

The Henceforward Episode 23

“How Can I Talk About This Violence Without Being Violent?” An Interview with Belinda Kazeem-Kaminski and Naomi Rincón Gallardo

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Eve: Aang aang. This is Eve Tuck, and this is The Henceforward, a podcast about connections between Indigenous and Black life on Turtle Island. Here we come to the table to discuss settler colonialism and anti-blackness but more, to imagine shared futures and the practices of theory and care that it will take to get there, to get elsewhere.

Sefanit: Hello, everyone. Welcome back to our new episode of The Henceforward podcast. My name is Sefanit, and for most of you listeners, I am a familiar voice. I'm someone who has appeared on the podcast before. I'm a Black Eritrean woman who lives in Toronto and is a PhD student at this time at the University of Toronto.

Sigrid: Hello, everyone. My name is Sigrid. I'm actually a new voice on the podcast, also a PhD student here at U of T. I am first generation to Canada and of Eastern European background, and I'm really privileged to be here.

Sefanit: This episode is being recorded at OISE, the Faculty of Education at the University of Toronto which is on land that has been home to Indigenous people since time immemorial. This is the land of the Huron-Wendat, the Haudenosaunee, and the Mississaugas of the Credit River, and today we have the pleasure of talking to two artists, Naomi Rincón Gallardo and Belinda Kazeem-Kaminski.

Sigrid: Welcome, Belinda and Naomi.

Belinda: Thank you.

Sigrid: Thank you for being here with us today. We would love if you could start talking a little bit about yourselves and how you have journeyed to this point in your work.

Belinda: Hi, my name is Belinda Kazeem-Kaminski. I am many things. I would say I'm a writer and an artist, a mother of a soon-eight-year-old and a former lecturer at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna. I studied International Development and wrote my diplomat thesis about Bell Hooks' Engaged Pedagogy and the relation of theory and practice.

I always wanted to be an artist, but I never dared to go to the selection exams. I never took this test. So I would say I'm a late bloomer when it comes to practicing art. It's only since 2013 that I started to work independently on my own artistic career. Since 2015, I'm also a candidate in a PhD program at the Academy of Fine

Arts. It's a PhD that is based on art-based research, and of course my theoretical interests also inform my artistic work.

Naomi: I'm Naomi Rincón Gallardo. I'm a visual artist, and I'm an educator and a cultural worker. I studied painting in Mexico City and then I did my Master's in Education in a program that is called Education, Culture, Language and Identity, in Goldsmiths in London. I'm currently doing my PhD at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, and I position myself as a queer feminist of color yearning for decolonial futures.

Sefanit: So, both of you use art in different ways as a tool of resistance. In what ways would you say this medium is different than other forms, and what does art make possible for you?

Naomi: I think that this practice can contribute to shape political imagination by different means, those means include, for me, magic, humor, eroticism, desire, fantasy, absurdity. You're actually opening a wide range of emotions and reflections into the scene of research. I do think of art as a way of doing twisted pedagogies, provoking thoughts and emotions with certain delay and to be processed in a different way, beyond the exclusive way of reason.

Belinda: I think your question reminds me of a line in Bell Hook's Engaged Theory where she says, "I came to theory because I was hurting. The pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend, to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted the hurt to go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing."

I think the same goes for me in my approach to arts. Images, representations and words have a very strong impact on me, on us; and to start and create my own images, representations, to write my own text in a way that were not exclusively governed by how I was supposed to write in academia, I think this made it possible for me to talk about my feelings and the pain I felt in other ways. It gave me more possibilities to do that.

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Also, when I started to experience that I'm not the only one feeling like this or thinking about these things and that what I'm feeling doesn't have to do with me being somehow wrong or not good enough, then this was a very empowering moment to understand that what you may be experiencing on an individual level is shared by others and then you understand that there's something wrong about the structure in which you're living. I think this really helped me a lot.

To understand that, then I also understood that it's important to use my artistic practice as a way of sharing because I do believe that we have to share and to

communicate in order to cope and also to heal and live this fight. That's how I see the way I use art.

Naomi: I would like to add something. I think that art is part of a wider struggle over men in production, especially when there's a redeem of horror that is engineering a set of conflicts that I need to silence people. I think art, it's also a way to break silence.

Sigrid: Perhaps you could talk a little bit about your intended audience, who is it, and how do you tailor your work so that it reaches your intended audience?

Belinda: I think I ended the last answer with same, that I believe that we have to share and communicate as a way of coping and healing and living. So, first and foremost, I would say I talk to people of African descent. I'm also talking in solidarity to people of color that are not of African descent because that's also very important for me.

Although I'm always also very cautious of the term, people of color, although I often use it because I think we have to be well aware of the differences between this group and the various negotiations, so it's also important for me, but, yeah, so this would be my audience.

I want to reach out because I feel a connection. I feel a sense of solidarity, and I'm focusing on this group of people that knows all too well, white supremacist processes have been made other, being turned into a spectacle, of being made to feel like you're an alien.

Everything I'm saying in my works is not new. It's not something that I have invented and just singled out, but I often have the feeling that it's things that have to be said in public because I think that, often, we tend to -- I don't think that what we experience release just our own private problem. I think it can really help to understand that other people also feel like this, and that's why I think it's important to share this.

I think it's important to share this also in order to remind us that we are not what white imagination wants us to be. As I see my artworks as a form of an invitation, I also have to make sure that I use images and words that are thoughtful in a sense that I don't repeat a violence that is anyway already there. I know that's sometimes also hard because I'm talking about violent processes, so it's hard to think of how can I talk about this violence without being violent?

What I mean is, for example, that now in European ethnographic museums, you will have this trend that they will invite artists. Artists will go into their archives and work with the stuff. Then you come to these exhibitions that are intended to criticize colonial practices, but what happens is that regimes of looking, regimes being made other are repeated in these exhibitions and then you experience these flashbacks when you visit these exhibitions because it's happening once again.

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You're objectified because people are not even thinking that people of color might go to these exhibitions because they are just producing this for white people. It's different if I go to these exhibitions. I relate very differently to this material. Those are things I'm talking about. I don't want to be violent. I really want to invite my audience to think and discuss with me, go further with me. That's why I have to watch how I do it.

Naomi: I'd also have an audience in mind. It resembles this notion by Cherrie Moraga of Queer Aztlan, that we make room and we make place for eccentric coalitions of queers, racialized, Indigenous, Black, mix of both people, paperless people, disabled people who could meet in order to trace signs for alternative futures. It's not necessarily that you find your ideal audience every time you present your work, but I think it's import to relocate oneself whenever one arrives at a different context because every displacement brings new sets of desires and anxieties that shape one's position.

There are specific roles and narratives available that suit certain subjects and not others, and I think that these roles are not only individual choices, that these roles respond to structural conditions. I think one has to be aware of that specially because sometimes artistic practice, is intention with the possibility of becoming a spectacle and your work might be commodified. So I think it's always important to remind one's self, how to shake that tendency to be commodified, how to bring discomfort and how to, as Belinda says, how to produce or how to look for an oppositional gaze.

Belinda: It's difficult sometimes, no?

Naomi: Yes, it is.

Belinda: Sometimes also I'm getting this, like you present a specific work, but you really have the feeling that it's quite uncomfortable, the things that it says. Specific group of people should be really uncomfortable. Then they approach it and say, "Wow, I really liked it a lot." There's always this moment where, no, you're not supposed to like this. Then I know that maybe I've not done enough. This was not good enough. If someone can then come to me and say, "I like this," I'm like, let me think again.

Sefanit: Yeah, or maybe they completely missed the point, and that also happens. I think there are certain audiences who aren't used to things just not being for them. Therefore, they, so easily, are able to say, "Oh, I really enjoyed this piece." Then that's the part where you say, "You're supposed to be uncomfortable." You're not supposed to understand this in the same way. I think there's something also important about bringing that up.

Sigrid: I think maybe it's sometimes it's a self-defense mechanism when they feel uncomfortable and they have to explain it to themselves. It's called part of the artwork, but it's not meant to be that way, I think.

Naomi: Or you might have someone in the audience saying, "I would like to have it. Where can I find it? Can I download it? Is it online? Is it available? Can I appropriate it?"

Sigrid: Well, speaking of your work, recently both of you had film shown at the Indigenous Film Festival called "State Violence and Indigenous Resistance." Naomi, you screened Formaldehyde Trip, a speculative fiction comprising of a cycle of songs and videos dedicated to the murdered activist, Bety Cariño. Can you tell us a little bit about this work and the inspiration behind it?

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Naomi: The Formaldehyde Trip is a cycle of songs and videos that are organized in a performative screening, and these nine videos are dedicated to a Mixtec modern activist who dedicated her life to the opposition of extraction projects in Mexico, transnational projects. She was pretty much influenced by the Zapatista movement.

She participated in struggles against mining, transnational companies that were contaminating the land and the water of Indigenous communities. She was killed in 2010 in a paramilitary ambush when she was taking part in a humanitarian caravan to San Juan Copala in Oaxaca, Mexico.

I decided to dedicate what I consider an outpouring altar that's trying to activate her ghost. In The Formaldehyde Trip, I imagine her journey to the underworld where she will find companion with witches, with warriors, with creatures that are inspired by Mesoamerican cosmologies, and they are altogether trying to prepare a ceremony or a rebirth party.

In this narrative, I'm playing the role of a storyteller, and I'm taking the form of my animal spirit. This animal, it's not even an animal, it's the larva of a salamander that is called axolotl, that is an amphibian from Xochimilco Lake in Mexico City, who has the ability to regenerate its limbs and organs, but also who never reaches adulthood, so it maintains its larval features. It has, as well, a mythical dimension in Mesoamerican cosmologies. It used to be a deity.

This magical creature in The Formaldehyde Trip is already preserved in formaldehyde so that allows me to travel over different temporalities because I'm frozen in a state in which I'm not alive but I'm not yet dead. I'm trying to play with this nonlinear way of weaving narratives. Also, I think that being preserved in formaldehyde is a metaphor for working within the academy.

Sigrid: Maybe I would ask, could you maybe explain why being an axolotl in formaldehyde is like being in the academy?

Naomi: I was referring to the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna where I'm now studying. I was thinking also what it is to be the other in a mainly white context. When I first arrived in Vienna, I went to the Natural History Museum, and I saw this axolotl in formaldehyde, isolated, and I really identified with this creature. For me, being an axolotl in formaldehyde was a way to be the other within a necrophiliac context of knowledge production.

Sigrid: There's one other realm.

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Naomi: They have one in --

Belinda: Two.

Naomi: -- in the world, yes.

Sefanit: Oh, yeah, in the Royal Ontario Museum, yeah. You were saying that, yeah, apparently. It made me think of the expression of fish out of water, and how that's an expression for a fish that's not where it's meant to be or in disarray because you're not in your regular habitat. I know it's not a fish. It's a larvae. Almost the formaldehyde seems closer to water, but it's still not the habitat. It's not where it belongs.

Sigrid: Which is really interesting if you think about it within the context of an academy, in my opinion.

Naomi: You can also trace a story of colonization intertwined with a story of knowledge production as a same project. Why is an axolotl in formaldehyde in a European Museum of Natural History? There's no colonization without a project of modernity.

Sefanit: I think that connection between knowledge production and colonization is something, implicitly or explicitly, I think you subvert in your work, Belinda, and so I think that leads us then into a question for you around your short film, *Unearthing. In Conversation*. I was wondering if you could please share a little bit about that film.

Belinda: *Unearthing. In Conversation* was a project started with an encounter I had with the photographs of Austrian-Czech missionary, writer, photographer, Paul Schebesta. Just that you know in which time frame he lived, he was born in 1887 and died in 1967.

I saw these photographs in a museum in Frankfurt, in an exhibition. I was really struck by that image because I -- I mean, I have this interest in ethnographic

museums, I have this interest in ethnographic material, but I had never before seen -- I never before had such an interaction where I felt this violence so strongly.

So, when I came back home, I started to research on this guy, and I wanted to know more about him. I also went to the National Library, and I found tons of his images. Because Paul Schebesta was very interested in people that are smaller than average, so he traveled to specific regions where people lived. He measured them. He recorded their voices. He took photographs, stuff like that.

This image that I encountered was taken approximately around the 1920s in the then still Belgian colony, Congo. What interested me when I saw this image was not only experiencing this violence, but I really had a feeling of a flashback. I totally was able to relate with the photographed man that was -- I mean, in the image you saw Paul Schebesta and he had his arm stretched out, and under his arm was a Black man. This stretching the arm out is a pose that you will find a lot in ethnographic material because it's like a possibility to measure the height, to just show the height of a person just by stretching your arm out.

When I saw this and I looked at the eyes of the person, I immediately was able to relate, and I experienced a flashback. It was like I knew exactly what this was about. I knew exactly how this must have felt. Although I have not experienced this past, of course, but still I have somehow, I would say. This was the first time that I was really able to put my finger on that and to really name it. Because, of course, when we experience racism, it's a re-staging.

There's this book by Grada Kilomba who is an author and an artist that I really like. She lives in Germany, and she wrote this book. It's called, "Plantation Memories: Episodes of Everyday Racism," where she describes these racist encounters as a re-staging of a colonial past or the past of the plantation. It's like you always push back to the plantation whenever this happens. So, that's exactly what I felt.

Then I started to work with these images because I had the feeling that I have to do something. I have to somehow do I don't know what. I was, by that time, still deeply influenced by representation theories, so I was thinking that there might this one thing that I could do to the images that would change the story. Of course, you can see in my video, I tried and I tried, and I didn't come up with something like this.

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When I started covering the people, I was thinking, yeah, that's good because now people can't look at the images anymore the way that Paul Schebesta was intending people to look at the material. Then again, you cover our people, and you take away the possibility of them confronting you with their case. So, it always went like that. I cut them out, but what happens when I cut them out? It's like I make invisible what was there.

I think when I was really stuck but I still knew that I had to do something, that's when I started to write, and I really like this combination of visuals and texts. It's another layer, and I have different possibilities with the different media. So, I started to write, and what happened while writing was that I thought of my writing, of my text as a conversation with the people that I depicted. Because I felt a need to do something for them, I also felt a need to explain to them why I had done different things and why I still hadn't come up with some solution, why I'm still failing.

That's basically what you see in the video. You see me in an empty cinema space. Some people might think it's empty, others might not. I'm talking to people, and I'm showing what I've done with my images. That's basically it.

Sigrid: Naomi, in our conversation outside of this interview, you have discussed how depictions of the future are different in Mexican science fiction. You compared it to the way that taken for granted science fiction often depicts the future as a technologically advanced place of progress. Can you discuss that difference?

Naomi: Yes. I do like science fiction, Mexican science fiction from the '60s and '70s. In other countries, the '70s and '60s were times for thinking about the future, but in Mexican science fiction, the narratives are not based on the belief of progress. They rather involve a lot of humor, narratives full of absurdities, fantasies and cheap props. In that sense, I think Mexican science fiction is closer to carnival imagery or to folk parades. That's a playful element of it that I really like. Although they are not radical at all, but they are still really funny, and I usually work with humor.

I see a potential of putting together science fiction and the colonial epistemologies. Because I think that if we think about futurity, we can only think about the survival of the planet if we deeply listen to Indigenous knowledge because they've managed to survive because of their ancient knowledge to connect with nature, with matter, with other forms of life, with animals, with plants, with minerals. If we don't look towards Indigeneity, then we're lost. There's no possible future.

Also, I think, entrenched in their cosmologies are the notions of the co-presence of different temporalities. I think this way of being able to travel in different times, it's already there, so there's a nice connection between science fiction and Indigenous futurity.

Sefanit: Belinda, you described your process of trying to decide what to do with the images you're working with, as one that involves caring for those photographed. We love this idea of talking to people through time and space, and, Naomi, you just talked about this traveling through temporal spaces. So we want to imagine yourselves as already the ancestors to future generations, and you're in conversation with Black and Indigenous peoples who are not yet here. What would you say to them, or what do you want to say?

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Belinda: I think I would say we are, we have been, and we'll always be, despite. Even if you are alone, no one that looks like you to connect to, keep in mind that there are and that there have been and will be many of us. There will be many also after you and that you can connect to the past and the future always.

I think I would also say, take the frustration, take the pain, take the anger, the feeling of being lost and wrong, and connect by creating. Creativity can take so many different ways and forms. It can be the way you prepare food for people. It can be the way you write a story, the way you listen to someone in need, the way you stand on the street in a rally, the way you hug a loved one, so it can be so many things.

I think it is also very important to take care of yourself. I would really underline that, take care of yourself, watch your energy and resources, take time to recharge, to be on your own, to be with others, to communicate with your ancestors, to listen to the silence. That's what I would say.

Naomi: I tried to answer this question before you asked it, in a song I've written for The Formaldehyde Trip. I will just quote the song. I will just swap between Spanish and English because it's the way that the song is written.

How do you cope?
Tu como le haces?
Talk back
Write back
Take back energy
Flourishing planet!
Prehistoria del milenio zurdo
Global South
Insumisas interseccionales
Puentea los abismos
Close the gaps
Learn to see
From the cracks
Flourishing planet
Ecologias del cuidado
Inter-conocimientos
Pepenadoras de saberes subyugados
How do you cope?
Tu como le haces?
Talk back
Write back
Take back energy.

Sigrid: What are some things we and our audience can expect from you? Do you have any projects that we should look forward to? How can we keep in touch, and how can our audience keep in touch with you?

Belinda: I think I'm a very lucky person at this moment of my life because I go to scholarship, it started in December, so now I have three years to just focus on the things I really love to do. I really want to go on with my research. I'm slowly starting to conceptualize the next video. I think it's going to be a video again. Although it was my first video, and I really have to say that when you take photographs and you write text and it's just you, it's very easy. What am I saying? Your Formaldehyde Trip, it involved so many people. Everyone needed to talk to you. Only my 30-minute film was like a lot.

Yeah, I think I want to go on with the next film, and the next film will be dedicated to a group of Black people that was exhibited in Vienna, in the Viennese Prater which is an amusement park, in the years 1896 to 1897, so I want to concentrate on that. There are also, now that I've been looking at my older works, I tend to leave my old works sometimes in ruins like abandoned babies, so I think I'm also going to go back and revisit some of the works and update.

Actually right now, I'm just trying to put together my website. It's just going to be belindakazeem.com. You can already find some things, but it's going to be updated in coming weeks.

Naomi: I'm, at the moment, cooking up a new project. I'm trying to think in a nonhuman entity who wants revenge. I'm working now in the context of Zacatecas, Mexico where 48% of the territory was sold to transnational mining projects, so that comes with a lot of proper engineering of conflicts involving enforced displacements, the contamination of waters, the contamination of land, assassination, femicides, children's blood now is full of lead, disappearances, et cetera.

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So, within that context, which would be just paralyzing, I'm trying to imagine a force full of rage and that is hungry for revenge. I think looking at different Mesoamerican cosmologies where their goddess who is goddess of earth, they do not resemble human features necessarily, but they do have vagina dentata. There's this vagina with teeth. There's this whole idea of mining as raping, as raping nature. So I want to explore this idea of vagina dentata, of an entity who wants revenge against mining projects.

I will leave the axolotl for a while, let it rest, but I'm now taking another animal spirit which is a hummingbird who's actually migrating from Alaska, all the way down to Mexico. It usually goes to reproduce in Mexican desert, but now is threatened with extinction because of this contamination of the landscape. I think that will be now the animal who will come with me in this project.

Sefanit: Okay, those are all the questions. I don't know if either of you have final notes or anything you want to say before we -- anything you want to return to?

Belinda: I want to take the opportunity to thank Dr. Eve Tuck who was very, very generous and brought us here and guided us to come here and to share our works. I also want to thank all the other people involved here, Marie. I want to say thank you to you, of course, Sefanit. Thank you to Moira Hille. I'm sure there are many, many more people that I should thank but that I forgot to mention now. They should be assured that they are in my heart, and I really, really want to say a heartfelt thank you. I really had a very good time here. Thank you very much.

Naomi: I can just join your thanks. Yeah, thank you all for having us. It's been fantastic.

Sefanit: Thank you for being here.

Sigrid: Yeah.

Sefanit: Yeah. I can't necessarily speak on behalf of everyone, but I'm going to attempt to in this moment, and we've just been so grateful to have you both here with us and been so grateful to have you share your work with us and your thoughts with us. Even your thinking processes of how you come to your work has been so inspiring and insightful. For myself, I know it's something that's going to stay with me as I continue to do my own personal work and something I'm sure I'm going to continue to learn from. I'm just so grateful for both of you, and I am so happy that we got to have you here in Toronto for a week, but also have you here on the episode of The Henceforward to have more people learn about your work and all the wonderful things you're doing. Also, you are both very wise ancestors.

Sigrid: Yeah, thank you so much for being here.

Belinda: Thank you.

Naomi: Thank you.

Eve: The Henceforward, Indigenous and Black life on Turtle Island.

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