



The Kit Changemakers

Our 2023 list of trailblazing Canadians is here! In this special double issue, we celebrate eight inspiring people working in media, medicine, fashion and film to make space for the next generation of superstars

Profiles by Briony Smith

Photography by Claudine Baltazar

1

Lainey Lui

Canada's favourite gossip columnist is 50, and ready to write her next chapter. Renée Tse gets the scoop

Lainey Lui is a trailblazer, no question. Over the past decade, she's become a mainstay of Canadian entertainment media, putting her commitment to Asian-Canadian representation in the spotlight as co-host of *The Social*; as a correspondent for *Etalk*; and as a widely read celebrity writer on her site, *LaineyGossip.com*. Across her platforms, Lui highlights her pride in her Chinese culture in moments big and small, whether that's sharing her Lunar New Year traditions or explaining her obsession with a Hong Kong idol

during a debate on Canada's number 1 afternoon talk show. For those watching from the sidelines, especially in the Asian community, Lui is a true changemaker.

Surprisingly, she says she doesn't feel that way.

"I appreciate other Asian women who come up to me and say it means a lot to them to see me in the spaces that I occupy, but change is measurable," says Lui. "At least in my case, I don't know if I can say that I can measure any change."

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Sometimes I think we declare that change has happened before it has actually happened. I don't want to say it just to pump up my own ego.



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You need to have evidence, you need the receipts." That slow pace of change may include the lack of Asian people coming up behind Lui in media—or the effort that's often still required to make the case for covering Asian talent or Asian-led stories on major media platforms.

"Sometimes I think that we declare that change has happened before it happened," says Lui. "I don't want to say it just to pump up my own ego because a lot of progress still needs to happen."

In August, Lui stepped down from her decade-long co-hosting role at *The Social*, but she's not slowing down. "I feel I proved something. Now, it's onto my next chapter." As she enters a new decade in her life (she turned 50 this month), Lui has been focusing her time and intentions on *Etalk*, the space where it all began.

"That's where people get their entertainment news, and increasingly, entertainment news is news, period," says Lui. "I want to tell cultural stories that a whole generation of people are relating to and finding themselves in."

As Lui has proven, seeing a Chinese-Canadian woman on TV is more meaningful than simply checking a representation box. Lui has long been advocating for more Asian presence in the stories she tells: She identifies Chinese stars as her best-dressed picks during red carpet coverage segments; she shares regular BTS and BlackPink updates on TikTok; and, at this year's TIFF Etalk party, she interviewed Korean A-listers Park Seo-joon, Park Bo-young and Lee Byung-hun.

"Asian artists have global reach, but here in Canada, for far too long, we've only seen celebrities through a western lens," says Lui, who is also an ambassador for *EliminSHate*, which aims to harness the power of art and media to fight racism against Asian Canadians. "I try to use [my platform] to amplify [Asian] entertainers and their work."

As much as she has accomplished in that space, Lui says there is more she wants to do.

"I know I can do a better job engaging with our community—I know I can show up for them more," she says, adding that her busy work schedule kept her from things that she would have loved to commit to. "I was honoured to be asked to write a blurb for Evelyn Chick's new cocktail book, and I was so disappointed in myself because I ran out of time. Situations like this come up often—when your intentions don't match up with your reality." Lui's recent career change should help: "I'm looking forward to finding a more productive balance between intention and practicality."

One exciting practical change: a new Substack that is an extension of Lui's site, *LaineyGossip*, which started as a newsletter in 2002 with an email distribution list of 4,000 people. "We're going back to our roots," says Lui.

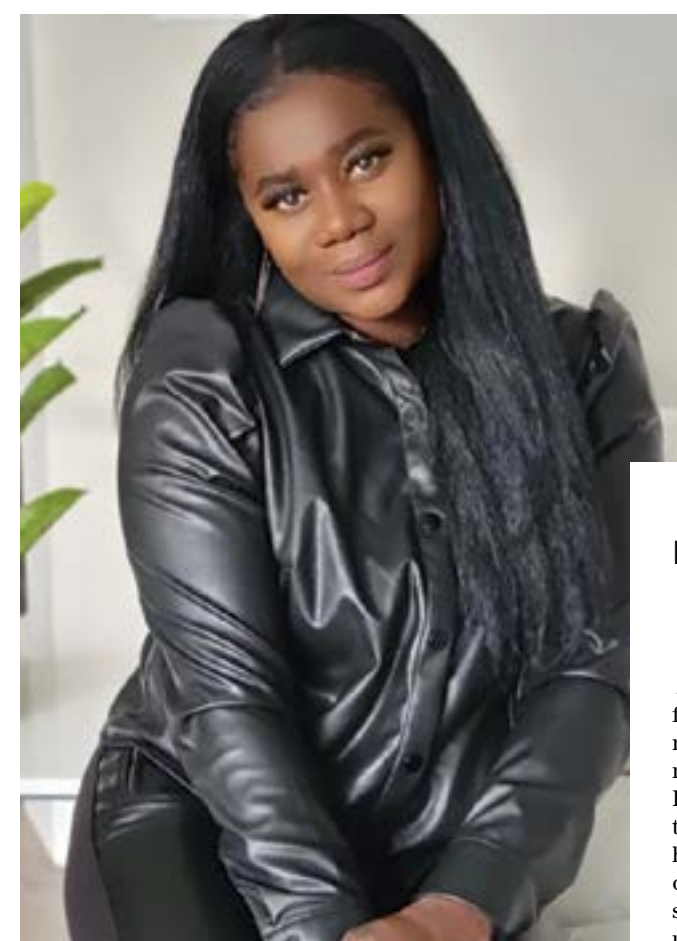
The site will continue to feature breaking celebrity news, while the newsletter will include a weekly mailbag and stories that, as Lui describes them, "might not be immediately appropriate for the large general gossip-seeking public." Her Substack goal? "Different levels of conversation where we can get more nuanced and can offer feedback."

As for the future, Lui sounds hopeful about the prospect of seeing more Asian Canadians taking up space in the media landscape. "I was lucky I joined an entertainment talk show where there was Tanya Kim as the host," says Lui. "Hopefully one day looking back, I could be among a [larger] cohort of other Asian women in the Canadian media space — alongside Melissa Grelo on *The Social* and Jennifer Hsiung on CP24 — who have been doing the same thing and maybe, at times, feeling lonely about it."

Lainey Lui, photographed at Hotel X Toronto by Claudine Baltazar.

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PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY OF MILLICENT ASIEDU; MAKEUP: NIKKI STRACHAN; HAIR: KESHIA WILLIAMS; STYLING: SIMONE PALODINA (LUI)



Millicent Asiedu

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Motherhood can be as alienating as it is beautiful, especially for Black women. This maternal health pioneer is helping them feel seen

Millicent Asiedu just wanted to be a perfect mom. The Edmonton-based registered social worker had her first child in 2016—and struggled. "Due to many societal and cultural pressures, I found myself striving to be a perfect mom, a strong Black mother," she says. "Striving for this stole the joys of motherhood for me." After having her second child in 2019, she started reaching out to other Black mothers who expressed the same frustration. "They felt hopeless, dysregulated, upset, intense sadness and anxiety;

however, they didn't feel safe enough to share their stories with anyone because they didn't feel that anyone would validate their experiences," she says. "And there was limited understanding and acceptance of mental health from the mothers. This is what ignited my desire to create a safe space for our moms to come together to help support one another."

Asiedu started Mesh of Mothers (MOM) in 2021 to help address these challenges and lack of resources and statistics in Canada for Black mothers.

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The organization offers psycho-educational seminars and programs, maternal mentorship, fitness programs, a book club and mommy-and-me programs.

They also have a growing online platform where moms can gather to share their experiences. "Anytime there is a new member in our community wishing to join our online platform, to me that is an accomplishment because it tells me that there are Black mothers out there who are yearning for change and want to be part of something different to increase their wellbeing," she says. "This platform allows our moms to feel heard and seen—this gives me such joy to bring the community together to share their challenges and success while supporting one another with tools and resources."

We're bringing people together to create something meaningful, and a safe space where they can belong.

MOM's offerings are special, according to Asiedu, because the organization is Black-serving, Black-focused and Black-led. They also prioritize engaging their mom community to participate in various aspects of program planning, volunteering, engagement and execution. "Our services are unique because, at its core, we're bringing people together to create something meaningful, and a safe space where they can belong, regardless of their socioeconomic status. If you're a mom of Afro heritage, you belong here." The group also works to support the greater community as well, organizing food and clothing drives.

Advocating for better Black maternal mental health research is another crucial part of Asiedu's mission. In the United States, for example, data shows that Black mothers are three to four times as likely to die due to pregnancy or birth-related complications. Black women are also twice as likely to experience maternal mental health conditions. "Knowing that this is occurring with our neighbours down south creates a huge stressor for Black, African and Caribbean mothers," she says.

When Asiedu started doing research on maternal mental health within Black communities early in her journey, she discovered that Canadian data was limited. Statistics Canada indicates that 23 per cent of women in 2019 experienced postpartum depression or anxiety after giving birth—and that BIPOC women are more likely to develop postpartum depression and anxiety after giving birth. But there are no statistics that document the experiences of Black mothers and their health outcomes in relation to maternal mental health and overall maternal health. "There is limited data in Black maternal health outcomes," she says. "This alone is a crisis and a worrisome matter, which is why I am bringing more awareness of this lack of data and advocating for more research and change so that we can save lives."

3 Mae Martin



Knock, knock, who's there? A joyful, boundary-pushing comedian who wants to unite the world through laughter

Toronto-born, London-based comedian Mae Martin has made a killer career of spilling their guts, whether it's riffing on their substance-use issues in acclaimed stand-up special *Dope* or dramatizing the trials and travails of dating a comedian in recovery in the brilliant queer Netflix series *Feel Good*. This year brought a bounty of Mae flowers: their new stand-up special *SAP* scored rave reviews, and they won the latest season of buzzy British game show *Taskmaster*. The party continues this fall, as Martin drops their first music album and co-stars in the Crave comedy docuseries *I Have Nothing*. We chatted with the bicoastal non-binary treasure about the power comedy has to not only make people laugh, but to change them for the better, one guffaw at a time.

How have you felt your stand-up has evolved between your previous special and your 2023 special?

"Oh, man, I feel like such a completely different person even day to day, so, to me, my first special *Dope*, from five years ago, feels vastly different than *SAP*. To other people they might not seem so different at all, but I think *SAP* is a lot sillier and more confident, and my hair is marginally better because I didn't dye and cut it myself alone in my hotel the night before filming, like I did the last time. Also, I'm looking outward at the world a little more than inward."

You speak about gender dysphoria, trans issues, and the gender spectrum in your special. How can comedy work as a vehicle for increased compassion and tolerance for under-represented groups?

"Well, hopefully some people sent the special to their grumpy conservative family members, and hopefully the message of fluidity, tolerance and optimism secretly seeped into their brains in between all the dumb jokes about moose, puberty, and snow globes. Comedy has always been a great way to lower people's defenses and show them that the people they distrust or misunderstand aren't so different to them after all."

What LGBTQ+ comedians inspire you in how they tackle important issues through comedy? Why is laughter such a good weapon in the fight against bigotry?

"I just like silly people. I guess comedy naturally draws on observations about what makes us human, and that unity feels helpful in any fight against bigotry, no matter how politically driven the actual material is. Growing up I loved Scott Thompson in *The Kids in The Hall*, Eddie Izzard, Margaret Cho, so many others. I love Tig Notaro and Fortune Feimster, who are my co-hosts on the new podcast, *Handsome*."

What was missing in the podcast landscape that inspired the creation of *Handsome*?

"I'm not totally up-to-date on the podcast landscape except for intense true-crime shows I listen to, but I was so excited by the idea of having an excuse to shoot the shit with Tig and Fortune, and I hope people can feel how much fun we're having. We love doing it."

Why did you choose *Fortune and Tig* as your co-hosts?

"Tig had the idea originally because we all knew each other from the circuit but rarely have a chance to be on the same bill or get quality hang time. It seemed like a dream come true because we're so different in terms of our comedic voices

but have similar tastes and values, so we hoped it would be a cool mix of energies."

Why does it feel so powerful to have three queer non-binary comedians hosting a podcast?

"That's cool if it feels powerful! I love that! There's definitely an innate solidarity and common ground, and extreme ludicrousness, of course, and visibility is still vitally important. I think."

Will you use the podcast to discuss the LGBTQ+ issues that are so pressing right now? What are some advocacy topics that are close to your heart?

"Those things pop up for sure, because issues like transphobia for me, or identity and discrimination, are things that are close to us and we encounter in our lives. With big heavy topics like that it's great to be able to approach them in a funny, incidental and personal way that might be more accessible to people. But crucially there's also huge value in escapism and idiocy. I like doing deep dives into ridiculous things with them. The other week we were talking about Fortune going into hiding if she committed a murder and was wanted by the law, and she said she would be washing elephants in Thailand wearing white linen—that was a joyous image."

Comedy has always been a great way to lower people's defenses.

Is it important to you to use your comedy to destigmatize things like addiction and celebrate queerness?

"It's interesting, you know, because I just talk about my love life and childhood, feelings and ideas, like all comedians. I don't consciously try to destigmatize, or I think I'd be paralyzed by the pressure. But it's great that the stuff that's more personal or raw always seems to resonate most enduringly with people, and that's often what people reach out to me about after the fact to say they found it helpful, which is a great testament to the power of unity through vulnerability. Wait, is that a sentence?"



4 Shannaë Ingleton Smith

This content creator didn't see diversity on her feed, so she built a thriving business dedicated to promoting BIPOC Canadians

Shannaë Ingleton Smith was sick of it. Everywhere she looked, all the influencers looked the same: white. "There was a market oversaturation of white influencers getting booked for jobs and partnerships, and Black creators were being continually shut out even though they had the talent and the metrics to back it up," she says. So she founded Kensington Grey, an influencer agency for Black creatives and creators of colour. "It was our response to a market that often overlooked us. Black influencers and creators have so much to say and such an impactful voice, both individually and collectively. We amplify those voices and work to get our stories told beyond just Black History Month." Today, she is most proud of the fact that they have built a predominantly Black team of 30+ women and men and people of colour. "After so many years of being one of the only Black employees in corporate spaces, this ended up being a dream I had that manifested into reality," she says. "I remember graduating university, and just not seeing anything like this when I was

growing up or in a corporate setting. I knew early on that if I wanted to see change, I had to make it happen myself." Soon, Kensington Grey will be launching its first brand and getting into the event space as well. Ingleton Smith is proud to see a noticeable improvement in marketing campaigns in recent years; they're telling fuller stories and representing the people of all of BIPOC communities, she says. "It's been a heartwarming experience to have spearheaded so much of that work in the creator economy, and it's not lost on us that we are helping to create a world where my daughter will have an easier time than I did," she says. "I know that one person or one agency isn't going to solely change the world, but it means something to me that we can honestly say we're doing our part and we're making really meaningful strides toward a more equitable future for all of our children." Want to become a better advocate for inclusivity and equity in your career and personal life—and even your shopping habits? Here, Ingleton Smith shares five ways to start now and make it happen.

TOP TIPS

Make sure your team looks like the outside world. Diversify the people you work with and the people you work for. Whether it's gender, race, gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic background, it will cover your blind spots and it will help you be better equipped to advocate for the communities and people that you serve.

Tell children the truth. And this goes beyond the standard curriculum. Introducing complex ideas to children early helps in the effort to normalize them. Teach them about consent, pronouns, and different family structures and appearances. Children are very open to and willing to learn about and embrace differences. It is our responsibility to help them get acquainted with the world that they are in, fact, part of. They go to school every day with kids that don't look like them and come from different backgrounds and their families may be structured differently, so we owe it to our children to give them the tools and the language to be able to interact with their world and the people around them with respect and care.

Don't use diversity as a buzzword—it will show. You can't diversify at a surface level. If you view it as something you have to do to appeal to the masses so that you don't get "cancelled," your audience will be able to spot that out very quickly. Consumers are exceedingly smart and they know when they're being pandered to or will be able to determine if the C-suite doesn't match your brand's messaging. If you're going to do it, you have to do it all the way. You need to know where the blind spots exist within your company, and if you're going to bring in consultants or employees to help you better understand and service those blind spots and close those gaps, then let them do their job. They may tell you things that are uncomfortable to hear, or they may even propose intense overhauls of systems—or a total rebrand. It is your responsibility to listen with the aim of learning and trust that amazing growth and true value alignment is the result of the temporary discomfort you may be experiencing at the moment.

Become an informed consumer. We are in the information age. And with so many urgent pressures in the world—the climate crisis, workers' rights, sustainability—it's up to us as consumers to make sure that the products we buy come from companies that are at the very least trying to make a positive impact on this Earth, on who they employ, and on the people that buy their stuff. Do your due diligence! Figure out who owns the company. Where do they make their products? How was it made? Who do they employ? Who is in their C-suite? The companies that actually deserve your business will make this information readily available to you. We have the means to find out, so it is your duty to do so.

Learn something from everyone. I can't stress enough the benefits of getting outside your comfort zone. You have probably heard so many successful entrepreneurs and CEOs say this a thousand times, but there is a reason for that: because it works. Talk to people who don't look like you or think like you, or have the same background as you do. Be around people who are more accomplished than you are or are younger than you. Be open to forging new connections and allow yourself to be surprised. The only true failure is the moment you think you have nothing new to learn. You have to make a concerted effort to resist living and working in an echo chamber. No growth or genuine impact happens there.

Screen gold
Hit the theatres this fall to catch movies from two exciting homegrown filmmakers



SOLO
by Sophie Dupuis

In her TIFF 2023 film *Solo*, Sophie Dupuis turns her lens on a collective of Montreal drag queens navigating love and art. Théodore Pellerin stars as Simon, a beloved drag queen at the gay club where he works. When Olivier (Félix Maritaud)—a cool, tattooed French émigré—arrives at the club, Simon starts to lose himself amid a toxic whirlpool of jealousy, competitiveness and self-doubt. While this kind of exploration could have easily been an individual character study, Dupuis memorably fleshes out each of the characters in *Solo*.

"One of the most important things I learned from writing my films is to have more kindness towards the characters I create," says Dupuis. "It's easy to fall into a habit of writing heroes and villains, but we, as people who belong to several different social groups, are more complex than that. With every film I make, I'm more open to the imperfect natures of my characters."



THE QUEEN OF MY DREAMS
by Fawzia Mirza

The dichotomy between past and present, tradition and evolution is the key to all of Fawzia Mirza's work, from her short films like *Noor & Layla* to *The Queen of My Dreams*, which debuted at TIFF to great acclaim. This feature opens with a sudden death: It's the end of the 20th century and queer Muslim grad student Azra (Amrit Kaur) must return to Pakistan with her mother Mariam (Nimra Bucha) after her father dies. Mariam, a stern, conservative woman, remembers her own complicated life in Karachi 30 years earlier, which is depicted in a series of flashbacks. "The immigrant experience in the West has joy and struggle," says Mirza. "There's something about being a person who has multiple identities that forces you to pull the things that make sense to you out of those cultures to create your own space to thrive. This has been my journey as a director."

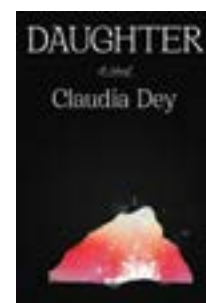
Hot type Top-shelf fall reads by eight Canadian writers to watch



AND THEN SHE FELL by Alicia Elliott
One of the most anticipated books of the season, *And Then She Fell* explores motherhood, mental health and impostor syndrome through Elliott's singular—occasionally surreal—lens. The plot may sound straightforward: An Indigenous woman who appears to have it all (great house in Toronto, sweet husband, new baby) starts to question her own sanity. But soon the novel twists, turns and takes big swings at questions of identity, guilt and grief. If you read one book this season, make it this.



HOW TO BE ALONE by Heather Nolan
In addition to being an acclaimed emerging author, Newfoundland-based Heather Nolan is a knitwear designer and multidisciplinary artist. In the elegant, experimental *How to Be Alone*, Nolan achieves a sophisticated feat: a duet of beautifully written novellas exploring themes of queer joy and struggle set against the backdrop of vibrant Montreal. The contrast between the characters' feelings of isolation and the joie de vivre of the city creates a tension that will grip even the casual reader.



DAUGHTER by Claudia Dey
Claudia Dey may be best known to *Kit* readers as one half (with Heidi Sopinka) of Horses Atelier, the beloved Toronto-based fashion line. But Dey is also a respected author, and *Daughter*—with its sly, incandescent rage and lovely prose—may be her best work yet. The novel follows Mona, whose charismatic, deceitful father betrays his family (and his daughter) over and over again with predictable yet devastating consequences. Still, as with all of Dey's work, there is hope amid the wreckage.



BACK IN THE LAND OF THE LIVING by Eva Crocker
The strength of this novel—which follows a year in the life of Marcy, a young queer woman who moves to Montreal in 2019—is its vivid, detailed writing. (From a description of Marcy's apartment: "There was a rangy plant on top of the fridge, and its vines had been thumbtacked so they wrapped all the way around the small kitchen.") And this description of pasta: "a comforting warm greasy lump.") The pandemic looms over the book, which delves fearlessly into the complexities of messy, modern life.

PHOTOGRAPHY: JOSEPH SINCLAIR (MARTIN)



COCKTAIL by Lisa Alward
Sometimes, in a sea of hefty novels, all you want is a short story collection, especially when it's as expertly crafted as this one. In her 12 stories, Lisa Alward (Halifax-born, Fredericton-based) takes aim at female desire and rage, and the horrors (and occasionally, the unexpected joys) of domestic life. A girl has an electrifying encounter with a stranger at her parents' party; a new mother sees herself anew through the eyes of a hired house painter. The great Alice Munro is an obvious influence.



THE CIRCLE by Katherena Vermette
Katherena Vermette made her name as a poet: Her 2012 debut *North End Love Songs* announced her as a major new voice in Canadian literature; the following year, she won the Governor General's Award for Poetry. In 2016, her first novel, *The Break*, won a host of prestigious awards; her 2021 follow-up, *The Strangers*, continued the story of three generations of Métis women. *The Circle*, the third and final novel in this loose trilogy, is a heartbreaking story of revenge, betrayal and mercy.



ROUGE by Mona Awad
Horror lit has been dominated by dudes for decades, but authors like Mona Awad (*Bunny*) have been slowly creeping into the space to claim their share of the genre pie. The very buzzy *Rouge* is part horror, part fairy tale—it's being marketed as *Snow White* meets *Eyes Wide Shut*. When her mother dies, Belle (an avid consumer of beauty myths and skincare videos) returns to southern California, where questions are sparked about her mother's death, vanity and mortality.



NORMAL WOMEN by Ainslie Hogarth
This hotly anticipated novel by Ainslie Hogarth (*Motherthing*) takes aim at the value of female labour. Stay-at-home mother Dani becomes obsessed with the idea of becoming financially independent from her husband, which leads her to a yoga centre called The Temple and its compelling leader, Renata. From there, the novel turns into an immensely enjoyable detective novel enlivened with sharp feminist wit.

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF SHANNAË INGLETON SMITH; MICHELLE KRASOVITSKI (FILMS)

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