Irresistible Revolution: Black, Trans, and Disabled World-Making Through Activist Portraiture

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Abstract

This practice-based dissertation project engages large-scale portraiture to confront and resist the fungibility of Blackness. The project comprises a selection of twenty drawings and an exegesis in which I analyze my aesthetic process in order to shed light on theoretical problems and gaps in Trans, Disability, Black studies and activisms. This collection of writing also discusses and presents activist struggle, white supremacy in the arts, abolitionist organizing and speculative futures. These theoretical explorations are supported by reflections on the collaborative creation process and the ways in which the portraits have been received. To this end, I have included interviews I conducted with the portrait subjects and through textual analysis of ways in which the portraits have been taken up in art and activist contexts. I argue that studying and supporting Black disabled activist practice can inform ways forward for disability arts in the Canadian milieu.

Dedication

This work would not have been possible without the love and support of my family and community. When I decided to go back to school, I conferred with my grandparents, Harold and Gwen Irons. My grandfather encouraged me to pursue this effort and my grandmother has continued to root for me even after his passing two years ago. I am so thankful to my grandparents for inspiring my love of education and learning and for always reminding us that we were loved unconditionally. All my love, always.

I am also so thankful to my twin, Dr. Jessica Ware, who read countless drafts and supported me by answering all of my academic questions as I went through this process. I'm thankful to my daughter Amelie Ware-Redman for letting me work on this when she'd rather have been playing and for rooting for me, always. Thank you to my partner Dr. Jenna Reid for her unwavering support and encouragement throughout this process. Thank you to my co-parent, Nik Redman for your friendship and care and for encouraging me to take this leap all those years ago. To my sister Janine Carrington, thank you for watching the kids so I could work and for reminding me to have fun and take breaks. Thank you to Hilary Offman, for believing anything was possible.

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This thesis is dedicated to Black disabled, Mad and crip activists Marsha P. Johnson and Harriet Tubman, and to my ancestors and all of my future generations.

Acknowledgements

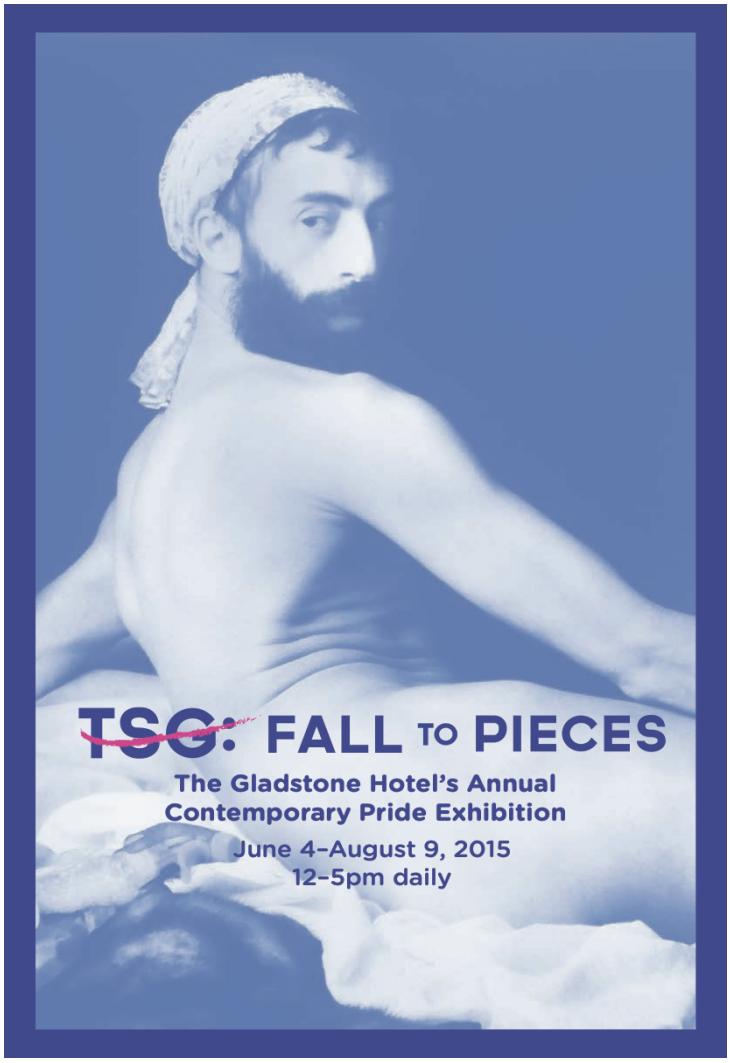
I wrote the majority of this dissertation on the unceded territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit- in the part of T'karón:to that was underwater at the time of the Toronto Purchase of 1805 (completed in 2010). This land is part of Treaty 13, it is Three Fires Territory and part of the Dish with One Spoon Wampum covenant. The portraits were all drawn in these territories.

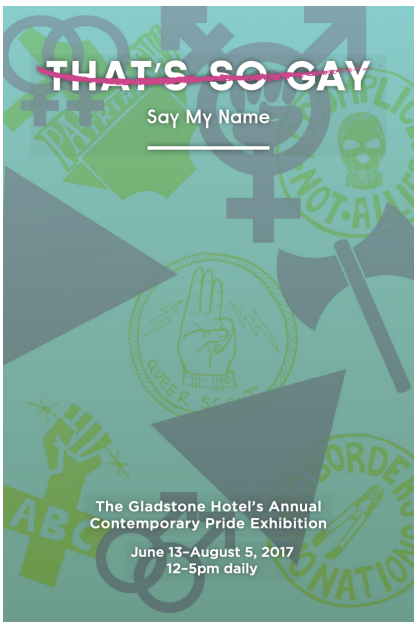
As a Black person whose ancestors spent generations on slave labour camps in the southern USA, I am very aware of the fungible conditions facing Black life on Turtle Island. I know that Black liberation will never come on occupied land, and am working to support Indigenous resurgence always.

I am thankful to the Land for holding me and caring for me as I undertook this process. I honour the beings who occupy this space along with me- the animals and plants and rocks and earth here.

Table of Contents

List of Illustrations





Catalogue covers for TSG exhibitions 2015-2019

Introduction

My name is Syrus Marcus Ware and I have been making art for twenty years. My artistic practice explores social justice frameworks, Black activist culture and disability justice through drawing, performance art, textile works and multi-media installation projects. My work is firmly rooted in and recognized as part of a contemporary practice in Canada/north Turtle Island. This practice-based dissertation project engages large-scale portraiture to confront and resist the fungibility (or disposability and immediate replaceability) of Blackness. Tiffany King (2014) and Riley Snorton (2017) offer insights into the fungible conditions facing Black life and offer different analytics on the impact of these conditions. King (2014) asserts that the disposability of Black life that we see in this current moment stems from the brutality of the slave labour camp and the processes of settler expansion. Snorton (2017) suggests that it is this very fungibility that allows for a certain escapability for Blackness- a possibility of being under the radar and moving towards freedom. This dissertation both interrupts the fungible conditions facing Black, disabled life by suggesting new ways forwards and centring care around activists on the margins, and employs Snorton's (2017) articulation of escapability, offering insights into the fight for Black liberation and freedom.The project comprises a selection of twenty drawings and an exegesis in which I analyze my aesthetic process in order to shed light on theoretical problems and gaps in Trans, Disability, and Black studies and activisms. These theoretical explorations are supported by reflections on the collaborative creation process and the ways in which audiences have received this work, to this end, I have included interviews I conducted with the portrait subjects and through textual analysis of ways in which the portraits have been taken up in art and activist contexts.

My Activist Portrait Series comprises twenty portraits of Black disabled, Deaf and Mad folks, as part of my exploration of disability, race and artistic practice in Canada. The portrait subjects are

involved in disability justice organizing, Black Lives Matter, Indigenous Resurgence, and/or trans organizing, and have thereby helped shape disability justice work in their respective cities. Their portraits, as a collection, offer a very different narrative about disability in Canada than what is taught in the whitewashed Disability Studies cannon and the similarly whitewashed disability arts communities. The project recenters the frame around Black disabled activists and encourages the support of folks marginalized within broader disability spheres.

This project is a revolutionary one. It is rooted in revolutionary goals. Toni Cade Bambara (1982, The Feminist Wire) says that it is the goal of the cultural worker from the margins to "make revolution irresistible". I want to use my work to do just that—to make revolution irresistible. It is this word, irresistible, that captures me. It is the emotion in this word, the sense of desire and longing bound up with the word that sparks my imagination. It speaks to Eve Tuck's (2009) call for desire-based research- in which we see our subjects, in particular those from marginalized communities as whole beings with fulsome lives, narratives and histories— and it helps me to imagine a world in which Black disabled people are subjects in our own right, desired and irresistible players in the fight for change. Each portrait calls for the audience to join the subject in their fight, with the most emotional and sensual efforts possible. These portraits are love letters to lovers in the struggle. I take up Cade Bambara's provocation to create work that makes revolution seem possible, with this army of lovers at my side. My goal with these portraits is to make activism and organizing seem familiar and possible. It is one step towards a revolution in both consciousness and in social conditions.

Disability Arts in Canada/North Turtle Island and Inuit Nunangat

My work is critically engaged with and is generally well supported by the contemporary arts scene in Canada. This is an unusual experience for disabled, Mad and Deaf artists, as I will

explain further below. As a disabled and Mad artist, I produce work that is also often considered as part of the disability arts movement in Canada, and I firmly root my practice in these contexts. Disabled, Mad and Deaf artists often have their work positioned outside of the contemporary arts scene, despite the quality of the work and contemporary aspects of their pieces. As Jenna Reid writes, “[m]ad artists continue to be positioned as outsider artists, devoid of aesthetic and technical skills (Davis, 2006; Maclagan, 2009; Jenkins, 2011).” (Reid, 2019, p. 11). As a disabled and Mad artist whose work is rooted in contemporary arts practices in Canada, I am well aware of how rare it is for "crip”[1] artists to have the chances that I have had to showcase my work in a contemporary market. I credit my acceptance in contemporary arts to the fact that my work did not directly engage with disability early on in my career. I think if I had been making political performances about disability and Madness in the early years of my career, I too would have had my work considered as being outside of the contemporary milieu. Having said that, there never was a time when my positionality was not part of my work: in this way, disability has always been present, though it became absented due to ableism in the arts community. Audiences and critics did not see it or notice it, so my work was received as if it wasn’t there.

As an emergent practice, disability arts bring together Deaf, Mad, sick and disabled artists who are creating work that is oftentimes about disability and sometimes about something else entirely. Disability arts draws on disability theory and activism such as disability justice organizing that helped birth the radical BIPOC Deaf/Mad/sick/disabled performance troupe Sins Invalid and the access organizing that helped inform Crip Your World, an interdisciplinary BIPOC disability arts showcase performed in Toronto in 2013. Disability justice is an emergent,

[1] This term crip is being reclaimed by Disability Justice advocates to be an empowering term of possibility for disabled folks.

activist rooted movement that is centered around interdependency, futurity, cross-disability organizing and racial and economic justice (Berne, 2018; Sins Invalid, 2017). Despite these initiatives, there has been a tendency to prioritize and amplify the voices and projects of white scholars/artists. As such disability arts as a whole has been a white-washed endeavour, much like the white washing of disability studies more generally (Ejiogu & Ware, 2008, Bell, 2006).

Disability arts has failed disabled artists of colour by creating a white supremacist elite club of practitioners whose work rarely engages in questions of race and intersectionality. The impact of these tendencies is wide-reaching. The omission of racialized perspectives in these arts practices centres white disability experience as the disability experience, skewing our understanding of the very different ways in which disabled people on the margins experience the world at large and artistic communities in particular. Despite being politically aligned with disability as an identity and aligning my work politically as part of the disability arts movement in Canada/ north Turtle Island, I have felt conflicted about my inclusion in disability arts because of these whitening practices. In turn, I have worked actively in the national arena to address systemic inequities in disability arts – for example, through large-scale projects like The Cycle, a three-year exploration of disability in theatre in Canada that was hosted through the National Arts Centre (https://nac-cna.ca/en/cycle/inclusion); and through Cripping the Arts 1 and 2 (http://creativeusers.net/events/cripping-the-arts-a-disability-arts-cabaret/), two three day symposiums exploring disability, Deaf and Mad arts in Canada. I have been part of creating a BIPOC disability studies- a field of study that centres the lived experiences of Black, Indigenous and people of colour disabled, Deaf and Mad people. I have been part of advancing disability justice- this beautiful conceptualization of interdependence, centring those most marginalized and addressing structural changes needed to improve the life conditions for disabled, Deaf and Mad people. Disability justice was innovated out of Black and brown Mad, disabled and Deaf communities and is a core part of my artistic practice- an intersectional consideration of

disability and justice. I have a strong desire to create new ways of understanding disability arts in Canada. I dream of disability art practices that are valued by the contemporary art world; ones that integrate critical race theory and intersectionality include artists on the margins as part of their essential work.

I have long been aware of the many ways that disability spaces have othered racialized people. In 2008, I co-authored a paper with Nwadiogo Ejiogu that explored the development of disability studies theory within academic spaces- specifically the development of a white supremacist disability studies that was failing disabled people of colour. In this paper, we argue that much of the writing in the emerging field of disability studies positions disability and race in binary opposition (Ejiogu & Ware, 2008). We co-presented this paper at one of the key meeting places for this field, the Society for Disability Studies Conference, in 2008. This paper challenged the very work that we had come together to celebrate at the conference, and it forced all to examine the mostly white attendance at the conference, and the many presentations that negated the experiences of disabled people of colour. The paper polarized the audience. On the one hand, some, including leading disability scholar Eli Clare, vocally supported our work. Clare (2008) posted a follow-up blog article and wrote,

> In their excellent presentation/paper "How Disability Studies Stays White and What Kind of White It Stays:A Call for Intersectionality within Disability Studies," Nwadiogo Ejiogu and Syrus Marcus Ware challenge the metaphoric use of the word colonize to describe the ableist marginalization of disabled bodies/minds, which are often presumed both in Disability Studies and the Disability Rights Movement to be white. […] What do white disability activists and academics gain by using the concept/metaphor of colonialism to describe ableism's impact on disabled people without exploring the specificities, histories, and lived realities of colonialism? Do we (i.e. white disability activists and academics) think we gain legitimacy? Do we believe colonialism is actually understood in all its horror? Are we trying to disown the ways in which we're complicit with and privileged by colonialism? What are the ways of talking about the shared forces that insist on owning a multitude of different peoples' bodies and cultures? The answer is certainly not through analogy. As an activist, I am suspicious of metaphor. (para. 2)

On the other hand, we received countless negative emails by those who felt that disability studies was on a timed trajectory- one where people of colour would be included at a later date- and that it was not the time to be thinking about those on the margins of the margins. As surprising as this response was at the time, these emails reflected a common idea in the field, that disability studies was an emerging field of study and that as such it was particularly vulnerable to internal criticism (Ejiogu & Ware, 2008). Our goal in crafting this scholarship was not to 'take down' disability studies, but instead to insist that we all desperately needed a scholarship that critically spoke to our experiences of disability, of impairment, and resistance and that pushed for social change. We could not wait until disability studies was ensconced securely within academia to be 'included' in the theorizing. We needed disability studies to be something by and for all of us, from the outset. We situated our critique within the educational institution- spaces created within a classroom, course lectures and readings. The work of Nirmala Erevelles (2011) reflects our thinking at the time,

> Educational institutions present themselves as agents of benevolence for the billions of students it purports to serve on a daily basis. However, these institutions, notwithstanding their "good" intentions, fail to educate "different" students…, because they have transformed themselves into institutions of social control intent on following bureaucratic "procedures," where most of the time, these "procedures" are intent on propagating and preserving normativity rather than meeting the desperate needs of (Other) students. (p. 118)

In many ways, there was a 'disabled-normativity' that was created within our classrooms and within much of the scholarship we had to read that rendered disability as always already white, North American, and cisgender. Our paper challenged this normativity, and the perception of benevolence implicit within it, instead exploring multiple forms of violence created within the space of a Disability Studies classroom for racialized disabled students. It was our contention that these practices of othering and erasure bleed through into all disability theorizing and spaces- including disability arts and contemporary arts environments. My personal experience of disability, activism and the arts has prompted this doctoral research. I have chosen to frame

my work in the context of personal experience and I will now turn to a reflection that highlights the root of my current inquiry.

In September of 2013, I stood in the Art Gallery of Ontario awaiting the speeches by the finalists of the 2013 AIMIA AGO Photo Prize. This prize is an annual photography competition that features a jury selection, a public vote and a grand prize award of $50,000. At the start of the competition, each of the four finalists makes a compelling speech about their practice and their motivation and, hopefully, inspire an audience of museum-goers to support their bid. As the program coordinator of the AGO's Youth Program, I had attended countless events such as this one. The speeches were often self-congratulatory and rarely addressed the issues of systemic oppression in which museums and galleries are rooted; this followed trends within both scholarship and art institutions, where these root problems have largely been left similarly unchallenged. I had written and edited publications about the need for a diversification of the museum sector (McIntyre & Ware, 2009, Ng & Ware, 2013), and by the time of the 2013 Photo Prize, I had begun to accept that change would likely only come from outside of the institution's walls. It seemed that there were few who would be willing to rock the boat from within.

The artists in the competition began their speeches. When one of the artists- Latoya Ruby Frazier- took the stage, images of her work flashing behind her, I was immediately struck. Her largely autobiographical work, centered around experiences of environmental racism and racialized experiences of disability, seemed a critique of many aspects I had also been challenging.

Frazier's work documents three generations and her surroundings. Her photographs mirror the physical devastation of her town, Braddock, PA with the medical effects of pollution, poverty and

systemic discrimination on the bodies and minds of her family. In The Notion of Family (2014), Frazier elaborates:

> Grandma Ruby, Mom, and I grew up in significantly different social and economic climates; each of us are markers of a larger historical timeline. Grandma Ruby, born in 1925, witnessed Braddock's prosperous days of department stores, theatres, and restaurants. Mom, born in 1959, witnessed the close of the steel mills, white flight, and disinvestment at the federal, state and local levels. I was born in 1982. I witnessed as the War on Drugs decimated my family and community. (p. 38)

This quote makes up part of her artistic statement. Frazier makes her lived experience the subject of her artistic exploration. She chose the launch of the photo prize to address both the audience and the institution broadly, emphasizing that as a Black, working class contemporary artist with lupus, she felt the issues embedded in her work were central themes for art museums at this moment. She implored the audience to take back art institutions and make them our own. In her video statement, Frazier (2014) proclaimed,

> I am an artist and a photographer from Braddock, Pennsylvania. Braddock Penn is where Andrew Carnegie migrated to and started the whole industry of steel mill and railroad companies…There's never been a depiction…told about what happened to African American families after they migrated there and were left without any jobs once the industry crashed. Braddock is one of the most polluted toxic places in the region, and all of us have terminal illnesses. My family has died off because of illnesses like cancer and lupus. I have lupus. A lot of my self portraits are about documenting myself when I have a lupus attack…I think that people should know. That this is what you're actually getting into…toxicity doesn't discriminate…We have a right. As poor or working-class people or elderly people to see ourselves in these institutions. We have a right to have our voices heard at this type of level and to be taken seriously…Looking in the history books, not seeing this kind of work there or being validated…The only way for me to make a mark on history or to insert my family or community is through the tools and forms of the arts…I'm making a statement, that this work needs to exist within contemporary art, because look at the reality that we are facing in our country today. If we don't have photographers that are willing to make these kinds of portraits and contest mainstream media…then we are going to lose another part of humanity. (video interview)

The audience broke into scattered applause after her video speech. I cheered. I was struck by her honesty: as a Black artist negotiating the public art gallery environment from the inside, I welcomed her challenge. I was aware of the rarity of her call to action, particularly its insertion of

an entwined consideration about race and disability within art institutions. Elizabeth Sweeney (2012), writing about the dearth of contemporary disability art within the Canadian arts ecology, explains,

> While some arts organizations in Canada may be slowly starting to realize their legal and moral obligations to create access for disabled audiences, few acknowledge, let alone consider or respond to, the stark absence of disabled artists and art that explores disability within their collections and exhibitions. As disability art is so scarcely shown in contemporary visual arts venues, these rare opportunities for inclusion are key occasions to investigate. (p. 7)

After nearly a decade working in the field, I agree with Sweeney's assertion that "disability art is so scarcely shown in contemporary visual arts venues". As such, I was curious: Would Frazier's frank discussion of disability affect her chances of winning? Would her work be considered to be as rigorous as that of her competitors? Would her work, and the challenge it presented, help to foster change within the gallery and/or the contemporary art community? As the AIMIA AGO Photo Prize involved a public vote for the winner, visitor expectations of what they were used to seeing in a contemporary gallery impacted the outcome of the prize. Dodd, Jones, Jolly & Sandell (2010) have researched visitor responsiveness to encounters with disability within gallery and museum exhibitions. Their research poses key questions; namely,

> What happens when visitors to museums and galleries encounter displays, educational programmes and other interpretive projects that are designed to offer and illicit support for new ways of understanding disability? How do visitors respond…? (p. 92)

I, too, questioned how visitors would respond, and through what lens visitors to the AGO would view Frazier's art. Her contemporary photography was surely "designed to offer and illicit" many things, above and beyond a singular understanding of disability. Her frank portrayal of disability, poverty, experiences of racialization and environmental racism may have challenged some visitors' expectations of what they were likely to see at an art gallery (McIntyre, 1996). Although it would be impossible to know for certain what visitors took from her work, the subtle nuances of working-class, racialized disability in her work may have been lost on some gallery viewers.

To return to Dodd, Jones, Jolly & Sandell (2010), their extensive visitor testing of reactions to an exhibition about disability in nine UK museums yielded fascinating, if expected, results. Although contextually this data differs from Frazier's involvement in a contemporary photo prize, they offer insights into the ways that visitors respond to encounters with difference in museum settings. They state,

> Discriminatory attitudes, supported by negative stereotypes, are rarely addressed in the public arena and are often deep-seated and challenging to overcome. How then would diverse audiences respond to more complex and nuanced portrayals of disabled people in museum settings? And how would visitors react to the adoption by museums of a moral and political position underpinned by a concern for disability rights? (p. 95)

Their research shows that many visitors bring their understanding of disability, often rooted in a medical model of disability, as a lens through which to experience the work (Dodd, Jones, Jolly & Sandell, 2010). I was curious whether such a lens would be employed by AGO visitors when considering Frazier's work worthy of a contemporary art prize. In the end, Latoya did not win the prize. The winner was a white non-disabled artist who took photographs of archival photographs of Canadian landscapes, something much more 'expected' in a Canadian art gallery. If visitors had been more used to confronting understandings of race, class, gender and disability (as present in Frazier's work) in art galleries, perhaps the vote's outcome would have been different.

Frazier's work left a lasting impact on me by highlighting tensions between race, disability, class and institutional art space and the ways that museums and galleries dealt with these issues. In this way, Frazier spurned an inquiry, rooted in institutional ethnography. As Karen Elizabeth Jung (2002) states,

> Institutional ethnography provides a way to start with everyday experiences in order to show "how power is exercised, in what official or unofficial activities, by whom and for what purposes" (Campbell 1998, 96).…in institutional ethnography, experience is not the object of the research; experience, in and of itself, is not treated as knowledge or truth,

experience provides a place to begin the inquiry. (p. 268)

My personal experience as a Black, disabled artist working within the museum sector has provided “a place to begin the inquiry” as Jung states above. Sarah Ahmed (2012) elaborates, “Perhaps the habits of the institutions are not revealed unless you come up against them” (p.26). As a museum worker on the margins, I have come up against the habits of the institution quite frequently. I have been very aware of the ways that colonialism has shaped collecting practices and has funded certain families to ultimately become wealthy decision-makers in the arts. Indeed, the process of collecting and displaying objects is intrinsically tied up with colonial projects and set on defining cultural norms, establishing a sense of nationhood, and ensuring dominance of the ruling culture (Edwards, Gosden & Phillips, 2006). This process has rooted the very foundations of museums in “race-based thinking” (Gilroy, 2000), marginalization, and imperialism. My work has largely focused on highlighting these processes and supporting activism from within the museum communities to make lasting systemic change, to “‘take these institutions back” ’as Frazier urged. I have also tried to ensure that these reclamations use an intersectional framework, to insist that experiences of disability, class, racialization, gender and other interlocking oppressions are being addressed in concert. I draw on the work of Kimberle Crenshaw, particularly her conceptualization of the impacts of the interlocking experiences of oppression at the intersections of identities (Crenshaw, 2017) Similarly, I draw on the brilliance of the Combahee River Collective (1977) who encouraged us to consider our whole selves in our work and the need to strive to make the world safer for those who are most marginalized, Black women (and I would update this conceptualization to say we should be aiming to make the world safe for Black trans women with disabilities). Perhaps this is why I was so moved by Frazier’s brief call to arms. In her work, and in her speech, she brought disability, race, class and gender together and insisted that the experiences of Black disabled working-class women were important and vital to the survival of all of us.

I am struck by the correlation between this assertion and the work of the Combahee River Collective's (1971) position that fighting for the self-determination of those most marginalized—Black women—will benefit everyone, and that "[their] politics initially sprang from the shared belief that Black women are inherently valuable, that our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else's maybe because of our need as human persons for autonomy". (Combahee River Collective, p. 363)

Like the Collective, Frazier was insisting on the inherent value of Black, working-class disabled women Frazier has written about her work, and the thesis behind her artistic practice. Describing her experience of environmental racism, anti-drug legislation, government divestment, economic marginality, and the influence of these experiences on the lives of her grandmother, mother and self, Frazier states (2014),

> Seldom is there relief or aid for Black women living below the poverty line in our healthcare system. Tired of waiting in emergency rooms and being told by UPMC doctors that her migraines, chest pains, seizures, and shortness of breath are psychological, Mom stays inside. She becomes a prisoner in her home. Emotional fatigue has erected barriers around us. (p. 46)

Frazier centres working-class Black women in her work, claiming their liberation as a "necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else's" as the Combahee River Collective quote above illustrates. The women in Frazier's work are her family. Their relationships show tense connectivity, but also their "need as persons for autonomy" (Combahee River Collective, 1971). Frazier's work is exhibited within and part of larger discussions within contemporary art institutions, including at The Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City and as part of the AIMIA AGO Photo Prize at the Art Gallery of Ontario. At these sites, she launched her assertion about the need for change within such institutions, springing from, as the quote above

suggests, “the shared belief that Black [disabled, working-class, women’s art was] inherently valuable”.

Human bodies and minds come in a variety of forms and manifestations, and the ways that our identities intersect and overlap with experiences of racialization, class, gender, body size, and other forms of difference are opportunities for celebration. We resist, fight back, redefine, reclaim, and re-remember. I am particularly interested in the ways that communities fight against marginalization and push for social change from within and without these spaces. I draw on Sara Ahmed’s (2012) phenomenological consideration of institutional life, wherein she states, “I want to think specifically about institutional life: not only how institutions acquire a life of their own but also how we experience institutions or what it means to experience something as institutional.” (p. 22)

Moreover, I am interested in the ways that institutional life is experienced by artists of colour with disabilities. Dorothy Smith writes about an institutional ethnography method, stating that this ethnography “would begin in the actualities of the lives of some of those involved in the institutional process” (Smith, 2005). My current inquiry builds upon my thesis for my Master of Arts from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (2010), entitled, “No One Like Me Seemed to Have Ever Existed’: A Trans of Colour Critique of Trans Scholarship and Policy Development in Post-Secondary Schools”. In this earlier ethnographic study focused on the development of trans studies curricula and administrative trans policies and post-secondary schools in North America. Through a textual analysis of scholarship, policy documents and newspaper articles, my thesis examined the stated desire to include gendered ‘diversity’ on campus against the actual experiences of trans students— in particular, trans students of colour— at these same institutions. The tendency to prioritize the experiences of white trans

people in contemporary scholarship is replicated in trans studies curricula and reinforced through policy documents. These whitening practices affect trans students of colour and limit their ability to find meaning in trans studies. Similarly, these practices limit racialized trans students' access to university programs and services. This study provided me with insights into the contradictory effects of institutionalization on people with intersectional identities.

Both my past scholarship and my current research takes an interest in those who are marginalized within institutional life, and the ways that their experiences offer an examination of institutional processes and highlight the emergence or development of institutional entities. To return to Ahmed (2012), "To explain institutions is to give an account of how they emerge or take form….describing not simply the activities that take place within institutions…but how those activities shape the sense of an institution or even an institutional sense." (p.20)

At the AGO Frazier called out the creative class, and the arts institutions in which many on the margins are enmeshed as a way of illustrating how such places "emerge or take form" (Ahmed, 2012). Her work so clearly documents the impact of systemic oppression, as well as her family's way of resisting the institutions and systems that have dramatically affected their livelihood. She centres this discussion in a contemporary art ecology, insisting on its relevance to the work of art institutions. Her work—and her institutional critique—suggests possibilities for revolutionary institutional change. Chantal Mouffe (2013) writes that institutions have always been sites of resistance and contestation, and that ignoring this fact limits movement-building within and across institutional walls. She explains, "To believe that existing institutions cannot become the terrain of contestation is to ignore the tensions that always exist within a given configuration of forces and the possibility of acting for subverting their form of articulation" (p.66).

It is what Mouffe terms the “possibility of acting for subverting their form of articulation” that fuels my work: a thread running through my arts admin work, activism and my creative practice. Although I’m not always convinced of the possibility for change on an institutional level, I feel that an engagement with institutional spaces can be an important part of our resistance movements. Frazier’s call to action in the heart of the institution in the midst of a public moment celebrating institutional greatness afforded my insight into the possibility of centering our resistance from inside of the institutional sphere to make systemic change broadly. Yet, I also remember Tanya Titchkosky’s (2011) caution,

> We (disabled people) are excluded, even unimagined, and we know that getting in is tied to the production of who and what is out. But how do we live in the midst of these tensions? Half of the battle is the fight for access; the other half is the need to think about or question what we have indeed been given access to. (p.27)

I am interested in what exactly we are ‘taking back’ when considering these art institutions that Frazier references. Although Titchkosky is focusing more on access, namely, ‘what are we fighting for access to’, while Frazier is pushing for a more revolutionary systemic change, the questions remain: what are we taking back, and what do we want these institutions to become?

My decades of activist work in communities suggest that perhaps the prefigurative future we are building may not include institutions at all. I question what this contemporary arts environment actually is that we are working to change, from both within and without. As we consider these institutions, we need to examine them through a lens of disability, for as Simi Linton (1998) explains, disability is ”a prism through which one can gain a broader understanding of society and human experience” (1998). As such, bringing an analysis of art institutions, and more broadly of the contemporary art world that considers disability and racialization as central to the analysis, we create the prism-like conditions to illuminate what is at play. Pre-figuring (Yates, 2020; Leach, 2013), or living as if we were already in our dreamed or imagined future, is essential to my practice. Despite beginning my project interested in rooting my work in an

institutional analysis, instead I realized that through my curatorial and artistic practice I was living into the future- prefiguring new ways of working and reimagining who we considered artists, activists and leaders. I returned to Frazier's work and her call to action, something I had actively taken up through my creative practice and curatorial work.

Frazier's work suggests an impending catastrophe if we do not address the ways that the creative class is implicated in economic inequality, the dissolution of poor neighbourhoods, gentrification, environmental racism, and the effects of systemic ableism, classism and racism on society. She states (2015),

> I am not a journalist. I am a conceptual documentary artist that is using my visual expression for building narratives that are unseen and unheard. I am pushing for cultural and social change through a different story that runs parallel to a lot of the media coverage discussing Braddock…that avoids crucial issues. It is the fact that we still haven't dealt with this as a society or culture. A slow violence is occurring all the time. The media and journalists tend to go toward headlines, but this is something that has been slowly troubling for a long time. This is about how industry impacted quality of life, and led to conditions of economic inequality… I am staying inspired because I am watching history repeat itself with the rise of the creative class—people not interested or invested in the residents that have taken the last 30 year hit. If we fail to change, history will repeat itself. (Accessed online at https://photolicioux.wordpress.com/2015/07/02/the-notion-of-family-of-braddock-pennsylvania/, 2015)

Frazier "is staying inspired" and creating work that offers "conceptual document[ation]" of buried stories and communities. The stories of racialized disabled artists, activists and administrators are still being written. In September 2015, Latoya Ruby Frazier won a McArthur Genius Grant and her work is now being discussed in a way that was perhaps not possible in 2014 when she addressed the AGOs visitors. How this might impact the uptake of crucial issues discussed in her work on a larger scale remains to be seen, and it is something that I look forward to following in my future research.

I have been interested in the change making that would result in the kinds of radical reimagining of our institutions- and in fact, our societies- that Frazier is calling for in her work. This dissertation explores the pressing social issues of our times- white supremacy in the arts, welcoming and belonging, calls for widespread police and prison abolition, and highlights the lives of activists at the centre of all of these struggles- change makers who are doing the work to ensure a better world is being birthed into being.

Research question and overview of the dissertation

My main research question is as follows, "What can Black and trans disabled activism teach us about disability arts?". I'm interested in considering the ways that Black trans and disabled world making leads us towards this concept of the irresistible revolution (Bambara, 1982). I will explore this question through an exegesis and collection of articles. This dissertation contains a compilation of relevant articles published during the time of my doctoral studies. As I was trying to better understand what happened and was at play during Frazier's participation in the 2014 Aimia-AGO Photo Prize, I began writing more about the experiences of Black and Indigenous artists in contemporary art spaces. I also wrote about similar challenges against white supremacy happening just outside of the gallery's walls—in the city's streets and corners. I wrote about the changes being striven for in academic environments. This article compilation draws all of these elements together in an exploration of white supremacy and its influences on several sectors: the arts, the academy, and activism. I chose articles that addressed systems change and creative practice- articles that focused on futurity, abolition, institutional change and revolutionary ideas. I also included a summary of the 15 exhibitions showings I had during my doctoral work and the 11 curated exhibitions that I created during this time. This summary illustrated my efforts to prefigure new ways of working and creating. They centre disabled artists on the margins and bring conversations of race and disability together in essential ways.

The dissertation also presents The Activist Portrait Series—a compilation of twenty drawings and a written accompaniment that explores the project's genesis and process. Together, this project offers insights into activism, struggles for change, and what is needed to uproot white supremacy in the future.

This compilation of articles explores the ways that white supremacy is playing out in art institutions and the contemporary arts milieu in Canada, the role of activism and art in movement building, and the need for archives that centre BIPOC narratives. I am interested in challenging white supremacist notions that guide what art and what artists gets shown, critiqued, and collected. I would love to witness the development of an arts world that uplifts and supports the work of those on the margins and as an activist, I have been fascinated by the ways that arts have informed and shaped our movements, and I write about these factors in the publications included below. I have also been interested in who and what gets remembered and in the idea of counter-archiving—that we could trace a different lineage of organizing that does not start at a white origin story but rather is rooted in QTBIPOC ancestry.

This collection of published writing was created during my doctoral studies and reflects my current research interests. Specifically, I have included the following publications: (1) "The Black Radical: Fungibility, Activism and Portraiture in These Times," (2) "Give Us Permanence," (3) "The Most Unwelcoming 'Outstanding Welcome': Marginalized Communities and Museums and Contemporary Art Spaces," (4) "All That We Touch We Change: Octavia Butler's Guide to Belonging (in a Neoliberal World)," (5) "All Power to All People? Black LGBTTI2QQ Activism, Remembrance, and Archiving in Toronto," and (6) "Abolition in Our Lifetime." I have included brief descriptions below.

In the book chapter “The Black Radical: Fungibility, Activism and Portraiture in These Times” (Ware, 2020) I articulate the fungible conditions facing Black activists and the need to create supportive engagements that ensure their survival and thriving into the future. I consider my Activist Love Letters project and the Activist Portrait Series as a way to respond to the tolls of Black organizing in the movement for Black lives. In “Give Us Permanence” (Canadian Art Magazine, Summer 2020), I discuss the prevalence of white supremacy in the contemporary arts milieu in Canada/ Northern Turtle Island and Inuit Nunangat. I explore the experiences of Black artists and arts professionals in the field, and I make recommendations for ways to uproot white supremacy from the hearts of many legacy institutions. This compilation also includes "The Most Unwelcoming ‘Outstanding Welcome’: Marginalized Communities and Museums and Contemporary Art Spaces.” (Ware, 2019). In this article, I explore the ways that white supremacy is fostered within arts institutions and academic institutions. I specifically tell the story of a white professor who gets away with making white supremacist statements at a public dinner and read this alongside a self reflexive experience wherein I experienced systemic transphobia on the first day of a job at a large arts institution in Canada. In 'All That We Touch We Change: Octavia Butler's Guide to Belonging (in a Neoliberal World) ' (Ware, 2017), I explore Octavia Butlers prophetic storytelling and ways of predicting our contemporary moment. I consider her work alongside that of Black Canadian visual artist Janine Carrington and American musician Toshi Regan. Both Carrington and Regan set their work in the future, with the latter directly inspired by Butler.

I articulate the need for a counter-archiving practice that would help us archive the unarchivable- as in activism, community gatherings, and community-building in the article “All Power to All People? Black LGBTTI2QQ Activism, Remembrance, and Archiving in Toronto.” (Ware, 2017). I talk about the white supremacy present in many mainstream queer and trans archives and how these practices erase QTBIPOC people from queer history and narratives. I

discuss how white gay male's history is positioned as the official LGBTQ history and I speculate what conditions would have been needed in our community for the history of Black trans women to have been considered as inherently valuable— and thus as worthy of archiving. Lastly, I interview abolitionists working across a diverse set of communities to create systems change in "Abolition in our lifetime" (Ware, 2020). As a collection, these works articulate the need for radical change in our system and society and the need to support those on the front lines of fighting for change.

In addition to my writing for this dissertation, I have created an Activist Portrait Series, which explores Black disabled and Deaf activism and organizing through the lens of portraiture and drawing. The exegesis expands, unpacks, and theorizes the context through which these activist portraits come to be, and it reveals my own location as both an actor in and chronicler of the social movements which comprise and intersect my social location. These portraits, twenty in total, and their accompanying interviews consider organizing history, power dynamics, speculative fiction, and prefigurative futures rooted in love and interdependent work. Through my artistic practice, I consider activism and the lived experiences of community mobilizers, with a particular focus on queer and trans racialized activists. I aim to shift the frame around their lives, their work, and the processes in which they engage to make change, "reframing [their] figure[s] in a public space of honour" (Garland-Thomson, 2010).

What follows is a compilation of articles in which I've attempted to unpack white supremacy in the arts, explore Black activist movements and investigate movements towards abolitionist futures. These articles are offerings towards a more free world, they articulate some of the issues we are currently facing and offer suggestions for ways forward towards change. Similarly, I explore the Activist Portrait Series as a means of examining Black disabled movement-building. Through these explorations I have considered the incredible leadership by

Black trans disabled people offering us ways forward in disability arts, something that would uproot the white supremacy dyed in the wool of disability arts, bringing to the fore an intersection of gender and sexuality to “make you question” as Ravyn Wngz, trans Afro Indigenous activists in Tkaronto is fond of saying. The projects in this exegesis celebrate and uplift the leadership of Black trans disabled people within activism through a decidedly disability arts practice- modelling a way forward for a field on the brink of change. These works create irresistible revolutions, changes in our field that will result in better worlds for all of us.

Exegesis

The Black Radical: Fungibility, Activism, and Portraiture in These Times

In this chapter I present examples of my activist and artist practice, as a way of showing how both inspired each other and allow me to tackle the societal issues of anti-Blackness, Black fungibility, and our shared survival. I explore the possibilities of resilience in our activist organizing through projects that attempt to render us fully human, and are connected to a community of care. Resilience in this chapter will be approached through the concept of fungibility, as a counter to the disposability currently facing Black communities around the world. This chapter describes art and activisms that reclaim our uniqueness and insist that we are not exchangeable bodies and selves.

I have found Tiffany Lethabo King's concept of fungibility in relation to Black bodies to be insightful for my artistic practice of embodied resilience.1 Her theorizing addresses the current war on Black bodies: the disposability of Blackness in our current climate of systemic racism, white supremacy, and anti-Black violence. King explains that fungibility usually refers to crops. A seed is fungible in the sense that it is replaceable immediately with another seed, and in this way it does not matter if you spread seeds and some do not grow; you can always have these replaced by other interchangeable, exchangeable seeds. For example, when I grow tomatoes, I don't care if every seed from my seed packet survives, pokes its way out of the soil, and grows into a robust plant; if just three or four seeds make a tomato plant out of my seed packet, that's still more tomatoes than I'll need. They are in this sense fungible.

From this reference to seeds, King expands the term to describe the historical conjuncture of the North Atlantic slave trade. When Black bodies were brought to North America/Turtle Island to do slave labor on large-scale plantation-style labor camps in the southern USA and on smaller-scale labor camps in Canada, they were treated as if their bodies, their persons, were fungible seeds, to be planted. Enslaved peoples were and are treated as seeds to be planted to make the master and enslaver rich, and were seen as interchangeable and expendable. King explores how this fungibility resulted in a disregard for the massive Black deaths that happened during the slave trade, and how it has continued to shape our experience of Blackness in Canada. She states

> Fungibility represents a key analytic for thinking about Blackness and settler colonialism in White settler nation-states. Black fungible bodies are the conceptual and discursive fodder through which the Settler-Master can even begin to imagine or "think" spatial expansion. The space making practices of settler colonialism require the production of Black flesh as a fungible form of property, not just as a form of labor. (Pg. 2)

Black fungibility thus fuels settler expansion. Put differently, Black people are not settlers on this land, we were brought here through colonial violence as a way of terraforming this land and supporting the spatial expansion of the white colonies. We are treated to this day as if we are disposable seeds, as if our lives did not matter as unique non-exchangeable lives.

In 2014, a group of young radicals, the majority from Black trans communities, in Toronto got together to organize a rally for Trayvon Martin and they boldly proclaimed that Black lives did in fact matter, and they formed a chapter of the steadily growing Black liberatory network of Black Lives Matter (BLMTO). They began a series of large-scale direct actions aimed at reversing this fungibility, aimed at ensuring the survival of all Black people on this land, on Turtle Island. I joined the team in 2016, and have been a proud member ever since. Our team is like no other that I have ever joined; I feel surrounded by

kinship. Black Lives Matter is a direct counter to fungibility, to the idea of Black people as simply seeds to be expended in the exploitation of labor, or left to wither away.

As an activist with BLMTO, I am enmeshed within the movement for Black lives, and as a result, I spend an inordinate amount of time poring over cases of anti-Blackness and in particular police violence directed towards Black Mad and disabled people. I have rallied, protested, hosted discussions, created art, and lectured about the movement for Black lives and about the concept of our lives mattering. That Black lives matter. I am all too familiar with the insidious ways that anti-Blackness manifests itself within our society: from five-year-old girls handcuffed during detention in Peel Region schools, to Black teens being sent home from school for wearing their hair natural, to the targeted policing of Black communities resulting in an disproportionate amount of Black people in the prison industrial complex in Canada. In short, I am well aware how anti-Blackness is dramatically affecting the lives of Black Torontonians and moreover Black folks living in the northern part of Turtle Island.

I know that Black lives matter. I also know that we are still living within the fungible conditions that allow for our disposability writ large on the news week after week. I also know that there is a specific kind of toll that this work takes on the activists in the struggle. We are exhausted, but we are not stopping our fight. We have cultivated a resilience that allows us to face being battered and exposed to the dire conditions of survival, to resisting our disposability.

In the following sections of this chapter I want to describe two of the actions we took as BLM-Toronto. One artistic action was to draw attention to the killing of a Black Mad person, Andrew Loku, and one was aimed at tackling anti-Blackness within the Toronto

Pride festival. These actions can usefully be framed in terms of developing aesthetic and political techniques for embodied resilience: we aim to create alternative environments wherein Black people can live and thrive.

MAD as Hell: The Tent City that Erupted in Front of Police Headquarters

When Andrew Loku was killed in 2015, few people heard about his case. He was a Sudanese man who had psychiatric disabilities who lived in a building designated for people with these experiences. He was a handyman and had been doing repairs around the building. He was observed behaving in unexpected ways in public space, something that is often said about those of us with psych disabilities or who identify with madness. The police were called and two officers arrived. The first was training the second in deescalation techniques for working with people labeled with mental illness. And with all of their training they entered Andrew Lokus's building and shot and killed him after a 12-second interaction. 12 seconds. The measure of reasonable doubt when dealing with Blackness, with madness in public space: 12 seconds. But because of who he was few people heard about the killing or about the police officers involved. It wasn't until the SIU, a civilian oversight body for the police, came out with their investigative report seven months later that his name appeared in the news. Now, 30-odd years after its inception, the SIU is mostly staffed by ex-cops and retired police officers who always rule in favor of the police, with a statement of finding "no wrongdoing." It's enraging. We organized a protest at city hall aimed at talking about Loku and his life, aimed at calling out his death and calling for the city to answer to its citizens' cries of horror at this case.

We gathered with tents, candles, a fire barrel, and food, and we set up a vigil for Loku. It was one of the coldest nights of the year. Perhaps to be expected, the police came and interrupted the vigil, asking us to move on. To move along.3 As Black people, as Black

queer people, as Black queer disabled people we were always already out of normative space/place and time and we needed to be dispersed. Perhaps these are the conditions of fungibility: Blackness can never exist in gatherings of six or more; we are forever seeds to be spread far and wide to decrease the threat of our collective presence.

We knew that we were not done protesting, but also that no matter where we moved to they would come and break it up and ask us to move along. So rather than playing cat and mouse with the police, we decided to save them some time by setting up an encampment at police headquarters. It went on to become a 15-day occupation led by trans activists from BLMTO. And the city got behind us, in part because of something that happened on the second night of the occupation. On night two, we were freezing, standing around our fire barrel, playing games, talking. There were children present. Suddenly the police came out in force from HQ, in a line of about 50 officers linking arms. They advanced on our encampment. They approached the fire barrel and tipped it over, on top of blankets and sleeping bags where seconds before children had been playing. The children had gotten out safe, but not everyone realized this. People began running, screaming, while police officers hit activists, hurling many to the ground. It was horrifying. People took to social media so reports of the attack spread rapidly through the city in a matter of minutes. People came as reinforcements and held the encampment. The following day the media covered the attack widely and support poured in from citizens horrified at the violence of their police force on mainstream news. The anti-Blackness of it, the endangerment of the children, all of it played badly for a police force already being criticized for its decidedly anti-Black programs.

This support took the form of massive artist projects, an open letter signed by 400 artists, food donations, medical supplies, solidarity actions from sister communities. We held dance classes every day, and dance parties every night. We had a full-day rally

midway through the occupation and a full-on dance and DJ event that briefly turned police HQ into the most banging trans-led party, with DJ Star Amerasu, Rayvn Wngz, and others performing. We had solidarity from Indigenous elders who came and took care of traditional medicines for the community, and who stayed up and watched over us while we slept out in the cold night after night. It also opened up the space to talk about police brutality and other deaths or mishandling of deaths such as the earlier police killing of Jermaine and Faraz Sulman and their woeful mishandling of the death of Black trans woman Sumaya Dalmar.4

This space, this tent city, was magical. It was one of the most beautiful activist experiences I've had. We were not fungible. We were alive, irreplaceable, and essential to life on this planet. We were occupying space in a city hell bent on the disappearance and disenfranchisement of Black people.

Just before tent city, we were named the Pride Toronto honoured group, which is the group asked to lead the parade and set the tone for the march. Pride showed up very late to tent city and was called out by Black queer and trans activists for not supporting this group they supposedly valued so much. They did eventually show up to tent city and so we continued planning for Pride as a known direct-action group. It should then perhaps not be surprising that we decided to bring some direct action into the parade. Before the trans march on Friday we talked about anti-Blackness and the issues facing Black trans people, and in particular trans women. We talked about gendered violence and anti-Blackness at the dyke march on Saturday. And on Sunday we decorated our truck with images of Black queer and trans people who had gone before us, upon whose shoulders we were standing. And we marched, leading the parade down Yonge Street. When we got to College Street and Yonge Street we stopped, we sat down, we sat in. Yes, at a festival whose previous campaign slogan

was “you can sit with us” in a joke about their inclusivity, we sat down to address the festival’s anti-Blackness and lack of accessibility for Black disabled and trans people.

We worked with Black queer and trans organizers who had been working with Pride for longer than we had, namely the organizers of Blockorama, Blackness Yes!, and the organizers of the Black queer youth stage (BQY). Together we crafted eight demands aimed at addressing the gap and lack of funding and support for Black queer and trans programming at the festival, highlighting the lack of funding increases for Blockorama, despite nearly 20 years of consistent programming by Black trans and queer people, and the shutting out of BQY from the festival that year. We also demanded an increase in access supports at the festival, including increasing the number of deaf interpreters and accessible stages. Lastly, we demanded an end to uniformed police in the parade. This was the only demand that the media seemed to hear, and it led to a larger public debate about policing in Pride festivals internationally—a debate that is still raging on today. We stopped the parade and waited for the executive director and board co-chair to come and agree to our terms before we allowed the parade to march on. And agree they did, sadly only to flip-flop a day later.5 Nevertheless, this action changed Toronto Pride, perhaps permanently, and highlighted the very racism within the community that we were calling out.

While we sat in, I addressed the crowd about the important work of Black trans women in leading liberation struggles across Turtle Island. I talked about the creation of the Black Coalition for AIDS Prevention and about the need for spaces for queer crip communities at Pride. And I was assaulted with water bottles, caps, and other things hurled at me while I spoke. The crowd reacted violently to this intervention, and this violence carried over in the ensuing dialogue in the weeks and months, the entire year that followed. Many white queer and trans communities supported the action, but still others admonished us for taking up

space in “their parade,” as if we were not queer too. They admonished us for not taking our fight to the Scotiabank Caribbean Carnival (known locally as Caribana) the Caribbean festival in the city, as if Black and queer were mutually exclusive dichotomous identities that did not intersect or overlap; as if the fight for Black lives weren’t essential to the fight for queer and trans liberation and to all struggles for equality internationally. For as the Combahee River Collective (1971) explained, when we make the world safe for Black people, we make the world safer for everyone.6 So our fights are intimately connected and Black liberation is essential to the successful liberation of queer and trans communities.

As we neared the anniversary of our historic demonstration at Pride 2016, all eyes were on BLMTO when it came time to register to march for 2017. We chose not to register for the parade, and honestly had little interest in marching. But as the festival grew closer, we decided to make a statement about the ways that questions of Blackness in the parade had been handled in 2016. We entered the parade on the day of Pride Sunday, surreptitiously. Like a Trojan horse, when we got to College and University Streets we emerged from a float, with signs bearing witness to our truths: “May we never again need to remind you that we too are queer” and “May we never again need to remind you not to celebrate our torturers,” meaning the police, corrections, and the entire prison roadshow that usually graces the parade. We put ourselves out there for a second year, and amidst rainbow-coloured smoke bombs we again held an audience of millions captive as we solemnly marched with our signs, in another show of protest until the end of the parade route. It was also such a magical experience.

We put ourselves on the line during these three actions—tent city and both Pride actions—because to paraphrase Sylvia Rivera, as Black trans and queer people, we had nothing left to lose.7 We were dying, being killed by the very people allegedly on the

streets to protect us, and we were having trouble finding a home even within our own queer village because of anti-Black racism. We fought back because we had to; the stakes were just too high.

Now, I should say that activism is stressful, but it is also a wonderful and fun and life-giving practice that just happens to come with lots of dangers. Activists often face burnout and health issues as a direct result of the stress of their organizing, particularly those who receive death threats and hate mail as we do in the BLM movement. For Black activists there is an intersection between the experience of activism and its stressors and the experience of being Black in a decidedly anti-Black world. As such, Black activists are at a greater risk for burn-out and effects of the struggle.

I became interested in considering how to support the lives of activists, how to ensure that they not only survived but were able to thrive. I wanted us to be more than fungible seeds in a seed packet. I wanted us to be free. Through my artistic practice I began exploring ways to support the lives of activists in our communities. To make an analogy to the space of war, if these activists are the soldiers, then art is the medic supporting people on the front lines.

Next, I would like to examine a few projects that I have been doing that attempt to give specific personhood and identity to Black activists in the struggle, as a way of ensuring that we are all seen in our whole humanity.

Activist Love Letters and Activist Portrait Series

The first example is a project I began in 2012, called Activist Love Letters, that

encourages the audience/viewer to think about their role in sustaining a movement and supporting their communities. Inspired by the powerful and often hidden letters that activists and organizers have sent to each other that contain words of support and encouragement, words of rage and fear, cautions and inspirations alike, this project asks you to consider your own activism and that of the people you hold dear.

To begin the performance, I read aloud from letters that activists have written to each other, such as from a letter that James Baldwin wrote to Angela Davis, having seen the magazine cover of Newsweek in 1969 of Davis handcuffed and in chains. He questions how an American bound up in the history of the enslavement of Black peoples could relish and glory in this image. They did not have a previous connection, they were not friends, but he wrote her this:

> Dear sister,
> One might have hoped that, by this hour, the very sight of chains on Black flesh, or the very sight of chains, would be so intolerable a sight for the American people, and so unbearable a memory, that they would themselves spontaneously rise up and strike off the manacles. But, no, they appear to glory in their chains; now, more than ever, they appear to measure their safety in chains and corpses. And so, Newsweek, civilized defender of the indefensible, attempts to drown you in a sea of crocodile tears ("it remained to be seen what sort of personal liberation she had achieved") and puts you on its cover, chained. You look exceedingly alone—as any one of our ancestors, chained together in the name of Jesus, headed for a Christian land. (Online resource) 8

Baldwin saw her isolation, the kind of isolation that the prison industrial complex is predicated on, the chains and incarceration imagery conjuring a means to isolate people from their communities, as a way to "punish the soul" as Foucault writes about in Discipline and Punish (2012).9 He writes to her, across a great distance and generational divide, and offers this activist love letter.

I read from letters that Leonard Peltier wrote to Mumia Abu Jamal, and from an open

letter from activist Tooker Gomberg to all activists. It is perhaps this letter from Gomberg that propelled me the most to begin this project, for in it he talks about disability, he talks about isolation, and he talks about the need for activists to have sustained relationships outside of their activism to ensure their survival, to ensure their wellness to join in the next fight. And this letter by Gomberg was written just before he took his own life, the isolation he describes in this letter overwhelming him. I take up his challenge to reach out and try to maintain connections among communities, and I push it further to help establish new connections among strangers, to find common ground despite vast intra-community divides, and to work collectively toward our shared set determination as Audre Lorde (1980) encourages us.10

Through this project I've mailed thousands of love letters written by strangers to activists in their communities all around the world. It is amazing to watch the reactions of activists when they receive the letters; they are so overwhelmed by the beautiful act of this reaching out. Each letter is unique, as unique as the individuals who are working as activists in this struggle. These letters are salve to heal the activist's burn-out and they serve as testimony to the individualization of us as people. These letters are a testament to the fact that we are not fungible. With every letter written, and each one mailed, we are creating interconnected networks and communities of care that will carry us through into the future times together. These letters offer a hope for our collective futures, and our shared survival.

A second project is the Activist Portrait Series. I have been creating very large-scale portraits of activists, revolutionaries, and community mobilizers as a way of celebrating activist culture and activists' lives. The portraits frame an understanding of the many daily choices that we all make, in big and little ways, to make the world a place where we all

have active self-determination and where we all get to be free. These portraits are an act of reverence, a celebration of life and of choice and of individual and collective action. They draw our communities large and in charge and they show us at our strongest, resisting and resilient. They offer insight and possibility to those who view them—perhaps igniting a desire to “get to know the activists better” and maybe even to join in the fight. The portraits demystify activism and activist lives by showing activists as we truly are: as humans, as friends, as siblings, as parents, as people who want more in this life.

When you picture who gets their portraits drawn or painted, especially at a large scale, who do you imagine? Larger-than-life portraits are usually those who hold positions of power. Typically they showcase the solemn faces and decorated torsos of popes, university presidents, and senior hospital administrators. I can picture in my mind the portraits of John A. MacDonald that hung in my elementary school, but I cannot recall seeing portraits of Black people when I was a young person studying in Canada. In my practice I wanted to use portraiture to instead imbue a sense of power on those who I feel really deserves our respect and reverence: the activists.

I began exploring portraiture and painting also as a way of painting my community into art history and as a way to document my reality. I have been drawn to portraiture to render invisible lives visible: trans activists, political heroes, people with disabilities painted large in a style and medium previously reserved for dignitaries and wealthy patrons. The artistic tradition of portraiture is impacted in re-enforcing systemic structures such as class hierarchies, racism, by defining and emphasizing which humans are valuable. My work shifts this emphasis by recentering the frame of portraiture around ‘unintelligible bodies’, those living or being represented on the margins. By drawing activists 12 feet tall, I interrupt the process of fungibility, for each image presents the activist larger

than life, and in this way they become more than a fungible seed: accentuating the uniqueness and narrative of each person, that so clearly can't be replaced. These activists are in their everyday clothes, fresh faced staring out at the viewer, ready for the world. I have spoken to many who have viewed the portraits and they all describe a sense of connection with the sitter. We find ourselves rooting for them through the process of the gaze from viewer to portrait and back.

One commonality that these activists all share is that each has said to me, thank you for including me in this project, but I'm not really an activist. They say this not because they question the term or its usage, but rather, they explain, "I don't do that much, not like other people out there." They all are doing all of this incredible work and yet they have this mythical activist to which they compare themselves, who "does more."

<u>But Who Makes the Photocopies? Labor Divisions in Activist Circles</u>

I am well aware of the labour of activism, and also that these labours are often not divided equally among practitioners. Women and trans people do an incredible amount of invisibilized labor within our movements. As an artist and researcher I became very interested in the phenomenon of hierarchized labor in the activist movement; I investigated the gendered dynamics into who made the photocopies, who sews the banners.
In October 2016 I participated as one of 12 in a year-long set of performances for the Canadian Performance Artists Organization FADO. For this performance I wanted to address this issue of often disregarded, invisibilized labor. I wanted to create a project that would appear to be one thing but would really be another. A switcheroo, if you will. And so what I created was a call for a series of "training sessions for freedom fighters." The phrasing and mythology around activism made it seem as if one

might be coming to learn hand-to-hand combat or other direct action techniques. In a way this was not untrue. But I had people come instead to learn the (invisibilized) techniques of direct action, meaning, I got people to come and learn how to sew the banners!

We made four banners, each one emblazoned with a quote by a Black revolutionary or freedom fighter with patterning that connects to their message. We created write-ups about each quote that were photocopied, again highlighting the education that female socialized people do. The write-up-as-fliers concept was borrowed from the Black Panther Party's "each one teach one" pedagogy. The quotes went together, connecting the four banners through calls and responses in the text. The first two banners consisted of the messages "Afraid of the Dark" and "Take Root Amongst the Stars," while the last two read, "We will win" and its counter, "But what if we don't." Together they tell a story through time and space of Black revolution across generations and communities. As we read the text we call into the room the spirit of the people we are quoting, from the soft-spoken Nat King Cole to the boldness of Lauren Olemina proclaiming her truisms in Octavia Butler's tome Parable of the Sower (1993). They remind us that we are all connected, part of a legacy of change-making and resistance, and that we can draw on their strength when we are in our hardest moments.

The first banner quote by Nat King Cole came from an improvised response to being attacked by a white audience when he walked on the stage of a segregated theatre to play a mixed bill. When they threw things at him and screamed, he very quietly walked to the microphone and allegedly said, "Some people are just afraid of the dark" and then walked off. And this quote always stuck with me because it was this moment when this artist, who was not known for politicized lyrics or for creating Black-conscious

music, specifically refused to play the bill as he was contractually obligated to do; a moment then of resistance and direct action. He withdrew his labor and he refused to be fungible.

The second banner is based on a quote from Butler's Parable of the Sower wherein the roving community of marginalized misfits, called Earthseed, unite to increase their chances of survival in the violent not-too-distant post-apocalyptic future. This Earthseed community creates a Book of the Living filled with truisms, including this one: "The destiny of Earthseed is to take root amongst the stars."11 This quote refers to literal space travel but also to the destiny of this band of racialized, Black, and disabled queer and trans and cis and straight misfits who survive and grow to become ancestors, taking root among the stars.

The third banner was based on two Assata Shakur quotes, "It is our duty to fight for our freedom, it is our duty to win. We must love each other and protect each other, we have nothing to lose but our chains" (2016), and "We have to believe that we will win" (2016). These quotes grew out of Black resistance to the 500-year-long attempted genocide of our people through the transatlantic slave trade that extends to the policing and prison system today.

The last quote speaks to my anxiety, my own worries about how high the stakes are in our struggle. The dangers of not winning are framed as the pressing question, "But what if we don't?" What if we don't win, if we don't succeed in gaining the self-determination of all people, as we have been fighting for?

When carried in marches for direct action, the banners provide visibility, cover and invisibility, warmth and connectivity through their use and reuse. They help ensure our survival by offering us places to hide, signage to meet under, fabric to bundle us up in, and endless possibilities for being inspired by our ancestors.

For me, one of the ways of ensuring that we do “win” is to rebalance the struggle, and so this project’s exploration of gender-based labor offered a way to reconsider how we fight for our lives together: in what ways, using what tactics, engaged in what forms of labor, etc. In many ways my work and their’s is a form of struggle and offers a way to SAVE US and ensure our livelihood and thriving. Indeed, the movement for Black lives is an arts-based movement. Through my work, I’m trying to ensure that the activists that I work with make it to the next fight. My work attempts to ensure that we are not fungible, that we are not seeds scattered to grow and make money for the masters, that we are free and that our lives matter, and our survival is essential to all life on this planet.

You can choose the way you view us, you can choose to look at what is happening to brown and Black people and understand that these atrocities are happening to people, people who are unique, who are humans. We, like you, need the chance to grow and live and be. We are not fungible seeds, we are a vast and diverse garden; a rainforest of biodiversity, and expansive community created through peers. We are growing despite your violence and your systems of profit and anti-Blackness. We know there is another option, a plan B, an alternative way for us all to live together. The fungibility of Black people, the disposability, the ease with which we are discarded, this can end now. We can end this now, and all be free.

Assata Shakur once said that if the conditions facing Black life were different when she was born, she would have been freed up from struggle to pursue artistic practices. She states, “I would be free to be so much more, a painter, a gardener, a sculptor, but instead this identity of a struggler has been forced on me by oppression.”12 I am influenced by this quote in many ways. Through my practice I have attempted to embody the struggler and the painter, the activist and the sculptor, the poet and the gardener, reversing legacies of anti-Blackness through my everyday existence as an artist and an activist.

In the word of my ancestors, All Power to the People.

Notes

1 Tiffany Jeannette King, “In the Clearing: Black Female Bodies, Space and Settler Colonial Landscapes” (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 2013), https://drum.lib.umd.edu/bitstream/handle/1903/14525/King_umd_0117E_14499.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

2 Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society (blog), “Labor’s Aspasia: Toward AntiBlackness as Constitutive of Settler Colonialism,” by Tiffany King, posted on June 10, 2014, https://decolonization.wordpress.com/2014/06/10/labors-aphasia-toward-antiBlackness-as-constitutive-to-settler-colonialism/.

3 Thinking here of the Saunders and Kriy “Move Along Report” chronicling the practice of “move alongs” in the Washington DC area as part of ongoing police harassment of sex workers and trans women. Penelope Saunders and Jennifer Kirby, “Move Along: Community-based Research into the Policing of Sex Work in Washington, DC,” Social Justice 37, no. 1 (119) (2010): 107–127, www.jstor.org.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/stable/41336938.

4 Toronto police have a history of killing Black people and mishandling their cases. For further information, see “Suleman Inquest Begins Amid Heavy Police Presence,” CBC News, November 1,1999, www.cbc.ca/news/canada/suleman-inquest-begins-amid-heavy-police-presence-1.168855; Muna Mire, “Unanswered Questions Following Death of Toronto Trans Woman of Colour,” Vice, February 26, 2015, www.vice.com/en_ca/article/4w5bjn/unanswered-questions-following-death-oftoronto-trans-woman-of-colour-497; Errol Nazareth, “Jermaine Carby Inquest Jury Makes 14 Recommendations Following 2014 Shooting Death,” CBC News, May 26, 2016, www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/jermaine-carby-inquest-1.3601734.

5 See Alex Migdal, “Black Lives Matter Denounces Pride Toronto, Continue Call for Ban on Police Floats,” The Global and Mail, July 7, 2016, www.theglobeandmail.com/news/toronto/Black-lives-matter-blasts-pride-toronto-handling-of-Black-lgbtq-youth/article30786807/.

6 Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement. 1979,” Off Our Backs 9, no. 6 (2007): 6–8.

7 Sylvia Rivera, “Sylvia Rivera’s Talk at LGMNY, June 2001, Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center, New York City,” Centro Journal 19, no. 1 (2007): 116–123.

8 James Baldwin, An Open Letter to My Sister, Miss Angela Davis (New York Committee to Free Angela Davis, 1970).

9 Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (New York: Vintage Books, 2012). First published 1995. Fungibility, Activism, and Portraiture 167

10 Audre Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” in Women in Culture: An Intersectional Anthology for Gender and Women’s Studies, ed. Bonnie Kime Scott, Susan E. Cayleff, Anne Donadey, and Irene Lara (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2017): 16–22. First published 1980.

11 Octavia E. Butler, Parable of the Sower (New York: Grand Central, 2000), 84. First published 1993.

12 Spoken on Asian Dub Foundation and Assata Shakur. Committed to Life. Electronic music track. 1999.

“Give Us Permanence”, Canadian Art, June 2020

Sometimes I don’t know into what world I have woken up. It is as if I went to sleep in a pre-COVID time and awoke to a new future.

I scroll through my news feed and see abolition messages writ large across the city streets. I read about defunding the police in, of all places, Cosmopolitan magazine, and my email is clogged with “solidarity with Black Lives Matter” statements from every bakery and soap store where I’ve ever spent $2.00.

We are in this strange period of transitions. We are at the beginning of a new world emerging post-COVID and we are at the beginning of people awakening to these activisms. We are in the middle of a revolution of our global consciousness and we are at the end of old systems like racialized capitalism. As the system changes, as Octavia Butler assured us it would, the system is desperately trying to save itself, in part by positioning the system itself as part of the revolution. Hence my email is filled with these statements, the performative solidarities and demonstrative actions that do nothing to address the structural changes needed in this society for us all to live self-determined free lives.

Perhaps the most perplexing, or perhaps most complex for me in these performativities are the pro-Black/Black Lives Matter statements from arts organizations and institutions. I have worked in various arts institutions for decades and have been an artist for 25 years. I have witnessed firsthand the anti-Blackness that is dyed in the wool of the arts. We have a white supremacy problem that is perhaps the art world's best (worst?) kept secret - this secret is something these

solidarity statements do not address. Without addressing the larger systemic issues that plague the arts, what is the purpose of these statements?

Dr. Naila Keleta Mae, artist and Assistant Professor, at the University of Waterloo stated the following this week on Facebook:

> I am disgusted by statements from institutions, corporations and organizations on what they plan to do about anti-Black racism in the future if they have done little or nothing to end it in the past. Their statements need to explain why they haven't taken the horrors of white supremacy seriously even though they are well documented and centuries old. #Blackandfree (Mae, 2020)

Indeed these statements fail to "explain why they haven't taken the horrors" seriously, rather they paint the institution as already doing the work. Meanwhile, the history of erasure and the shutting out of Black artists from mainstream - and yes, even lefty art spaces - persists and cannot be separated in this moment of renewed support for "all Black lives".

Co-founder and host of BlackChat Vancouver, !Kona states that we are demanding more from institutions than such statements. She says:

> In the arts, as this unlearning racism moment happens for so many white people, I'm also seeing in many places people are really digging into white supremacy and tearing down images of colonialism. And once the statues start going, the arts institutions can't be far behind. As those things come down, I think the bricks and mortar institutions are going to have no choice but to address what's in their archives, what's actually hanging on their walls, who they're actually collecting."

Further, we need to address who is making the decisions in these places, who is holding the power and how such power is being shared. There are few Black people in positions of decision-making power in most institutions across this northern part of Turtle Island. Those of us who have occupied positions in the art world have experienced erasure, hostility, and outright violence while simply trying to do our work.

As dancer, choreographer, and Black Lives Matter Toronto co-founder Rodney Diverlus has stated, “I wonder how many Black employees are reading their workplace's Black Lives Matter statements knowing full-well of how toxic/racist the workplace is, how little Black employees are supported/nurtured, and all the other garbage that comes with anti-Blackness.” (Diverlus, 2020)

As I read these statements in my inbox, I feel a mix of hope and rage; hope that perhaps this is the time to finally speak about the unspeakable in the arts, anti-Blackness, and rage because it's also just as possible that these performative activisms are attempts to placate us while maintaining the status quo. I think about Chaédria LaBouvier, the first Black curator and the first Black woman to curate an exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City, who was consistently passed over and had to fight to have her work credited because of systemic anti-Blackness. In response to the Guggenheim Blacking out their profile photo with a Black square for Blackout Tuesday, she famously tweeted, “Get the entire fuck out of here. I am Chaédria LaBouvier, the first Black curator in your 80 year history & you refused to acknowledge that while also allowing Nancy Spector to host a panel about my work w/o inviting me. Erase this shit.” We are indeed in a new era; “we are not having it” as !Kona states.

For all of my Black colleagues in the arts, I hope that changes are coming, and soon. But I also know that we are being asked incredible things right now by institutions who have done little to support us in the past. !Kona states:

> I'm hearing from different Black friends of mine in the arts, that arts organizations are contacting Black people to write their statements for them. Because then they don't have to take responsibility. They don't have to worry about coming correct. And if things go sideways, they just point to the Black person.”

How does this process reflect any sense of accountability or responsibility to Black communities? In the end we will always be the last hired, and when the statement blows up, the first fired.

Black Power and the Art Community

In Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power, Susan Cahan writes about how art museums have historically exhibited a pattern when it comes to showing/writing about Black artists' work - they ignore it largely except during times of civil unrest and uprising. She chronicles the last 50 years of the museum and gallery field in the US and clearly delineated a pattern of only showing interest when fashion dictates, or when they are required to seem "woke". Further still, she illustrates how when galleries do show the work of Black artists, it's often in kitchen galleries, temporary shows, and never as part of the permanent collection of the gallery. Kosisochukwu Nnebe, a Black curator and artist based in Ottawa, explains how this phenomena also translates to an overwhelming busyness during Black History Month, the one time a year when Black artists are suddenly in demand,

> In Montreal, there was this feeling of being very tokenized and being invited into spaces only when it was a particular month, February. Sometimes the people who were inviting me to show work were Black folks who were only able to access resources for exhibitions at that time. That's when TD is all up and open to funding these Black History Projects and spaces are ok with handing over their space to exhibit Black artists. TD also has material impacts on when/under what conditions curators and Black cultural workers are afforded resources.

I think so much about how as Black workers in the arts, how often we've been put in the position of keeping the institution secrets. And what I mean by that is that the anti-Blackness that manifests itself within the actual working of the organization we keep secret. The racist things said in meetings, the terrible anti-Black exhibition titles (just how many times can you name something The Dark such and such to mean bad, evil etc? Please get over this), the times when we are outright told we don't belong in the field because we are Black. We are expected to flag up any majorly offensive practices the institution is undertaking to help it save face, while keeping the horror of what they would have otherwise done to ourselves. Why? We are pressured to do so in order to keep our jobs, or we're placated with a conversation with the

person in HR who talks about more training and then somehow it's unwritten that we are not ever supposed to talk about it again. Thanks to the secret keeping, there is this perception that the arts are liberal open places where everyone gets to be a free-spirit, everyone can be whomever they want to be. There is a perception that all are accepted, that weirdness is encouraged, that misfits fit in, all of which completely erases how anti-Black racism materializes and is enforced.

I spoke to colleagues in the arts who took the risk of speaking out, and for this, I thank them. I think of Eunice Bélidor's project exploring how arts institutions should be working with BIPOC artists and staff, and how useful it would be if these practices were followed through (https://www.eunicebee.net/pullout-wig).

Strategic Inequities and Replicating White Supremacy

In 2004, I can remember arguing with a head of security for an hour about why it was anti-Black to introduce a policy at the gallery to bring in uniformed police officers when the DJs were planning on spinning "hip hop". 'Hip hop' is, of course, like 'urban' is code for Black. Similarly, I can remember with joy witnessing the planning for the art of hip hop showcase, Helping Young People Excel, at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO)- led by Toronto-based art collective them.ca- in the early 2000s. I lived near the gallery and was excited to see this initiative by my local gallery. This joy and excitement was short lived. I had my heart broken later watching them install metal detectors at the front doors of the AGO for that show. Why the metal detectors suddenly? To "keep out guns" I was later informed by the same head of security pushing for uniformed officers at youth (of colour) events.

The legacy of anti-Blackness in the arts, galleries, and museum sector remains and no email message with a trending hashtag will erase centuries of anti-Blackness. Black artists are under-

supported, underrepresented by galleries, and face uphill battles having their work engaged with critically for many of the art critics and editors replicate anti-Blackness in their writing, including who and what they cover. Black curators have their work passed aside over and over in favour of their white male colleagues at institutions across the country. I spoke with Michelle Jacques, Chief Curator, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria. She describes a time when she was working at the AGO, where she spent the bulk of her career, "

> They wouldn't acknowledge the issues as anti-Black. They would say the reason I didn't get to do things was because I was a junior curator and hadn't earned the right to do them. But my path through the curatorial department was so arduous. I was a curatorial assistant for 5 years. I had a colleague who did all of the AGO's Indigenous programming from the position of curatorial assistant. There was no Indigenous curator, but they wouldn't acknowledge his leadership in his title. Yet a white man was brought in as assistant curator; he had a costly American degree that impressed them. In my final 2 years, I was the Acting Curator of Canadian Art. When Gerald McMaster, who I was replacing decided not to return, I was told they would be posting the position. I asked if they would consider my application. They said no. I had been doing the job so well, that I already had the offer from Victoria. I resigned the next day. The AGO position went to a white man.

This experience of having to work twice as hard through piles of resistance to be able to do what a white supremacist society freely gives away to white people: the privilege for curators to get to 'just do their job', for museum professionals to be able to advance in their careers, for artists to have their work shown, critiqued, and collected; these all point to the ways that a white supremacist system opens doors for some while shutting out marginalized voices. !Kona explains further about an experience on an arts festival jury, "[so] many large scale events organized by white people did not have to go through the process. Meanwhile, Black, Indigenous, and other people of colour were held to a really high bar in terms of the content of their applications and the process that they had to go through to even get an invite. I remember one year there were two Burmese organizations that came through for funding and the team of white people literally said they should work together because there's two of them. Meanwhile,

they funded like four Shakespeares." Two or more BIPOC artists in one festival or show seems too much for some organizations to handle.

What about the HR departments and hiring committees in the arts that keep replicating all-white institutions? Speaking with Jacques, she stated,

> I think about having a conversation with the head of Human Resources about how it was ridiculous that we were introducing guiding principles for programming - one of them was diversity - but there was no guiding principle of diversity when it came to hiring practices. She just cut me off and told me that I was taking the conversation dangerously close to talking about quotas."

White supremacy is reproduced in hiring practices and across HR policies. I think of the incredible work that Fractured Atlas is doing in strategic HR and tackling white supremacy in their field and wish more arts institutions would follow their model. For example, they have an active group/caucus practice that allows for them to tackle white supremacy collectively in ways that are necessarily unequal with responsibility for addressing whiteness falling to white folks. In this way they strive to reduce trauma and harm for their BIPOC employees. In contrast to this expansive and impressive anti-racist model of Fractured Atlas, Jacques describes an art gallery HR department that used classic white supremacist tactics to suppress Black engagement. "You couldn't even offer to mentor somebody if they weren't attached to a formal post-secondary program…you would try and have a conversation about how these rules just perpetuate inequities, and that graduate school was: a) an opportunity that not everyone could afford and; b) not the only path to curatorial work. They didn't even want to listen to the argument."

This strategic inequity is replicated in most docent programs, with few BIPOC folks in these roles, and programming content that often shies away from the political. One day, at a gallery in which I worked, I was moving offices and was carrying my desk plant to my new desk. I was

quickly stopped by a white docent who confronted me and asked if the plant was marijuana. This was about a decade and a half before legalization. She asked in all seriousness. When I discussed it with my colleagues later, I was largely unsupported, and she was excused away because of her age, as if she had some sort of legitimate reason for her anti-Blackness. This response from my colleagues was both unsupportive and, frankly ageist (for what of the raging grannies, and of my 93 year old white nana who is absolutely down with ending white supremacy and fights for it every day). While responding in this way, they were being complicit in this docent's anti-Black racism. My colleague's silence communicates so much - they upheld white supremacy in that moment. To the day I left that job this story was described by colleagues as a 'funny incident' that had happened.

A Change is Gonna Come

So what do Black artists and arts professionals want to see? Change, rapid change, and structural change. The activism we are witnessing in the streets, from our beds, and from our homes is part of a groundswell of activism calling for change. !Kona said, "The longer people march in the street, the more change that happens, when these galleries open up, when these companies start putting their works on stage, people are going to be so much more racially vigilant and aware. They will have no choice because people will not have it".

As Nnebe stated in our interview, "I honestly think that what I'd like to see is people just handing over the space. One of my favourite experiences was with artist run centre AXENEO7 because I really did feel as though they just stepped out of the way and we're like, 'What resources do you need? What resources can we provide you?', and that's it.... All of these collectives that are emerging within Ottawa of Black artists and BIPOC artists, they're doing the work, they're creating their own events, they're organizing. Just give them the space. I feel as though people just have to let go, just pass the mic. You don't have to say anything."

Galleries, museums, artists run centres: consider giving over your space to Black artists curators and programmers. Not as one-offs or as special events to tick off boxes. Do this in long term ways, ways that touch change and in ways that shift the existing structures in the arts. Shift the power dynamics on your boards and acquire the work of Black artists into your collections. Especially the work of Black artists living and working here, in northern Turtle Island/Canada. Hire Black leaders. This country is full of brilliant creative Black leaders. Hire them. To white and POC artists: consider asking about Black representation in the exhibitions and showcases in which you participate. Ask questions about anti-Blackness and push for the support of Black artists and curators in your community. Refuse to work with white supremacist organizations. Check the receipts and don't work with places that aren't actively working against anti-Black racism, hiring and deferring to Black artists and leaders, and paying them accordingly.
We are witnessing an amazing revolution in our collective consciousness. The ground is shifting beneath us every minute. Change is our new constant and these are revolutionary times. It's time to stop keeping our secrets about anti-Black racism and to start demanding justice for Black people in the arts. We need to root out the white supremacy that is inherent in the structures of our organizations and radically reimagine what our work could look like going forward. We are creative, brave people and we can do this work, this crucial work, together, right now. Black artists and arts matters.

As !Kona stated, “I know that you can see from space that Black lives matter. I look at the marches on the television, and they are increasingly white, and they are chanting on their knees like a prayer, an invocation, like they're casting a spell. And the question I ask myself, 'Who am I? Who am I as a Black person not to heed what a planet full of people is saying, which is that my Black life matters’."

We are in the moment of revolution, a revolutionary moment that has spanned decades. We each can make choices now that can dramatically address this crisis in the arts. It's time to move beyond performative allyship. This is the time to get involved in meaningful ways that lead to structural change. This is the time to commit to rooting out and addressing white supremacy and anti-Blackness in all its forms each and every time it rears its ugly head. It is time for a new creative future- one that we can build together.

Which side of history do you want to be on?

Ware, Syrus Marcus. "The Most Unwelcoming 'Outstanding Welcome': Marginalized Communities and Museums and Contemporary Art Spaces." Canadian Theatre Review 177 (2019): 10-13[2]

The Most Unwelcoming 'Outstanding Welcome': Marginalized Communities and Museums and Contemporary Art Spaces

by Syrus Marcus Ware

Art institutions across North America are grappling with how to create an 'outstanding'1 sense of welcome for their visitors, artists, and potential work colleagues.2 Community outreach programs, access initiatives, and other dedicated resources have been implemented across the board to try to reach the goal of creating an outstanding welcome. But what makes an outstanding sense of welcome? And, importantly, what makes a sense of unwelcomeness? For many traditionally marginalized from arts communities (such as Black and racialized, disabled, queer, and trans people) our sense of unwelcomeness is all too familiar in this white supremacist, ableist, trans and queer phobic anti-Black world. Our institutions are microcosms of a world full of systemic oppression, and as such they recreate the conditions that give way to ableism, racism, and queer/transphobia within the arts milieu. As marginalized people, we feel this sense of un-belonging, aware of our unintelligibility to the masses when we leave our homes and encounter the state in all its forms. This state, and its people, acting out the goals of the state, seem hell-bent on the eradication of our people through a slow and persistent genocide. In this space, I am going to explore how this sense of unwelcomeness is manifested through the academic, prison, and arts industrial complexes, as a way of considering the common threads of these systems to help us figure out how to unsettle it.

[2] I've chosen to keep the original citation style to preserve the original format

First, the academic industrial complex: Here is but one example, the case of Michael Marrus, a history professor at the University of Toronto's Massey College. At a dinner in 2016, the head of Massey College, Hugh Segal, known as the Master of the College, entered the room and sat down at a dining table. Marrus, also seated at the table, commented to a Black student that Segal, the Master, was *his* master, and he allegedly asked the student, "You know this is your master, eh? Do you feel the lash?" ("Massey College"). How horrific.

Students complained, and Marrus was asked to resign. He did submit his resignation as a Senior Fellow from the college, but says he is "disheartened" by the lack of dialogue between him and those who asked for his resignation. "Where was the due process, where was the effort to hear me out, where was the effort to relate to 30 years of scholarship that have a lot to do with human rights? There is something cruel and reckless about this campaign," he said in an interview with The Globe and Mail (Chiose, 2017, accessed online).

Cruel and reckless. What was cruel and reckless? Not Marrus's practice of seeing the Black student as Black first and student second. Not his seeing only the student's Blackness and being part of a white supremacist society that draws automatic links between Blackness and the process of enslavement, causing his brain to immediately connect to the antebellum South, despite being in Toronto in 2017. Was that not what was cruel and reckless about this incident? This same phenomenon of equating Blackness with processes of enslavement has resulted in the creation of a billion dollar movie industry in Hollywood that repeatedly doles out slave narrative after slave narrative. This phenomenon of equating Blackness to enslavement and of positioning this as always already being in the past prevents Black people from naming the lasting effects of this enslavement on our lives today.

Cruel and reckless, again, was it not the practice of naming everything 'master,' as if we all didn't know that word carries with it generations of trauma and a legacy of violence every time the word was uttered: master list, master of arts, master and servant, mastery . . . master of all trades. The word 'master' is absolutely loaded and carries with it a history of trauma. Take, for example, the case in California in the early 2000s in which a Black employee sued (and won!) a human rights case for having to work with mainframe computers and having to see master and slave boot-up disks every day as the commencement of his work shift ("'Master'"). We gleefully use the word 'master' within multiple contexts in this city, both within the academic industrial complex and within the community, as if that word was something that should be uttered aloud in 2017.

Regardless of the overuse of this problematic word, this Black student at Massey College could have also been a master, holding an MA perhaps in history, knowing full well the weight of that title in that context. But his skill and knowledge were invisible in that context, with a white supremacist seeing him not as a graduate student, not as a visiting professor, not as a guest to Massey College deserving a glorious welcome. No, instead, he was seen just as 'a Black,' and thus his relationship to the word 'master' would always already be one of servitude, and of memories of the lash.

This is violence. I offer this story as an example of the pervasiveness of white supremacy within our society, a deep-rooted anti-Blackness that creates inhospitable and unwelcoming conditions for Black people. But as Kimberlé Crenshaw and the Combahee River Collective remind us, there are intersectional links that bring anti-Blackness together within a larger context of transphobia, ableism, and class warfare that makes things particularly injurious and unwelcoming for Black, trans, disabled people. I offer this story as an example of the

pervasiveness of white supremacy within our society, a deep-rooted anti-Blackness that creates inhospitable and unwelcoming conditions for Black people.

And so, I offer another example: the case of Andrew Loku, one that exemplifies the flaws in the police and prison industrial complex. Andrew Loku was at home, in his building, walking around the exterior and interior of the space, experiencing psychosis. He lived in a building designed for people who experience psychiatric disabilities, a place 'welcoming' of people with Madness. He worked as a handyman around the building and was often seen working on parts of the building.

On the day of his death, however, he was holding a hammer and was confronted in the hallways of his building near his apartment by the police. He had been behaving in ways that were unexpected in public space, and pervasive sanism3 had caused someone to call the police to curb his behaviour. The police officers arrived, one trained in de-escalation tactics for people experiencing psychosis and one being trained that day on how to do de-escalation. They had a 12-second exchange with Loku—12 seconds—and decided to discharge their weapons, killing him instantly. Loku was always already out of place, even in his home, because he was behaving in ways that our deeply ableist society deemed unwanted and unexpected, and thus dangerous. This violent process of unwelcoming by the police resulted in his death.

Unwelcoming. This is far too benign a word, but I will use it in the context of this theme. Unwelcoming. This is the case far too often when it comes to Black disabled people—and in particular Black Mad people—the list of fatal interactions with unwelcoming police keeps growing: Amleset Haile, Abdirahman Abdi, Andrew Loku. And this unwelcomeness is not exclusively tied up with anti-Blackness, but directed at Mad people often in general, as was the case with the fatalities of Mad Torontonians Sammy

Yatim, Otto Vass, Edmund Yu . . .

I've discussed the unwelcoming conditions of the academic industrial complex and the policing complex, but what of our experiences within arts environments? What of our experiences within non-profit and arts industrial complexes? What of our welcome
or unwelcoming here? I want to close by telling you the story of the start of my work within this field, fifteen years ago when I began a job at one of the largest art institutions in the country. Let's call it Big Art Institution #304. As a Black, trans person I felt dubious that I would experience a great welcome at this colonial institution, and as such I was super-nervous during my interview. However, it actually went really well. My interview was long and truly fulfilling. I talked about art for hours with my interviewers. I got the job. But when I went to sign my contract, something entirely different than a welcome happened. I was ushered into an
HR room and grilled about whether or not I had sent someone to do my interview for me. I was completely perplexed. Did they not recognize me as the person who came in for the interview? I was told that the interviewers had written notes during the interview referring to me as 'she' and that my references had all referred to me as 'he.' Rather than assuming the obvious, that the interviewers had gotten my gender wrong, they assumed that I, a Black trans person, must have sent someone to do my interview for me.

I tell this story to illustrate the deep dichotomies of us and them at play within our institutions, this sense of unwelcome that exists within these settings. What are we to make of this story? As a trans person, my being was unintelligible to the HR department, who couldn't imagine my existence. As a Black person, it was plausible and even probable that I had somehow cheated during my interview—for I am always already deceitful, criminal, and devious. As a Black person I was deserving of the lash, to return to the story earlier, and I was reduced to, not a Master's

student, not a skilled artist, but someone trying to get away with something, to worm my way into a place where I didn't belong. I asked them if anyone had ever done that before—sent a stranger to do their interview for them. Was this a common problem? Of course, no.

I still accepted the job, and went on to spend years offering free education about trans issues and Black communities for the entirety of my tenure there.

This is the part where I normally close with something hopeful— where I weave together a story of hope and futurity that brings it all together. But today I can't do that. Because Michael Marrus will be heard, and his explanations will be welcomed into public discourse and because that Black student will never be more than one waiting for the lash, as I was, at Big Art Institution #304. Because white supremacy is so pervasive that we don't even see it, so that any reporting of Marrus's transgressions don't even mention the word 'racism' in the coverage. Because we as Black, trans, and disabled people are so completely unwelcome within all levels of the social world, in every industrial complex and even within our social justice and artsy environments.

We are ready for something different, and we will not wait for the welcome mat. Instead, I suggest we move, metaphorically and psychically, to another space of knowing rooted in Black empowerment and trans, disability, and racial justice. We will build our own communities rooted in these principles, and I need you to know that it will be necessarily unwelcoming to the white supremacist mainstream society. In short, I'm headed for the hills. I'm climbing on the underground transport that my ancestors sought to find another place, a place of real freedom and a welcoming so beautiful and so expansive that my community can flourish and can continue to work in support of Indigenous resurgence and Black liberation. To a place where the welcoming will be imbued in every being, for we will have built this place of knowing

and loving rooted in social justice with welcoming—perhaps I shall call this welcoming a sense of self-determination—with the self determination of all peoples in mind. And I welcome you to join us there.

Notes

1 The term 'outstanding' was used as part of the Art Gallery of Ontario's strategy plan.

2 This reflection is based on a talk that I gave at the Hemispheric Institute for Performance and Politics in the Americas Fifth Graduate Student Initiative in October 2017.

3 Sanism, the fear and hatred of all things Mad, leads to the perception that everything that Mad people do in public space is 'unwelcome' and unexpected. When the police are called, as they often are, these interactions often end badly, and in the case of Andrew Loku, Sammy Yatim, Edmund Yu, Amleset Haile, and Otto Vass, fatally.

Ware, S. 'All that we touch we change: Octavia Butler's Guide to Belonging (in a Neoliberal World) '. Canadian Art Magazine, Winter 2017.

‘All that we touch we change’: Octavia Butler’s Guide to Belonging (in a Neoliberal World)

A right-wing US presidential hopeful threatens the remaining comfort left to the privileged few, as widespread environmental devastation and economic collapse destabilize imperialist countries like Canada and the US. Families huddle in walled neighbourhoods, keeping organized shift-watch during nights. They work outside the home only one day a week to avoid danger.

This is the uncanny vision of late US speculative-fiction writer Octavia E. Butler, as told in her incomplete trilogy Parable of the Sower (1993) and Parable of the Talents (1998). Butler’s story begins here, but it is by no means where it ends.

In Parable of the Sower, when neighbourhood walls finally fall, people form a community and, together, try to figure out how to survive. There is a shared and ever-shifting understanding of the nature of change, social justice, disability justice and the experience of marginalization and difference. The leaders of a new, emergent “nation” are disabled and BIPOC (Black,Indigenous and people of colour), forming an intergenerational collective. Naturally, they come with very different ideas for moving forward, which both aids and challenges their continued survival. They are motivated by the strong words of Butler’s main character, Lauren Oya Olamina: “All that you touch / you Change. All that you Change / Changes you.”

Butler herself experienced a compromised sense of belonging. She was a disabled, Black

artist, and a woman writing science fiction—a field that remains largely dominated by men and, as Butler often spoke about, can be outwardly hostile toward women and trans-identified writers. Butler's compromised citizenship inspired her to create worlds in which those of us on the margins could imagine ourselves surviving. She created worlds in which we might storytell ourselves into thriving existence.

Butler seemed to be on the minds of many on November 8, 2016, as many watched in horror as conservative forces swept through the US electorate, taking the presidency and maintaining control of the House and Senate, with at least one Supreme Court appointment to follow. President-elect Donald Trump's slogan, borrowed from Ronald Reagan's 1980 campaign, mirrored that of ultra-conservative presidential hopeful Christopher Charles Morpeth Donner in Parable of the Sower: "Make America Great Again." There are other similarities. Donner dismantles the "'wasteful, pointless, unnecessary' moon and Mars programs," and abolishes "'overly restrictive' minimum-wage, environmental, and worker protection laws." He gives increasing power to big business, permitting gross labour-rights violations as long as workers are provided "training and adequate room and board."

There seems a real risk of a Donner reality, in which, for one, democracy is thoroughly corporatized. In Parable of the Sower, Donner's presidency ushers in company towns such as Olivar, with enslaved people "working off" their debts to the company. In these towns, workers are only allowed to buy things with company money and are barely paid enough to survive, ensuring they remain trapped in the town. These towns remind me of the fictional "M Corporation" in Canadian artist Janine Carrington's graphic novels, Human Beings are Rats, wherein this mythical corporation has taken over the world's economy, completely controlling finances by securing all remaining government-produced monies in giant piles on M Island,

which is guarded by the stories' protagonists.

Such horrors have been imagined by those fighting for justice as well as by the Donners and Trumps of the world, who have the resources and power to make them a reality. What Butler does so well is to offer something to hold onto. In Parable of the Sower, Lauren writes Jenny Holzer–style truisms in her journal that later become the texts of her spiritual community: Earthseed: The Books of the Living. These truisms give us a window into Lauren's life as she tries to unite a strong, BIPOC and disabled–led community rooted in self-determination in a world that is constantly changing. They are also words that I will be holding onto throughout 2017:

When apparent stability disintegrates,
As it must-
God is Change-
People tend to give in
To fear and depression,
To need and greed.
When no influence is strong enough
To unify people
They divide.
They struggle,
One against one,
Group against group,
For survival, position, power.
They remember old hates and generate new ones,
They create chaos and nurture it.
They kill and kill and kill,
Until they are exhausted and destroyed,
Until they are conquered by outside forces,
Or until one of them becomes
A leader
Most will follow,
Or a tyrant
Most fear.

Butler toured her last book, Fledgling, to Toronto in 2005. I had the chance to spend the day with her and talk about the Parable series, about Earthseed and about her time-travelling

book, Kindred. I was fascinated by her remarkable ability to predict the reality that we are now living in. I had always found Butler to be a sort of truth-seer, her writing to be prophetic, and I wanted to understand how she was able to do this magic. It was as if she was capable of living the now, but decades earlier.

She brushed off this suggestion, stating simply that she was writing a future based on the present. She explained that in the late 1980s, she considered that if humans followed the trajectory that we are currently on—environmental carelessness, growing class divides, white supremacy upheld at the highest levels of government and basic human nature—what would happen? Butler wrote the Parable series during the height of the Gulf War, of challenges to environmentalism, of violence and police brutality—the Rodney King beating, a growing Prison Industrial Complex and a country still plagued by the expansive legacy of slave labour. One of the texts in Earthseed states,

All struggles
Are essentially
power struggles.
Who will rule,
Who will lead,
Who will define,
refine,
confine,
design,
Who will dominate.
All struggles
Are essentially power struggles,
And most are no more intellectual
than two rams
knocking their heads together.

I asked Butler what she thought of people taking up Earthseed as a living spiritual practice. There were few, if any, fully formed Earthseed communities at that time, but the seeds were being planted (excuse the metaphor). I wanted to know what she thought of us taking up her

texts for guidance, of following them in literal ways. She was surprised and perhaps even dismissive, saying she couldn't imagine Earthseed as a comforting "religion." She felt strongly that the idea of a faceless god that was simply "change itself" would not be useful for followers during times of stress. She explained that most successful religions offered comfort during moments of personal and global chaos. She questioned how we would find comfort in the idea of change as the only constant—in an understanding that struggle was a core part of being alive.

Since Butler's passing, however, more and more have turned to Earthseed as a way to find a sense of purpose and safety. These people are building intentional communities modelled after Acorn, the first such community in Parable of the Sower. These real-life communities are rooted in concepts of shared work, respect and love of children, social-justice frameworks, disability and healing justice, and a way of living in harmony with nature. They root their work in kindness, drawing again on Earthseed: The Books of the Living, in which Butler states, "Kindness eases Change." They meet regularly with each other, sharing ideas, creativity and love and also drawing on suggestions in the text that,

Once or twice
each week
A Gathering of Earthseed
is a good and necessary thing.
It vents emotion, then
quiets the mind.
It focuses attention,
strengthens purpose, and
unifies people.

Artists are also taking up Butler's texts as creative fodder. Musician Toshi Reagon created an opera based on Parable of the Sower, and Butler's books have spawned an anthology of new writing, Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice, featuring speculative fiction and essays by LeVar Burton, Mumia-Abu Jamal and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-

Samarasinha, among others. It seems Earthseed is continuing to grow and change. As Butler states, “We are Earthseed / The life that perceives itself / Changing.”

Ware, S.M.. "All Power to All People? Black LGBTTI2QQ Activism, Remembrance, and Archiving in Toronto." TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly 4, no. 2 (2017): 170-180[3]

All Power to All People?: Black LGBTTI2QQ Activism, Remembrance, and Archiving in Toronto

SYRUS MARCUS WARE

Abstract

In this article, the author considers the erasure of racialized and indigenous histories from white trans archives, time lines, and cartographies of resistance. The author examines interventions by Black queer and trans historiographers, critics, and activists who have attempted to reinscribe Blackness into the history of LGBTTI2QQ space in Toronto. Lastly, the author considers how power and privilege influence what is allowed to be remembered, and what is considered archivable. The classic archive structure—primarily white trans and queer archives—is the allegedly neutral disembodied collection of objects that create and inscribe a narrative of struggle and resistance that always begins with whiteness and that is used too often in the service of homonationalism, gay imperialism, and the vilification of the less progressive other. The author suggests that we start with a Black trans and queer history as a way to orient us toward different pasts and futures, and a radically different account of the present and what needs to change.

Keywords Black, trans, archives, Toronto, time

In this article, I will consider the erasure of racialized and indigenous histories from white trans archives, time lines, and cartographies of resistance. I will examine interventions by Black queer and trans historiographers, critics, and activists who have attempted to reinscribe Blackness into the history of LGBTTI2QQ space in Toronto.1 Lastly, I will consider how power and privilege influence what is allowed to be remembered, and what is considered archivable. This article was created through several collaborative feedback sessions with the Marvellous Grounds collective and draws on the emerging Marvellous Grounds archive project.

[3] I have chosen to keep the original citation style to preserve the original formatting.

In particular, I draw on the writing of contributors Monica Forrester, a Black trans activist from Toronto who has done sex worker outreach for the past two decades; Richard Fung, artist and activist and one of the founders of Gay Asians of Toronto; and Douglas Stewart, a Black activist and organizer who started Blockorama and other key Black queer and trans organizations in the city.

The classic archive structure—and I'm speaking here primarily about white trans and queer archives—is the allegedly neutral disembodied collection of objects that create and inscribe a narrative of struggle and resistance that always begins with whiteness and that is used too often in the service of homonationalism, gay imperialism (Haritaworn, Tauqir, and Erdem 2008; Walcott 2015), and the vilification of the less progressive other (Taylor 2003; Stoler 2010; Said [1993] 1994; Dadui, forthcoming). As Haritaworn argues in Queer Lovers and Hateful Others, the queer time line we are describing/critiquing suggests a seamless march toward rights, with hate crime activism as the apex of history into which the rest of the world must be forced (2015). Instead, I am suggesting that we start with a Black trans and queer history as a way to orient us toward different pasts and futures, and a radically different account of the present and what needs to change. As I will illustrate in this text, we need to consider what we want to remember and how we want to remember it, building an archive of our movements going forward to ensure that intergenerational memory can inform our activism, community building, and organizing. By tracing the histories of QTBIPOCs in Toronto,3 and the omissions of these narratives in mainstream archives, we can begin to do this work.

I would like to begin by calling names, following author Courtnay McFarlane (2007) and his important commitment to remembering the great legacy of Black queer and trans folks in Toronto over the past several decades. I want to call names to bring the spirit of these activisms into the room with us, to remember that it is ongoing and enlivened by a consideration of the past, present, and (Afro) future (Yaszek 2006; Butler 2012). I'd like to call into this space the

important work of trans women of colour and indigenous trans and two-spirited folks who are often omitted from the archives—from official records and collective memories of what has happened in this place. And so I call names: Mirha Soleil-Ross, Yasmeen Persad, Monica Forrester, and Nik Redman. The names of those with us, but also those who have already passed on, include Sumaya Dalmar, Duchess, and countless others. I call these names as an act of remembrance and reverence, but also as a suggestion for where to begin looking for our trans-of-colour archive—in names called and stories shared.

Coming Out as Trans and Black

When I entered the largely white trans community in Toronto in the late 1990s, coming out as a Black trans person felt incredibly isolating. The 519 Church Street Community Centre's trans programs were in their infancy, and though they did a lot to promote early trans visibility, the ephemera they created tended to reproduce the idea that there were few (if any) Black trans people. Online resources like FTMI (Female-To-Male International) and the Lou Sullivan Society didn't do a good job of connecting with and creating work by trans folks of colour, something that would eventually change after years, if not decades, of trans folks of colour mobilizing and organizing. And so I came out and felt quite isolated. But through organizing within Black queer spaces, I met other people. I worked with Yasmeen Persad through 519's Trans Shelter Access Project, and I connected with Monica Forrester through my work at Pasan. We shared information and resources. I found out through researching sex-reassignment surgery (SRS) in North America that one of the first trans people to have SRS inside the United States was Delisa Newton, a Black trans jazz singer. I learned about Storme DeLarverie, a Black gender-variant performer and activist who set the stage for countless future trans artists of colour.Where was I to go to find out about Black trans history in Toronto?

Historical and grassroots queer archives often don't do a good job at actively participating in the documentation and preservation of the artifacts, stories, and materials of Black and African diasporic cultural production and activism (Flinn, Stevens, and Shepherd 2009) despite a stated desire by community members to have their work be part of a visible archive.5 This erasure is part of a larger conceptualization of the Black queer subject as a new entity, whose history is built upon an already existing white LGBTTI2QQ space and history.

A Marvelous Archive: Black and Trans Communities through Time and Space

Trans lives of colour follow a different temporality: we fail the progress narrative espoused by the white trans movement, as advancement is typically reduced to acquiring "rights" that are inaccessible to most and in fact are wielded against so many on the margins of the margins through the prison industrial complex, the war on terror, and the aid development industry (Haritaworn, Kuntsman, and Posocco 2013). At the same time, trans lives of colour open up different futures that are not just a reproduction of/diversification of/assimilation into the same. As Sylvia Rivera explains, trans folks of colour were at the front lines in part because they experienced rampant marginalization and as a result they "had nothing to lose" (quoted in Gan 2007). Our relationship to the law changes our relationships to space and organizing and creates a certain set of freedoms and also restrictions in our work (Rivera 2007; Ware, Ruzsa, and Dias 2014; Sudbury and Okazawa-Rey 2009; Palacios et al. 2013). Rivera and her communities put everything on the line to fight for systemic change and self-determination because of these relationships. Here, I am pointing to a different set of activist ancestors to create a tension with and challenge how we remember collective struggle.

By starting with QTBIPOC narratives, we gain a different entry point into trans and queer collective time lines of resistance and archives, and we interrupt the ways that these omissions

produce a whitewashed canon. Starting with our stories and reading them alongside more mainstream narratives, we can inform trans theory, guide future activism, and set the stage for new ways of working for change. Jacques Derrida (1996), in his seminal work Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression, argues that we produce something through these acts of reremembering, or sharing stories: we create a sense of physical, liminal, and phenomenological space to consider our past presents and futures. In contrast, the prioritization of white queer and trans people's history by white historiographers suggests that all LGBTTI2QQ community organizing and development was created by and for white people (Ramirez 2015; Flinn, Stevens, and Shepherd 2009). Instead, we offer a type of counter-archiving, as conceptualized by Jin Haritaworn et al. (UTP 2018) in their introduction to the Marvellous Grounds book project Queering Urban Justice (BTL, 2018). Counter-archiving highlights the problems of a presentist agenda that selectively highlights and erases subjects, spaces, and events to expand its own power in the present into the future, without letting go of the past or the future. It further questions what acts, subjects, and inscriptions legitimately constitute an archive.The question thus becomes not where is the archive but, rather, why are Black subjects always already conceptualized as new additions? The stories of the resistance that Black peoples have enacted since being on Turtle Island continually get forgotten and erased.

We've Been Here: Black Trans Organizing in Toronto and Beyond

Contrary to the claim of newness, countless artists, activists, poets, and community mobilizers within Black queer and trans communities in Toronto have done the work of documenting our stories. This archive of Black movements over time and space exists and is exemplified by, for example, Debbie Douglas, Courtnay McFarlane, Makeda Silvera, and Douglas Stewart's (1997) anthology that brought together queer Black authors in Canada entitled Má-ka: Diasporic Juks: Contemporary Writing by Queers of African Descent, the piles of historic video, the vivid textile

banners and art by Black queer and trans people created for Blockorama 6 (currently housed in local activist Junior Harrison's basement, highlighting a large gap in the municipal archive), and the embodied interpersonal storytelling that happens when we get together in community—at Blockorama; outside a Black queer dance party by local DJs Blackcat, Nik Red, and Cozmic Cat; and in the park outside the queer community center, the 519 Church Street Community Centre. There is, in fact, a big literature on the Black queer and trans subject already, and here, I'm thinking of the important work of Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley (2008), Rinaldo Walcott (2009a, 2009b, 2012), Omisoore Dryden (2010), Cassandra Lord (2005, 2015), and so many others.

The "newness" of the discourse of the QTBIPOC subject is further belied by the long history of activism by QTBIPOCs across this northern part of Turtle Island. Toronto in the 1970s and 1980s was brimming with activism by QTBIPOCs, who organized around homelessness, LGBTQ issues, HIV/AIDS, education, apartheid, and disability justice, as well as challenged racism and other forms of systemic marginalization and oppression, to name but a few examples. Folks were getting together to write letters in support of activists fighting apartheid on the continent, including to South African gay rights activist Simon Nkoli. Artists were coming together to form political arts initiatives like Desh Pardesh, a festival of queer and trans South Asian arts and culture in Toronto; Mayworks Festival of the Arts, a labor arts festival that makes intersectional links between class, race, and gender through an understanding of labor arts; and the Counting Past Two festival, one of the first trans film festivals in North America. Mainstream LGBTQ records and municipal archives have omitted these initiatives, yet they exist in our community and persist in an oral tradition of telling and retelling, embodied in our activism.

These tellings and retellings are self-directed and draw on what Eve Tuck (2009) has conceptualized as a desire-based research: the need to root our considerations in a "framework

. . . concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives" in order to

> "document . . . not only the painful elements of social realities but also the wisdom and hope. Such an axiology is intent on depathologizing the experiences of dispossessed and disenfranchised communities so that people are seen as more than broken and conquered. This is to say that even when communities are broken and conquered, they are so much more than that—so much more that this incomplete story is an act of aggression" (page 416).

Indeed, these archives interrupt the neoliberal insistence on the forced telling and retelling of a one-dimensional narrative by those on the margins—a telling that is obligatory in what Tuck contrasts as damage-centered research. Instead, these shared memories tell of a deep, intersectional knowing that can inform our understandings of our own lives today, direct our future activism, and help us build stronger communities rooted in care and justice. These lived movements and collective memories are described by Monica Forrester, who talks about her entry into activism in the 1980s. She helps us understand the different relationship that young Black trans women of that time had to archivable ephemera—keeping the kinds of objects that mainstream archives value as proof of value/worth was hard given what they were up against. She states:

> The corner was the only community that existed. At that time, it was the only place where we could share information. And, that's where I've learned a lot . . . the determination to make change. . . . And when I was thinking about history, and archiving, I thought, "Oh! I wish I took pictures." . . . Because we were in such a different place back then. I think survival was key. No one really thought about archiving, because we really didn't think we would live past 30. Our lives were so undetermined that no one really thought about, "Oh should we archive this for later use?" (p.175)

Forrester's text references an urgent activism that aims to prolong life and chances of survival in a white supremacist and transphobic world, but it frequently eludes dominant queer narratives of space and time. Thus, QTBIPOC organizing happened not in the village but at the corner. Her story informs our understanding of subsequent activisms in the city, for example, shaping our

understanding of how to organize to stop sex workers from being pushed out of the LGBTQ Village neighbourhood in Toronto as part of ongoing gentrification processes and anti–sex worker stigma. By situating our understanding of the corner as being a community center, as a home, as a classroom, and the other ways described by Forrester, we can build a fight that ensures that the access points the corner represents are intact when we are done fighting.

Furthermore, in the face of ever-present systemic violence, “no one really thought about archiving, because we really didn’t think we would live past 30.” Just because we didn’t keep ephemera doesn’t mean we don’t have an archive and things to remember. For obsessive collecting of memorabilia, think of the elaborate pin button project launched at the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives, a national archive of queer culture that was founded in 1973, and that now is the largest independent queer archive in the world.7 Despite claims that it represents and reflects queer culture across Canada, many have critiqued its lack of racialized historical content and visible trans archive, as well as its anachronistic name, “Lesbian and Gay Archives.” Displays such as the thousands of pin buttons mean nothing without the embodied memories and stories that contextualize their creation. We might speculate how the archives of Monica Forrester would have differed from the elaborate pin button project. What would the archives of Monica Forrester have looked like had there been the capacity to create such documents at that time of great struggle? What would have been created or changed through the process of such recording?What would the community have had to look like, and who would have had to be in power to foster an interest in the creation of such an archive? What would power have had to look like in the village at that moment for the lives of Black trans women to be considered worthy of archiving or remembering?

We can reflect on Forrester’s text to help us understand recent QTBIPOC interventions in the city, such as the Black Lives Matter– Toronto (BLM-TO) shutdown of the Toronto Pride Parade

in June 2016 and the subsequent anti-Black racist backlash and violence that followed within Toronto's queer and trans communities.8 Her articulation of who gets to hold power and have ownership over the directions and decisions of these communities, in essence, who is remembered as being here and part of the fight, is brought to life in the BLM-TO moment. Their presence in the parade was seen by many to be unexpected, and their political analysis considered divergent and unwanted, with some white community members chanting, "Take this fight to Caribana,"9 suggesting that Black queer and trans organizing was not "of the Village," as this is an always already white space, but rather that our organizing belonged to an explicitly Black space, Caribana. BLM-TO's leadership, largely made up of queer and trans members, and their role as Pride Toronto's honoured group still did not afford their belonging to the (presumed to be all-white) queer and trans community.

Forrester's text tells of the need for an intersectional understanding of what has happened within Black queer and trans communities in Toronto in the past four decades. She urges us to consider sex workers, poor and working-class trans women, and others who are marginalized within larger Black queer and trans organizing as historical subjects. At the same time, her historical narrative does not simply "bring Black trans ephemera to the archives." It raises larger questions about who can interpret our histories, and who can understand our embodied repertoires.

Conclusion

I began this article by calling names. I will end it by sharing an encounter that illustrates, or perhaps embodies, the problem with the archive. Memory is a fascinating process. The more we recall, or perhaps repeat, our memories of events, the more we begin to remember the

memories more than the events. The memories of an elder I encountered, for a variety of reasons including anti-Black racism, transphobia, and the active marginalization of trans indigenous and racialized people from these movements, do not recall our presence at these events and eventually become "the event." I recently met with a self-proclaimed elder, a white gay activist whose account of the Toronto bathhouse raids is widely cited. He asked me for an interview, and I was telling him about my own organizing, and my desire to build on the important work of trans women of colour leading our movements. He leaned forward and said, matter-of-factly, "You know, it's not true. People nowadays say that trans women of colour were there, but they weren't. I was there. I would have remembered." He was so certain that he was a more accurate witness of what had happened in the Toronto and New York histories that he could discount the living stories of trans women. He felt such confidence in his own memory as being the memory, the archive, the impartial record of human history. We simply were not there in his mind, and thus we were ripped from the fabric of time and space.

But we were there, and we are, as Miss Major says,10 "still fucking here" (Ophelian 2016). And we already exist in the beautiful (Afro) future. By beginning here, by starting with these genealogies, we can re-remember that we are here, that we will continue to exist, continue to fight, to struggle for change, and to win, as Assata Shakur urges us (1987). Black trans archives live in the moments of shared story, of names called, of gatherings and celebrations in public space. Our archives live in our bodies and minds, and they span time and space.

Notes

1. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, intersex, two-spirited, queer, and questioning.
2. Funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and ERA, Queering Urban Justice is a forthcoming collection of art, activism, and academic writings by

queers of colour in Toronto from the Marvellous Grounds collective. It is a book- and web-based project and is coedited/curated by Jin Haritaworn, Alvis Choi, Ghaida Moussa, Rio Rodriguez, and Syrus Marcus Ware at York University in Toronto.

3. QTBIPOC stands for queer, trans, Black, Indigenous, and people of colour.

4. These trans activists contributed greatly to the development of trans community during the 1990s and early 2000s in Toronto. Mirha-Soleil Ross is a trans artist, sex worker, and activist who has led seminal research and organizing from the early 1990s to the present day in Montreal and Toronto. Yasmeen Persad is a Black trans woman in Toronto who has worked over ten years to create access programs for trans women of colour through the 519 Church Street Community Centre and the Sherbourne Health Centre. Monica Forrester is a Black trans woman who has spent several decades doing street outreach and organizing among trans sex workers in Toronto. Nik Redman is a Black trans man in Toronto who has worked for two decades to create trans-specific programming and resources for queer trans men, trans parents, and filmmakers of colour. Sumaya Dalmar was a Black trans woman who died in 2015 in Toronto. The handling of her case by the Toronto Police Service came under fire when her death was not initially reported. Duchess was a well-known Black drag queen in Toronto who died suddenly of meningitis in the early 2000s in Toronto.

5. The lack of adequate archiving and a desire to create a Black queer and trans archive have come up several times; for example, this was the theme and focus of the Toronto Queering Black History gathering at Ryerson University in 2010, featuring talks on the subject by Notisha Massaquoi, Rinaldo Walcott, Courtnay McFarlane, and Syrus Marcus Ware. The gathering was organized by a student collective led by Lali Mohamed and has become an annual event. WARE * All Power to All People? 177 Downloaded from https://read.dukeupress.edu/tsq/article-pdf/4/2/170/486042/170Ware.pdf by YORK UNIV user on 13 September 2019

6. Started in 1998 by Blackness Yes!, an independent committee of grassroots organizers, Blockorama is a day-long arts festival at the city's annual pride celebrations; it has engaged in over seventeen years of resistance to whitewashing within queer organizing. An explicitly political space, Blockorama consists of arts programming that spans twelve hours and centers the narratives of Black and African diasporic trans, disabled and deaf, and queer people.
7. The Pin Button Project featured a campaign to solicit the donation of historic activist buttons from Toronto queer and trans people. The project had some content that reflected a racialized history, but it largely reflected a white queer history. For more information, see Pin Button Project 2016.
8. Black Lives Matter–Toronto (BLM-TO) was named Pride Toronto's honoured group and as a result was asked to lead the Toronto Pride Parade. Along the parade route, BLM-TO held a twenty-five-minute sit-in, during which they presented demands to the Pride Toronto executive director, cowritten with two other Black queer and trans groups: Black Queer Youth (BQY) and Blackness Yes!. The groups collectively demanded that Pride Toronto do better by Black, indigenous, racialized, trans, and disabled people, and they refused to restart the parade until the Pride executive director agreed to address their concerns. There was tremendous backlash by white festival attendees, with many throwing water bottles at Black activists, screaming racial slurs, and yelling that they were being "selfish." In the days that followed, many of the BLM-TO organizers received death threats and hate mail in response to this direct action.
9. The Toronto Caribbean Carnival, known by most as Caribana, is the largest annual festival in the city of Toronto. Held over several weeks and culminating in a day-long parade and carnival celebration, the festival is heavily policed, and the site of the festival has been moved from a prominent location down to the edge of the city's waterfront.

10. Miss Major is a lifelong activist and community organizer well known for her role in the Stonewall Riots and for helping to set up supportive programming for Black trans women across the United States.

Ware, Syrus Marcus, Abolition In Our Lifetime, This Magazine, Fall 20204

Abolition in our Lifetime

By Syrus Marcus Ware

We are living in revolutionary times. The ground is shifting beneath us every day. We are seeing a radical shift in our collective consciousness about ideas pertaining to abolition and defunding the police. We are beginning to awaken to the idea that we can solve issues of conflict, crisis, and harm in ways that do not rely on the prison industrial complex and police systems. Far from being new, these concepts have had recent groundswells globally. From “Black Lives Matter” and “Defund the Police” being painted big and bold across city streets, to colonial statues being toppled, to people organizing collective care circles and mutual aid networks that ensure no one is left behind—including organizing from home and from beds—this movement is so vast and so impressive a footprint that it can literally be seen from space. Abolition offers a possibility for self-determination, the ability for all of us to live the lives that we choose and that we want. It offers a possibility for the end of slavery—something that was technically abolished but continued through the prison system. Abolishing police and prisons allows us to finally complete the project of the abolition of slavery—and our children’s children will be born free from that system of domination, punishment and control.

Abolition is being taken up in the most unlikely of places—from the playground, to the family dinner table, to Cosmopolitan magazine. More importantly, it is firmly supported by a bedrock of abolitionist struggle that is 500 years strong on Turtle Island. We are fighting for this new system to be a more just one, one that is rooted in justice and freedom. We are moving steadily towards abolition and our victory seems close and sure. Now is a time to reflect on the history of the

4 I’ve chosen to maintain the original citation style to preserve the original format.

abolition movement and what the future could look like if we reach abolition in our lifetime.

Abolition, which is necessarily rooted in Indigenous resurgence, disability justice, and anti-capitalism, is based on the not-so-radical idea that we could treat each other like human beings deserving of love and care and as beings that are inherently valuable. It's this idea that we don't need prisons or police to keep our communities safe or secure. It suggests that we could reinvest these resources into communities to ensure all of our basic needs are being met. Abolition is rooted in the idea that we could stop relying on punitive measures to solve moments of distress, interpersonal disagreements and harm. That we could stop caging living beings. I spent a few weeks in August, in the immediate months after revolutionary action sparked in the streets across Turtle Island following the killings of George Floyd and Regis Korchinski-Paquet, speaking with abolitionists from coast to coast about the movement to defund the police and about their wildest abolitionist dreams for the near future. What I found out was not surprising: there are expansive networks of abolitionists, with new additions springing up regularly. I found that these are coordinated and ready to give abolition its final push into place. I spoke with Morgan Switzer-Rodney, one half of Black Chat, a podcast focused on intergenerational learnings and Black liberatory culture based in western Canada. She explained, "I think it's something like above 50 percent of Canada is in favour of defunding the police. And so that's really great. We see different cities in the states who are actually having whole defunding programs becoming a thing. And I can't look at those things and be like, 'Wow, there's nothing to hope for here.'"

Rajean Hoilett is the co-founder of the Toronto Prisoners' Rights Project; I spoke to him about this moment and how he came to be involved in the abolition movement. "When the carceral system hit me personally, when my brother was locked up and serving a two-year sentence I had to navigate how hard it was to continue to exist, to continue to maintain a connection with

him. I was moved to use those skills, to use my practice as a community organizer to contribute to this movement specifically for prisoners." He began the project in December 2019, at first focusing on the exploitative pricing scheme that Bell Canada holds as the provider for prison calls in Canada. After the pandemic hit, the group amplified its efforts. "The pandemic has opened up everyone's imagination into what kind of world is possible. And the Toronto Prisoners' Rights Project has been very well placed as a group who has started to do activism and started to do organizing and bringing people together around this particular issue."

The Toronto Prisoners'' Rights Project has organized several COVID-friendly protests during the spring and early summer of 2020 aimed at pushing for decarceration and abolition. Importantly, they used the newfound time and online world that the COVID lockdown brought about to conduct a weekly series of webinars on abolitionist topics from how to get involved in organizing to Black liberation to Indigenous resurgence. These resources aim to build up community capacity to fight for change. "I think what's beautiful about abolition is that we hold space for everybody. And there's definitely some space for leadership to be taken and for folks who have been doing this work to help guide all of us as we're moving forward". As much as drawing on experienced organizers, there's room for everyone in this movement. Hoilett continues, " As we've been talking to people, as new people have been getting involved in our organizing, folks are like, 'Oh, I need to read up on transformative justice, and I need to do all my readings about abolition, and I need to do this, and I need to do that, in order to feel like I'm comfortable enough to organize.'" The group has provided these resources in a multitude; as well as the weekly webinars they've also been organizing a support fund for people just getting out of prison or jail.

Far from a Toronto phenomenon, abolition work is spread all across Turtle Island and Inuit Nunangat. I spoke with Paige Galette, key organizer for the movement for Black lives in the

Yukon. She explains, “We have been trained to believe that systems such as police, court, and prisons are created to keep us safe. But when we look at who is placed in these systems—predominately Black and Indigenous People—we can see how these systems rely on Black and Indigenous bodies for their functioning. It's quite obvious to me whose ‘safety,’ ‘security,’ ‘justice’ and ‘comfort’ we are upholding.” White supremacy is steeped in the police and prison system and Galette speaks to the disproportionate targeting of racialized people in order to keep white communities in a position of dominance and control. It is their safety that is considered first and foremost.

As we move towards an abolitionist society, one wherein we have eradicated white supremacy; uprooted racism, ableism, and classism; wherein we have ended colonial and imperialist practices—we are already planning for the world we are going to live in in the future. Talking with activists about their ideal abolitionist futures is insightful as they offer us rich fodder for imagining possibilities. As we talk about the future, we dream together about what could be.

I asked the activists I spoke to about their visions and what they were doing to prepare. As for Switzer-Rodney, her preparation is rooted in intergenerational work. “My current work in the movement is focused on bridging intergenerational relationships. Helping bridge that gap is crucial. I've been doing a lot of youth education, particularly in relation to abolition and Black liberation.” We do work together in community to prepare but there's also our personal work to begin this journey. She continues, “I've been doing my own deprogramming. I am looking at systems of harm that I perpetuate and am working to dismantle those systems.... In the midst of a revolution, on a path towards abolition, I am trying to get myself right and build up my skills for the resistance so that I have something to provide.”

From the personal to the broader community, we are learning how to be in relation with ourselves and each other again. Ravyn Wngz, anAfro-Indigenous artist and organizer with Black Lives Matter Toronto says, “One thing that I believe will help us get in better relationships with each other is to treat each other as if we were chosen family. To approach abolition as the most loving thing that we can do for one another. I believe the most loving thing that I can do for you is to set you free. This is what we were asking people to consider—to be a part of this struggle until we are all free.” Wngz encourages us to find familial ties and community connections as part of our work to build a more just society. Hoilett shares the sentiment, “As we move away from relying on the same systems that are hurting us, we can have those transformative conversations about how we see people who have done harm. Can we still hold space for them in our community without writing them off and without exiling them from our community?” He says, “In the future we will find ways of taking care of each other even in the face of harm or conflict. And because of this community care, there would be less harm overall to have to address. We would all have what we needed to survive and thrive”.

Switzer-Rodney is engaged in similar conversations in her community in Vancouver. “My dream is a world where Black people are everywhere and are free from police. I dream of a world where elders are seen and cared for, and are well-respected. I dream of a world where we are taking care of each other, and we are holding each other accountable in ways that are focused around healing individuals, both those who maybe enact harm as well as are harmed.... We will all get in right relations with the people whose land we occupy and work towards sustainable climate and food systems.”

Everyone I spoke with expressed the importance of the longevity of this movement and the impact of the work we are doing now on society around us. Switzer-Rodney said, “I have a sticker that I recently put on my computer, which it says ... ‘Every generation demands

liberation.’ I think that even if this current moment—this movement—if it doesn't succeed in the way that we want it to, it has still planted so many seeds in so many people. It has done a lot of prep work for a lot of youth, youthier youth than me even! And so I think it will just come back. I think abolition will just keep coming.” Considering her words, I’m imagining cutting back raspberry cane in the heat of late summer and seeing it grow back fuller and deeper the next year. Perhaps abolition will be like this?

Hoilett is sure that we will continue pushing towards freedom. He says, “I'm excited. It's a beautiful thing. I think that most of this future I can't even imagine. I trust all the people that we sit with in community, I know that we'll continue to push this forward.” Galette senses an urgency in this moment and says "We need action. Time waits for no one…. The time to act is now. Start allowing your mind to imagine a world possible without police, prisons, and court systems. It is possible and is happening sooner than you think. Familiarize yourself with words like ‘community safety’ and ‘accountability’ and ‘restorative justice.’ These words exist because they are -and have been for centuries- being put into practice.”

We are on the edge of a new world. As statues topple—such as the John A MacDonald dethroning in Montreal—and streets are painted in Tkaronto, and communities are gathering in BC, the Yukon, Halifax, Edmonton, Winnipeg, Hamilton, and beyond demanding justice for the many Black and Indigenous people killed by policing and prisons in Canada—a new world is being birthed. Abolition offers us the chance to build communities founded on love and social justice values. We can finally get free. As Galette encourages us, the time is now to get involved in shaping this change. Switzer Rodney reminds us, “ I see enough people being willing to have conversations and slowly start to move along with it. And so that gives me hope.”

Have these conversations and then prepare yourself, your family, and your community—change is coming. We are all about to be so much freer. It's time to get ready.

Ware, S. *"Walking into a changed work: Drawing and Forest Baths with Youth in Tkaronto".* Walking Lab (forthcoming) in Qualitative Inquiry, Special issue on Walking and Critical Place Inquiry, Guest Edited by Stephanie Springgay and Sarah Truman, forthcoming.

Foraging the Future: Forest Baths, Engaged Pedagogy and Planting Ourselves Into the Future

Syrus Marcus Ware

Imagine with me, for a moment, what it feels like to be desired. Shut out distractions in some way and turn inward to imagine. Can you feel this sense in your body? That deep knowing that you are wanted and expected. Now, imagine a world full of desire- desire for difference and desire for the most marginalized in our current system.

Let's continue dreaming together for a moment longer.

Imagine a future where ALL Black lives were desired- where we were anticipated in the world and as a result, planned and cared for. Imagine a world where the beautiful diversity of Blackness was celebrated and protected as it was considered inherently valuable. Imagine a world where Black Deaf, Mad and disabled people lived full self determined lives. Imagine a world where Black trans people lived long enough to become elders.

Can you imagine this beautiful alternate world with me?

I've been drawn to imagining future moments wherein we all 'make it'; a future in which we survive the ravages of colonialism, capitalism and white supremacy. It's a way for me to hold onto a sense of hope. Hope that the work of our ancestors fighting for a free state of Blackness

could finally be done in our near future, and hope that my children's children could be born into a freer world. It is essential to centre Black lives in our futurist imaginings. We need to carry forward the work of the Combahee River Collective (1977) who in the 70s articulated the need for Black women to be considered inherently valuable, and showed us how this would change everything on this planet.

In northern Turtle Island or "Canada", we have been fed a steady stream of anti-Black media, government practices and policies that have suggested that to be Black is to be a problem, to be *the* problem. This is "damaged-centred research", a way of thinking through our subjects (this term for such research was coined by Dr. Eve Tuck, 2009). Tuck explains, 'damaged centered research' suggests that BIPOC subjects are always already too damaged by the conditions of supremacist violence to live self determined futures. To counter these practices, I am drawn to Tuck's thinking about research through desire. She suggests that a desire-based research (2009) would root our considerations in a "framework […]concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives" (2009: 416) in order to, she elaborates,

> document[…] not only the painful elements of social realities but also the wisdom and hope. Such an axiology is intent on depathologizing the experiences of dispossessed and disenfranchised communities so that people are seen as more than broken and conquered. This is to say that even when communities are broken and conquered, they are so much more than that—so much more that this incomplete story is an act of aggression. (p. 416).

To return to imagining, I want to create a world wherein our communities are imagined as "more than broken and conquered" but rather as beautiful resistance rebels who have survived and will thrive in our collective future. I have been imagining a desired Blackness, a Blackness that is supported as an essential part of all life on this planet. In this way I am drawing on the speculative- a sci-fi possibility that we can turn into reality. I am interested in Walidah Imarisha's

assertion that all activism is speculative fiction because we are daring to imagine that another world is possible (2015). As an artist and activist, I have been creating speculative futures that contain desired Blackness, one that is a complete story interrupting the “act of aggression” that our erasure creates as Tuck thinks through above.

These speculative imaginings are inspired by Octavia Butler's incredible work. Arguably the mother of speculative fiction, Butler creates scenarios where Black disabled and queer/trans heroes not only survive into the future but lead the way for all survival for life on this planet. From Lauren Olemina’s character in Parable of the Sower (2012) to Lilith, the titular character in Lilith’s Brood (2012), Black, disabled women lead us to our survival. I spent the day with Butler in November 2005 when she was on tour for her last book, Fledgling (2011). I asked her about her process for creating these expansive worlds. She described a walking practice as research. She told a beautiful story about her time visiting South America doing a month long hike through the jungle, camping and living in the trees to research for a novel where the characters would be doing much of the same. She told me about her walks, what she found, the wondrousness of the forest floor, and all of its biodiversity, how it had inspired the fantastical worlds she created in her novels.

I was ecstatic to hear her stories of walking as research. I've been interested in research into walking practices, Butler’s articulation was one of my first exposures to walking as a practice of research. I, too, had spent time in the old growth rainforests of South America doing walks, as such I felt a synergy with Butler’s process. I experienced disability, as she did, though we did not talk about this together. Now I wonder if she too struggled with the walks- if her knees, like mine sometimes decided that today was not a day for walking? When I'm feeling up for it, I now

Activist Portrait Series: Portrait of Queentite Opaleke, Graphite on paper, 12 ft x 6 ft, 2015

spend as much time as I can in the forest— practicing forest bathing and slow 'cripped' walking practices that for me are a way to think through big questions and return to a sense of calm and belonging on Earth. As a disabled artist, activist and scholar, I know well the value of bringing a disability lens to our work. By cripping something, we insert a different timeline for process and flow, and we reimagine the thing we are considering from a disabled perspective, adjusting and shifting as we go. Through a process of cripping, we discard what no longer serves us, and think up new ways of doing and being in a disabled, Deaf and Mad-affirming way. For the purposes of this article I will talk through the process of walking pedagogies, but these must be 'cripped', I'm imagining a walking methodology that is not tied to the act of using one's legs for locomotion- rather a methodology tied to our experiences of moving through space, in a variety of embodied ways.

Forest baths and walks in the woods help restore balance and create a sense of peace (Oh, 2017; Woo, 2012). Walking through the woods, breathing less polluted air, taking in the beauty of our natural world—- all of these efforts have lasting positive effects on human health and this practice has helped my creativity greatly. Feinberg (2016) did a recent literature review of the benefits of forest bathing on both health and creativity. Feinberg contributes:

> The notion that walking enables and enhances creativity is a well-considered and theorized topic. Marily Oppezzo & Daniel Schwartz (2014) claim that "walking opens up the free flow of ideas, and is a simple and robust solution to the goals of increasing creativity and increasing physical activity" (p. 1). Since at least 2000, multiple texts have also been published that refer to or focus on walking as artistic gesture, medium, or a mode of inquiry in forms such as land art, performance, furtive art, cartographic expression, and photography (Davila, 2002; D'Souza & McDonough, 2006; Evans, 2012; Horowitz, 2013; Irvine, 2013; Collier, Morrison-Bell, & Ross, 2013; Solnit, 2000; and many more). This burgeoning interest in walking art is also evidenced by international walking art initiatives such as the UK-based organization Walking Arts Network and the blog Walking and Art, both of which facilitate networking for artists who walk. (pg.157)

I am thankful for this research, and use it to guide my own planning process. If walking "enhances and enables creativity", and if forest baths improve the health and wellbeing of practitioners, how do we ensure it is accessible to as many people as possible? Due to socioeconomic barriers and economic injustice, forest baths are accessible to few living in urban centres. In response to this question, I created a project, *Foraging the Future*, that focuses on forest bathing, engaged pedagogy (hooks, 1994) and drawing practice as a way of opening forest baths to Black communities and working class communities grid locked in the core of the city. I spent a full day in September 2017 walking the Bruce Trail with 35 young people from the Lawrence Heights neighbourhood in T'karon:to, reviewing forest basics, including how to survive if stranded in the woods, what to eat in the forest and how to find shelter and safety in the depths of it. As an art practice the project shared knowledge and helped inspire creativity with the participants, as articulated in Feinberg's research into walking art practices. Through engaged pedagogy, the project employed reciprocal learning practices and drew on collective knowledge and intergenerational engagement, inspired by hooks (1994).

To bring the practical safety teachings and botanical data shared into the body as a way of fostering a deep knowing and remembering, we engaged in drawing practices and storytelling. Drawing is a physical practice that can be quite strenuous. I've been drawing large scaled portraits of activists for years—-portraits sized between 8 and 10 ft tall, and I'm often left sweating after a strong drawing session. To turn the verbal knowledge of plants and survival in the forest into an embodied memory for the participants, I used the rhythmic movement of our hands and our

arms through the process of collecting plant rubbings and undertaking drawing/observation. We also told stories, sharing what we knew about plants and the Land. This engaged and reciprocal learning practice created a web of knowledge that we could hold together as a group. In storytelling, what is not said is as important often as what is said. Moments of silence can be profound punctuations in our storyline. We walked in silence through the trees for moments on end. It was a powerful and magical day. This project speaks to Tuck's (2009) call for desire-based research—in which we see our subjects, in particular those from marginalized communities as whole beings with fulsome lives, narratives and histories. Rather than fall into sloppy narratives that position youth of colour from urban centres always already disadvantaged and "damaged", to quote from Tuck, rather this project sought out these participants as desired contributors to a shared collective process of forest bathing.

The project was nestled in a large project led by artists Dr Elle Flanders and Tamira Sawasky, entitled, *The New Field*. Under the umbrella of their art collaborative Public Studio, the duo set out to walk the Bruce Trail during the problematic year of celebrations of colonialism on northern Turtle Island—- the Canada 150 celebrations. Flanders describes why they chose to walk the Bruce Trail in particular, "

> The Bruce Trail...historically runs through a variety of treaty lands that we don't know anything about. So it's an opportunity to learn the pre-history of the history that the naturalists thought they were recovering. The trail was built for '67 for Canada's centennial. We're now at the sesquicentennial. It's interesting for us to look back at what the aspirations of Canada's 100th anniversary were, and where it is now fifty years later. We're interested in thinking through those changes and contrasts that have occurred under neoliberalism. The proposal is to walk with different people over the course of two months. We'll be joined by philosophers and writers and students and families—a broad spectrum of people to walk with us so that we can figure out: what is this next moment of time?"(Spacing Magazine, online publication).

I was approached by Public Studio to engage in a walking practice with them and was immediately drawn to the idea of forest bathing for health, and beginning some shared botany

101 and emergency preparedness training for youth. These young folks will need this shared knowledge in our coming apocalyptic moment- the climax of the sci fi story that is bound to peak. What follows in this chapter is a reflection on our time in the woods, on forest baths, walks and survival and resilience of BIPOC communities in the post apocalypse.

Forest Bathing beginnings

As a child, I grew up in the decidedly gridlocked Weston/Mount Dennis neighbourhood in T'karon:to. Yet every summer we would go to my grandparents house for childcare while my parents worked in the city. My grandparents live on a lake in the country, surrounded by a long track of woods that was so large it had three separate marsh areas and expansive swaths of trees, thick moss like *Plagiopus oederianus,* covering every inch of the forest floor. As kids we would go over there with my nana and go for forest baths and long walks. We would go sit by a marsh we called the "first marsh"—- marvelling at the hundreds of loud bullfrogs who lined the shores- echoing so loud with their cries that you sometimes couldn't hear each other. The marsh is much more silent now due to climate change. My nana would let us play and would rest on the low branch of a pine tree- low to the ground and covered in nettles, she would lie down on it as her bed for her nap.

My nana would teach us about the plants that grew along the forest path—-what she called spearmint (her name for the small short plant that grew by the marsh, but was definitely not *Mentha spicata*) that you could pick, split down the pink stem and smell for spearmint scent to

confirm before chewing like a gum. She showed us where to find Blackberries (*Rubus allegheniensis*) and how to pick them without getting pricked by thorns. During the peak of their harvest we would spend a whole day back there harvesting berries into pale turquoise pots that she'd packed for this purpose. She taught us what plants not to touch or eat- how to avoid poison ivy (*Toxicodendron*), to look out for the only poisonous snake in Ontario- the Massasauga rattlesnake (*Sistrurus catenatus*). Day after day she would take us into the woods and prepare us for what was coming- a test to see if we could survive back there on our own- that we could find our way home. On the day of our 'test' my nana took us deep into the woods, asking us to point out edible plants along the way. When we were sufficiently deep in the woods, she said, "Now how would you get back?". And quietly she waited for us to figure our way home, which we did, passing the test.

After this trial run we were allowed to visit the woods on our own, and this generated a sense of independence and the kind of "big-kid freedom" that I could only have imagined as a younger kid. I remember one of my first solo visits across the woods with my twin. We went by the 'first marsh' and the floor was covered with orangey brown pine needles that had fallen and created an underbrush. Swimming in and amongst these needles were hundreds of small baby snakes that had just hatched. I remember checking that they were garter snakes—-a *Thamnophis hibernaculum*— safe to hold- and then scooped my hands down and picked up two huge handfuls of baby snakes. They writhed and wriggled out of my hands, between my fingers and back onto the ground. We caught one for keeps and brought it back across the street to our Nana's as proof of our adventures only to have it slither away (happily) free.

We learned to be free, ourselves, in those woods. The confidence that came from learning the trails, knowing the trees and remembering how to survive there if we needed too- all of it was so

empowering. I am aware of the privilege of access to forest space as an urban dweller. To return to speculative fiction for a moment—- if the future would require us to find new, or rather old ways of living with and surviving in nature, how could we prepare BIPOC youth locked in inner city cores for life in the forest? Similarly, if forest baths were to be seen as a useful strategy for maintaining health in an increasingly digital world, how do we increase access to forest spaces for those most marginalized from this access? *Foraging the Future* came together as a way of addressing these questions.

FORAGING THE FUTURE

Early one Saturday morning in late summer of 2019, I launched the *Foraging the Future* project. As a beginning, I met 35 young BIPOCs at ten AM in a Lawrence Heights parking lot lined with wire fences and low-rise apartment buildings. We awkwardly introduced ourselves standing in a circle in the lot— it's hard sometimes starting out with a big group and learning about each other as you go. Intros out of the way, we got on the bus and drove a couple of hours out of town to meet Elle Flanders and Tamira Sawatzky at their trailer on the Bruce Trail, near the Blue Mountains. We were going to hike the Margaret Paull Side Trail near Len Gertler Memorial Lokee Forest. I had advertised our day together as a chance to forage for the future— to prepare for a future where we may need to live off the land in new and old ways. I'd promoted it as follows:

"*FORAGING THE FUTURE" September 2, 2019, lead by Syrus Marcus Ware*

Drawing has always held a strong relationship to remembering and collecting. For this walk, artist, activist and educator Syrus Marcus Ware will be joined by a group of youth from Lawrence Heights who will use the trail as a mobile drawing class. While learning about wild foraging and living off the grid, we will draw everything seen and imagined along the trail.

I wanted us to imagine rummaging through our futures to pick out just what we needed to help inform us what we needed to learn about in the now so that that skill was available to us in our future. The bus ride was quiet- some folks sleeping off the early morning arrival.

Soon, we arrived at the entrance to the Bruce Trail to meet with Public Studio. We pulled into the long driveway after several wrong turns on a narrow country road. We got off the bus and were hit with a muggy day punctuated by *that* smell: that particular combination of pollen and insects, a tree bark and moss, dust and dirt, animals and life. That smell that was so hard to experience in the city with all of our concrete and asphalt burying the earth. Public Studio welcomed us, disembarking from their trailer with their small dog Walter Benjamin[5].

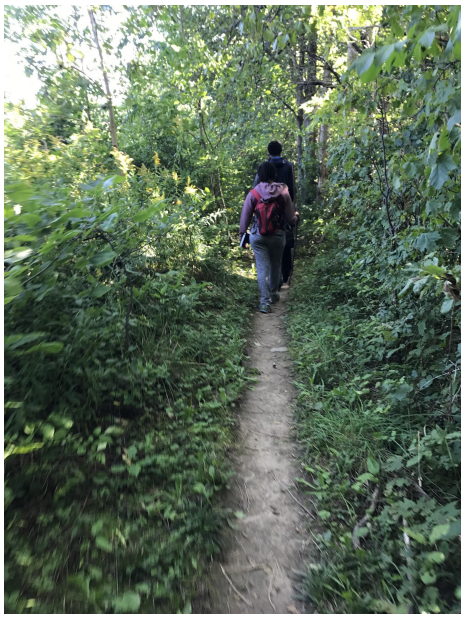
I got us started doing some stretches. I wanted to get our group into an embodied space before

beginning our forest walk- so that they could be fully present for the experience. I encouraged the group to stretch and shake out the stress and tension of the city. I had us take deep breaths, taking in the fresher country air. I had us twist and bend and stretch our limbs to prepare for the physicality of what we were about to do. Three of the participants asked to make Boomerangs[6] of their stretching movements- a looped video that they could share on social media. I happily obliged, and recorded a few boomerangs of their practice. Boomerangs were

[5] Walter Benjamin would argue that culture is ordinary (Williams, 2008) and that it should be accessible to all- something we tried to emulate during this program. Access to creative space was shared amongst the team and we engaged in reciprocal learning strategies.
[6] An online social media tool to create short video GIFs

supporting embodied movements, after all, and social media as an archive was also part of their practice of remembering and sharing what they learned.

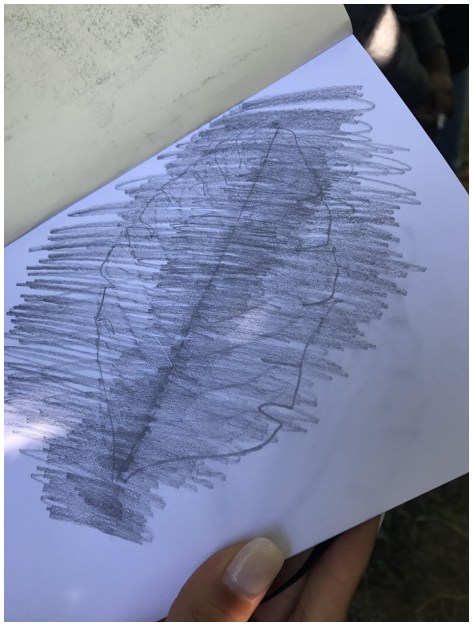
We entered the trail, rocky at first and leading to the forest. I encouraged the participants to keep their senses alert for striking moments in the forest. We walked single file into the woods. I



led in a silent walk for about 2 minutes and then I had us stop and note what we were experiencing. We stood quietly on the trail and listened for the sounds around us. We tried to identify things around us. Some called out " I see ferns!" "I see trees" "Wait, what is sumac?" (*Rhus typhina,* staghorn sumac, is ubiquitous there). We talked together as we kept walking. As we climbed the escarpment, a stream emerged alongside us, with waterfalls as we climbed. The young folks got really excited and we paused to explore this experience: The mist from the waterfalls, the muck from the embankments. These sensory memories we were laying down in our neural pathways that we could recall when back in the cityscape.

We walked higher along the escarpment. It was scrappy scramble-y work at times. Sometimes, I struggled with the walk, feeling my joints and muscles intensely. Other times it was slippery as the muddy damp forest gave way in parts causing us to slip here and there. It was contemplative work. I continued to share facts about our surroundings, but we often fell into an easy silence as we focused on staying on the trail and making it up the hill.

We reached the hilltop and we emerged from the forest into a wide and open field filled with life.



We could smell sweetness in the humid air— and I asked if they could name the scent. “Sweetgrass”, someone said. “Yes!”, I confirmed and showed where sweetgrass (*Anthoxanthum hirta*) was growing on the edge of the field. We paused to explore on our own. Folks wandered in the tall grass. We found clovers (*Trifolium*) and I told stories of my grandmother drinking morning dew from the clover petals as a child. We ate some clover flowers together and I encouraged everyone to make at least one drawing of a plant or moment in their experience in the field. We created leaf rubbings, and drawings of the plants we were surrounded by.

There were large clusters of milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*) and tall grasses; with bees buzzing everywhere. The sun was hot and beating down on us and felt intense after the coolness of the forest. We walked across the length of the grass-field, in the hot summer sun. Milkweed had sprung up everywhere. I talked about milkweed cooking and how to harvest and prepare milkweed pods by frying them in butter before they turned to seed; this was knowledge shared with my hem through me from my grandmother— which I gleaned from our forest walks in the countryside by her home. This was knowledge that I got to share to offer a possible nutritious fuel source in our near future. We spent 15 minutes drawing some of the milkweed lining the trails.

The trail continued and we found ourselves on a tract of land lining a farmers field. Apples and crabapples hung heavy on the trees lining their fenced in land. Emerging onto “private land”

allowed us to question land ownership on occupied Indigenous land. It allowed us to return to Flanders and Sawatzky's choice of the trail as fodder for rich conversations.

Flanders states,

> One of the most interesting features of the Bruce Trail is the fact that it's such a unique mix of public and private space. If we want to walk the Bruce Trail in one go, the question of how and where do you stay becomes vital. Some people will let you camp, but in many places you can't, so where and how do you go? Who actually owns this space? We have this very public access route, well publicized, that cuts across a lot of private and government land, through which we are encouraged only to keep moving. The idea that this space is intended only to be "moved through" is a key feature – What does it mean to have so-called public space? (Spacing Magazine, online publication)

What is 'private' space on occupied land? What is 'public' space on occupied land? Questions of colonialism sprung forth as we talked about the trail and its origins. We questioned the process of 'creating' the Bruce Trail by "Old white guy naturalists" as Sawatzky explained. The youth in our group asked about the Indigenous presence in that territory before the trail was created. Most of the trail is covered by Treaty 72, yet also crosses Treaty 18, Treaty 45, and Treaty 82. We stood on the trail bridging the "public" and "private' part of the section and rapped together about our knowledge of colonial practices and about what has now come to be known as Land Back. This movement of Indigenous Resurgence is so beautiful and talking through what resurgence could look like, as articulated by Indigenous activists and scholars and Elders, under those fruiting trees with 35 BIPOC youth felt important to our futures here. Flanders explained her questions about the landscape here in relation to human activity stating,

> "We think of history as it relates to settlement, and if you're politically conscious and articulating a decolonizing position, we speak about it in terms of Indigenous life. Mostly we think in terms of human inhabitation...What is the record here of "deep time"? How

> did the escarpment come to be the dominant, constant feature of this landscape?" (Spacing, online publication)

We ruminated on this for a while before picking back up on our walk. Turtle Island has such a beautiful history of life here, but also a painful history of white supremacist violence and colonization. These violent practices enacted by the colonizers aimed to change the landscape of Turtle Island— to terraform this place through the use of enslaved Black labour and through disappearing Indigenous communities from their lands. Tiffany King (2014) talks about these fungible practices as they relate to Black and Indigenous life here on Turtle Island. Fungibility usually refers to crops. A seed is fungible in the sense that it is replaceable immediately with another seed, and in this way it does not matter if you spread seeds and some do not grow; you can always have these replaced by other interchangeable, exchangeable seeds. King expands the term to describe the historical conjuncture of the North Atlantic slave trade. When Black bodies were brought to North America/Turtle Island to do slave labor on large-scale plantation-style labor camps in the southern USA and on smaller-scale labor camps in Canada, they were treated as if their bodies, their persons, were fungible seeds, to be planted. Enslaved peoples were and are treated as seeds to be planted to make the master and enslaver rich, and were seen as interchangeable and expendable. King explores how this fungibility resulted in a disregard for the massive Black deaths that happened during the slave trade, and the disregard for Indigenous lives as exemplified by the crisis of Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women. King illustrates how fungibility has continued to shape our experience of Blackness in Canada. She states,

> Fungibility represents a key analytic for thinking about Blackness and settler colonialism in White settler nation-states. Black fungible bodies are the conceptual and discursive fodder through which the Settler-Master can even begin to imagine or "think" spatial expansion. The space making practices of settler colonialism require the production of Black flesh as a fungible form of property, not just as a form of labor. (Online publicationdecolonization.wordpress.com)

Fungibility thus fuels settler expansion. We talked about how to undo the fungible conditions facing Black and Indigenous folks on these lands, as we stood in this precipice between public and private on the "old white guy naturalist" created Bruce Trail (as Sawatzky reminded us). Collectively, the conversation turned to the forest. We were eager to get back into the woods— it was more fun than the farmers road. We kept walking.

Eventually the trail turned and we found ourselves back in the dappled shade and cool dampness of the forest. The participants were armed with shared knowledge and this walk through the forest had a different feeling. "Poison ivy! Leaves of three!" They cried out. "This is sugar maple!" (*Acer saccharum*). We were seeing the forest in a new way after our initial set of teaching time in the forest. We walked in silence for a few more minutes before I had us pause near the running stream. "What do you notice?" I asked, similar to how I had begun.

Participants spent some time doing solo walks around the patch of forest. They looked at the trees, the underbrush, the deep much along the stream. They returned to the circle after a few minutes brimming with observations, identifying plants and animal habitats they noticed in their explorations. We had only spent a few hours walking and talking together but they had successfully held onto the knowledge and could put it into practice.

I chose this moment to talk about Octavia Butler, about her future worlds wherein we would be asked to live off the land in new ways and find strategies for survival in a climate changed landscape. I told them about her walks in the jungle and how it has inspired her research, just as their walk and drawings had created an archive in them that they could draw on for future projects and for future survival.

We emerged from the forest together, and back onto the gravel road near the school bus. Folks began milling around the area, looking at plants growing on the edges of the wood, examining an apple tree filled with fruit. I'm sure they picked some.

The ride home on the bus was quiet, although some folks sing songs together in the back of the bus while others listened to electronics. When we reached home, the drop off spot for the group, we pulled up to the grey concrete parleys that was the play area for the neighbourhood. "Syrus!!! It's Sumac!" Someone explained. And there, growing in a crack beside a metal fence and hemmed in by concrete on all sides was a small sumac (*Rhus typhina,* staghorn sumac) tree. A forest of one, back in the city.

Conclusion

Imagine with me, for a moment. Close your eyes or shut out distractions in some way and turn inward to imagine. Together, let's imagine a future where all Black lives were desired. Can you imagine this beautiful alternate world with me?

I've been thankful for the chance to reflect on what could have been a one off day- a walk in the woods. But this project of foraging our futures together- planting seeds that we can nurture and grow in our minds and bodies so that we are ready for the changes coming- it was so much more than any simplification. As we 'foraged' into future archives and learned by digging through our earthy past teachings, we imagined a world where these youth were desired. We imagined a world where our embodied 'cripped' movements through space created possibilities for collective knowledge keeping and shared practice. We created an inter-dimensional space in which they could be simultaneously 'here' in 2019 and also doing work to prepare for their existence in the future worlds of the 2030s and 40s.

This walking practice and forest bathing that we shared together seems ever more important now. As the white supremacist attacks of early 2021 in the US (with ripples here in 'Canada') dash our glimmers of hope after a disastrous 2020, I'm convinced that the Octavia Butler-type post-apocalyptic changes articulated in my favourite sci-fi are around the corner. We are facing unique challenges as we head into this new decade. Ever pressing climate change is advancing. White supremacy and facism is creeping and seeding itself everywhere, built on centuries of practice and support in our societies. Capitalism seems on the brink of collapse and the winds of change are everywhere.

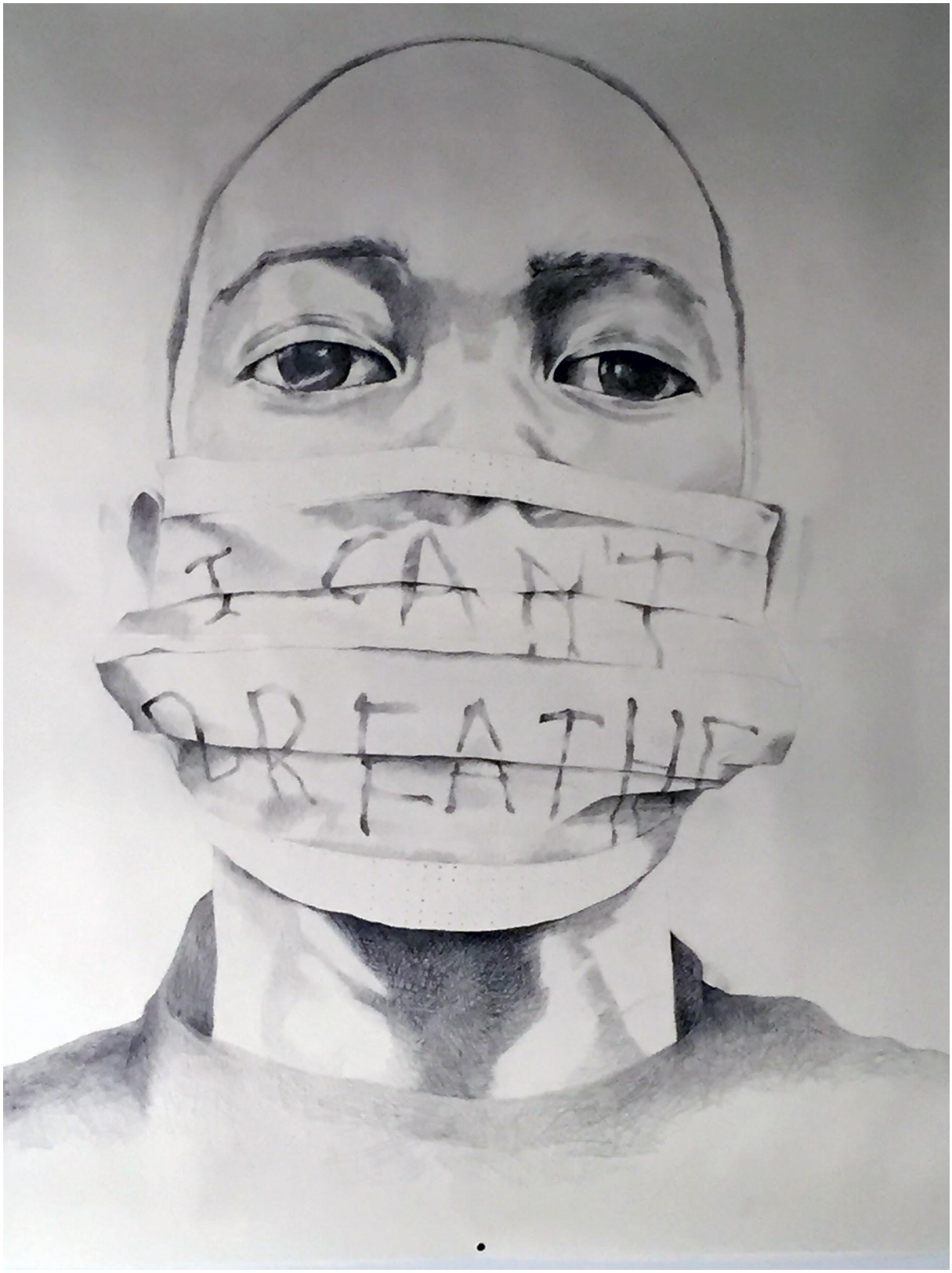
For the 35 BIPOC youth that I worked with in *Foraging the Future*, they are now perhaps better equipped to meet the challenges of the years ahead. It's interesting to think that that walk was perhaps the last big hurrah (a large gathering, eating shared food, and walking together across a long distance; all things we can't do under lockdown) before these months of being at home, far from our forest floors with their streams running through. I have been eager to get back into the woods- to smell the fragrant moss and to feel the soft pine needles under my feet. More than returning to restaurant dining, shopping or in person education- I can't wait for the return of

forest bathing together. I've done some solo hikes, but nothing really compares to the reciprocal learning environment of a collective, shared walk in the woods.

The Activist Portrait Series

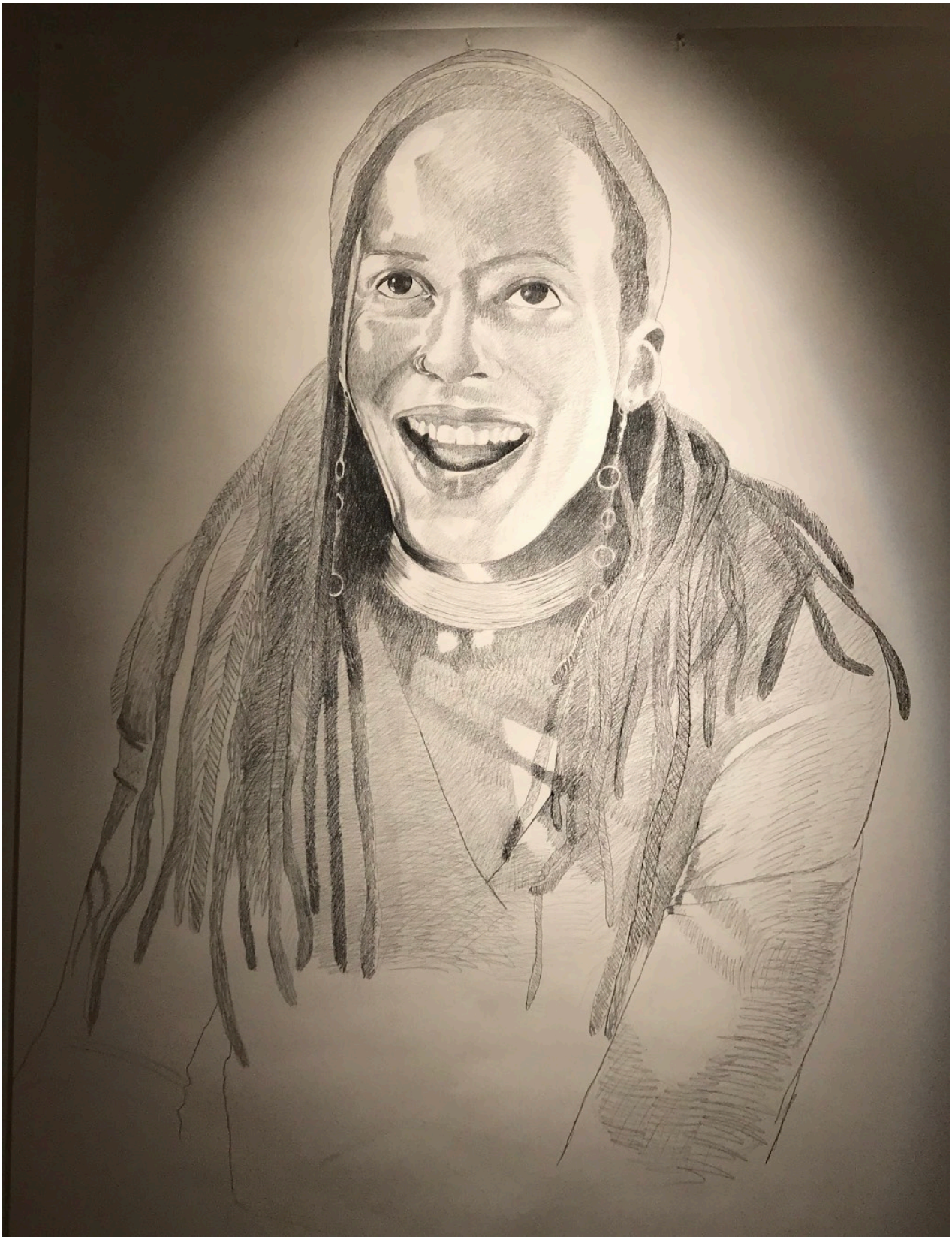
Activist Portrait Series: Portrait of QueenTite Opaleke, Graphite on paper, 12 ft x 6 ft, 2017

Activist Portrait Series: Portrait of !kona kotranya, Graphite on paper, 14 ft x 5 ft, 2018



Activist Portrait Series: Portrait of Taui Green, For Eric Graphite on paper, 10 ft x 8 ft, 2015

Activist Portrait Series: Portrait of Rodney Diverlus, Graphite on paper, 12 ft x 5 ft, 2017



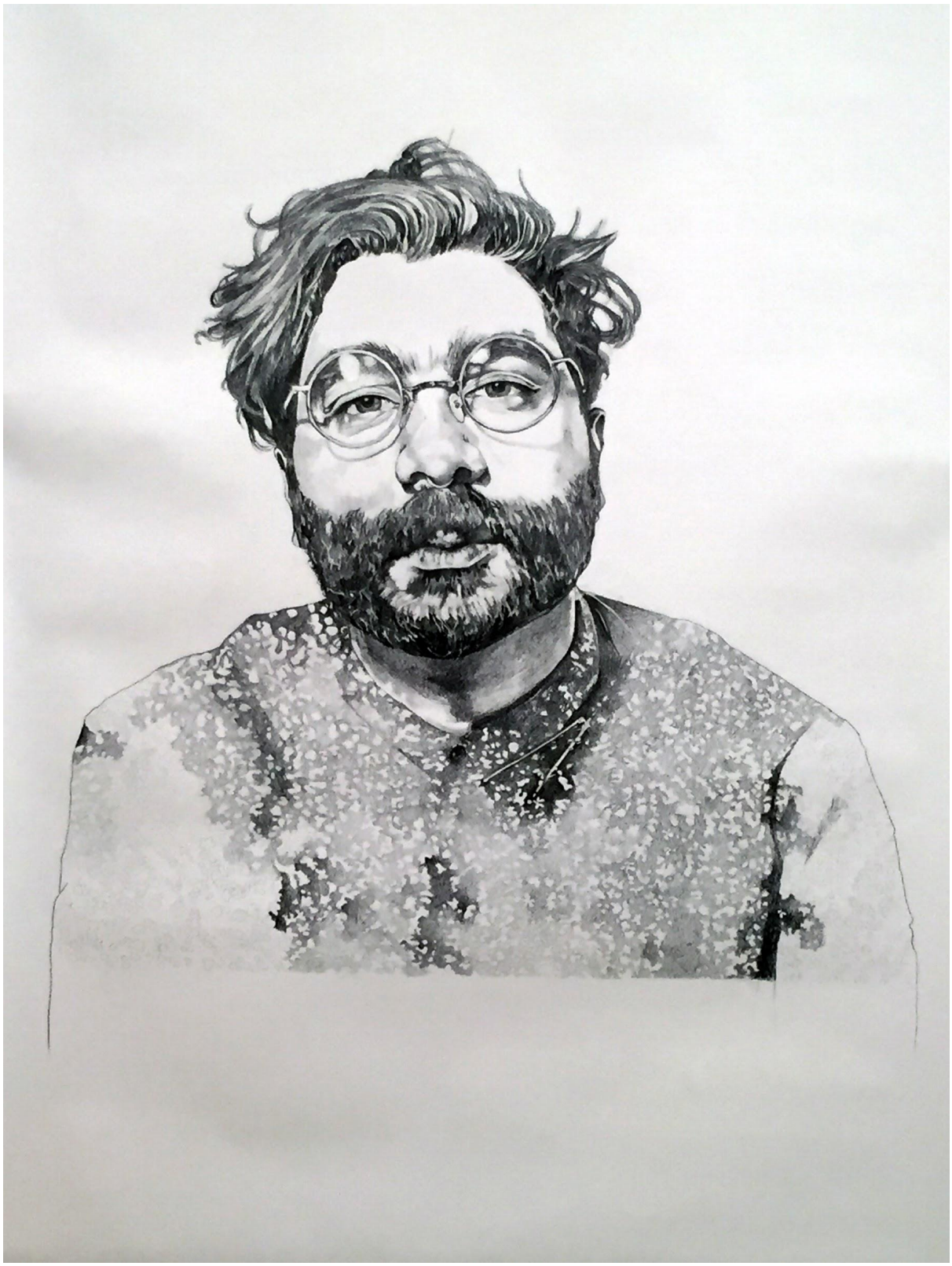
Activist Portrait Series: Portrait of Kim Nikuru, Graphite on paper, 10 ft x 5 ft, 2018

Activist Portrait Series: Portrait of Ravyn Ariah Wngz, Graphite on paper, 10 ft x 5 ft, 2019

Activist Portrait Series: Portrait of Activist from the UVic Trans Archives, Graphite on wall, 15 ft x 8 ft, 2018

Activist Portrait Series: Portrait of Troy Jackson and El Farouk Khaki, Graphite on paper, 12 ft x 5 ft, 2018

Activist Portrait Series: Portrait of Leah Lakshmi Piepzna Samarasinha, Graphite on paper, 10 ft x 6 ft, 2018



Activist Portrait Series: Portrait of Joshua Vettivelu, Graphite on paper, 12 ft x 6 ft, 2015

Activist Portrait Series: Portrait of Dainty Smith, Graphite on paper, 10 ft x 5 ft, 2019

Activist Portrait Series: Portrait of Yousef Kadoura, Graphite on paper, 12 ft x 5 ft, 2019

Activist Portrait Series: Portrait of Meleisa Ono-George, Graphite on paper, 12 ft x 6 ft, 2017

Activist Portrait Series: Portrait of Addis Aliyu, Graphite on paper, 12 ft x 6 ft, 2018

Activist Portrait Series: Portrait of Dainty Smith and Kyisha Williams, Graphite on paper, 12 ft x 6 ft, 2017

Activist Portrait Series: Portrait of Hampton, Graphic on paper, 5 ft x 10 ft, 2017

Activist Portrait Series: Portrait of Maria, Graphite on paper, 10 ft x 5 ft, 2018

Activist Portrait Series: Portrait of Yaniya Lee, Graphite on paper, 12 ft x 6 ft, 2018

Activist Portrait Series: Portrait of OmiSoore Dryden, Graphic on paper, 5 ft x 10 ft, 2018

Activist Portrait Series: Portrait of Miski Noor, Graphite on paper, 6 ft x 10 ft, 2017

Portraiture and Power

Portraiture is implicated in helping to set up power dynamics, literally depicting who holds power. Portraits of popes, hospital administrators, kings and queens, and university presidents adorn the walls of many public spaces, reinforcing who should be considered important and valuable. By rendering their subject in a grand way, artists connote power in their depiction of the subject. Similarly, by displaying these images in public spaces, the portraits elevate the status of the subject, serving as both aspiration and reminder of a watchdog presiding over public events in the absence of the physical presence of the figure-head. I would like to upset this tradition in portraiture by redrawing the frame around unsung heroes—around activists in the struggle for the self-determination of all people, through disability, trans, and queer justice, environmental justice, and other activisms. I appropriate symbols of power in this project by reclaiming portraiture for the left to elevate our work and organizing. In doing so, I create an opportunity to connect with activists, giving a shape and a liveliness to their spirit.

As Rosemary Garland-Thomson (2010) explains in her examination of classical portraiture and power, the re-contextualizing of the subject matter, the treatment of imagery and the materials used to render the images point to elitism:

> Part of the frame of meaning in a classical portrait is the convention of oil painting. Oil is an elite medium that bespeaks an elite process requiring deliberation, resources, sitting time, studio space and the support of others to produce a classical oil-painted portrait […]. Classical portraiture entails, then, the aesthetic act of de-contextualizing or 'cropping out' a figure with selected surroundings from everyday life and re-contextualizing or literally reframing that figure in a public space of honour, often complete with elaborate gilt frame, artistic signature and reverential viewers. (p. 26)

Reframing the subject crops out the mundane and banal of the everyday, creating a space of honour and accomplishment which, in turn, creates a powerful image. History painting as a

genre also involves portraiture and writes history. Introduced by the French academy, these paintings elevated political figures and acted as a pictorial history for empires (Phillips,2006). The artistic tradition of portraiture is implicated in re-enforcing systemic structures such as class hierarchies and racism and in defining which humans are valuable. My work attempts to interrupt this process by re-centering the frame of portraiture around 'unintelligible bodies' (Butler, 1998), those on the margins. These activists are people that I have some familiarity with; much of my work draws on personal connections and is inspired by relationships and history together. I want viewers to look at them, to consider them, together, perhaps not to create reverence, but rather to showcase their work and let it inform our everyday interactions.

Looking and viewing practices differ from person to person, and they are informed by one's unique positionally and resulting implicit biases. When we look at something, really interrogating the subject matter, we explore much more than the subjectivity of the portrait-sitter. Ann Millett-Gallant (2010) explains what is at play when we view something intentionally, employing the language of 'gazing' or 'staring': " Body images and images of the body matter, to individuals, to societies, and to politics. Gazing/staring at bodies articulates, mediates, and informs everyday social interactions, as well as larger social constructions" (p. 152).

I propose that my portraits invite the viewer into activist space, and as such, these drawings celebrate activist practice and labour while informing social encounters and exchange. When the viewer examines or gazes at the portrait, they are drawn into the personhood of the activist before them. No longer faceless militants in the street, these activists are now familiars, interrupting social constructions of who activists are and what they do, as Millet-Gallant describes.

My Activist Portrait Series (2015-present) has grown out of my interest in supporting the lives of activists and folks involved in the struggle. Activists are at war, in many ways. We need to sort out ways to survive. Art can be a way of making this happen. The labour of activism is very real and taxing. Activists are at great risk for burnout. Through my artistic practice I began exploring ways to support the lives of activists in our communities.

I began exploring portraiture and drawing also as a way of inserting my community into art history, and as a way to document my reality. I have been drawn to portraiture to render invisible lives, to become visible: trans activists, political heroes, and people with disabilities painted large in a style and medium previously reserved for dignitaries, and wealthy patrons. In this series, I create portraits that draw out emotions from the viewer and make seemingly personal connections between the subject and the viewer. These connections create a sense of care for the subject— in this case, the activists that I am trying to keep alive through this project.

As an artist, I've been interested in Black activist culture and its sustainability. As an activist I have experienced first hand the pressures of the work and the dangers of burn out. I have proposed a study that allows me to explore activist daily life while creating a large scale drawing honouring and celebrating their labour. I hope that this project will not only shed light on the experiences of activists working for change, but will buoy and sustain their work through these small acts of celebration and thanks. Each portrait is large-scale, graphite on paper, and uniform in size. All works use 150-weight Fabriano paper. The use of this archival paper and graphite lends a formality to the work. Drawing with graphite takes the medium down to the essential elements, forcing me to pay close attention to the nuance of line, light, and shade to capture the details of hair, eyes, and shoulders. This medium is an intentional choice, a choice that both allows me to trace the shape of the cheeks of my beloved activist friends, and one that shows them in the raw, as human subjects, fallible.

As a collection, the artworks offer a contemporary snapshot of activism in Tkaronto and, more broadly, of the northern part of Turtle Island/Canada. This counter-archive seeks to reverse the disposability of activist's lives and labour in our current system. Counter-archiving is conceptualized by Jin Haritaworn, Ghaida Moussa, and myself in our introduction to *Queering Urban Justice* (Haritaworn, Moussa, & Ware, 2018). Counter-archiving highlights the problems of a presentist agenda that selectively highlights and erases subjects, spaces, and events to expand existing power into the future, without letting go of the past nor the future. These portraits work against the ongoing colonial and anti-Black erasures by producing larger-than-life renderings of activism in the northern part of Turtle Island. These portraits are inseparable from the larger movements that they represent, and they necessarily resist the model of the single, charismatic individual leader, instead suggesting a lineage of activist heroes upon whose shoulders the subjects stand/sit.

The portraits themselves comprise a significant component of the dissertation project. The exegesis expands, unpacks, and theorizes the context through which these portraits come to be, and reveals my own location as both an actor in and chronicler of the social movements which comprise and intersect my social location. The exegesis includes articles and chapters prepared and/or published during the same time period, including an article in Trans Studies Quarterly on archiving Black LGBTTI2QQ activism.

The portraits are an example of research through creative practice, as described by Peter Dallow (2003) in *Representing Creativeness*. He states,

> Research through creative arts practice centres on a 'studio/creative project' which results in the production and presentation of a body of 'finished' creative work, where, additionally, the documentation of what is done in the process of creating these works is taken as a significant component of the research. (p. 51)

Similarly, Margolin,"describes the approach of research through art and design, centred as it is upon the 'studio project', as representing a 'practice-led' approach to research which is not bound by traditional methodologies, but seeks to 'facilitate the relation of reflection to practice' (as quoted in Dallow, 1998).

The Activist Portrait Series is an opportunity to connect practice and reflection in new and beautiful ways. As Smith and Dean (2009) explain,

[creative] practice can result in research insights, such as those that arise out of making a creative work and/or in the documentation and theorization of that work. […] Attempts at definitions of research, creative work and innovation are all encircled by these fundamental problems- that knowledge can take many different forms and occur at various different levels of precision and stability, and that research carried out in conjunction with the creation of an artwork can be both similar to, and dissimilar from, basic research" (p. 2-4).

Specifically, Smith and Dean illuminate how the creation of these new artworks can be understood as a way of understanding the current experiences of disabled Mad and Deaf racialized artists and activists. I employ some traditional research techniques, such as interviewing, as I photograph these activists for drawing. The interviews all follow the same short format—three questions are designed to elicit information but also to change the shape and gaze of the subject for the purposes of portraiture. The questions explore the subject's history with organizing; a social movement (from any point in history) in which they wish they could have been involved; and their understanding of their own responses to love and affection. I also use decidedly different techniques; drawing larger-than-life portraits, as a way of tracing every line of the subject's face and the contours of their bodies, gives literal shape to the

subject's personhood and evokes an emotional response in the viewer in ways that are not always possible through traditional research methods.

As Dallow (2003) describes, my art practice is research. My artistic process involves research before, after and throughout the creation process. As I ask these interview questions of my subjects, I am simultaneously researching artistic practices exploring activism and researching through exploration during the creative process. In the Activist Portrait Series, the process—the practice of exploring the subject through oversized pencil drawings— has taught so much. As I listen to the interviews that I have recorded while I draw, I meditate on the activist, their labour, their organizing, their dreams for the future, and their ideas about love. I marinate in their words and thoughts and explore these further on the page through drawing. Dallow continues, "An individual creative 'practice' is itself as much a product of the broader social and cultural, generative (transdisciplinary) schemes it emerges from, as it is (in)formed by the field of practice and academic discipline it is dependent upon" (2003). My artistic work emerges from my life work of investigating disability arts, disability studies, and justice activism. I have been at the centre of the fight for twenty years now—at the cutting edge of activism supporting prisoners' lives and ideas of abolition in the 1990s; organizing around trans healthcare and justice in the early 2000s, when there was nothing out there for trans people needing health info; and through my current work as a core team member of Black Lives Matter Toronto and a director of its sister organization, Wildseed, a national Black justice organization aimed at reversing Black fungibility. I have explored activism in other ways through my artistic practice as well. Since 2012, as mentioned earlier in this dissertation, I have been hosting conversations and community exercises wherein we write love letters to activists in our communities as a way of supporting their lives and recognizing their labour, which is called Activist Love Letters. This project was first performed at the FAG: Feminist Art Gallery in Toronto as part of Cinenova: An audience of enablers cannot fail// All hands on the ~~archive~~. Through this project, I have met

hundreds of activists and have mailed over 1000 letters worldwide to activists in the struggle. I've also addressed activism through my scholarship, in particular through my work with the Marvellous Grounds Collective, a group dedicated to counter-archiving QTBIPOC stories and lives in Tkaronto/Toronto. Through this project, we have created an interactive arts-filled blog exploring QTBIPOC histories and community-building and have also released two book projects, *Marvellous Grounds: Queer of Colour Formations in Toronto* (BTL, 2018) and *Queering Urban Justice* (UTP, 2018). Overall, my work is inseparable from the broader social and cultural milieu from which it spurs and is informed by the field of practice of disability theory and disability justice activism.

In this dissertation, my artworks are accompanied by an exegesis that offers critical conversation sparked by and about the works and the political and aesthetic contexts in which they were produced. Similarly, Bolt (2007) describes the potential for the symbolic to stimulate the exchange of ideas between existing practices and ideas. He explains the exegesis as comprising "particularly situated and emergent knowledge [with] the potential to be generalized so that it enters into dialogue with existing practical and theoretical paradigms" (Bolt, 2007, p.#). As such, the artworks and exegesis of this dissertation intersect with current research into disability arts, trans studies, Black studies, critical race theory, and practice-based theorizing.

In further support of this approach, Linda Candy (2020) argues for practice as a way of rigorously thinking through ideas. She uses scientific research terms like hypotheses in her translation of art practice:

> For the practitioner researcher, creating a work and then reflecting on the process and outcome, is a pathway to understanding some of the underlying questions and assumptions (we might call them 'working hypotheses' or 'theories in use') that have not been articulated beforehand. The process of making something can facilitate a form of 'thinking-in-action' that is needed in order to move towards a clearer understanding. (p. 5)

This project will help me better understand the lives of disabled artists of colour in this current arts context in Canada, and my exegesis will help me "reflec[t] on the process and outcome [as] a pathway to understanding" what we did not know before about these experiences. Put differently, this project allowed me to explore the lives of artists through an artistic process, specifically through a creative practice that I share with my portrait subjects.

Rigour in my approach to artwork creation can be understood as being similar to the rigour of academic research. Ardra Cole (2008) articulates the rigour of arts-based research through a metric that she calls "the qualities of goodness" in the research. These qualities include: intentionality, which she describes as research that stands for something and is about improving the human condition; researcher presence, which she describes as being informed by an "explicit reflexive self accounting"; aesthetic quality, which she describes as a marrying of the form and the research goals; methodological commitment , which she explains is reflected in evidence of a "principled process, procedural harmony and attention to aesthetic quality;" (Cole, 2008, p.13) holistic quality, which she describes as an internal consistency and coherence; communicability, which includes accessibility and resonance of the research; knowledge advancement, which she describes as generative rather than propositional; and contribution, which both furthers understanding of the human condition and has us think about new possibilities of who our research audience is. In all, Cole talks about the rigorous context of arts-informed research and supports its value as research. I would like to consider these qualities of goodness as I approach my research project. Cole states:

> [...] a study imbued with the[se] qualities is one that is likely to both exemplify ad contribute to the broad agenda of arts-informed research, that of enhancing understanding of the human condition through alternative processes and representational forms of inquiry, and reaching multiple audiences by making scholarship more accessible. (p. 65)

Cole's matrix and articulation of arts-based research is useful in considering how to assess and measure my project. My work aspires to be the kind of creatively expansive project that helps us make change and better understand each other through a self-reflexive, intentional process.

I group my portraiture practice with a compilation of publications exploring disability, race and contemporary art, abolition and future worlds. Together they offer insights into our future directions in both art and activism.

The Activist Portrait Series

The Activist Portrait series is a collection of twenty, black-and-white graphite drawings of activists from across Turtle Island and Inuit Nunangat. The series is expansive and large scale—each drawing is 8 feet tall or larger. Each drawing has been created through a care-based process in which the activist is fed a meal and then interviewed while being photographed. Large-scale drawings are then created from the photographs, while listening to the audio of the interviews for inspiration. Using super realism, I have attempted to capture the spirit of the activist as they talk about their work and their dreams for the future.

To date, there are twenty portraits of organizers, including images of well-known activists like Leah Lakshmi Piepzna Samarasinha, Kim Ninkuru, Kona Kontranya and Ravyn Wngz and unsung mobilizers like Joshua Vettivelu, Maria, Hampton Gerbrandt, and Kyisha Williams. These portraits span an intergenerational spread, documenting activists in their early-20s and those in their 50s, from locations in the so-called United States and across so-called Canada.

I have created these large-scale portraits of activists/revolutionaries/community mobilizers as a way of celebrating activists culture and activists lives, and as a way of understanding the many

daily choices that we all have to get involved in big and small ways in order to make the world a place where we all get to have self-determination and freedom. These portraits are an act of reverence, a celebration of life and of choice and of action(s).

I began exploring portraiture and painting also as a way of painting my community into art history, and as a way to document my realities. I have been drawn to portraiture to render invisible lives visible: trans activists, political heroes, and people with disabilities painted large in a style and medium once reserved for dignitaries and wealthy patrons. The artistic tradition of painting is implicated in re-enforcing systemic structures such as class hierarchies and racism, by extension defining which humans are valuable. My work attempts to interrupt this process by re-entering the frame around 'unintelligible bodies', those on the margins. In service of destabilizing and reclaiming the medium of portraiture, the portraits are drawn using graphite on heavyweight Fabiano paper. They are drawn at a larger-than-life scale as a way of honouring and revering the activist depicted in each image. By drawing the activists at a minimum of 8 feet tall, I am turning their images into powerful celebrations of love and labour. I chose to use a greyscale palette as a way of focusing in on the shape and lines of the activists' embodied presences. Rather than including the distraction of colour, I have drawn out the spark of life from the activists' eyes using light and shadow. This allows the viewer to take in the subject's humanity and focus on details such as the curve of their lips and the roundness of their eyes.

Practice and Approach

When I began this portrait series I first drew activists that I knew personally— Nzinga Maxwell was the first portrait in the series. Nzinga was a long time activist in Tkaronto who lived without status in the city in the 1990s and early 2000s. She was infamously arrested and deported after collusion by the Ryerson campus police and the Canadian Border Service Agency on

International Women's Day. I continued to draw activists that I knew and met through my travels, always building a connection with the people I was drawing. I found this helped to create a sense of safety and comfort for the activists. I would message or text the activist and invite them to join this process. I would then formally invite them for a photo session and meal. We would meet in a comfortable location, share a meal and take pictures while they talked about activism, love and the future. I drew one picture of someone that I did not know- activist Taui Green from Minneapolis. I was compelled by her portrait- this image of a Black activist with “I Cant Breathe” written across her masked face. I loved this portrait but felt weird that it was the one stand out—someone I did not know. But activism is magical, and one afternoon in Los Angeles for some BLM organizing, as I sat with a fellow activist from Minneapolis and talked about our shared work and organizing and art practices, I showed them my work. They knew the activist I had drawn. They told me her name—Taui Green—and connected us. We got to meet virtually, and I was able to close the loop. Now all of the portraits are of people that I have met and have started a relationship with.

Because I knew the people that I interviewed for this project, I wanted to make sure that we addressed the power dynamics of me being the researcher at all times. I ensured that each subject knew that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. I stressed that their decision not to volunteer, to stop participating, or to refuse to answer particular questions would not influence the nature of the ongoing relationship they had with me or any study staff, or the nature of their relationship with York University either now or in the future. I stated, “Since we know each other, I want to recognize the ongoing relationship you may have with me as a researcher and/or community member. I stress that you can withdraw from this study at any time.” This allowed participants to have the choice to leave in any case where they may have felt uncomfortable and or wanted to change their minds.

For the interviews themselves, we would meet at a safe space—sometimes in a gallery and sometimes in the participant's home. I would bring food for them to dine on as we got set up. I would then take out the camera and start an audio recording. I would ask each activist the same three questions, in the same order, and would snap photos of them answering and reacting to each question. I would pace my question delivery to make each question a surprise and thus illicit interesting facial reactions.

I would first ask, "How did you get involved in organizing?" and then, "If you could get involved in a moment in activist history or of change-making at any point in human history, anywhere in the world, where would you go and why?" and lastly, I would slowly state the final question, "Can you describe for me in words the feeling that you get when you first realize that you are falling in love?" and their faces would react, they would begin to talk, and I would capture their poses and gestures throughout the conversation.

Performing the Study

The interviews were times of joy. We laughed as we got comfortable and set up to take the photos. The first question often elicited groans of serious pondering, depending on the person and their relationship to organizing. The second question got people lit up, as they stretched their imaginations and talked about the moments in our histories that have so inspired them. The last question often came as a surprise and elicited laughter or more groans, depending on the person's feelings about falling in love. I captured all of these embodied reactions through the audio and photo documentation. I then tried to translate the essence of those genuine reactions in the portraits through the use of super realism.

I would then listen to these recordings, these moments of intensity and of Black and QTBIPOC joy, while I drew the portraits- bringing the activist into the space with me while I worked on their image. I often lamented that I wish we could have people sit for portraits for days on end but capitalism would never provide the conditions to allow for this- it perhaps never did which is why only the wealthy elite were rendered in such a way. When I have done live drawing performances in galleries- such as during my installation at the Art Gallery of York University's *Centre for Incidental Activisms* show in 2016, or for the Progress festival at the Theatre Centre in 2018- I have brought these audio recordings into the space as a way of bringing these important figures-these activists- to life while I draw.

What follows is a reflection on the interview data. I've presented these full quotes to allow the participants to speak in their own words and share their own words, as part of my commitment to the key intentions of this project, which is being process oriented and engaged to learn with the portrait sitters. As these are largely unsung QTBIPOC activists, I want to give them the space to share their words and thoughts in full. These longer quotes allow the reader to get a fuller sense of these beautiful and complex lived experiences.

The Myth of the Super Activist

A common theme that emerged through the interview process was a misperception of exactly who can or should call themselves an activist. Not necessarily because participants were challenging the term and its complexity—which is needed and perhaps just outside of the scope of this study—but rather because they were not sure they had done enough to "count" as an activist. Queentite Opaleke, an activist based between Winnipeg/Treaty 1 territory and Tkaronto, had created a foundation to collect used prosthetics in Canada after finding out that they could not be reused in Canada but could be sent to other locations globally that were in

need of any prosthetics they could find. Queentite and her son Iahnijah collected 60,000 prosthetics and redistributed them around the world, but she still questioned if she had done enough to be considered an activist. This was a common idea. There was a sense of a “super activist” out there who was doing everything all the time that these folks seemed to compare themselves to—a mythological creature against which they knew they would never measure up.

Another activist in the series, Hampton Gerbrandt was tied to an intergenerational understanding of the impact of activism yet still expressed caution at using that term to describe himself. He stated,

> My mom was an activist, and so I've been exposed a lot to activism throughout my life. Since a pre-teenager, I've been going to demonstrations and meetings, so I feel like I'm an activist in the sense that I know what activism looks like a lot. But I feel like there's that disconnect where it's like, "What is an activist?" Maybe we're just people and stuff.”

He performed a lot of the actions of activism—going to both meetings and demonstrations, and this fostered a sense of being an activist. Yet there was still a hesitation with the identification of what we mean when we say “activist” in the first place. This question of “what is an activist?” raised by Hampton is something that appeared in other interviews as well.

When asked if she considered herself an activist Kim Ninkuru stated,

> I think so. I think that now I'm in this phase where any label feels unnecessary, and I'm just doing what I want to do and what I feel like my calling is, and what I feel like my body's like drawn to do, and my spirit and my mind are drawn to do. I guess you can say that I'm an activist. But I'm also not really thinking about labels like that in this moment right now. It's kind of like the same thing as feminist or any labels like that. Whether that's like my identity or like activities that that I take part of, I'm not really interested in labels right now.

Here, she recognizes that she is embodying many of the practices of activism but doesn't feel the need to take on the label of “activist” as part of her practice. She necessarily brings in a critique by comparing identifying as an activist as identifying as a feminist—a complex and

contested terms after its appropriation by TERFS and white supremacists. Similarly, Mi'jan Ciele stated, " You know that's so wild because someone just wrote that as my bio and I was like, "Why did they put that down?" And I think I have a complicated... Just like to artist, are all these words where I'm like, "Oh, I just do the things that I do." So I would say maybe, maybe." So these terms- artist, activist, feminist- these contested terms are complicated. Who gets to define what the terms mean and encompass? Addis Aliyu, a Black activist organizing in Chicago stated,

> I do think that survival is activism. So in that way, I am doing it by default of being in my body and carrying the thoughts and dreams that I have, that I know that are antithetical to the system. I think that that constitutes activism, but not in the administrative form of activism, I would say I don't do that".

There were many people I spoke with who disassociated from the term activist either because of negative associations or because of the perception that they hadn't yet earned the title. As Addis continued, "Well maybe activism it's a title that you just receive. So it lacks self-reflexivity. You can't give it to yourself, but other people give it to you. Yeah." From another perspective, Yaniya Lee talks about a negative association based on white activists she had engaged with in Montreal and how this makes her want to use different terminology:

> I've figured out in my own way how to do stuff that makes me feel like I'm working towards rebalancing the world. And so I may not be an activist like the people that I really didn't like in Montreal who claim to be activists or people that I was around, but I've figured out how to organize or participate or collaborate in a way that I think is quiet activism or swellow activism, and that's okay but I don't think that I would call myself an activist necessarily.

Yaniya does organizing and movement building—she "figures out how to organize" in ways that are outside of mainstream activism. She does the work of activism without using the terminology.

Others, however, proudly claimed the term. Some were excited about being a central part of a movement that was exploding before them. As Miski Noor stated,

> Wow, so as this current iteration of the Black Freedom Movement just popped off. And I was working in retail at the time as a pharmacy technician, legal drug dealer, trying to help people take care of themselves. And in Minneapolis specifically, folks were taking over the Mall of America. And it felt like a moment in history that I couldn't miss, and it was as if somebody just pressed the "go" button and we're all going for Black correction. And I felt something I felt before, and that I feel every day I think, but this duty to Black people, duty to future generations, to contribute, to be a part of this, to build, to create more space for us and for them. A duty to love, care for and protect Black people.

Miski described this sense of responsibility to their ancestors and to all future generations of Black people and how this propels them in their work. I think a lot of people found themselves doing something under capitalism when the revolution began and began to question their role and work in society. Miski was a pharmacist, a “legal drug dealer” as they say, before delving fully into the movement for Black lives. OmiSoore Dryden explained,

> We were protesting surveillance of Black students when York security was asking Black students for ID, because apparently they didn't look like they were students. And so that's when I really became involved in having to plan meetings, planning, organizing, how to get people out, how to talk to people about it. And so like leafleting, postering, phone trees, that kind of thing. And then I became more involved with political communities downtown. So, Sisters Cafe, spoken word events. This is around the time that I met Faith Nolan, Dionne Brand, Grace Channer, Angela Robertson, who I knew before because she knew my mom. Linda Carty, this is when I started showing up to International Women's Day events, that kind of thing. So that's when I first met Debbie Douglas and folks who have been around a minute. That's when I first became... That's when I claimed the... I guess it was like, "Yeah, I'm an activist, I'm a student activist."

So it is often through the labours of activism that we choose to claim the term as OmiSoore puts it. What does this mean for the many folks who cannot do the labours of activism but who are helping to shape change and push movements forward in their own way— through supporting friends with meals, as some activists describe or through mutual support and aid?

Speculative Fiction and Organizing

All activism is speculative fiction, as Walidah Imarisha says (2015, AK Press), because we are daring to dream that another future is possible. I have been interested in asking activists about the speculative imaginings about organizing and our past/present and future. I have asked all of the folks that I interviewed about what time period and place they would travel to get involved in a social movement and why. The answers have fascinated me. First, some wanted to go to the past. For example, Hampton stated, "

> I feel like I'd want to know what happened during the colonization of a lot of parts of Africa. I feel like there's not that much actual knowledge or shared documentation about what happened on that continent. For me, anyways, a person who grew up in North America, so my knowledge of history is very Euro/Western-centric, but I don't know. I just remember recently learning about... the history of that struggle in Kenya, and wanting to know more about what that process and that history looked like in other places."

This draws on the Adinkra concept of "Sankofa", which comes from the Ashanti people in Ghana, West Africa, in which we are encouraged to learn from our past in order to understand where we are going to go in the future, The phrase "It is not wrong to go back for what you've forgotten" is associated with Sankofa. Similarly, Miski Noor wanted to go back to a recent movement of queer ancestry. They stated,

> And there was this moment after the Stonewall riots and they're having the first gay rights parade and Sylvia Rivera gets up there and she just lets them have it. In that moment, in that moment, they just were already leaving a trans woman of colour behind and beginning to rewrite history and erase them. So I'd love to go back to that moment and let me bring a hundred of my homies with me to back her up and to back her and Marsha P. "Pay It No Mind" Johnson up and maybe change the course of history as far as getting a little bit closer to a world that deserves trans women, especially trans of colour.

This act of solidarity, these hundreds of "homies" rolling up to support Sylvia and Marsha is beautiful to imagine. Imagine how this acting might have altered the course of our recent

history? If trans erasure had been stopped then and there? These ruminations on an altered past help us to imagine a dream or ideal present and future. OmiSoore also wanted to journey to this time. She stated,

> Stonewall in New York. I always seem to go to the States, but there were some early activist movements that my dad talked about in Jamaica. And that Sherona Hall would speak about. And so I would do those. And liberation movements, I guess the movements in the future are going to be about water. Like when we read any kind of fiction or see any kind of African dystopic future narratives or off-world narratives, it's often about water. And so those would be my political movements. Yeah. But for Stonewall, I'd still be a femme, right? I'd still be a femme. I'd still be involved in all the things that were seen as being unseemly. So the clubs, sex work, dancer and dancing, any kind of spectrum of that. But also really working with Black and Indigenous communities about being able to create home and raise our kids and survive and feed one another and love and fight and all of that.

OmiSoore discussed wanting to be part of the grit of the city, the underground parts of our communities- for this is where the change-making has often resided. This desire to go back to such a significant point in queer and trans history was cited by several, including OmiSoore and Miski.

Others, however, were centered in the now. Addis stated,

> Literally it's atemporal or omnitemporal, assumes all time. I think the moment I'm in now is pretty dope. I have the most intimacy around this moment. So I think this one is definitely up there. I think that a lot of our like tools around resistance are just reorganized all the time. We've had the same tools, the same medicine, but the way that they're configured is a different sort of recipe, different configuration. So I don't feel like there's a certain time in history I would go back to that I would gain more or less than what I have now."

They go on to explain that this historic moment is beyond time and space- what they are searching for as an activist is the ways that we celebrated together- and so they want to return to moments of celebration-as-activism. They continue,

> But I'm more interested in what our celebration would look like. And so to me, the '90s would have been a really dope time to have been around because they would have just been A Tribe Called Quest, Arrested Development. Just going to those shows and gaining a lot of energy for a minute. that would have been really... Yeah. I do lament not being alive. Or not being an adult then."

This idea of activism-as-celebration is quite beautiful, and to me could help us get to the irresistible revolutions that Bambara encourages us to foster. Whether it is returning to the 1990s or 1980s or to the underground movements of the now, the ways that we celebrate our survival are interesting considerations. We could learn a lot about what we value and hold dear in studying how we celebrate, with who, and under what conditions.

Yaniya also described turning to fiction and writing to help her imagine where and when she would like to go. She explains,

> if you think back to capitalism and racial capitalism... All this fucked up shit that has been happening for a little over 500 years... Silvia Federici is an Italian writer and economist, I guess and she wrote a book called Caliban and the Witch and she talked about the transition from feudalism to capitalism in Europe. She was looking at enclosure and how relationship to land changed again from the top down. And also how relationship to time changed because people were having jobs, they started working in factories. You had to actually be on time. You weren't living on a farm and working for a person that you had to pay them a tithe once a year. And I wonder, I mean, I wouldn't want to be Marx, but what kind of thinking was going on at that time as the world was changing in these ways. that people were being literally dispossessed in like...The witch Hunter, everything that was going on at that time was I think the inception of a lot of the horrible things that we're dealing with now, not that there wasn't stuff before then, but I would be interested to be there to somehow have a glimmer of what's going on. Maybe I could be a traveler who had seen lots of different lands and ways of being and came back to wherever and was seeing these changes. And of course, I suppose I'm talking about Europe and those changes that started there. That would be interesting. And to Organize, you know? Because not everybody read, maybe it was mostly the clergy or some class, but how did people organize? How did they communicate? I think I'd be into that.

Yaniya talks about how the advent of capitalist structures shaped our ability to organize and the conditions in which we did this work. She thinks through the different ways that we would organize considering literacy and shared knowledge.

Love and Revolution

Che Guevara once said, “At the risk of seeming ridiculous, let me say that the true revolutionary is guided by a great feeling of love. It is impossible to think of a genuine revolutionary lacking this quality.” (2003, Ocean Press) I was curious about the experience of love or of falling in love in the midst of a movement and in a time of profound change. When I asked about their experiences with love, Miski described it as an ethereal experience: “I feel like there's a giddiness and a freedom and a lightness. I feel like I can fly. It feels easier to exist. It just, it feels like my whole body is breath. Yeah.”

I wondered if these experiences of love could be translated into our work in the revolution. OmiSoore explained further:

> In Ifa, they talk about how the moment of orgasm is the presence of Osun, because Osun is the God moment, or what you see in movies now as the God particle. But it's that moment where you are able to see in all moments at that time, in all moments at the same time. So when I am falling in love, I feel the most connected to Osun, but also the most connected to all aspects of myself and in all moments of time. So in all ways that I have been through time. And as much as it's terrifying, I'm at my strongest. And the tears that I often shed when falling in love is the realization that what I thought was love before, that I deserved better love before. And this is the love that I deserve. So the love that I was calling to myself is the love that's manifesting. And so those tears are tears of healing and tears of joy. But yeah, I am connected to all manifestations, all iterations of myself.

This moment of being in love as being “at my strongest” as OmiSoore explains suggests that if we could channel our feelings of love during our work organizing we might be stronger in doing our work. Addis described love as a feeling of lighting up. They explain, “

> Whatever the antonym of pastel is, that feeling, that word. Because I feel like we're the opposite of when something is muted. Because you're on your grind and I feel like that's just being alive. And being in love feels like, it is a deviation from your grind. Whatever you feel like you're accustomed to you, suddenly it's like... There's scene in the boondocks where granddad smokes a joint for the first time. And so the world, he sees everything in colour. But then he gets high and he sees it in hyper colour. That's kind of

> how I feel like it is when you're in love. Is not that everything was monochromatic and then suddenly you see things in colour. Instead things can be beautiful, but then they take on a super life to them. In words I can't, there aren't adjectives. But that's the descriptions I feel like. It has a hyper quality to it.

This sense of hyper colour, of things being more vivid and vibrant when we experience love, this could lead to more colourful and vibrant movements if our work was rooted in this sense of wonder. But what of folks who have had negative experiences of love, or betrayal? Yaniya reacted strongly when asked about love. She explains:

> I don't know. I don't remember. I blocked it all out, but I think it's lots of feelings. One thing I remember is that it's like finding a home or like you have this family and you... It's really surprising and amazing to have this person in your life that is... That you are for them and they are for you and this is... Yeah. It's like family, but they're not your family, but they are. I think that feeling is pretty amazing [...] I'm not in the right head space. I don't remember. I'm sure it's really nice and great. I've been there. I think good things. I don't actually remember it. I'm sorry.

What does negative experiences of love do for our experiences of revolutionary love that our movements are founded upon? Mi'jan described her experience as being one of falling, and of navigating the hard experiences alongside the beautiful ones:

> Helplessness, falling. Like literally falling, not able to hold... Oh yeah, because I realized actually fairly recently, there's a difference because I'm learning how to swim. I go for these private lessons with the dreamiest preschool teacher who's a swim teacher. And we're just like mermaids in the water together. And I'm like, "Oh, I'm just learning that my orientation. Wow. That's important." My orientation to water up until now has been highly polarized experience where I'm like, "You could drown, I could drown people could drown." Or, "Oh my God, water is the best, it's so dreamy, I love water." And now that I'm learning how to swim, I'm like, I have third relationship to it where I'm like... Or it can create buoyancy and you just float and you're supported by it. And so I realized my orientation to love as also falling in love has felt like that very much to where I'm, Oh, this was perfect for today. Where I'm like, my orientation has been... It can be the thing that takes you down. I could drown, I could die. Or, "It's the dreamiest. I love it." And now I'm like, or it could be the thing that supports and creates buoyancy. And so up until now... That's what I want. I want the buoyancy. up until now, I have been like, it's the thing that will take me.

Mi'jan offers complex relationships to the concept of love and falling in love and this equation of the relationship to incredible highs but also great danger- as with the power of water, rings true for me in many ways. Our relationship to love can be like trying to save a drowning person- you could be successful and it be the most significant day of your lives or you could not, and both drown in the sea. But this buoyancy that will take us as Mi'jan puts it, this buoyancy is part of what carries us through all of the dangers- the dangers of love, yes, but also of activism, of the struggle, of life at the end of a dying system.

Activist Culture and Resilience

I began this study as a way of better understanding how to support the lives of Black activists in the struggle for our self-determination and freedom. What I found out is that "activist" is an amorphous experience with shifting definitions. To be called an activist seems to be a process—— one of inclusion into a sort of team or club and one of exclusion through defining that which we are not. Perhaps it's what Fred Hampton said all along, "You are going to have to keep on saying that, You are going to have to say, I am a revolutionary, I am the people, I am not the pigs". (Online archive) He argues we need to make clear our affiliations, and remind ourselves to abolish the cops in our hearts and minds. Who is the revolutionary, though? Who is the activist? These shifting definitions complicate who gets to be considered as activists and as such not everyone is getting the support and care that they need to stay in the struggle for our freedoms. What would it mean for us to address the problematics of the term "activist" for those that need it and to broaden the definition and make it a self-determined one in order to ensure all could receive the supports being created to keep activists going in the long haul?

Throughout this creative process, I also learned that Walidah Imarisha is right— activists make great speculative fiction generators- for they can dream up imagined futures we haven't yet considered. Asking them about traveling through time and space yield such vast and surprising

results- from those who would catapult to the future to “see where we end up” as Queentite Opaleke stated to those who would go back to the past to live through some of our biggest battles. Then there are those who are most committed to the now, who want to live fully through all that this moment has to offer, for change-making, for our communities. This particular moment when everything could change in an instant, if the right levers were pulled and the right chain of events flowed through.

This study elucidates the complex feelings we have about love, particularly for those in the struggle. It may guide our work, but it can wreak havoc on our complex social lives. It is for this reason that I have strengthened my resound- to continue to work to support activists, to provide support and encouragement in the face of hate mail, break ups from the stress of surveillance, and the effects of activist burnout.

Conclusion

As a cultural worker who belongs to an oppressed people my job is to make revolution irresistible. One of the ways I attempt to do that is by celebrating those victories within the [B]lack community. And I think the mere fact that we're still breathing is a cause for celebration. (Bambara, 1982)

Black, trans and disabled activists are leading the charge for change and revolution. I have worked to exhaust their labour and efforts as a way of stoking the fires of revolution, bringing about changes in disability arts, certainly, but also in the world. My goal as an artist and as an activist is to make the revolution irresistible as Bambara suggests. I have attempted to do this by chronicling and archiving activists organizing and portraits, through writing about the movement and through this dissertation project. Reading this dissertation together is synergistic- it is more than the sum of its parts. The compilation of exhibitions and curated content, the exegesis, the portraits and the accompanying research together tell a story that is much bigger than any one element. Together, the dissertation elements prefigure a future world, spark revolutionary ideas, archive activism in northern Turtle Island in this moment and offer a roadmap forward towards an abolitionist future where racialized, disabled people are thriving. Revolution is not a one time event, but rather a process that we live through in embodied ways. As I sit to write my conclusion I am sitting in the middle of a revolution- one sparked perhaps by the killings of Black and Indigenous people by the police in May and June of 2020, but also fuelled by the conditions: a global pandemic that resulted in a months-long lock down that resulted in many having time availability and resources, thanks to the CERB, for the first time in their lives. People poured into the streets and found new ways of doing online organizing. Black, trans and disabled women, like Ravyn Wngz, Monica Forrester, and others were leading the charge. In this this time of a heightened focus on disability and collective care during a pandemic, it was these leaders who helped us move forward and push for our wildest dreams- a world without police so that Mad people could be safe in the streets, a world rooted in abolition

and wherein disabled and mad people wouldn't be held captive in carceral spaces. Everything is changing- as the calls for decarceration due to covid in April changed to defunding the police in May/June and then to abolishing the police in July and finally to abolishing the system that killed Breonna Taylor by the fall. We are witnessing the panarchy cycle in action- as one system collapses and another one is being birthed.

In this dissertation I have considered the need for support in the lives of activists, centering my project the Activist Portrait Series around creating more care and support within activists' lives. I have explored their experiences of organizing, their dreams for the future and about love and their imaginings of how they would like to contribute to the struggle outside of time and space. I have also gathered writing that ties together activist struggle, white supremacy in the arts, abolitionist organizing and speculative futures. The collections in this dissertation speak to the need for change and help us understand this current moment of revolutionary struggle in which we find ourselves organizing. The collections also speak to systems changing practices- as we challenge dominant thinking and ideologies and pave new ways forward towards self determination and freedom together.

On Juneteenth at 7:30 am 80 Black artists and their allies gathered to create a monumental mural that called out white supremacy, making important connections to the arts; that spoke to the need for abolition and a new way of resolving conflict, crisis and harm and that offered a speculative vision of the future, a decidedly creative one wherein the streets were ours for use and for mobilizing and wherein we could dream of a world without policing and prisons. We painted a 7500 square foot neon pink mural, in a nod to the decades of anti-police activism from within queer and trans communities across Turtle Island and Inuit Nunangat. The mural spelled out Defund the Police and listed the names of over 15 people killed by the police from January 2020- June 2020- an impressive list of far too many gone. This mural brought the contemporary arts community into the conversation about Black lives and the need to uproot white supremacy in all of its forms everywhere it is found. It broadcast a message of abolition onto the global stage and it was a cathartic process of care that the artists activist practiced through the creation process.

This mural project was conceived of during the height of the revolutionary moment that now grips us. In the theory of panarchy and adaptive change cycles (Gunderson, 2001), we are in the phase of systems collapse and rapid reorganization of the ways that we structure our society. We are currently rooted in fertile ground and we are planting the seeds of abolition and a white supremacist free future with every step. It is intense and exhausting work. We need

support around activists perhaps now more than ever as the ravages of the struggle wears on and as we face new challenges- a new pandemics within existing pandemics, climate change etc.

Many of us are recognizing that we are perhaps all the reluctant warriors that Assata described. She stresses that she is within struggle by circumstance and that if she were born in a world free from oppression she would be free to be so much more- a sculptor, a garden a carpenter but instead she was a struggler, a reluctant struggler but one because she was committed to life. We are similarly committed to life. We are fighting to change the world, but we also know that we are doing it because of love, as so many of those that I interviewed stressed. We are doing it so that we can all get to relax and be free, and be the sculptor, the gardener, the baker, or the carpenter. We will all get to be free to be so much more. And so to return to the metaphor, we are planting seeds now to grow the beautiful new ways of being in relation to each other- a new system that will replace this current system of violence and control, of hate and supremacy.

My future research will be rooted in this future world- I am interested now in sitting and listening to our elders and our young ones talk of old ways of knowing being and doing, and dream of new ways of being. Now is the time to water the seeds of abolition, to strengthen the base around the activist plants, growing tall and stretching towards the sun. I am dedicated to seeing this fight out to its competition. I will be linked with movement builders across Turtle Island and Nunangat as we push forward to destroy white supremacy, systemic ableism and sanism, anti-Blackness in all its forms. We will keep the fires of this revolution burning until the radical changes that are needed to topple the old and usher in the new have happened and we are able to live future, self determined lives. As Assata says, we will win. Through my research I have found examples of the hope she imagined, that she wishes for us- in the lived lives of

activists, in the irresistible revolutionary movements for change sweeping across this continent and across the globe. We are winning. We will win. In many ways we already have. I'm planning for the future and will meet you there- where we will finally be free.

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Appendix A: List of Citations for Publications and Exhibitions

This exegesis is made up of the following publications:

1. Ware, S. “The Black Radical: Fungibility, Activism and Portraiture in These Times”. Aesthetic Resilience: Art and Activism in the Age of Systemic Crisis. (Ed. E.A. Steinbock). Antenne Series (Amsterdam: Valiz Press), 2021
2. Ware, S. “Give Us Permanence”. Canadian Art Magazine, Summer 2020.
3. Ware, Syrus Marcus. "The Most Unwelcoming ‘Outstanding Welcome’: Marginalized Communities and Museums and Contemporary Art Spaces." Canadian Theatre Review 177 (2019): 10-13.
4. Ware, S. ‘All that we touch we change’: Octavia Butler’s Guide to Belonging (in a Neoliberal World). Canadian Art Magazine, Winter 2017.
5. Ware, SM. Abolition in our lifetime. This Magazine, Winter (2020).

The artworks reproduced on pages 83-110 have been included in the following exhibitions during my doctoral study:

1. (Forthcoming, May 2021) *Future.* Tangled Art Gallery, Curator: Sean Lee. Toronto. (drawing) (forthcoming, 2021)
2. January 2021 *Irresistible Revolutions*. Will Allabe Art Projects, Vancouver, 2021
3. January 2021 *Black Revolts*. Never Apart gallery. Curator: Michaëlle Sergile, 2021
4. *In the No Longer Not Yet,* Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery Concordia University*,* Curator: Julia Eilers Smith, 2020.
5. *Taking a Stand,* Stamps Gallery, Ann Arbor, MI. Curator: Srimoyee Mitra, 2020.
6. *Toronto Biennial of Art,* 259 Lakeshore E, Toronto. Curators: Candice Hopkins and Tairone Bastien, 2019.
7. *Drawing Room,* Luminato Festival, Harbourfront Toronto. Curator: Sally Frater, 2019.
8. *Summerworks: Burn, Burned.* Massey Harris Park, Toronto. Curator: Laura Nanni, 2019.
9. *Summerworks: Antarctica.* The Theatre Centre, Toronto. Curator: Laura Nanni, 2019.
10. *Still I Rise*, Art Gallery of Newmarket, Newmarket. Curator: Logan Bales, 2018/2019
11. *2068: Touch Change.* Grunt Gallery, Curator: Vanessa Kwan. Vancouver. (drawing and multiples). (2018)
12. *Out the Window*, Luminato Festival, Harbourfront Theatre**.** Director: Sarah Garton Stanley, 2018.
13. *Deconstructing Comfort,* Open Space, Victoria. Curator: Michelle Jacques, 2017.
14. *Every Now Then: Reframing Nationhood,* Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Curators: Andrew Hunter & Anique Jordan, 2017.
15. *The Images in Our Heads,* Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa. Curated by Vanessa Dion

Fletcher & Lindsay Fisher. September 10, 2016 - January 08, 2017.

16. *Centre for Incidental Activisms #3.* Art Gallery of York University, Toronto. Curator: Emelie Chhangur & Suzanne Carte. Installation & Residency, 2016.

Exhibitions I have curated during the dissertation research:

1. Thats So Gay: Eleventenn, Online Exhibition, Toronto. Featuring work by Jenna Reid, Ifetayo Alabi, Rojelio Palacios, Helen Reed and Hannah Jickling, Christopher Rodrigues, Elizabeth Sweeney, Raven Davis, Darryl Deangelo Terrell, Kyisha Williams, Puff Paddy and more.
2. *That's So Gay: Love is a Battle*ffi*eld.* Gladstone Hotel. Toronto, Ontario. Featuring Moses Tan, Leanne Powers, Embassy of the Imagination, Camille Turner and more. (2019)
3. *That's So Gay: Say My Name.* Gladstone Hotel. Toronto, Ontario. (2018)
4. *The Cycle.* The National Arts Centre, Ottawa, Ontario. Featuring Barak Ade Soleil, Yousef Kodura, Jess Watkins, Prince Amposah, Paul Peters and Alex Bulmer, Eliza Chandler, Michele Decottignies, Jan Derbyshire, Barak Ade Soleil, Prince Amponsah, Erin Ball, Olivia Basha, Sonny Bean, Caroline Bowditch, Lois Brown, Chris Dodd, Rachel Gorman, Bruce Horak, Kirsty Johnston, Yousef Kadoura, Christine Karcza, Landon Krentz, Petra Kuppers, LAL, Leah Lewis, Sage Lovell, Justin Many Fingers, Niall McNeil, Deborah Patterson, Adam Pottle, Matthew Poutney, Paul Power, Alan Shain, Brian Solomon, Jess Thom, Kazumi Tsuruoka, Jack Volpe, Adam Warren, Jess Watkins, Melisse Watson. (2015-2017)
5. *Black Mystic.* Art Gallery of Ontario. Toronto, Ontario. Featuring: Rodney Diverlus, Barak Adé Soleil, Junglepussy and more. (2017)
6. *That's So Gay: Uprising.* Gladstone Hotel. Toronto, Ontario. Featuring Kara Springer, Melisse Watson, Lindsay Fisher, Melanie Monoceros and more. (2017)
7. *That's So Gay: Come Together.* Gladstone Hotel. Toronto, Ontario. Featuring work by: Paddy Leung, Evan Ifekoya, Lia La Novia, Kara Sievewright, Humboldt Magnusson, and more. (2016)
8. *That's So Gay: Fall to Pieces.* Gladstone Hotel. Toronto, Ontario. Featuring work by: Calder Harben, Andrew Zealley, 2Fik, Shira Spector, Micha Cárdenas and more. (2015).
9. *That's So Gay: On The Edge.* Gladstone Hotel. Toronto, Ontario. Featuring work

by: Mary Tremonte, Hazel Meyer, Elizabeth Sweeney, Rebeka Tabobondung, Daryl James Bucar and more. (2014)

10. *Re:Purpose*. Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, Ontario. Featuring work by: Stephen Fakiyesi, Maria Hupfield, Jan Derbyshire, CoCo Riot. Lisa Bufano and more. (2014)