara Elmi, detail, *Salt of the Earth*, 2017.

this specifically relate to the Black trans and queer experience?

**BE:** A lot of us [Black trans and queer folks] have difficult relationships with our families, or no relationships, and that's another kind of exile as well. On top of the exile that already exists from society. It's important for me to tell this story, because yeah, shit is depressing sometimes, but it's also loving, soft and tender. It's a story that's not often told. So maybe in me putting this story out into the world, it will inspire other stories like this.

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#### ENDNOTES

1. Alex Greenberger, "‘The Painting Must Go’: Hannah Black Pens Open Letter to the Whitney about Controversial Biennial Work," *ArtNews*, March 21, 2017, <http://www.artnews.com/2017/03/21/the-painting-must-go-hannah-black-pens-open-letter-to-the-whitney-about-controversial-biennial-work/>.
2. Paul Watkins, "we tellin' stories yo": An Interview with d'bi.young anitafrika, *Improv Community*, August 8, 2013, [http://www.improvcommunity.ca/sites/improvcommunity.ca/files/research\\_collection/1074/we\\_tellin\\_stories\\_transcript.pdf](http://www.improvcommunity.ca/sites/improvcommunity.ca/files/research_collection/1074/we_tellin_stories_transcript.pdf).

This essay accompanies *A Kind of Return*, works by Bishara Elmi and Luther Konadu, at the Doris McCarthy Gallery from May 4 - June 22, 2019.

*A Kind of Return* is a Featured Exhibition in the 2019 Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival.

Alyssa Fearon is a curator, educator and arts manager currently based on Treaty 2 territory (Brandon, Manitoba), where she is Curator of the Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba. Raised in Scarborough, Ontario, Fearon actively seeks new ways of organizing artistic projects within communities that have not traditionally been sanctioned as places of creativity and innovation. She has organized a range of projects, from large-scale performances by international artists to community-based youth artist residency programs. In 2018, Alyssa Fearon curated the inaugural Scarborough zone of Nuit Blanche Toronto.

COVER IMAGE: Bishara Elmi, *Cynn*, from the series *The Space Between Us*, 2019.

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