

# **Michèle Pearson Clarke**

## PARADE OF CHAMPIONS

JUNE 5 – JUNE 28, 2015

Ryerson Image Centre  
Student Gallery



# A Destitute Grief

by Ricky Varghese

"There are things you can't do – like write letters to a part of yourself. To your feet or hair. Or Heart."

- Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*

"The grief we carry, anybody's grief, is exactly the weight of a sleeping child."

- Anne Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*

Grief is necessarily an unruly thing – it knows no time that can contain it, no space into which it can be relegated or cordoned off. It betrays restraint; it belies constraint. It is neither sacred nor profane as far as experiences go, and conceivably there is no easy salve for it, either in the form of conceptualizing a version of the divine that might help one grieve with apparent greater resolve or, on the other end, within the seeming comfort of a rhetorical statement such as "There is no God!" uttered in the face of that which offers one cause for grief. In a manner of speaking, it leaves, it would appear, room only for the uncanny, that most deeply personal and significantly intimate experience with oneself – a sense of being alone together with one's sense of sorrow, with one's sense of desiring to lament that which causes one to grieve. It leaves the griever in ruins: fragmented, disoriented, longing. It leaves the griever irreducibly destitute, poorer in a sense, wanting for what was lost.

How, then, might we think of grief with regards to its capacity to be represented? How can grief's destitution, its poverty, be rendered? How can its almost incommensurable devastation of the self, one's own self, be shown when that very same devastation and destitution – even a sense of it – is what renders it difficult even to be imaginable? Further to this, how can

we negotiate a representation of grief when oftentimes it is expected to happen in the private sphere; how might we lift the shroud over personal grief, allow it to exist both as a private experience and, as well, permit it to breathe a little easier within the space and place of the public, the community as such, and the social? What would it mean for grief to be revealed, not as spectacle, but as experience? What would it mean to be recognized for one's grief, in one's grief, and see oneself as possibly recognizable in the grief that one might share with another?

Grief, while it could be conceived of as universal, as a universal category of experience and historicity, might also have a sense of the intensely personal attached to it, something that gives it a feeling akin to one's own skin, the shape and form of one's own body, the weight and density of one's own flesh, a textured history, an affective and affect-ed sense of intimate connectedness to the lost love object being grieved. Perhaps we might take this a step further by considering what it might mean to imagine grief as being raced and queered and existing outside normatively universalized time and space. This is what Michèle Pearson Clarke's provocation, her three-channel video installation, seems to make possible – it imagines black queer grief amidst a sea of impossible-to-represent-but-still-represented instances of misrepresentations and misrecognitions. Centred on the grief that arrives at the experience of losing one's mother, Clarke's visual text gestures at one approach to think of grief as both plausible and representable, one such approach to rendering the impossible, at least slightly, possible – that impossible task of writing a letter of sorts, as Arundhati Roy suggested, to a part of one's self.

Perhaps as an unconscious and unintentional response, a surreptitious contravention of sorts, to such spectacularized spectacles by which blackness is represented,



*Parade of Champions* (Karen's son, Jelani), 2015, digital video still



*Parade of Champions* (Irene's son, Chy), 2015, digital video still

is oft-times deemed representable, as in the case of such ill-conceived aesthetic endeavours as Brett Bailey's controversial *Exhibit B* and amidst the demanding and dissenting voices – demanding of ethics, dissenting in the name of ethics – that form the clarion call for social, civil, and political justice as in the case of the now well-known *Black Lives Matter* movement, Clarke's *Parade of Champions* poignantly and movingly attempts to rewrite the script of and for black pain. Part eulogy, part lamentation, part poem, part love letter to the dead and the remembered past, and part gesture to both personal healing and that of the other, Clarke colours within the margins of the negative space created by loss and filled in by grief's affectations, an uncommon portrait of blackness that both eludes her subjects from being rendered as spectacles to be gazed at and simultaneously makes public an intimate form of grief-stricken pain often exiled to the presumed

sanctity of the private sphere. By privileging vulnerability, as an ethics of and for psychical healing in the face of intimate loss, Clarke gives a different image of what it means to endure and survive this loss and the grief that is incumbent to – and forms an affinity with – it.

Trained initially as a social worker, in *Parade of Champions*, Clarke effectually mobilizes a technique and ethic of care in relation to her artistic practice and more specifically with regards to her subjects, three black queer-identified Torontonians, namely Chy Ryan Spain, Jelani Ade Douglas, and Simone Dalton, and draws from her respective encounters with each of them a set of nuanced and interspersed narratives regarding both maternal affinity and the loss of that relational bond. Despite, or precisely because of it being autobiographical – to the extent that the work acted as an extension to Clarke's own coming to terms with the death of her beloved mother





*Parade of Champions* (Esther's daughter, Simone), 2015, digital video still

– what marks the installation is the compelling negotiation of both what is present and absent in the text itself.

Clarke, herself, is never present in the video – neither in the physical and embodied sense nor in the sense of the prompting authorial voice of the interviewer, behind the scenes, leading and negotiating the intricacies of the remarkable discourse regarding grief and loss being produced by her subjects. However, the text under her directorial hand stages a self-portrait as much as it stages the varied portraits of others who have experienced this similarly devastating loss. Further to this, while the embodied presences of her three subjects are felt and are what one, the viewer, experiences in the three channels projected as three wall-sized images, we do not see these subjects physically speaking; rather the viewer only hears their interspersed remarks in the form of delicate voiceovers to the three channels. She offers her

subjects room to speak the fragile nature of their respective grief.

It is a deeply incisive presentation precisely because rather than physically representing speech as a presence, speech is presented as an absent presence, or even as a present absence, in the form and shape their respective narratives take in how they remember their mothers and the ways by which they have each experienced and negotiated the grief that came with their mothers' passing. That loss, or rather the objects of that loss, their respective mothers, also act as unending absent presences that haunt what the viewer is asked to witness.

Implementing both the techniques that inform the making of a staged documentary and situating the presentation of her subjects amidst the long history of portraiture, the installation exists somewhere between being a documentary – a visual document and an aural archive of feelings regarding loss – and a portrait of black

queer pain. One might be reminded of that significant and now famous question that literary and cultural theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak posed: Can the subaltern speak? One might, as I would like to endeavour to do here, rework that query by asking, can the subaltern speak grief or, even more specifically, can the subaltern grieve? And, if so, then who, if anyone, might listen or be called upon to listen to that grieving other? It is into this constellation that mixes in equal measures remembrance, commemoration, and witness that Clarke invites her viewer to partake and participate in. Black queer grief is given the time and space to both listen to itself and be, possibly, listened to.

By creating a three-walled room, with the walls serving as screens onto which the images of her seated subjects are projected, she quite literally makes room for their grief. Effectively minimal in style, presenting their silent bodies in sparsely decorated spaces and seated facing Clarke's camera in various styles reminiscent of the genre of portraiture, while simultaneously allowing their voiceovers to speak to their respective losses, Clarke envelops her viewer within the texture of her subjects' voices; their voices fill up the literal space of the installation such that it becomes more than a "mere" visual experience, but, as well, an experience of the sound of remembering, the voice of grieving. In this gesture, what the viewer is made to bear witness to is not only the physicality of the body, but also the ephemeral voice of a subject grieving what is, at its heart, an ungrievable loss. In this gesture, too, the viewer is held, swaddled as though in the manner of a sleeping child, in their grief.

Having come out at varying times in their lives and having had their mothers respond and relate to their coming out in varying ways, what Chy, Jelani, and Simone share is an inexplicable feeling that despite all else, their mothers (still) loved them. In a way, Clarke's visual text acts to

bind them in their commemoration of that loss to one another and to herself. She makes room to measure the weight of that loss within the words that come from their remembrances. The document acts as a way to remember against a forgetting that seems always on the edge of occurring, always around this or that proverbial corner of one's life. This frightening persistence and insistence of forgetting is so evocatively captured in the words of one of the subjects during the course of their remarks:

I think the hardest part of the grieving process has been not being able to connect with my mother as I thought I would have been able to...I often hear stories of people that say just talk to her, she's there with you, you can talk to her... [but] I have this sense of nothingness, and it frightens me because I don't, I have difficulty remembering what she sounded like, and that feels crazy to me...I just, I'm, I'm constantly trying to find where she is, in this life, in this present moment, and I'm not seeing her. And it's the one thing, it's the one thing that I want.

In writing this, I had to recognize that I was writing a text about an affect or a feeling of grief that was still other to me, that was still distant to me. My mother is still alive and the only way I can imagine her passing is in realizing how impossible it is to imagine it and how unbearable it is to even conceive of someday having to search my memory to remember how she sounded or the gait of her walk, the way she smiled or the smell of her. And yet, one might write, as I have attempted to do here, already in anticipation of that loss and of all, as Clarke elsewhere has suggested, that might remain left

unsaid between us.<sup>1</sup> If such a text is a gesture at remembering against forgetting, a hopeful gesture of having hope against hope, then such remembering might be a way to live with and alongside that most impossible sort of grief. In such grief, the subject both loses themselves and also recognizes what they might experience as inexplicable loss itself and as an irreparable sort of destitution.

## **Biography**

Ricky Varghese received his PhD (2014) in Sociology in Education from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. His research interests extend across the fields of psychoanalytic theory, aesthetics, art criticism and film theory. He serves as an advisory editor for *Drain: A Journal of Contemporary Art and Culture* and has most recently guest edited a special issue of the journal on the theme of the "ruin." Professionally trained as a social worker, he works as a psychoanalytic psychotherapist in private practice in Toronto.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a reference to Michèle Pearson Clarke's earlier work *All That is Left Unsaid* (2014), a short video rendered as an elegy to her mother.

**Michèle Pearson Clarke**

Trinidadian (b.1973)

*Parade of Champions*

2015

HD video (looped)

23:50 min.

Participants            KAREN'S SON, JELANI ADE DOUGLAS  
                              IRENE'S SON, CHY RYAN SPAIN  
                              ESTHER'S DAUGHTER, SIMONE DALTON

Camera                 JORDAN KAWAI  
Colourist               BLANCA MARCELA LÓPEZ  
Sound Edit & Mix      ROBERT E. GARFINKLE

Ryerson Image  
Centre Staff            GAELLE MOREL  
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                              VALÉRIE MATTEAU

Installation            ERIC GLAVIN  
                              JOHN VERHAEVEN

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