

UNSILENCING THE PAST:  
STAGING BLACK ATLANTIC MEMORY IN CANADA AND BEYOND

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## ABSTRACT

### **Unsilencing the Past: Staging Black Atlantic Memory in Canada and Beyond**

My project probes the silences of Newfoundland's colonial past by making connections between faraway lands on the other side of the Atlantic that seem, on the surface, to have nothing to do with this geography, but are, in fact, socially, economically, and geologically entangled. It traverses the landscape and the seascape of the island, linking it to Europe and Africa and back again. It makes this journey by land and ship in search of what lies beneath what can be seen, in search of the deeper geologies of this eastern tip of Canada.

I use a research-creation approach to critically investigate this silence – a silence that shrouds a ghostly past that is still present. I draw on the idea of hauntology, which Avery Gordon (2008) theorizes as a social force manifested in unsettled feelings that occur in response to loss and violence that are systematically denied but are still present, and which Viviane Saleh Hanna (2015) explains as colonial delusions that underpin modernity.

Guided by my feeling of being haunted, I lift the shroud that envelops this history. In so doing, I unmap Newfoundland, revealing its connections to the Atlantic trade in humans and defamiliarizing what appears to be an innocent landscape that has not been tampered with. The results of this unmapping are expressed by the interdisciplinary artworks *Afronautic Research Lab: Newfoundland* (2019), *Nave* (2021), and *Sarah* (2021), which accompany this written record of the dissertation. The written portion of this project also retraces and records the steps of my own artistic process and the journeys I have made by walking on land, travelling across the ocean in the hold of a ship through the archival records, and mapping the process of my work,

the ‘facts’ I encountered, and the affects these produced in my own body and which guided the choices I made about how to represent or perform them. I explore all these as they appear and evolve throughout this research-creation process.

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**PREFACE | UNSILENCING THE PAST: STAGING BLACK ATLANTIC MEMORY IN  
CANADA AND BEYOND**



*Figure 1: Film still from Afronautic Research Lab: Newfoundland (2019). Filmed and edited by Brian Ricks for Bonavista Biennale.*

Silence seems to cover the landscape of Newfoundland like mist. This enveloping quietude is thick, shifting between the rock and the water, settling over the small houses that dot the landscape and the sky filled with grey and white clouds. My project probes the silences of the island's colonial past, making connections between faraway lands on the other side of the Atlantic that seem, on the surface, to have nothing to do with this geography, but are, in fact, socially, economically, and geologically entangled. It traverses the landscape and the seascape of the island, linking it to Europe and Africa and back again. It makes this journey by land and ship in search of what lies beneath what can be seen, in search of the deeper geologies of this eastern tip of Canada.

I use a research-creation approach to critically investigate this silence – a silence that shrouds a ghostly past that is still present. I draw on the idea of hauntology, which Avery Gordon (2008) theorizes as a social force manifested in unsettled feelings that occur in response to loss and violence that are systematically denied yet are still present, and which Viviane Saleh Hanna (2015) explains as colonial delusions that underpin modernity (p. 20).

Guided by my feeling of being haunted, I lift the shroud that envelops this history. In so doing, I unmap Newfoundland, revealing its connections to the Atlantic trade in humans, defamiliarizing what appears to be an innocent landscape that has not been tampered with. The results of this unmapping are expressed by the interdisciplinary artworks that accompany this written record of the dissertation. I will describe them below, but before I get to these interdisciplinary visual and sonic manifestations, which are in many ways alive, I retrace the steps of my own artistic process and the journeys I have made by walking on land, travelling across the ocean in the hold of a ship through the archival records and mapping the process of my work, the “facts” I encountered, the affects these produced in my own body and which guided the choices I made about how to represent or perform them. I explore all of these elements as they appear and evolve throughout this research-creation process that has resulted in the production of artistic work that unleashes memory and provokes those who experience it to imagine an alternative to the fixed and inscribed meanings of the nation, and to consider their accountability in this violence across discrete borders of time and space.

One of the main contributions of this dissertation is a detailed reflection on this silenced memory through my artistic methodology (Loveless, 2019; Springgay & Truman, 2017), which I refer to as “Afronautics.” My Afronautic approach centralizes Blackness, conceptualizes time as nonlinear, utilizes imagination as a tool for worldmaking, and pays attention to silence as

information and direction. The suffix *nautic* refers to journeys that traverse, disrupt, and conflate time, space, land and water. By emphasizing navigation, ships, and sailing, I root this exploration in and around the ocean, the primary stage where people who were commoditized and products created through their forced labour such as rum, sugar, cotton and salt were exchanged. As Linebaugh and Rediker (2000) assert, the ship provided the means through which “capitalists had organized the exploitation of human labor” across Europe, Africa and the Americas (p. 149).

I apply my Afronautic methodology to my research, writing and artistic production to investigate and produce knowledge about the little-known slave ships that were constructed in Newfoundland and the people they transported in their holds. Rather than creating an exhaustive history of these ships, I produce creative nonfiction writing and artworks that center my personal and imaginative encounters with this past. I tell these stories as a descendant of ancestors who were abducted from their African homelands and carried to the Caribbean on ships much like these – and were, in fact, perhaps carried on these very ships.

My artmaking is also inspired by dreams that have propelled Black people to struggle towards a new world, as theorized by Robin Kelley (2002, p. 7). Within the Black Radical tradition, art is referenced and revered as a mode of inquiry, embodied theory, thinking through making. In the words of Fred Moten (2020), Black art is “radical, disruptive social energy” that records the pain of Black life and prompts us to imagine “how we might live otherwise” (00:43–00:57).

Throughout this journey, I create new artworks and revisit some of my earlier artistic projects. Using a mode of time travel, I trace the movements of Africans across the Black

Atlantic.<sup>1</sup> I employ this conceptual frame, building from Paul Gilroy's (1993) distinctive formulation of this vast watery territory that came into being through the forced migration of African people in the holds of slave ships that connected Europe, Africa, and the Americas. Gilroy argues that modern hybrid cultures emerged through this massive and violent upheaval. My work extends the Black Atlantic construct to Newfoundland, articulating the ways that racial terror, ushered in by the Middle Passage, underlies this seemingly innocent place.

In the Introduction, I discuss the beginning of my journey as it emerged from within another journey. I tell the story of my previous work that has led to this work, describing my commitment to excavating Canada's national narratives through my previous piece *The Resistance of Peggy Pompadour* (2013), which uses performance and media to unsilence the presence of enslaved people buried within Canada's past. I begin this current project when I venture through Senegal's Door of No Return to confront the haunting spectre of slave ships built in Newfoundland.

In Chapter One, I lay out in more detail the key ideas that inform my theoretical frame, including some of the literature, artists and artworks that have inspired me on my journey. I examine various approaches to the problem of silences and epistemic violence in the archive, and gleaning what I can from these examples, I elaborate my Afronautic methodology, the various stages and phases of my research-creation process, and my use of embodied methods such as walking that ground and make physical the experience of ephemeral pasts.

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<sup>1</sup> Although popularized by Paul Gilroy, "Black Atlantic" is a term that was coined by art historian Robert Farris Thompson, who used it in his 1983 book *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*.

In Chapter Two, I look beyond the nostalgic landscape to the spectral residue of the violence of the past, which makes its presence known through my feeling of being haunted. In considering what produces this haunting, I examine the genocide of the Beothuk, an Indigenous people declared extinct, and the dispossession and absencing of the Mi'kmaq from the island's historiography. The suppression of these histories provides insight into the colonial silences that shroud the history of the slave ships constructed on these shores.

In Chapter Three, I present *Afronautic Research Lab: Newfoundland* (2019), an artwork of this dissertation that was presented by the Bonavista Biennale in 2019. This work was filmed and installed in a former fishing storehouse – now transformed into a provincial heritage site – that was constructed from large trees gathered from forests that once lined the shores. The slave ships would have been constructed from trees of a similar size to the ones from which this structure was built. These trees have now been depleted and can no longer be found on the island, so I use the building where the installation was presented as a place of memory to think about the trees from which ships were built.

In Chapter Four, I leave land to enter the archive of enslavement. I use archival records to travel in the hold of the *Sarah*, a slave ship constructed in Newfoundland. I apply my Afronautic approach to the process of archival research, moving between the affective power of what the archive hides by utilizing my own body and responses to confront the clinical objectifications of the written but partial archive of the slave ships. I do this by finding the subjunctive spaces – that is, what could, should, or might be – and I immerse myself in this overlapping past, present and future.

In Chapter Five, I translate my embodied experiences in the archive into artworks. Incubating my ideas in time's pentimento, I consciously and critically allow them to lead me to

the embodied materiality of the three artworks that accompany this writing – *Afronautic Research Lab: Newfoundland* (2019), *Nave* (2022), and *Sarah* (2021). Together, this art and writing comprise my dissertation and provide a map of my research-creation journey.

A description of the artworks follows. The artworks can be viewed at [camilleturner.com/unmapped](http://camilleturner.com/unmapped).



*Figure 2: Afronautic Research Lab: Newfoundland (2019) at the Bonavista Biennale. Photograph by Camille Turner.*

*Afronautic Research Lab: Newfoundland* (2019) is a video installation in which a time traveler from the future arrives in current-day Newfoundland, which she refers to as the “Age of Silence.” To create this artwork, I became a willing vessel for the story that emerged as I opened

myself to a spiritual process of walking along the eastern shores of Newfoundland, journaling, listening, and attuning myself to the spectral residue of the violence that settled over the transformed land. As I contemplated how to commemorate those who have been made to disappear, images came to me. I envisioned and performed a character dressed in white walking across the land. I wrapped my head in white fabric and found white fisherman's gloves with fingers cut off. Silver boot liners became my boots. The effect was otherworldly, futuristic, and ghostly. White is a colour associated with the spirit world in many African and African Diasporic spiritual traditions. Obatala, the Yoruba deity of art, and imagination who creates human beings in a diversity of forms is associated with white (Lawal, 2005, pp. 163–164). In the spiritual tradition of Lukumi, initiates wear exclusively white for an entire year as they receive wisdom through their bodies.<sup>2</sup>

The character I performed and filmed walks beside the ocean, along the barren shores of Bonavista, bearing a rock that she found off the coast of West Africa but which was originally from Newfoundland. The rock was brought by a slave ship that had been constructed in Newfoundland in the eighteenth-century. Ships, in this era, were displacement vessels built to carry a load. In the absence of the load, they had to be loaded down and balanced by what is referred to as ballast, which often included rocks from the local area where they were built. When the ships sailed to West Africa, ballast rocks from Newfoundland would be unloaded onto the shore so that people, their intended cargo, could be loaded into their holds. This character holds a walking stick made from wood and debris washed up onto the barren shores of

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<sup>2</sup>C. Lynn Carr (2016) sheds light on the experience of wearing white for a year through her own story and the stories of other initiates.

Newfoundland. As she walks along the water, she carries the rock she found in West Africa. She enters a building constructed from large wooden trees. She then reverently lays the rock and her walking stick on the floor. On a table, she spreads out archival documents, providing evidence of this history. She exits the room leaving the documents, the rock, and the walking stick as remnants of the performance. A film projected onto the wall shows her performance. The audience is invited to sit at the table and read the documents she brought there. Notes written by previous participants annotate the documents, and pencils and sticky notes are provided to encourage participants to contribute their comments.



*Figure 3: Production still from Nave (2022). Photograph by Roxanne Fernandez.*

*Nave* (2022) is a three-channel video installation that builds on *Afronautic Research Lab: Newfoundland*. The word “nave” (OED, 2021) originates from the root *navi*, which refers to navigation and the marine world, and it also references the body of a church. Shipwrights of Newfoundland often constructed buildings in outport communities, including churches. Looking up into the nave of a church is similar to looking down into the hold of a ship; accordingly, in this artwork, I invert the meaning of the nave, utilizing its shape as a container for Middle Passage Memory.



Figure 4: Production still from *Nave* (2022). Photograph by Roxanne Fernandez.

*Nave* weaves together two characters, pilgrims, representing the past and future. One character, a time traveler from the future, revisits the audience from *Afronautic Research Lab: Newfoundland*. She enters the nave of a church and performs a ritual at the altar, pouring salt and water – representing the sea – to remember and honour those who were carried in the wombs/tombs of slave ships (Figure 4). Salt is a powerful element in Caribbean spiritual traditions. In Haitian folklore, stories circulate of zombies awakened by tasting salt or “goûte sel” in Haiitan Kreyol (Lauro, 2015, p. 124). Zora Neale Hurston (1938) observes that in both Haiti and Jamaica, salt is carefully avoided in feasts in which food is prepared to honour the dead (p. 162). Hurston recounts a tale from Jamaica where duppies (human spirits after death) were weighed down by salt since it was a heavy substance that could prevent them from flying. The

teller of the story noted that “once Africans could all fly because they never ate salt” (Hurstun, 1938, p. 62).

The items on *Nave*'s altar include nineteen candles representing the nineteen ships constructed in Newfoundland. A conch shell, which is an instrument through which Agwé, a Voudun loa, protector of those who made the Middle Passage crossing, is summoned is placed beside a small wooden ship, his vévé, or symbol.



*Figure 5: Production still from Nave (2022). Photograph by Roxanne Fernandez.*

The second character in *Nave* embodies the spirit of an ancestor called forth from the water (Figure 5). She offers movement and sings a song in Haitian Creole, reminding the African Diaspora of the strength and resilience of ancestors who crossed the water on slave ships. The

soundtrack is dominated by the sound of the sea, the voice of the ancestor, and drums fading, rising, and dispersing with the waves.



*Figure 6: Film still from Sarah (2021). Filmed and edited by Esery Mondesir.*

The third and final artwork included as part of this doctoral work is *Sarah* (2021), a short film (11:30) that was not planned for this dissertation but which took shape as I opened myself up to the urgency of the work of reckoning with this ongoing past. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, I found myself alone and locked away in my apartment. A talk I was scheduled to present in Halifax was cancelled. I could not visit my partner across the US border as I had planned. I could not return to Newfoundland to continue my research, and I had no physical access to archives. George Floyd's murder on May 25, 2020, triggered in me into intense sadness, weariness and wariness. I was in mourning. I felt like curling up into a ball. What I saw in the media mirrored what I had been researching in the archive. The past was most definitely not past. Police brutality against Black people was the top news story, and finally people outside of Black communities glimpsed what we had been fighting for all this time. Protests

reverberating around the world made me realize that I had to fight this exhaustion that threatened to consume me and seize the moment to keep going.

Filmed in my Toronto apartment, *Sarah* explores my interior state and the personal toll of doing this work. To reckon with the past, I reached towards the future. This demonstrates the Afronautic principles I draw on in much of my work, which are discussed further in Chapter One. The film is narrated by an Afronaut from 1,000 years in the future who returns to our time to recover the erased stories of their Black ancestors who left Earth in the twenty-first century, when Black life on the planet had become unlivable. We never see the Afronaut. The only character visible is a character I perform and who is based on myself: a researcher living on present-day Earth. The Afronaut observes the weariness of the researcher, who is searching through evidence of the *Sarah*, a slave ship constructed in eighteenth-century Newfoundland. As the researcher does her work, she is bombarded by media reports of police violence targeting Black people. What the Afronaut encounters addresses the questions they had brought with them. Through observing what the researcher is watching in the media, the Afronaut gains insights into the present-day violence and terror endured by Black people in the twenty-first century, the cause of their ancestors' departure from Earth. At the same time, they learn about the unimaginable violence of transatlantic enslavement in the past that dispersed previous generations of ancestors from their original homelands. These echoes of the past reverberating in the present leads the Afronaut to voice shocked recognition that these crimes have not been redressed nor have debts owed been paid.

The film is bookended by UFO sightings by the US military that were released by the Pentagon in December of 2020 and broadcast by a plethora of mainstream news stations. By utilizing footage that serendipitously appeared as I was writing the script for this film, I suggest

that perhaps the UFOs are piloted by Afronauts, and perhaps I am signaling their arrival on Earth and the researcher's possible escape. Although this work emerges from and engages with grief and mourning stemming from the past and continuing into the present, it also imagines and gestures towards possible futures.

Taken together, these three artworks act as a vehicle to unsilence memory of Newfoundland's slave ships and the people they carried. As Huyseen (1995) articulates, structures of power such as museums try to dictate and enforce official memory, but the terrain of memory is not and cannot be permanently fixed. Meanings exceed what is officially sanctioned, which opens the way for counter-memories to be asserted (Huyseen, 1995, p. 15). By publicly uncovering this memory and laying bare silenced crimes of the past, this investigation links the Black Atlantic across geographies and through time. As Honor Ford-Smith (2011) demonstrates in her work on performance, transnational memory, and violence in Jamaica and Toronto, the memory of collective pain, grief and mourning presented through art and performance can be mobilized to call for accountability, reflection, and public dialogue (p. 12).

I have briefly charted some of the points on this transatlantic journey and the artworks that have resulted from my research. The next chapter traces the motivations that led me to embark on this journey.

## INTRODUCTION | ARTICULATING A TRADITION OF BLACK INSURGENT MEMORY

Newfoundland<sup>3</sup> is a feast for the senses. As I walk along the steep and ragged rocks on its eastern shore, I'm bathed in a fine mist and am mesmerized by the rhythmic crashing of waves. A textured tapestry of stones, bones, and shells, the remains of living beings crunch under my feet. This haunting place continues to inspire artists, and I am excited about the artwork I am about to create.

It is well known and documented that Newfoundland was a key provider of cod that fed people who were enslaved in the Caribbean in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Heritage Newfoundland and Labrador, 2021). Cod was exchanged for goods such as rum, sugar, salt and molasses made by unfree labour. In Jamaica, where I was born, this history persists in everyday culture through the national dish of ackee and saltfish.<sup>4</sup> I am, however, in search of a less well-known story. In the eighteenth century, 42 slave ships were built along the eastern seaboard of what is now Canada for the transatlantic trade of Africans. Nineteen of these vessels were constructed in Newfoundland. I search not only for these ships but also for the 5,798 people who were entombed in their holds. Most of the vessels constructed in Newfoundland sailed from Africa to the Caribbean. The records, however, did not include the names of, or any other

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<sup>3</sup> I am specifically focusing on the colonial history of what was formerly known as the Dominion of Newfoundland rather than that of the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, which came into being as part of Canada's confederation in 1949.

<sup>4</sup> Saltfish is usually cod, sometimes from Newfoundland. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the cod industry in Newfoundland depended on markets in the Caribbean, where they sold a low grade of cod that was not saleable anywhere else.

information about, the people they transported. Since my own people's history has been lost through the rupture of a forced exodus from Africa to the Americas via this transatlantic trade in Black flesh, these ships may have carried my ancestors. Like NourbeSe Philips (2008), I seek to remember the dead: "I want the bones" (p. 201). What is at stake here is not only the past but also a present in which, as Saidiya Hartman (2007) reminds us, Black people are marked with "skewed life chances" and "premature death" (p. 6). As I mentioned in the Preface, when I began writing this dissertation, George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, was publicly lynched in Minneapolis. The world watched as a white cop squeezed the life out of him by kneeling on his neck for 9 minutes and 29 seconds. What calls me to reckon with this ongoing past is an acknowledgement, in Hartman's seminal words, that like Floyd and many others, "I, too, am the afterlife of slavery" (Hartman, 2007, p. 6). This traumatizing incident is a vivid illustration that Black lives continue to be targets of a brutalizing system, created in the past and persisting in the present.

In writing this chapter, I realized my journey to locate these Atlantic ships did not begin in Newfoundland; rather, it began across the sea in a most unlikely place. It was 2014 and I was in Senegal, a place I have found at once startlingly familiar and utterly alienating. My first visit was in 2004, when I spent a week speaking as part of a group of Canadian artists who were invited to share our media art practices at DakArt, otherwise known as the Dakar Biennale of Contemporary African Art. The sights, sounds and feelings I experienced in Senegal overwhelmed me then. A decade later, I found myself propelled to return.

At every turn on this visit to Senegal, I was reminded that I must venture into the past to gather what I need for the future.<sup>5</sup> As I slowly felt my way around the country, tall, elegant women who could be my sisters sashayed past me in their beautiful, brightly patterned dresses. The rounded sounds of Wolof, the most common of the local languages, sensuously curled around me. I recognized only a few words, such as the familiar greeting, *Na nga def*. I felt like a child, reading faces and bodies, paying close attention to context, and straining to understand what people around me were saying. My French, dusted off from high school, marked me as a foreigner. I was able to recognize French words on street signs, maps, newspapers and in the archive. In Senegal, higher education is only available in French. But even as this language continues to impose its colonizing grid, most Senegalese speak to each other and navigate the world in Wolof. On this visit, I was reminded of Senghor's (1964) efforts to blend and graft "the fecund elements" of the colonizers and the colonized into a new nation (p. 49). This process of hybridization, Senghor has argued, would produce "more succulent fruit" (p. 50). At the same time, what I witnessed is a constant resistance to persistent colonial domination.

My travels include several visits to Île de Gorée, a small island off the coast of Senegal whose rocky surface was formed from molten lava spewed from the bowels of the earth. Gorée, now a UNESCO site commemorating world heritage, was one of the earliest active slave ports of the transatlantic trade. Established by Portugal, it changed hands numerous times between

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<sup>5</sup> This is the principle of Sankofa from the Akan people of Ghana. It is often represented as a mythical bird whose body points forwards while its head looks backwards. Sometimes it carries an egg in its mouth.

European colonizers, ending with the French (UNESCO, 2000). The slave castle, where captives were held in bondage while awaiting their fate on slave ships, is now a museum.

On my first trip here in 2004, I was unaware of colonial Canada's role in the transatlantic trade of enslaved Africans. When I visited the "Door of No Return"<sup>6</sup> on Île de Gorée – the portal through which the vanquished were loaded into slave ships, never to see their homelands again – I was unprepared for the sudden rise of anger and irreconcilable loss that knotted inside me. The guide spoke to me in French, and I could not find the words to express my rage and anguish. The island was teeming with tourists. Vendors, who referred to me as "sister," beckoned me to buy their wares. The price of admission to the boat taking passengers on the 3.5 km journey to the castle depends on whether you are Senegalese, a continental African, or a tourist from overseas. There is no category for who and what I am; no recognition that I am a daughter of those forced through the Door of No Return.

Like my ancestors, I am a ghost here. I embody the return of a painful past that is difficult to reconcile, a past that is understood and experienced differently by continental Africans than by the descendants of those who exited through the door. When I read Saidiya Hartman's (2007)

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<sup>6</sup> Along the coast of West Africa, there are numerous fortresses that were built by European nations as cells in which enslaved African adults and children were imprisoned. The various portals through which the prisoners made their final exit from the continent is often referred to as the Door of No Return. On Senegal's Île de Gorée, the Door of No Return has become an important tourist destination and heritage site. As Ana Lucia Arujo (2010) notes, there is debate amongst historians about the site's authenticity, its centrality in the story of the trade and the numbers of Africans who were held there (p. 150). The Slave Voyages database, which produced the latest figures of the trade, reports 33,562 Africans made their exit through this portal. The numbers cited by its original curator, Boubacar Joseph N'Diaye, however, numbered in the millions (Arujo, 2010, p. 152).

poignant research in Ghana, I found she shed light on my experiences in Senegal. As a descendant of those ripped from their homelands and traded across the ocean from the hands of Africans to Europeans for paltry items, I embodied a tragic and complex past which, as Hartman affirms, “represented what most chose to avoid” (2007, p. 4).

On my return visit to Senegal, I no longer expected to be welcomed. My outrage about the past had been replaced by a desire to imagine the future, but I was constantly reminded of my ruptured ancestral histories. This was especially true when I travelled to Saint Louis. Known as *Ndar* in Wolof, this UNESCO World Heritage site is located five hours north of Dakar. I decided to spend a few weeks there enjoying its crumbling pastel beauty.

Shortly after my arrival in Saint Louis, I went on a walking tour. The first stop was a salmon-coloured eighteenth-century house which had, as the guide informed our group, belonged to a young French couple who were the first traders on the island. Many more traders followed. I learned that Saint Louis, the hub of France’s West African colonies and the capital of Senegal from 1872 to 1957, had played a significant role in the transatlantic trade of enslaved Africans. Unlike the castle on Gorée island, though, the sites connected to human trafficking are unmarked here. Instead, UNESCO (2000) repurposed these colonial architectures to tell the story of France’s conquest as an experiment that produced a hybrid society and gave birth to *a new humanism* – a supposedly radical shift that includes the formerly enslaved.



*Figure 7: House in Saint Louis, Senegal, where traders held enslaved people.*

*Photograph by Camille Turner.*

Newfoundland was not on my mind when I travelled to Saint Louis. I could not have imagined that it was connected to this place; yet, as I subsequently discovered, the *Swallow*, a 40-ton sloop constructed in Newfoundland in 1774 had, in fact, sailed to Saint Louis in 1775, where it spirited 119 people across the Atlantic. The 93 people who survived the journey were brought to Mississippi. As we walked through faded, abandoned rooms of the once opulent house, the guide continued the story of the young couple who had traded in gum arabic, palm oil and enslaved people. We entered a dank, dark cellar and were greeted by a sharp, acrid odour. The door along with two small windows barely above ground level were the only source of light. By the way, the guide informed us, we are standing in a holding cell where enslaved people had

been imprisoned before they were sold to slave ships. His voice trailed off and felt distant. The tour group disappeared, and my imagination kicked into high gear as I fell backwards in time.



*Figure 8: Room in house in Saint Louis, Senegal, where traders held enslaved people. Photograph by Camille Turner.*

The idea of time traveling was not new to me. The year prior to my trip, I had created a character I named Gloria Smith, a contemporary Black Canadian woman, the protagonist in my sonic walk piece entitled *The Resistance of Peggy Pompadour* (2013). Gloria was an inadvertent time traveler; that is, she could not control her travels – she was pulled to different space-times by forces beyond her control. Time travelling is also a device Octavia Butler deployed in novels such as *Kindred* (1979), in which protagonist Dana is called back into the past, where she finds herself grappling with the dilemma of whether to save a white ancestor to ensure her existence in the present. Like Dana, my time traveler Gloria encountered the history of enslavement firsthand

when she found herself in an eighteenth-century jail cell with Peggy Pompadour, a historical figure who had been the property of Peter Russell, the administrator of the town of York (now known as Toronto). Peggy had been incarcerated for resisting her bondage. In *The Resistance of Peggy Pompadour*, when Gloria returned to the present, she visited the archive in search of Peggy Pompadour. She soon realized that Peggy was not a fictitious character produced by her imagination but was the haunting of an ancestor making her presence known.

I, too, am haunted by my ancestors. As I stood in the holding cell in Saint Louis, I was overwhelmed by the unspeakable horror of what had transpired there. The stench of this history remains in numerous marked and unmarked cells along the coast of West Africa. According to the Transatlantic Slave Voyages database ([slavevoyages.org](http://slavevoyages.org)), which has recorded 36,000 voyages, an estimated 12.5 million who survived to pass through cells like these made it into the waiting holds of slave ships. Almost two million people died during the Middle Passage journey; their bodies, dumped overboard, have become a part of the ocean. The 10.7 million<sup>7</sup> who survived were forced to labour for generations to build the wealth of those who enslaved them. For centuries, it would be debated and debatable whether their lives and the lives of their descendants were human lives at all, and whether they mattered.

In the holding cell in Ndar, I realized that my ancestors may have stood in this very place, and that just as I was imagining them, they may have imagined me. I am here. I have returned. I am listening. I will tell your stories.

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<sup>7</sup> These numbers of enslaved people are estimates that vary widely amongst researchers. I have used numbers from the Slave Voyages Database here as they are amongst the latest estimates.

I thought about what would happen if Gloria Smith, the character I mentioned above, had unintentionally tumbled through time to land here. She would have noticed bodies huddled together on the dirt floor, their eyes drinking her in. She would have been aware that she appeared as an apparition to them, just as she had to Peggy, materializing from nowhere and dressed in twenty-first century clothing. Gloria's search for people of African descent who have preceded her is my search. Her desire to make meaning from this past and to imagine new liberatory futures is my desire. Fueled by this mission, I have followed the clues that appeared. At the time, I could not have imagined that this journey would lead me to a dissertation project following slave ships made on the shores of Newfoundland.

While in Saint Louis, I read Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* (2007), which felt like an urgent call to action. I was stirred by her deeply personal point of entry into a history that is often recounted in ways that fail to capture the magnitude of the crime, or its centrality to the production of the modern world and its continued catastrophic resonances. In this work, Hartman tramples history's disciplinary bounds by stepping into the story to become both teller and subject. Trying to tell the story of enslavement using the language of colonizers who committed the crime, as NourbeSe Philip (2008) explains, could easily result in performing "a second violence, this time to the memory of an already violent experience" (p. 197). Hartman attempts to avoid this inherent violence of telling the story solely through the archival records by narrating her personal, emotional, and embodied experiences of encountering this past in the archive and throughout her journey traversing the places where the stories took place. On her travels, she grapples with the realization that kinship ties to Africa are a product of the Diasporic imagination since those who were sold were outsiders and were not considered kin. By stepping into the frame, Hartman becomes visible within the story as the storyteller. Since her research is deeply

connected to her personal identity, she takes readers on a journey through the heartache of not being able to mend the rupture, let alone find pieces of her ancestors' past.

Hartman's articulation of the searing pain generated by this alienating experience resonated deeply. Alienation is familiar to me. I grew up in Canada, a country that never felt like a place in which I would or could ever feel a sense of belonging. I was born in Jamaica, and in my early years, my father travelled alone trying to make a life for his family. When my mother, sister and I finally left Jamaica to live with him in Canada, I was nine years old. I did not return to Jamaica for a visit until I was twenty-two. It was a shock to realize that this place I remembered as home had changed, and so had I. The resulting feeling of rupture and loss continues to drive my search for home and fuel my artistic work.

My earliest artworks point to the contradictions between the welcoming multicultural narrative of the Canadian state and my lived experiences in Canada as a Black person. I created the performance persona *Miss Canadiana* (2002), a Black beauty Queen representing Canada for example, in response to my experience of being followed by staring eyes as I walked through a mall in North Bay, Ontario. Similarly, the performance *Final Frontier* (2007), collaboratively created and performed with Karen Turner, Lee Turner, and Sobaz Benjamin, featured African Astronauts who returned to Earth to save the planet and emerged from an alienating visit to Lethbridge, Alberta.

Unlike Hartman, I did not deliberately set out to trace my route back to the source of my rootlessness. Instead, like my character, the previously mentioned Gloria Smith, I stumbled into this journey by accident. But perhaps it was not an accident after all. I have come to think of it as the haunting of ancestors who have been waiting for me to tell their story, a story in which I am implicated, and one through which I came into being. My journey to Senegal opened up the

possibility of thinking about the ways my migration to Canada mirrored an earlier forced migration. It placed in perspective the precarity of “belonging” for the Black diasporic subject whose citizenship is a constant negotiation.

At the end of my trip to Senegal, I returned to Île de Gorée. As I stared through the Door of No Return one more time, contemplating the rupture that severed my ancestors from this continent, I was assaulted by a barrage of feelings. I was aware that I was at the western-most point of West Africa, and I saw – or perhaps more accurately, felt – someone staring back at me through another door on the other side of the Atlantic, a door I had yet to find. The Door of No Return is a haunting place; at that moment, I was haunted not just by the past but also by a future I was not yet aware of that was calling to me from across the ocean. I could not have imagined how these two places, spanning the Atlantic, were connected, nor could I have imagined that I would be plunged into the journey I am relaying now – one in which I have become a vehicle for expressing this transatlantic tale.

Two years after my 2014 visit to Senegal, I was invited to Newfoundland to participate in an exhibition entitled *New Found Lands* (2016), curated by Pamela Edmonds in collaboration with Bushra Junaid, who is a Newfoundlander of Jamaican and Nigerian descent. For the *New Found Lands* exhibition, Edmonds and Junaid brought Black artists together to explore historic and contemporary connections between Newfoundland and the Caribbean. Junaid shared her research with me, which included archival materials such as a 1790 letter written by John Fowler, an agent for Bristol merchant James Rogers, owner of a slaving vessel named the *Sarah* that was constructed in Newfoundland. I did not expect to find a slave ship constructed in Newfoundland, and later, I was again surprised to find many more such ships in the archive. Finding these vessels opened my eyes to the ways that, as Gilroy (1993) explains, the history of

the transatlantic enslavement of Africans saturates the modern world. What happened hundreds of years ago has left traces that can be perceived only if one knows how and where to look.

On that fortuitous trip to Newfoundland, we visited Cape Spear, the eastern-most eastern point of North America. Walking on the windswept rocks, I was drawn to a door at the foot of Cape Spear's lighthouse – an abandoned military battery overlooking the ocean. As I peered through the door, I recognized that the person I had glimpsed through the door in Senegal, on the other side of the Atlantic, was me. This moment made me realize that Newfoundland was somehow connected to the journey I had begun in Senegal.

Finding this door and experiencing what I now understood to be a transnational version of myself, signaled that I was on the right trail, even if I had no idea where it would lead. Three years later, I was invited to participate in the 2019 Bonavista Biennale, an event that brought together artists to create artworks that were shown in various sites along the east coast of Newfoundland, and my journey continued. I spent three weeks prior to the biennale exploring the island's eastern shore, searching for the *Sarah*, the first Newfoundland-built slave ship that had crossed my path, and creating the artwork that was shown in the biennale. In my pursuit of the *Sarah*, I found eighteen more slaving vessels that had been constructed in eighteenth-century Newfoundland in the slave voyages database, adding to the weight of the silenced colonial violence that continues to haunt this place.

These slave ships are visible in archives, yet they are rarely mentioned. Natasha Henry (2010) noted slave ships built in colonial Canada's Atlantic coast in her book, *Emancipation Day: Celebrating Freedom in Canada*:

Very few Canadians are aware that at one time their nation's economy was firmly linked to African slavery through the building and sale of slave ships, the sale and

purchase of slaves to and from the Caribbean, and the exchange of timber, cod, and other food items from the Maritimes for West-Indian slave produced goods.

(p. 41)

Henry's statement is quoted by Yves Engler (2015) in his book *Canada in Africa: 300 Years of Aid and Exploitation* (p. 15). In the catalogue for *Reading the Image: Poetics of the Black Diaspora* (2006), an exhibition curated by Fatona, Rinaldo Walcott references the slave ships in his response to the ways that historian Harold Innis bypassed slavery in his writing on Canada's Maritime fisheries:

Because the Canadian nation begins with a diminished notion of slavery (and I am being generous here), thinkers of Innis' calibre can bypass the significance of Canada's role in ship building for slavery, the cod fisheries and salted cod in particular, and all the ways that Canada's modern borders are formed by New World transatlantic trade in African bodies. (Walcott, 2006, p. 17)

The spectre of these ships as part of Newfoundland's history brings to light the ways that this story underlies the modern world. It is everywhere. That Newfoundland's labour, geography and resources were involved in the trade in enslaved Africans is not surprising since Newfoundland was a part of the British empire which in the eighteenth century was at the height of its involvement in the trade. What is troubling, however, is the ways that this story is actively and currently silenced.

My experiences in Newfoundland and Senegal, as related here, have informed the artworks I created as part of this research. Through artmaking, I grapple with the origins of this history and its afterlives to render the present-day landscape a "truthful visual purveyor of past

and present social patterns” (McKittrick, 2006, p. 97). Excavating and unsilencing history and its connection to the land and seascape of Canada through artmaking is a labour of unmapping both the white settler landscape and what it conceals, with a view to making visible this invisible geography.

One strategy I have utilized in my artwork is to present the evidentiary trail, which consists of archival documents relating to the movements of the slave ships constructed in Newfoundland that first travelled to places in the UK and then to West Africa. The hegemony of the archival sources sutures these histories to “fact,” but since these facts have been silenced, their presence evokes a wide range of contradictory emotional responses from surprise to validation, rage, and mourning.

I have also paid attention to spectral traces that have presented themselves to me through unsettled feelings, not just to evoke empty ships but also to pay homage to ancestors whose names and identities I do not and cannot know because they have been lost in the rupture. I understood my feelings of being haunted as embodied evidence, and I have transformed them into gestures of care and into physical artifacts that could act as touchstones to anchor the past to the present. The ships and the people in them are now long gone, but I imagine the water, rocks and land that bore witness to these crimes of the past, and I sought to bring these elements into my artwork, visually, sonically, and physically.

Materializing Black memory and creating spaces of counter-memory through the exploration of place has been the focus of my artistic practice for over a decade. My previous work includes *Hush Harbour* (2012), a sonic walk that combines speculative fiction with history to remap and reimagine an area in downtown Toronto to explore the complexity of eighteenth and early nineteenth-century free and unfree Black life. In Windsor, *The Landscape of*

*Forgetting* (2014), a walk I collaboratively created with Alana Bartol, was the outcome of a residency at Windsor's François Bâby House, a heritage museum where we brought to light Black and Indigenous people who were enslaved within the Bâby household and in the town of Windsor but who were not mentioned in the museum's interpretive materials.

Building on this research, Camal Pirbhai and I collaborated on a monumental lenticular print (28' x16') entitled *House of Bâby* (2021), which portrays eighteen Black and Indigenous people who had been enslaved by the Bâby family. We used digital compositing and lenticular technology to layer and combine images to create what appears to be a moving image. The piece was photographed and installed in the Great Hall of Toronto's Union Station in September 2021, where it will be exhibited for a year. The ghostly effect of eighteen people emerging from and disappearing into the blur of a crowd as the viewer walks by the piece speaks to historical erasure.

My residency at Bâby House was followed by a residency at Bradley House Museum in Mississauga, where, along with Natasha Henry, I investigated the Bradley family's ownership of enslaved people in Georgia before they arrived in Canada with other Loyalists. The findings of this research were presented as part of my ongoing project, *Afronautic Research Lab* (2016), a futuristic archive inviting the public to examine documents providing evidence of suppressed local and transnational histories of the movement of Black bodies across the continent as they laboured to make the wealth that formed the basis for contemporary American empire.

All these artworks and written projects build on knowledge produced by researchers and artists who have worked to interrupt the silences in Canadian national histories and social positions and power relations these silences produce. Afua Cooper (2006) reveals the landscape of enslavement in colonial Canada through her detailed biography of Marie-Joseph Angélique,

an enslaved Black woman who allegedly burnt down Montreal in 1737. Charmaine Nelson (2017) writes about the seamless flow of enslaved labour, bodies and capital that was generated between Canadian and Caribbean ports, arguing that “the forced importation of Africans for labour was an integral part of Canada’s colonial origins and nation-building project by both British and French colonizers” (p. 3). Meanwhile, Harvey Amani Whitfield (2016) has traced 1,500 to 2,500 enslaved Black people who arrived with the loyalists and migrated into Canada’s Maritimes, an area where slavery had already existed.

My material, visual and sonic artworks are also created in conversation with a community of Black artists and curators doing the work of unsilencing colonial Canada’s role in the transatlantic trade of enslaved Africans. Many have focused on Quebec, drawing from Marcel Trudel’s (1990) pioneering research that illuminates the enslavement of Black and Indigenous people in French territories. For instance, historian/Hip Hop artist Aly Ndiaye, known by the moniker Webster, curated *Fugitifs* (2019), an exhibition at Musée des Beaux-Arts du Québec that provided artists with descriptions from eighteenth-century newspaper advertisements and commissioned them to illustrate thirteen people who were enslaved in Quebec. Marie-Joseph Angélique, an enslaved Black woman who was executed for her alleged role in setting a great fire Montreal in 1734, is the inspiration for Afua Cooper’s (1999) poem *Confessions of a Woman Who Burnt Down a Town*, Lorena Gale’s play *Angélique* (1998), Nadine Valcin’s film *Fire and Fury* (2008), Howard J. Davis’ *C’est Moi* (2017), and Ayana O’Shun’s *Les Mains Noires* (2010).

A focus on the Atlantic has begun to emerge in the work of Black artists engaging with enslavement in colonial Canada. Sylvia Hamilton’s installation *Mining Memory* (2015) presents documentary and material evidence of Black people, both free and unfree, whose stories were overwritten in Nova Scotia’s past. Nadine Valcin’s lyrical film *Whitewash* (2016) uses a

genealogical approach to recover the history of enslavement in Prince Edward Island. The unusual presence of last names of enslaved people on the island provided a trail that she could follow. Bushra Junaid's landmark curatorial project *What Carries Us: Newfoundland and Labrador in the Black Atlantic* (2020) explores Newfoundland and Labrador's entanglement in the Black Atlantic through archival documents, artworks, and material artifacts. When interviewed about her research, Junaid (2020) remarked on the astonishing depth and breadth of the interconnections between Newfoundland and the transatlantic history of enslavement. In addition to her curatorial work, Junaid has created artistic work such as a large-scale lightbox entitled *Sweet Childhood* (2017), which superimposes archival newspaper advertisements from Newfoundland's *St. John's Evening Telegram* featuring molasses, rum and sugar made by labourers on Caribbean plantations onto a 1903 stereogram image of children in a Caribbean sugarcane field.

These artists are collectively translating through performance practice, curatorial projects, and aesthetic sensibilities, colonial Canada's participation in the transatlantic trade of enslaved Africans which challenges, as Valcin (2020) explains on the *Breakthroughs Film Festival* website, the long-held and championed mythology of Black people as latecomers to Canada. Valcin argues,

It's time to lay to rest the myth that Black people are recent immigrants to this country. Slavery seems far away, but it is at the root of the systemic racism we experience today and the racial capitalism it grew out of. (Valcin, 2020, n.p.)

The work of Black artists engaging with enslavement takes place within a network of Black researchers addressing the systemic erasure of Blackness in Canada. Andrea Fatona, a key

contributor to expanding the recognition of Black artists, heads up the newly launched Centre for the Study of Black Canadian Diaspora at OCAD University, which will research, archive and provide access to decades of work by Black artists in Canada. Also recently inaugurated is the Institute for the Study of Canadian Slavery at NSCAD, which is headed by Charmaine Nelson and brings art and history into conversation. The critical work of Rinaldo Walcott (1997) and Katherine McKittrick (2006, 2013) has been foundational for informing my understanding of the mechanisms of erasure of the centuries-long history of Blackness in Canada.

Black artists confront and intervene in this erasure. Searching for our own artistic language, we assert experiences that remap and re-narrate Canada from our points of view. Andrea Davis (2022) describes the work of Black women writers and artists as “acts of courage and imagination” through which these creators articulate “their *being in* and view of the world” (p. 2). The work of Black artists in Canada advances a notion of Blackness that is different from the monolithic Blackness claimed by Black Americans and insists on multiplicities within blackness and the inclusion of our diverse experiences as part of the Black Atlantic. Gilroy (1993) articulates the ways that British and European nations have silenced the Black past, which consigns Black people to belonging elsewhere. Gilroy does not include examples of Canada’s connection to and disavowal of enslavement in his concept of the Black Atlantic. The work of Black Canadian artists helps to confront this omission and makes sense of Black life in a settler colonial state that is haunted by the silenced specter of anti-Blackness.

## CHAPTER 1 | CENTRAL CONCEPTS



*Figure 9: Rocks outside the Door of No Return, Gorée Island, Senegal. Photograph by Camille Tuner (2014).*

*“Water is the first thing in my memory. The sea sounded like a thousand secrets, all whispered at the same time” (Brand, 2001, p. 8).*

My journey to address the silences of Canada’s national narratives by confronting slave ships constructed in Newfoundland began when I faced a profound rupture at the Door of No Return. While standing there in this place that marks the origin of the African Diaspora, a place Brand (2001) describes as “real, imaginary and imagined,” I felt intense pain (p. 19). Brand’s engagement with the Door reveals that there is no return, and yet, there is no escape from the

Door, as “our inheritance in the Diaspora is to live in this inexplicable space” (2001, p. 20). I imagined my ancestors ripped from their homelands and banished through the Door, this Door, “the place of the fall” (Brand, 2001, p. 22). I contemplated the unimaginable violence through which their world was turned inside out, and the ongoing difficulty of piecing together their experiences of what happened. How do I make sense of the intensity of the feelings that have assaulted me and other descendants of those who made their exit through the Door? How do I and others understand this experience? How can I produce artworks engaging with this history? I grapple with the significance of commemorating this visceral memory and history and reckoning with the immensity of the crime and its legacies that Sharpe (2016) refers to as a “past that is not past” (p. 13).

Previous generations sought to heal this tragic rupture through various strategies such as stressing the continuity between Africa and the Diaspora and developing pan-African movements that were divided into various factions. Garvey (1923/1992), on one hand, advocated for a return to Africa and solidarity amongst Black people worldwide. Black people, Garvey explained, would always be outnumbered outside of Africa and surrounded by races that were anti-Black; therefore, Black people in North America needed to return to Africa and in unity make the African continent the economic and political power it needed to be to guarantee the racial dignity of Africans everywhere (Garvey, 1923/1992, p. 52). The embrace of pan-Africanism was also championed by Martiniquan sisters Paulette and Jeanne Nardal and other proponents of Negritude (Adi, 2019). On the other hand, some Black radicals like William Monroe Trotter who held ideas, according to Winston James (1998/2020), that were “predicated upon an unshakeable faith in America’s capacity to change and do the right thing by its black citizens” advocated for transforming the Americas (p. 191). W.E.B. DuBois (1903), for instance,

argued that Black people want to “be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face” (p. 3). DuBois coined the term “double consciousness” to capture the tenuous and troubling position Black people occupied in America which resulted in a sensation of looking at the Black self through the white gaze.

In this chapter, I consult a cross-disciplinary group of contemporary theorists and artists to inform the artistic choices I make as I create the artworks - *Afronautic Research Lab: Newfoundland, Nave and Sarah* - that grapple with the world that emerged from the transatlantic enslavement of Africans and the silences produced to obscure its origins. I explore key theoretical positions I draw on such as Afro-pessimism, Black Radical Traditions and theories of haunting. I also look at various approaches to the problem of archival silence. I incorporate these insights into my Afronautic research-creation process as a means of disrupting this silenced history. To articulate the process through which the work was formed, I tease out and present five nonlinear, overlapping stages of my artistic process: *discovery, immersion, incubation, epiphany* and *assembly*.

## AFRO-PESSIMISM

I begin with an emerging theory that is often referred to as “Afro-pessimism.” Its contemporary proponents, Frank Wilderson (2010) and Jared Sexton (2011), borrow from and expand Orlando Patterson’s (1982) ideas of “natal alienation” and “social death.” Specifically, Patterson argues that enslaved people were outsiders who did not belong to the body politic (1982, p. 44). Because they were not legible as part of the dominant society, their histories – and the histories of their descendants – have therefore not been regarded as meriting inclusion. Natal

alienation, as Patterson explains, is a form of social death. Turning his attention specifically to Black people, Patterson notes that Blackness, because of the transatlantic trade of enslaved Africans, has become a marker of enslavement, which normalized the idea of “the European on the deck of the ship and the Negro in the hold” (1982, p. 7). Building on Patterson’s idea of social death and expanding its scope to mean alienation from humanity, Wilderson and Sexton developed the concept of “Afro-pessimism,” a theory that understands Blackness as both outside of humanity and necessary for humanity’s coherence (Wilderson, 2020, p. 17).

Those of us whose ancestors were in the holds of ships can rarely substantiate our claims to kin beyond a few generations. Like our ancestors, we have been separated from our origins and prevented from gaining knowledge of our genealogies, histories, and memory. The heartbreaking despair of natal alienation that is central to Patterson’s ideas hit home for me when, citing Craton’s (1978) study of a former slave plantation in Jamaica, Worthy Park, Patterson explains that the descendants of people who were enslaved there had little to draw on to piece together their histories (Patterson, 1982, p. 6). My father’s family called Worthy Park home for generations until the mid 1940s, when descendants of the owners banished descendants of those they had enslaved from their homes on the estate. My father still remembers his community walking across pastures, balancing their possessions on their heads as they were forced to relocate. As a child, he was responsible for carrying the bedpost. This image of my ancestors evicted from their homes after producing generational wealth for a powerful family is seared into my memory. For me, social death and natal alienation are not abstract principles – they are the lived, embodied experiences of those of us who are descendants of people who were enslaved. These realities confront us as we do the work of unsilencing an ongoing ancestral catastrophe to which our own lives are tethered.

The rupture produced by this past is made personal and palpable by Hartman's *Lose Your Mother*, discussed in my Introduction. In this book, she positions her experiences as the embodiment of the afterlife of slavery (Hartman, 2007, p. 6). Hartman does not necessarily define herself as an Afro-pessimist, but her work makes an important contribution to this field. Hartman presents her research in Ghana from the viewpoint of an abandoned child who was unrecognized by her mother. She grapples with the rupture of enslavement as a divide that was produced between the continent and the Diaspora. The memory of suffering ancestors forced through the Door of No Return, she realizes, is the memory of the Diaspora and not a memory shared by continental Africans, whose elites, as she explains, had joined forces with Europeans to produce an expendable class of people that was exploited for the purpose of trade and exported for profit (Hartman, 2007, p. 29). Hartman ponders whether it is possible to heal this divide through sheer "desire and imagination" (2007, p. 29).

Although my experiences in Senegal in some ways paralleled Hartman's in Ghana, our positions are disparate. Unlike my tenuous sense of belonging to place as a Black person of Caribbean origin who lives in Canada, Hartman constructed herself as an African American. Africa was a place to which she had imagined she belonged, and she had arrived with an expectation that she would find some sort of welcome, if not a home. Her experience of being perceived as a stranger made her question the unbelonging of previous African Americans who had sought to relocate to Africa. She perceptively describes their exclusion and alienation in their imagined homeland to which they had "returned." I, on the other hand, did not visit Senegal with hopes and expectations of belonging. Until I stood at the Door of No Return, my orientation to a lost homeland had been to Jamaica, where I was born and from which I felt estranged. As a result, my experience of despair and rage at the Door of No Return took me by surprise. I shared

Hartman's sense of alienating loss when I realized that continental Africans understood the rupture of enslavement in vastly different ways than those in the Diaspora. The fact that, for some, their ancestors participated in and benefitted from the trade further exacerbates this relationship. In general, slave castles on the continent are understood as tourist attractions, nothing more. Like Hartman, I was perceived to be just a tourist – a stranger. Although there are and have been pan African solidarity movements that bridge the continent and Diaspora, Hartman acknowledges and mourns the personal consequences of a ruptured past and points to the ongoing present-day effects of the violence of this past on the Diaspora. As she exclaims,

If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and apolitical arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. (Hartman, 2007, p. 6)

Seen through an Afro-pessimist lens, the modern world is built upon and shaped by the history of enslavement, which continues to target and endanger Black lives. This is at the heart of what Afro-pessimism attempts to explain. Sharpe (2016) points out that “ongoing state-sanctioned legal and extralegal murders of Black people” are “normative and, for this so-called democracy, necessary; it is the ground we walk on” (p. 7). By naming and centering enslavement as the crime that produces this ongoing violence, the enormity of this past is revealed as foundational to the modern world. According to Wilderson (2010), “slaveness and Blackness” are conflated (p. 11). Blackness is located outside of the world yet is integral to the world's existence: “No Slave, No world” (Wilderson, 2010, p. 11). Patterson's “natal alienation” is

interpreted as what Sexton (2011) describes as an irreconcilable difference between Blackness and humanness: “Black life is not social life in the universe formed by codes of state and civil society, of citizen and subject, of nation and culture” (Sexton, 2011, p. 28). Black people are outside of the realm of humanity and, as Wilderson (2010) notes, are therefore outside of relationality (p. 18).

The world, as Afro-pessimists theorize it, is lethal for Black people, yet this theory does not make room for transformation or solidarity. Struggle is futile within this lens unless the idea is to destroy the world. For me, this is where Afro pessimism falls apart theoretically, politically, and culturally. Although Afro-pessimism offers my artistic projects a vocabulary of mourning and loss that I find useful for thinking about and expressing the magnitude of the original crime and its ongoing legacies, it does not offer a future, but rather, only an unending now-ness of suffering.

## THE BLACK RADICAL TRADITION

Afro-pessimism’s focus on the specificity of Black people as targets of violence has garnered critique for its lack of acknowledgement of the suffering of people of colour and Indigenous people and the long history of transnational solidarity between oppressed communities of Africa, Asia and the Americas who joined forces to strive towards freedom together. Olaloku-Teriba (2019) observes,

We have seen this pattern emerging for some time: on one hand, exceptionalisation of a thing referred to as ‘anti-blackness’; and on the other hand, the mobilisation of this charge against ‘non-black people of colour’ who attempt to draw comparison between black struggles and their own. (p. 97)

In contrast to Afro-pessimism, the Black Radical Tradition is premised on the idea that injustice is not natural or inevitable and the racialized world that has been made can be unmade through collective action and struggle which is crucial and transformative. Here, culture is understood as a key site of intervention through which oppression can be confronted (Lipsitz, 2017, p. 144).

Robin Kelley (2002) references a stirring speech by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. that speaks directly to pessimism. King acknowledges that Black people have been dreaming of freedom for a long time. He admits that the movements have failed and that we are still not free. He goes on to encourage us to “guard ourselves from bitterness” and strive for “vision to see in this generation’s ordeals the opportunity to transfigure both ourselves and American society” (Kelley, 2002, p. x). In contrast to an Afro-pessimist frame, King’s expansive dream of freedom points to the future. Even though I am grappling with the past in my work, I am not interested in staying in the past. Just as King had a dream that propelled him, I utilize my dreams of the future in my process of creation as a vantage point from which I engage the past.

There is much that can be learned from those who have dared to dream and to challenge systems that were designed to produce Black death. I am especially interested in learning from those who fought against enslavement.

Vincent Brown (2009) adds insights into the nature of struggle against enslavement through collective actions that took place at sea. He urges us to pay attention to often-overlooked incidents of resistance that occurred during the Middle Passage, which provides evidence of the inner lives of enslaved people. To make his argument, Brown evokes a 1786 death on the slave ship *Hudibras*, on which enslaved women on board came together to threaten mass resistance: they were mourning a much-loved and revered enslaved woman who had died and insisted on

witnessing the submergence of her body into the ocean (2009, p. 1231). Brown reads this funeral as “an act of accounting, of reckoning, and therefore one among the multitude of acts that made up the political history of Atlantic slavery” (2009, p. 1233). Numerous rebellions on the open seas emerged from the holds of ships during the Middle Passage journey, such as the successful rebellion aboard the Spanish slave ship *Amistad* in 1839. These and other small and large collective struggles from the hold show that systems which were meant to annul the lives of enslaved people and transform them into “dead matter,” as Hartman asserts, did not fully succeed (2007, p. 68). The actions of those in the hold speak of hope, which Ernest Bloch (1995) theorizes as an inner striving in alignment with a future that is coming into being rather than accepting what currently exists (p. 3). The courageous story of Africans aboard the *Amistad*, along with the funeral on the *Hudibras* and other insurgent acts – some of which are too subtle to record in the archive – reveals, as Brown explains, that people who were not considered people continued to envision life beyond the present and to struggle towards the future, even from the hold of the ship.

One of the most inspirational accounts of the dreams and struggles of enslaved people comes from the Haitian revolution. Anthony Bogues (2012) refers to C.L.R. James in his examination of the ways in which enslaved people produced knowledge that challenged the forces that enslaved them. Bogues asks us to consider how Haitians were able to rebel against the French and to seek sources of thought that were not included in the Western archive and that enabled them to practice freedom. By turning our attention to their resistance, and by orienting ourselves to their actions as historical actors, we can recognize the ways that they ruptured the seams of this catastrophic world (Bogues, 2012, p. 34). Haitian revolutionaries' practices of freedom were acts of creation that brought new thoughts, desires, and realities into being. This

idea provides inspiration for my turn towards spirituality as a key part of my artistic research. Since childhood I heard stories of dreamers and seers in my family, practitioners of various spiritual practices that made me uneasy because I did not understand them. Even though I did not have direct access to these practices, they infiltrated my consciousness. Paying attention to my inner guidance, I created artworks as an act of memory, drawing elements from various African and Caribbean spiritual traditions, reclaiming what was lost and utilizing clues that arose through dreams, imagination and embodied explorations. As Davis (2022) explains, “Diaspora identities are always inventions created out of the in-between spaces of memory, both complicating questions of authenticity and opening up critical spaces for re-creation” (p. 16).

## HAUNTING AND SILENCE

Examining these responses to the rupture of enslavement and imagining the dreams that propelled people in bondage into action raises the idea of my ethical responsibility to dreamers of the past and my desire to bring their dreams into the future. I want to turn now to such stories of the past that are yet unwritten, and which have propelled me on this journey, calling out to me to be heard.

Attending to my feeling of being haunted provides a way into this past. Positing that traumatic and unresolved losses in the past leave a ghostly residue in the present, Avery Gordon (2008) invites us to attend to strong and unsettled feelings that enable us to perceive what seems absent or invisible yet is very much palpable and present. As Gordon writes, “The ghost makes itself known to us through haunting and pulls us affectively into the structure of feeling of a reality we experience as a recognition” (2008, p. 63). Viviane Saleh-Hanna (2015) explains this feeling of being haunted as a particular way of knowing the world. Centering Black women, she

names her theory Black Feminist Hauntology (Saleh-Hanna, 2015, p. 24). She argues that the ghost that haunts us is colonialism. Applying Saleh-Hanna's ideas to the haunted spaces around the eastern coast of Newfoundland, ghosts, and hauntings point the way to violence and colonial delusions that underpin what can be seen (2015, p. 20).

Unsettled feelings and the presence of ghosts and hauntings associated with space can be further explained through Katherine McKittrick's (2006) ideas of space as palimpsestic and temporally fluid. These principles provide an understanding of what makes haunting possible, by presenting us with a way to imagine beyond the catastrophe of this past. McKittrick demonstrates these principles through her discussion of the 1991 discovery of African Burial Ground, a site that had been a part of an old plantation located in what is now downtown New York City. This rural geography of capture and violence of the past is now an urban site where anti-Blackness continues to repeat. Applying McKittrick's ideas to my inquiry, I imagine the slave ships as haunted geographies. The pain and grief of Black humanity suffocating in their holds is concealed through a white geographical lens; however, the meanings encoded in space, she tells us, are not stable. When Olaudah Equiano (1789/1967) articulates his personal experiences of the Middle Passage journey, he animates the hold of the ship, transforming it into a Black geography that unsilences Black humanity to produce new meanings of the ship.

The ships in Newfoundland are shrouded in opaque silence produced to obfuscate this past. According to Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995), silence is the product of an active process that is intrinsic to the production of history. Those who have the power to produce historical narratives also have the power to produce historical silence. Trouillot theorizes silence through his examination of the silences constructed to obscure the Haitian revolution, an event that he argues remains unthinkable within the ontology of the west because there are no conceptual or

methodological tools through which it can be made legible (1995, p. 82). White people could not imagine Black people organizing resistance; thus, when resistance occurred, it was dismissed as pathological, maintaining the ontological basis that affirms this impossibility (Trouillot, 1995, p. 83).

Even after the massive uprising of the Haitian revolution, the premise of Black inferiority has remained intact in ontologies of the west, and the revolution has largely been silenced or marginalized in accounts of world history. Trouillot theorizes two main mechanisms for this continued historical silence: the first, he names “formulas of erasure,” which means historians simply omit the event; the other, he refers to as “formulas of banalization,” where historians admit the event happened but trivialize the facts, rendering it meaningless and insignificant (Trouillot, 1995, p. 96). These strategies of silencing and the persistence of the ontology of Black inferiority are useful for understanding how colonial Canada’s involvement in the transatlantic trade of enslaved Africans remains unthinkable and silenced within Canada’s historiography.

Trouillot (1995) insists that silence permeates all the phases of historical production, including archives which, as he explains, actively organize sources to enable the possibility of making historical statements that “convey authority and set the rules for credibility” (p. 52). Archives are far from a neutral repository of facts and as Terry Cook (2011) tells us, archivists have the power to decide “who will have a continuing voice and who will be silenced” (p. 606). Unequal power over records and collections has far reaching consequences for me as a descendant trying to recover the stories of ancestors imprisoned in the bellies of slave ships.

Sharpe (2016) encourages those of us who work with the history of enslavement to originate “new modes and methods of research and teaching; new ways of entering and leaving the archives of slavery” (p. 13). I take up Sharpe’s challenge by originating what I have named

an Afronautic research-creation process, as noted above. I approach the archive as a place of violence structured by whiteness - that is, the archive is structured by the idea that the values, customs, and practices of people whose skin is white or lacking in melanin, form the standard regarded as normal. The archival records generated by the transatlantic trade of enslaved Africans are mired in what Redikker (2008) refers to as the “violence of abstraction,” that is, the humanity of Africans is obscured by numbers (p. 12). The accounting ledgers of enslavement concentrated on profits and losses, and the humanity of Africans was excluded. These ledgers, the main tools through which enslavement is studied, enabled European merchants to write up the labour of Africans as profits and write off their deaths as merely matters of their day-to-day business expenses. Enslaved Black people are entered into the archive framed as fungible merchandise that was bought, sold, packed, and transported as cargo. Spillers (1987) describes the scene in the hold as an undifferentiated mass of captive flesh stripped of subjectivity (p. 68). I want to destroy these documents. Surely, they cannot be relied upon as sources of “truth.” How can I use them to understand the lived Black experience? Yet, these types of documents written by predators for whom Black people were property to be tracked constitute the predominant way that captive Black bodies on slave ships are visible in the archive. These are the documents from which historical knowledge is produced and power is reproduced which means, as Hartman (2008) explains, “history pledges to be faithful to the limits of fact, evidence, and archive, even as those dead certainties are produced by terror” (p. 9).

Each time I enter the archive of enslavement, it is as if it is the first time. The violence is fresh. The wound is open. I am undone. It is the feeling I get when I read Dionne Brand’s (2018) *Blue Clerk*, Verso 55:

When I finally arrived at the door of no return, there was an official there, a guide who was a man in his ordinary life, or a dissembler. Exhausted violet, the clerk interjects. Yes, says the author. Violet snares. He arranged himself at the end of the story. Violet files. Violet chemistry. Violet unction. It was December, we had brought a bottle of rum; some ancient ritual we remembered from nowhere and no one. We stepped one behind the other as usual. The castle was huge, opulent. We went like pilgrims. You were pilgrims. We were pilgrims. This is the holiest we ever were. Our gods were in the holding cells, We awakened our gods, and we left them there, since we never needed gods again. We did not have wicked gods so they understood. They lay in their corners, on their disintegrated floor, they lay on their walls of skin dust. They stood when we entered, happy to see us. Our guide said, this was the prison cell for the men, this was the prison cell for the women. I wanted to strangle the guide. As if he were the original guide. It took all my will. Yet in the rooms the guide was irrelevant. The gods woke up and we felt pity for them, and affection, and love. They felt happy for us, we were still alive. Yes, we are still alive, we said. And had returned to thank them. You are still alive. They looked at us like violet; like violet teas they drank us. We said, here we are. They said, you are still alive. We said, yes, yes, we are still alive. How lemon, they said, how blue like fortune. We took the bottle of rum from our veins, we washed their faces, we sewed their thin skins. We were pilgrims, they were gods. They said with wonder and admiration, you are still alive, like hydrogen, like oxygen.

We all stood there for some infinite time. We did weep but that is nothing in comparison. (Brand, 2018, p. 223)

Here, Brand precisely captures the experience of returning to the original site of terror to confront the weight of the catastrophe, to mourn the loss and to face the responsibility for remembering and caring for the dead. She draws from the archive yet reaches well beyond its boundaries to breathe life into ghosts whose trauma persists in the present. Brand creates a space that encircles ancestors enslaved in the past and those of us living in “the wake” or, as Sharpe (2016) puts it, “within and after the legacies of slavery’s denial of Black humanity” (p. 14). *Verso 55* performs what Sharpe refers to as “wake work,” that is, grappling with the ongoing past and imagining and enacting ways to mourn, to care for, to remember “those lost in the Middle Passage, those who arrived reluctantly and those still arriving” (Sharpe, 2016, p. 20). Within Sharpe’s definition, the work I undertake in this project is wake work.

In her work on the Jewish holocaust, Shoshana Feldman (1992) reminds us that working with traumatic histories can produce trauma in the scholar. She describes how encounters with poetic representations of trauma, as in the poetry of Celan, can themselves lead to a slipping away of the notion of poetic mastery. She tells the story of a class on the Jewish holocaust that carried the students beyond predictable limits of learning, resulting in silence, restless talking across time and space. These charged responses broke the framework of the classroom and resulted in what she calls “an anxiety of fragmentation,” a loss of language, disconnection, and suspension (Feldman in Feldman & Laub, 1992, p. 49). The class returned to itself only having “passed through its own answerlessness” and through the teacher, ordering their response via her own narrative testimony about what had happened (Feldman in Feldman & Laub, 1992, p 28). Is

this what my journey is about to unleash in me? What if I cannot return from fragmentation? Will my literary and artistic interlocutors offer significant enough ordering of the narrative to allow me to return to myself? Feldman concludes that confronting such a violent crisis requires living through a performative crisis which is both intellectual and transformative of the psyche (Feldman in Feldman & Laub, 1992, pp. 54–55).

How do I care for myself in this archival encounter when entering the archive opens me to violence? Following Hartman (2008), I ask, “how does one revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence?” (p. 4).

M. NourbesSe Philip’s *Zong!* (2008), a project that remembers the massacre of the 150 people who were thrown overboard the slave ship *Zong*, provides powerful useful insights into how her research-creation resists the violent erasure of enslaved Black people in the hold/archive (Philip, 2008, p. 202). Contemplating how to tell the story, she realizes that this is a story that must not and cannot be told—an unspeakable story “that can only be told by not telling” (Philip, 2008, p. 191). Philip describes her growing understanding that archival documents purporting to tell the story of the *Zong* were “masquerading as order, logic, and rationality” (2008, p. 197). The humanity of Africans, she asserts, “could not be allowed into the record” (Philip, 2008, p. 199). This realization prompts her to argue that the story of the *Zong*, when told through archival methods, produces fiction. Instead of using the archive to try to make sense of what happened, she uses it poetically to reveal the people who are hidden within the data (Philip, 2008, p. 196). Instead of writing the story, she uses the strategy of disrupting the text that was meant to contain and obscure the people she tries to bear witness to: “Words arrange themselves...words are broken into...words break into sound” (Philip, 2008, p. 205).

Marisa Fuentes (2016) approaches the problem of epistemic violence by developing a method that combines archival research with mapping. Working from a map of Bridgetown, the place where an enslaved woman she found in the archive had lived, Fuentes follows the lead of her subject, imagining what and who her subject encounters as she navigates Bridgetown's streets. To try to understand the immense profundity of the past, she immerses herself in it as if she was the person she is following, exploring scenarios through place, time, and character. Through this method Fuentes proposes that "history can still be made, and we can gain an understanding of the past even as we consciously resist efforts to reproduce the lived inequalities of our subjects and the discourses that served to distort them" (2016, p. 8).

Toni Morrison's (1995) archival methods address gaps and silences in the writings of enslaved people themselves. Describing slave narratives as her literary inheritance, Morrison explains that she collaborates with their writers across time, expressing what they could not have written in the past (1995, p. 91). Since their goal was to put a stop to enslavement and since white people had the power to do that, their writing was addressed to white people, and was meant to appease them and appeal to their better angels. This resulted in silencing some facts and veiling others to express them in a more palatable way. Insisting that "facts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot," Morrison gives voice to what was unspeakable in the past to reveal the truth of the lived Black experience (1995, p. 93).

Hartman (2008) adds to these offerings a method she has named "critical fabulation" (p. 11). To critically fabulate is to strain "against the limits of the archive," utilizing imagination to fill in "what could have been" or "what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done" (Hartman, 2008, p. 11). Hartman applies this practice of speculation to the historical process, working from scant archival fragments and fleshing them out to tell stories of

people who were left out of human history. She argues that telling these stories can be a reparative act and perhaps, she adds, this may be the only gesture of repair that is forthcoming for those who were deemed disposable (Hartman, 2008, p. 3). By a “reparative act,” she means a gesture of remembrance and care. She makes it clear that she cannot undo what has been done or “provide closure where there is none”; rather, she tries to “create a space for mourning where it is prohibited” or “fabricate a witness to a death not much noticed” (Hartman, 2008, p. 8).

Hartman’s method of critical fabulation is generative, and I utilize it in my process. However, rather than thinking about fabulation as a tool for historical production as Hartman does, I adapt its use to suit my purpose as an artmaking tool. My goal as an artist is not to produce a historical narrative nor to explore the historical moment. Rather, I am interested in how the past has shaped the present. What I am producing through my research-creation process is a map of my encounter with this ongoing past.

## UNSILENCING THROUGH ART

I was reminded of the immense power of art to disrupt the silences of the archive and to catalyze imagination when I experienced John Akomfrah’s *Vertigo Sea* (2015), an immersive three-channel installation that provided inspiration for the artworks I have created as part of this dissertation. Akomfrah draws on and expands the concept of the Black Atlantic to reference an unbounded and uncontainable territory beyond nation states and across time. He uses the ship as both a material trace of atrocities of the past and a vehicle for memory and he presents the sea as an archive in which crimes that have been submerged are exposed. He draws on the tradition of montage – a series of images juxtaposed against each other – that he has utilized and made his own throughout his career.

*Vertigo Sea* opens with a contemporary incident: In May 2007, 27 young African migrants whose boat collapsed while crossing the Mediterranean clung for their lives to a fishing net in the Mediterranean sea for three days while Europeans on shore debated whether to rescue them. Akomfrah asks the troubling question, what could account for the abandonment of these young Black people, and why were they left in the ocean to endure this terror? Starting with these migrants, Akomfrah then widens the frame to reveal past historical moments of racial and environmental terror and injustice that have taken place at sea through time and space. He reveals slave ships, juxtaposed with other types of ships carrying imperiled people on forced and treacherous migrations that continue to repeat through time. The transatlantic trade of enslaved Africans is presented as one of numerous past and ongoing crimes. People are belched up from their watery graves and wash up onto shores. This, however, is not just a human story: majestic whales are hunted, their bloody carcasses are hauled up onto the decks of whaling ships. Polar bears swim through melting sea ice, bringing to the fore the ideology of extractivism at the root of such atrocities that have devastated the non-human world and this artwork makes apparent the disastrous effects of the present that were set in motion in the past.

To think about sonic and visual forms of I want to use in my artworks, I turn to Cheryl Finley (2018), who notes that the iconography of the slave ship is the symbol that is most frequently evoked by Black Atlantic artists to represent enslavement. Finley coined the term “mnemonic aesthetics” to describe the way artists use this icon to symbolically possess, reclaim, and reframe the past to make sense of the present (2018, p. 15). Amiri Baraka (1969) created an environmental performance, *Slave Ship: A Historical Pageant*. This immersive experience, with rituals, drumming, scent, darkness, and light, plunged the audience into the sensory world of a slave ship. Maria Magdalena Campos Pons (1992) brought the iconic shape of the slave ship icon

into her installation *The Seven Powers Come by the Sea*. In this meditation on migration, trauma, and exile of the Middle Passage, she combined the repeated shape of the ship with ritual objects to create an altar activated by her performing body (Finley, 2018, p. 217). The shape of the slave ship icon is a potent symbol I incorporate in my work *Nave*, deeply aware of the tradition into which I adjoin myself.

Framed by the Black Atlantic, my work forms a conversation with these artists, artworks, and ideas. To guide my research-creation process I draw on and expand these ideas to create what I have introduced in the preface as an Afronautic methodology which enables me to imagine beyond, write into, break apart, and allow disorder to emerge to reveal the archive's fictions. My Afronautic approach centers Blackness. To centre Blackness in the archive, I centre my own experiences, paying attention to my encounter with archival documents. Time does not operate sequentially. It is nonlinear. This shift in the understanding of time opens vast new possibilities that allow me to use the future as a stance from which to see the past and to shed light on the present. Through an Afronautic lens, I view silence as information that offers directional cues when attended to. Perhaps the most important Afronautic principle is imagination. I use my imagination to conjure a liberated future. Reaching back into the past from this future, I gain insights that sometimes arrive through dreams, in silence, and in clues that constantly present themselves when I am in a state of listening for them.

As stated above, I have identified five stages in my research-creation process. There are many more steps and stages that escape legibility as well as factors such as introspection, rest, trust, chance, openness to change, and serendipity that play vital roles in the creation of the artworks.

I have named the first stage of my process *discovery*.<sup>8</sup> During this stage, a problem/issue becomes apparent to me. In the case of this project, the problem/issue is my realization that slave ships were constructed in Newfoundland, people were carried from West Africa to the Caribbean in their holds and this silenced story underlies the apparently innocent landscape of Newfoundland. This growing awareness haunts me and propels my work. Guided by my feeling of being haunted, I search for clues that point to what and who has been silenced. One of the key methods I employ in this stage of my research is walking in the spaces where the stories took place. Chapters Two and Three demonstrate this stage of my process. As Springgay and Truman (2018) explain, the practice of walking “has a diverse and extensive history in the social sciences and humanities, underscoring its value for conducting research that is situated, relational, and material” (p. 14). While there is a tradition of scholarship on the flâneur, I would like to distinguish my use of walking from its French origins and from its use by Walter Benjamin. As a Black female subject, I utilize walking as embodied research, to engage with and confront a silenced history of abduction, forced labour and racial terror embedded in the land. Walking, as a tool here, is not a detached leisurely wandering that accompanies the observation of society as in the case of the flâneur. Instead, it is an urgent determined search for what has been covered up or suppressed in relation to the history of bodies like mine. It is a way of tracing and engaging with colonial histories that have been inscribed on the land.

While walking on the rocks along Newfoundland’s shore, for instance, I thought about the rocks at Senegal’s Door of No Return, and I realized that these ancient beings have been

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<sup>8</sup> I use this word, aware of its colonial connotations. Here, I want to denote my growing awareness of a problem or issue that pulls me into its orbit.

witnesses to this crime of the transatlantic enslavement of African people. As I explained in the Preface, rocks were used to ballast slave ships before they were dumped on the shores of West Africa and replaced with Black bodies. Rocks poetically reflected for me the complexity of the entanglements between geographies by standing in for bodies now missing, ships long gone, and devastating journeys that connect Newfoundland to the Black Atlantic.

The second stage of my research-creation process is *immersion*. This stage takes place in the archive, and I tell the story of my experiences of this archival encounter in Chapter Four. The knowledge that I produce here is not only from the archival documents themselves but also from my responses to these records. Immersion is painful and difficult emotional labour. Searching for people in the hold, brings me face to face with the violence through which they came to be counted as merchandise. In this stage, I work slowly, stopping often to grieve. This work demands rest and external support of my community. It is like walking through a field of landmines. Guided by my Afronautic approach, I intently listen for the haunting echoes of the past and open myself to the ghosts that, as Gordon (2008) insists, haunt spaces of unresolved trauma. Since time is nonlinear, space is shared not only with those who have passed but those yet to come. Envisioning a liberated future and anchoring myself to that future, as I have explained above, enables me to survive this journey into the painful past.

The third stage, which I have named *incubation*, takes place in my home studio and also outside in the world and away from my computer. In this stage, I bring my attention to bear on the insights I gained during the *discovery* and *immersion* phases. In order to facilitate *incubation*, I need to create the right conditions. For instance, at times, I need to pause my academic writing, as I explain in my journal entry below.

*It has been quite the revelation taking a week off to make art. It has been a joyous week. I feel free. I feel happy. I found myself excitedly thinking about the same things, the archive, trees, ships, rocks but in a state of listening and readiness to receive. I have received a deluge of feelings, visions, sounds coming to me from various places. I use my notebooks to focus my attention. I listened to talks online. I scribbled notes, read books, drew pictures and diagrams etc. I went for walks. I slept. I dreamt. I spoke to people. I paid attention. What draws these insights is my attentiveness to them. I am in a state of receiving. What surrounds me exerts a strong impression. I devour life in a different way. I am playing. It is effortless. I have become aware that there is an artwork that is emerging bit by bit. My job is to uncover it. I will do that by continuing to pay attention*

*(Journal, March 8, 2021)*

Experimentation and critical fabulation, as I explained above, entails imagining what may have happened beyond what can be known from the archive. Fragments of artworks begin to emerge. At times, the fragments are startlingly vivid and fully formed, waking me from my dreams to draw them or to write about them; at other times, they are vague and elusive, manifesting as fuzzy feelings that become clearer as I sit with and spend time with them. These fragments take many forms, some are sonic while others are performances, objects, films, animations, or virtual worlds. Like my experience of time traveling in the holding cell in Saint Louis, which I described in the opening chapter, myriad versions of myself traverse various times and spaces. I think of these fragments as rough sketches that deepen and add to/lead the journey as I engage with and materialize the ideas they present. As the ideas flow, I record them

in my journals through writing and drawing. At this point I invite all ideas. I do not edit. Some of these ideas will make it into my final projects, while others will be discarded or will continue to transform and will be realized in later iterations as I continue this work. I have recorded the process of experimentation in Chapter Five.

The fourth stage, *epiphany*, is a turning point in the artwork when there is a “sudden and great revelation or realization” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021). This is not so much a stage of artmaking but rather an “aha moment” that can arise during any stage of the research-creation process. Immersing myself in the labour of artmaking or taking a break from the conscious effort of making art and letting my subconscious take over leaves the door open for epiphanies to enter. Epiphanies enable the essence of the work to become apparent and can result in shifts in understanding that makes what I am doing intelligible to myself or can lead to the complete rethinking and transformation of the work. The epiphanies from which *Nave* emerged are relayed in Chapter Five.

The final stage is *assembly*, and this is where the artworks take form. I present the story of how *Nave* was assembled in Chapter Five.

I want to stress the role of community in my artistic production because for me, artmaking is not a solo endeavour. Canada-based Acholi poet Juliane Okot Bitek (Personal Communication, December 12, 2019) revealed to me that her research-creation process involved communicating with those who are unseen. She describes what she does as deep listening and writing what she hears. Similarly, Belinda Kazeem-Kaminski (Personal Communication, May 31, 2021), a Black Austrian artist-scholar, told me that she uses imagination in her research-creation process to bring together ancestors, not only kin but thinkers, activists, and supporters whose guidance she seeks. She meets them in a beautiful place in her mind and has

conversations with them. These conversations became a core part of her dissertation. Like Kazeem-Kaminski and Okot-Bitek, I draw on the Black feminist tradition of collaboration and community as the vital foundation of my work.

As I work, I feel my ancestors circling around me. They watch over me, and through my dreams, they whisper instructions. It is their story as much as it is mine. In the production stage, I assemble a team of cinematographers, a composer/sound engineer, editors, performers, voice artists and assistants. Each plays a vital role in bringing the work to life. Although these artworks bear my name, I could not have created them alone.

## CHAPTER 2 | KEELS: THE PLIGHT OF NEWFOUNDLAND'S OUTPORTS



*Figure 10: Keels, Newfoundland. Photograph by Camille Turner (2019).*

*What do I do with this silence? This innocent silence?*

*(Journal, May 19, 2020)*

It is August 3, 2019. My partner and I have arrived in St. John's, Newfoundland. We have a five-hour drive ahead of us to Duntara, a tiny coastal village on the Bonavista Peninsula. There, I will participate in a two-week residency during which I will create *Afronautic Research Lab: Newfoundland*, the first of three artworks comprising this dissertation that bring to light nineteen slave ships constructed in Newfoundland in the eighteenth century. I have come to search for these ships in Newfoundland's marine landscape.

We drive to Duntara following the directions sent by the organizer of the residency: "drive PAST the dock to T in the road and turn left. Go past the little bridge and then veer left into BOG LANE" (C. Beaudette, Personal Communication, 2019). Tiny wooden houses dot a small harbour. We find and settle into the little yellow cabin on Bog Lane that will be our home for the next two weeks, then we venture out to explore the surrounding area. The main road past Duntara cuts through the mountains and suddenly gives way to a dramatic view of the sea under a vast birdless sky. This is Keels, a small smattering of mostly white saltboxes, a simple wooden vernacular style of house with a sloped roof that developed in rocky areas along the eastern seaboard of both Canada and US. Keels' only store is our closest location for groceries. To step into the store is to step back in time to 1954. Its sparse shelves stock basics such as canned soup and potatoes. The store shares space with Maudie's Tea room, a cozy cafe where locals and visitors mingle. From the cafe's deck, the sunset is spectacular. It is my partner's first time in Newfoundland. What strikes him beyond its stunning visual beauty is its sonic absence. A few weeks ago, we were in Costa Rica, a tiny country of 5 million people that is home to 5% of the earth's biodiversity. With the cacophony of Costa Rica still ringing in his ears, he experiences Newfoundland as a haunted place eerily devoid of life. Until he mentioned the silence, I had not

noticed it. My hungry eyes had devoured the rich visual panorama before me without registering its silence. Now I want to know what has produced this silence and what this silence obscures.

As an artist, I work intuitively with serendipitous clues that suddenly appear and sometimes seem unrelated. I think of these clues as communication from another realm; breadcrumbs that define the trail I need to follow. I try to pay attention to these clues. Now, attuned to silence, my senses are open to receiving information beyond what I can see. My goal is to create artworks that unsilence, which is a process of creation that confronts silence by revealing the colonial mythologies it conceals.

As I continued my search for these ships and the people they carried, a different picture of the past emerged. In this chapter, I flesh out this picture by examining the way ghosts and hauntings inhabiting the present point to violence of the past. I look at Indigenous dispossession and genocide to think about the ways that white settler colonial states depend on and are produced through silencing violence. Next, I contemplate rocks as the material residue of this past and consider how rocks can be utilized in my artmaking as evidence of Newfoundland's entanglement in the transnational story of enslavement and colonization.

## GHOSTS

The ghostly silence permeating the present first called out to me in Keels. Through listening to silence, I became aware of ghosts and my feeling of being haunted. Newfoundland is thick with ghosts. Ghost ships. Ghost stories. Ghost towns. Avery Gordon (2008) argues that a ghostly residue of unsettled feelings lingers in the present when traumatic and unresolved

incidents of loss have taken place in the past that are denied and silenced (p. 64). I sit with the ghosts. I listen to their whispers for clues that the documents in the archive cannot tell me. Attending to ghosts alerts me to the violence lurking beneath what appears to be an innocent landscape. I borrow the term from Gloria Wekker (2016), who refers to innocence, specifically white innocence, to describe the delusional way that Dutch national identity is constructed as white while disavowing the accompanying white privilege and colonial violence. In the pristine scene in front of me, past violence is silenced and suppressed to produce a white space that is read as innocent. Silence is part and parcel of what Charles Mills (2008) refers to as “the racial contract,” a tacit agreement between white people that undergirds liberal democracy. According to this contract, white people recognize the personhood and property rights of other white people and silence the ways that white entitlement has been secured (Mills, 2008, p. 1394). Disregarding the rights and property of what Mills refers to as non-white sub-person does not breach the terms of the racial contract nor is their unequal treatment regarded as inconsistent with the norms of liberalism. As Mills (2008) explains, these norms were established without imagining the full personhood of non-whites (p. 1382). The racial contract remains intact through “suitable discursive shifts and conceptual framings” (p. 1381). These framings depend on silence to suppress the past and present violence of white oppression. In the terms of Gordon (2008), ghosts emerge from this silence and demand to be heard.

To begin to unravel colonial violence in Newfoundland and the ways it has been silenced I want to revisit an incident that occurred later in the trip when I spoke on a panel that opened the Bonavista Biennale. This incident brought silenced stories of colonization to the fore. The panel was promoted as a look at Newfoundland’s intersections in the globalized world and the speakers consisted of myself, Mi’kmaq artist Jordan Bennett and a white Newfoundlander who owned a

local cosmetic company. After the business owner explained that he harvests ingredients from the sea to make his products, I presented my work on the slave ships constructed in Newfoundland to a stunned audience consisting of locals as well as visitors from beyond the province, none of whom had previously encountered this information. The predominant story of Blackness circulating in Newfoundland is the story of Lanier Phillip, a Black sailor from America's Deep South who was shipwrecked off Newfoundland's coast during World War Two. Rescued and cared for by kind locals, Phillip's praise of Newfoundlanders is widely disseminated in the province. During my research, I often heard this story proudly repeated by locals. As Afua Cooper remarks in her interview in *The Independent*, "It's an uplifting story, but does its widespread promotion to the exclusion of other narratives risk suppressing other very real experiences of racism?" (Rollman, 2016, para. 15). The story of Phillip, which upholds white innocence, silences the story of the slave ships constructed on these shores.

When Bennett spoke, he introduced himself as Indigenous to Ktaqmkuk, the Mi'kmaq name for the territory known as Newfoundland. He then began his talk with the stinging remark that the only story of Newfoundland's Indigenous presence that has been incorporated into the dominant historiography is the story of Shanawdithit,<sup>9</sup> a Beothuk woman who along with her mother and sister were found sick and starving by Europeans in 1823. Her mother and sister died of tuberculosis shortly afterwards. Six years later, the same disease, brought by Europeans,

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<sup>9</sup> Heritage Newfoundland tells the story of a Beothuk woman named Doodebewshet, and her two daughters, one of whom was Shanawdithit who emerged from the forest suffering from tuberculosis and starving. The trio were rescued by fur trappers in 1823. Shanawdithit's mother and sister died soon afterwards, and her death followed in 1829.

would take her life. Shanawdithit is celebrated in Newfoundland's historiography as the last of her people. Bennett explained that the colonizer's version of the past, while registering the extinction of the Beothuk, does not acknowledge Mi'kmaq people as Indigenous to Newfoundland, but rather, as originating elsewhere. He then presented what has become known as the mercenary myth, a particularly insidious story that assuages settler guilt about the demise of the Beothuk by pointing to the Mi'kmaq as the means through which the nation was exterminated. As Bonita Lawrence (2009) explains, the circulation of these colonial mythologies paints the Beothuk as a noble race, safely dead and out of the way and the Mi'kmaq as a villainous group who are not Indigenous to the area. This enables white Newfoundlanders to claim the land as rightfully theirs (Lawrence, 2009, p. 47). Bennett, asserting his identity as a member of a nation Indigenous to this territory, undoes this white settler claim to belonging to the land, revealing the colonial myths that underlie Newfoundland's white and innocent landscape.

This resonates with Vivian Saleh-Hanna's (2015) idea discussed in Chapter One, that hauntings occur when colonial delusions that structure modernity become perceptible (p. 20). If I put Saleh-Hanna and Mills in conversation, the racial contract can be seen to encompass delusions that are normally kept hidden from the contractors but are now unveiled. In my work, I struggle to make this tension palpable. A strange and haunted feeling permeates the room, rupturing the silence to expose the violent past. This recalls Trouillot's (1995) theories that silence is actively produced by those with power to block the histories of non-dominant groups. I imagine silence like the thick fog resting on Newfoundland like a blanket, blocking and veiling colonial violence underneath. As Bennett spoke, the fog began to lift and the ugliness simmering underneath came into view.

Bennett's assessment of Newfoundland's historiography is corroborated by Ingeborg Marshall's (1996) *A History and Ethnography of the Beothuk*, which to date provides the most comprehensive academic research on the Beothuk. Marshall affirms that it is the story of the extinction of the Beothuk that holds the most fascination for the public (1996, p. 4). The Beothuk, Marshall informs us, were fishers/hunters/ gatherers who moved seasonally between the coast and inland, harvesting from the sea in the summer and living inland in the winter (1996, p. 3).

As Sean T. Cadigan (2009) notes, since the early sixteenth century, European fishermen had been arriving each spring to catch, dry, and salt the copious cod that drew them by the thousands to the island. In the fall, ships, some as large as 200 tons, and most between 20 and 100 tons, would leave for the Caribbean or Mediterranean to sell their catch (Cadigan, 2009, p. 49; Evans, 2013, p. 19). Cadigan conceptualizes the settler's encroachment on Beothuk land as land that to Europeans seemed to be empty (2009, p. 45). This idea of declaring land as *terra nullius*, or empty land, is often evoked by Europeans to legitimize seizing and possessing land as their private property. When Beothuk harvested metals such as nails from structures Europeans left behind each fall when they left to bring their fish to market, they were villainized as thieves violating what Europeans considered their private property. As Cadigan put it, this was a "misunderstanding," a clash of cultures (2009, p. 45). This encounter, however, resulted in genocide.

By the seventeenth century, merchants from England's west country, who controlled most of the Newfoundland cod trade, began making permanent claims to land along the coast. As Marshall (1996) reports,

British colonial policies promoted the appropriation of native lands without assuming any responsibility for the safety and well-being of the rightful owners. Intermittently these policies had been supported by the Church, which argued that by virtue of being non-Christians the native population was inferior; some proponents of the Catholic church had even claimed that by being heathen, native people had forfeited their rights. (p. 107)

Merchants began the practice of leaving crews behind on the land throughout the winter to guard the infrastructure they had built and to prepare for the coming season (Cadigan, 2009, p. 50). The Beothuk were subjected to the hostility, violence and diseases of these invaders and found themselves increasingly cut off from access to the sea, which had been an important source of their livelihood. Choosing to avoid confrontation with the foreigners, they retreated into the woods, adapting their practices to enable their survival. By the eighteenth-century, however, Europeans had penetrated the forests.

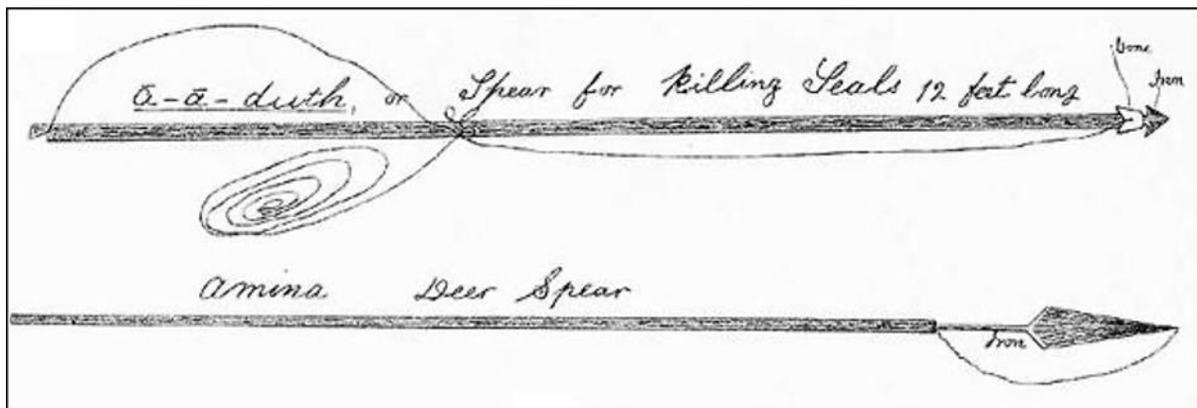


Figure 11: Drawing by Shanawdithit of spears used as hunting weapons. European encampments were a source of metals. Library and Archives Canada (C-028544), Ottawa, Ontario.

The violent encroachment by Europeans on the sovereignty and territorial rights of Indigenous people and acts of genocide against them did not begin or end here. Kevin Major and Maarten Van Dijk (2001) report that five hundred years prior, the Norse, who were recorded as the Earliest European explorers in Newfoundland, killed the people they encountered. They also note that in 1500, Portuguese explorer Corte Real abducted Indigenous people from Newfoundland and Labrador and forcefully brought them to Europe, where “the Beothuk, the Innu, and the Inuit became oddities, subhuman, something curious to be captured and displayed” (Major & Van Dijk, 2001, p. 30). By 1829, the Beothuk nation was declared extinct. But this declaration has been challenged by more recent scholars such as Fiona Polack (2018), who writes,

In 1829 the last known Beothuk, Shawnadithit, passed away. But was that really the end of her people? Oral histories from the nineteenth century and contemporary Indigenous stories speak of Beothuk continuity, the population having been absorbed by neighbouring Mi’kmaq and Innu. There is no real reason to believe that this is not the case. (p. 439)

Despite her acknowledgement of the oral traditions that point to close relationships between Beothuk and Mi’kmaq communities, Marshall (1996) references the archaeological record to insist that the Mi’kmaq were not Indigenous to Newfoundland but arrived here from Nova Scotia and Cape Breton centuries after the European “discovery” of the island in 1497 (p. 3). As an artist, Bennett (2016) utilizes artmaking as a tool to challenge this assertion. For the 2019 Bonavista Biennale, for instance, Bennett created a monumental mural entitled *Pi’tawe’k*

(Figure 12). Painted in vibrant colours in acrylic paint and overlaid with reflective prints, the artwork visualizes symbols from the shared iconography of Mi'kmaq and Beothuk cultures.



*Figure 12: Pi'tawe'k by Jordan Bennett, Bonavista Biennale (2019).*

*Photograph by Brian Ricks for Bonavista Biennale. Used with permission from artist.*

The starting point for his work, Bennet explains, was his exploration of the numerous drawings produced by Shanawdithit, who documented her life and the world of her people just before her untimely death in 1829 from tuberculosis. Bennett (2016), who greatly admires Shanawdithit's artistic abilities, found visual overlaps and commonalities between the Beothuk symbols she recorded and Mi'kmaq symbology. This shared visual language affirms connections between these two communities as evidenced by Mi'kmaq oral records (Bennett, 2016, p. 21). By creating artworks that express the visual continuity of Mi'kmaq and Beothuk worlds Bennett contests colonial mythologies that have been utilized to dispossess the Mi'kmaq nation of Ktaqamkuk (Bennett, 2016, p. 10). Bennett acknowledges his work as contributing to a

collective undertaking by Mi'kmaq artists such as Meagan Musseau and Jerry Evans, who similarly explore the overlaps between Mi'kmaq and Beothuk visual culture (Bennett, 2016, p. 29).

## RESIDUE

*Who is mournable? The Beothuk people? Enslaved Africans? The land? The fish? The trees? This work is an elegy. To create, I attune myself to the haunting and attend to what must be done.*

*(Journal, December 22, 2020)*

The unsettling moment on the panel, which I have just explored here, disturbed the silence, and revealed the violence that underlies the pristine landscape. This moment of rupture offered an opportunity for Newfoundlanders of European descent to acknowledge their colonial delusions and revise their founding mythologies. Instead, the panel ended, and the past was forced back into the opacity of silence.

The residue of violence continues to fester beneath the pristine landscape. Recently, across Canada, thousands of unmarked graves surfaced of Indigenous children who were abducted and forced to attend residential schools. The silencing of this past has been ruptured and garnering media and public attention beyond the Indigenous communities that have always felt the enormity of this loss and have always grieved for them.

I continue my travels, contemplating the silence enveloping Keels and the violence that this silence obscures. Maarten Van Dijk (2001) informs us that Keels was already an established

fishing station when James Cook arrived in Newfoundland to conduct a survey from 1773 to 1776 that “proved invaluable to the spread of the (sic) population” (p. 128).

By the nineteenth century, the population of Keels had swelled to 450, and hundreds of similar outport communities had sprung up around the island. In the early years of the fishery, the wealth of nature had seemed inexhaustible and the fish so numerous that they would practically leap into fishing nets. After centuries of plunder, by the twentieth century, these sites of colonial extraction were depleted, and settler communities began leaving in droves. As the national census reports, there were only 51 people living in Keels as of 2016. According to Major (2002), “except for the vacation days of summer, whole outports have turned ghostly quiet” (p. 448). The haunting continues.

*There is only now.*

*Only this fragile moment,*

*This door that opens into the infinite.*

*Let us pour out our grief as the dead march in coffles,*

*End to end, their dreams deferred*

*(Journal, May 29, 2020)*

## ROCKS

The feeling of being haunted is not only felt in the body, but it is also written on the rocks which are defining features of Newfoundland’s landscape. One of Keels’ most popular attractions is The Devil’s Footprints, mysterious round gouges in the area’s steep rocky cliffs that are attributed by folklore to the devil dancing across them. These otherworldly indentations

are a timeless reminder that rocks are witnesses to worlds beyond what can be seen. Rocks have made their way into my thinking about the artworks I will make to bring to light the slave ships constructed here and the people they carried. As I recall my childhood, I realize that rocks had found their way into my thoughts and experiences long ago.

In my earliest memory I am in Hatfield, a small community in Manchester, Jamaica. It is raining and I am playing outside my granny's house. I am slipping and sliding down a big rock and I am wondering how I will ever get out of the rain to the safety of the house. I left Jamaica as a child. When I returned as an adult, I was astonished to realize that these rocks of my memory, that had felt like mountains as a child, are barely the height of my knee. The fields in Hatfield are full of rocks and the houses are fenced by walls made from rocks stacked carefully on top of one another without mortar. This mortarless method of building is called dry stone or dry stack construction. Similar stone walls greeted me when I visited Britain's countryside in 2018. Dry stack architectures can be seen around the world, in structures ranging from European castles to Egyptian pyramids. The form reached its zenith in Great Zimbabwe, a medieval city in Southern Africa surrounded by massive curvilinear dry stacked walls that were seven metres high (UNESCO, n.d.). European colonizers, for centuries, tried to disprove the site's African origins, since its precision and sophistication were at odds with their prevailing ideology of Black inferiority. Despite their probing and looting, Great Zimbabwe endures as a testament to its builders, the ancestors of the Shona people who live in the shadow of this site.

*Saltwater memory.*

*The door.*

*This one, entangled in the one across the sea.*

*I see myself infinitely refracted.*

*My numberless selves splitting, splintering*

*Sliding on slippery rocks*

*Losing my footing in the treacherous familiarity.*

*(Journal, October 20, 2020)*

The terrain of Newfoundland contains some of the most ancient rocks on Earth and connects the island to the other side of the Atlantic through a story of epic proportions. These rocks are a part of the Appalachian Mountain system (Cadigan, 2009, p. 6). They were formed over 400 million years ago during the collision of two gigantic landmasses that became the continents of America and Africa. Now eroded over time, these formations which once rose to majestic heights like the Alps, travel over 4,000 kilometers along the eastern seaboard to connect Newfoundland and Labrador to America's Deep South (Bell, Liverman & Sheppard, 1999). Rocks are primordial beings, dynamic entities that envelop all they encounter during their long, slow transition cycles. They contain stories dating back to a time long before humans walked the earth and stretching towards the infinite. The rocks here have witnessed the violence of exploitation, extraction and extinction that underlies the landscape. This story represents a brief blip in rock time, yet its effects are devastating and ongoing.

*Rocks are an anchor to hold and preserve time. They are a material trace of memory that stands in for those who are missing. Rocks accompany me on my journey. They witness my story. I want to follow the rocks to get as close as I can to the holds of slave ships to pay homage to my ancestors.*

*(Journal, August 4, 2020)*

To translate the story of slave ships that have long dissolved into the sea into works of art, I called upon the rocks who witnessed these crimes to divulge the stories they hold. As mentioned previously, slave ships were displacement vessels that were constructed to carry a load. In the absence of the load, ships had to be weighted down and balanced. This was accomplished by using ballast which, as Heli Jutila (1996) explains, can be a mixture of rocks, soil, seeds, and flora (p. 166). In her project *Seeds for Change*, Brazilian artist Maria Teresa Alves (1999–ongoing) collected and germinated seeds that she found in the ballast that had been transported by ships traveling between remote shores. Alves, whose project has taken place in various parts of the Atlantic world, explains that seeds, which lay dormant in ballast for decades and even centuries, can be brought to life, given the right conditions. In New York City, for example, over 400 species of non-Indigenous plants can be identified in the hundreds of thousands of pounds of ballast that has been deposited there over the centuries. Bougainvillea, native to Brazil, can be found growing on Île Gorée, Senegal, where millions of captured Africans were forced to exit through the door of No Return (Michel Rein Gallery, 2018).

As an archive, ballast speaks to the ways that space is produced through the violent entanglement of distant geographies. Slaving vessels constructed in Newfoundland were ballasted with rocks from Newfoundland. The ships carrying these rocks sailed to London, Liverpool, Bristol, or Charleston where they were registered. They then set out on journeys that took them to West Africa then on to the Caribbean. Upon their arrival in Africa, the ballast was dumped from the ships onto the shore to make space for the Black bodies that were herded into their suffocating cargo holds. Rocks from Newfoundland have been stranded across the Atlantic

ever since. Thinking about the rocks in front of me and their relationship to rocks that travelled on ships to the shores of West Africa reframes Newfoundland as part of the world of transatlantic enslavement, bringing into view its entanglement with what is referred to in a catalogue on her work as “spaces of coloniality” and “landscapes of violence” (Alves, 2009, p. 11).

Thinking with and through rocks, I made the decision to utilize a rock in my artistic work as the material trace of slavery’s ghostly ruins and Newfoundland’s deep entanglement in colonization and racial slavery. Rocks from these shores witnessed these crimes of the past. The rock becomes a sentinel standing at the door of perception, through which I invite participants to become conscious of these unthinkable ships and to acknowledge these unimaginable lives. For example, the rock accompanies the character from the future that appears in both my artworks *Afronautic Research Lab: Newfoundland* and *Nave*. The rock and the figure who carries it exist in what Calvin Warren (2016) refers to as “Black time,” a temporality without a beginning or end that defies linear concepts of time (p. 56). Following Warren, instead of surrendering the story of the transatlantic enslavement of Africans to the past or distorting it as a singular and finite event, I use the rock and its travels to express the ubiquity of this story and the ways that it structures the Western world. Through its crossings of the Atlantic to Africa via Britain on slave ships constructed in Newfoundland, the rock stands in for those who were stolen and have returned to haunt the present. Traveling on ships that were part of the fleet of vehicles through which the Black Atlantic was formed, the rock evokes Newfoundland’s material and spiritual entanglement in the Black Atlantic.

I leave Keels guided by ghosts that brought me into awareness of Newfoundland’s silenced past. I have glimpsed the workings of colonization, genocide, Indigenous dispossession and wanton extraction and the silences produced to obscure this past. As Trouillot (1995)

explains, “what happened leaves traces, some of which are quite concrete” (p. 29). I take this idea into the artwork I am creating in which a rock becomes a trace of the material and economic entanglement of geologies and geographies through time. Alert for what the silence is trying to tell me, I will next travel to Bonavista, to visit the site where my artwork will be presented. There, I will continue my search for the ships.

### CHAPTER 3 | BONAVIDA: SILENCE DESCENDS



*Figure 13: Fishing Lake at Mockbeggar, Bonavista, N.L. Source: Memorial University of Newfoundland. Maritime History Archive (PF-318.135).*

This chapter is a meditation on the underlying violence that is obscured by silence in Newfoundland. I gather clues about what is concealed by the silence, and I use these clues to create *Afronautic Research Lab: Newfoundland*, the first of the three artworks that comprise this dissertation. This piece was shown in the Bonavista Biennale. I describe it here along with audience responses to the work.

I am driving with a curator from the Bonavista Biennale to the site where I will install my work. The highway rises and falls, hugging the rocky coast as it twists its way through small communities and descends into the town of Bonavista. We stop on the harbour to visit Ryan's Premises, a series of white wooden clapboard houses backing onto the sea. The site was once the headquarters of wealthy fish merchant James Ryan whose enterprises, established in 1869, included an export business which sold cod to European and Caribbean markets. This building, along with other parts of Ryan's former operation, is now a National Historic site presenting a curated glimpse into Newfoundland's colonial past (Parks Canada, 2019).

A large photograph in a display has captured my attention. As I stare transfixed, I realize that this is an image of silence. It is not, however, a silent image because as Tina Campt (2017) insists, images are capable of transmitting information if we attune ourselves to their sonic and haptic channels, paying attention to what is felt in the body rather than solely relying on what is seen (Loc. 344). This theory emerged from Campt's personal experience of listening to her father hum when her mother died and realizing that the sound and vibration of her father's hum communicated a feeling of loss beyond what could be articulated in words (Loc. 86). It was her recognition of sound's capacity to communicate the "sublimely expressive unsayability" of grief that led her to propose this methodology of listening (Loc. 91). The image that has captured me is a mouthpiece for the silence that has attempted to speak to me ever since I embarked on a

search for the slave ships constructed here in Newfoundland. In the picture, Bonavista Bay is covered with flakes which are large wooden platforms that were traditionally used for spreading fish out to dry. Where one flake ends, another begins. Placed end to end, the flakes snake around the shoreline as far as the eye can see. Like much of the built environment including the ships, these flakes are constructed from wood. The flakes are so close together that one can literally walk on top of them around the bay. The vast quantities of wood on what is now a barren shore visually overwhelms me. As I stand in front of the photograph, the silence that was always present screams to me, demanding that I take note. I am filled with wonder. Where did all the trees to make this wooden world come from? I must have wondered out loud because a museum guide is suddenly by my side informing me that trees had once lined what is now a treeless shore.

The extraction of fish accompanied the extraction of trees. As the government of Newfoundland and Labrador explains on their website,

For the first 400 years after the *discovery*<sup>10</sup> of Newfoundland the forest was used almost exclusively as a support for the fishery. In addition to the construction of premises, wood was essential for fuel, boat building, and the construction of stages and flakes used for splitting, salting and drying codfish. (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, n.d.)

The coastline of Bonavista appears to be natural and untampered with, but this photograph points to the ecological plunder that produced it. Deforestation, a problem that

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<sup>10</sup> Italics are mine.

plagued European empires for centuries, was exported to its colonies including Newfoundland. European nations had expanded their wealth, power, and territories by crossing oceans to steal land and seize people, forcing them to work on stolen land. This conquest of lands and people across the ocean depended on ships and shipbuilding. As Europeans built more ships however, their homelands became increasingly deforested. As Kenneth Pomeranz (1998) observes, “shortages increased, especially of tall, strong, and straight trees suitable for masts” (p. 118). Britain, which was one of the last empires to enter the slave trade, had long been a source of trees for other European nations. In the eighteenth-century Henry VIII, whose predecessor Henry VII (his father) had only built four ships during his reign, sought to rapidly expand the British empire by developing its shipbuilding capacity (Perlin, 2005, p. 285). Henry VIII brought Venetian shipwrights to England, as Evans (2013) explains,

to teach the English how to build the very staunchest vessels; wages were established for shipwrights, and a bounty was paid for shipbuilding. So, in the process, the English became experts at building ships for all purposes, including the Newfoundland fishery. (p. 23)

Britain began a flurry of shipbuilding and forging weapons to protect the goods carried by its ships. Both endeavours required vast quantities of trees. An average eighteenth-century war ship, for example, required about 2000 trees (Royal Museums Greenwich, 2021). Soon Britain caught up with and surpassed other European nations in terms of its production of ships and weapons which contributed to their rapid deforestation. To continue to satisfy their insatiable hunger for trees Britain turned to its empire and the Americas became an important source, as Pomeranz (1998) explains. So, it is not surprising that Newfoundland, with its ample stands of

pine and other trees close to the water and numerous deep bays where ships could be built, became an attractive site for shipbuilding. As Evans (2013) notes, “the English realized the value of local timber in the expansion of their fleets and the growth of their economy” (p. 31). In Newfoundland, forestry became an economic driver, second only to the fishery. However, in this vulnerable subarctic zone, trees grow slowly. Within two generations of clear-cutting trees, the coastline of Bonavista became barren (Collins, 2008, p. 41). Once the trees were devoured, species of birds and other animals that depended on them were no more. A deep and haunting silence followed. It is this silence that I follow on my search for the slave ships constructed on these shores. It is this silence that led me to an awareness of trees.

#### YE MATHEW AND OTHER SHIPS

The forests that once extended to the water’s edge at Bonavista’s harbour were here in 1497 to greet the Venetian explorer Giovanni Caboto, also known as John Cabot, whose expedition, commissioned by the British crown, was intended, like that of his compatriot Columbus, to find a route to the wealth of the east. The northerly path he chose collided with what became known as North America. Since few records of his journey exist, the exact location of his landing is unknown, but speculations range from Cape Breton to various harbours in Newfoundland (Major, 2001, p. 36). This uncertainty did not distract from the frenzy of the *Cabot 500* celebrations that took place in Newfoundland in 1997, however. According to Maureen Doody (1999), this celebration, five years in the making, plunged the town of Bonavista into “Mathew mania” (p. 86). The events, accomplished through a partnership with Bristol, England, included a reenactment of Cabot’s journey from Bristol to Bonavista in a full-sized replica of his ship, the *Mathew* (Doody, 1999, p. 16). Queen Elizabeth came to

Newfoundland to greet the ship and its crew as it sailed into Bonavista harbour on June 24, 1997, to mark the 500th anniversary of the explorer's journey (Doody, 1999, p. 17). The monarch's presence at this event attended by 40,000 spectators serves as a reminder that the British crown funded the extractive enterprise that transformed the thick forests of this Beothuk and Mi'kmaq land. The oceans around Newfoundland were once so bountiful that Cabot's ship had to slow down as it ploughed through fish trying to reach the land.

Bonavista now boasts its own full-sized replica of the *Mathew*, which is proudly displayed in the interpretive site *Ye Mathew Legacy*. This model of Cabot's fourteenth-century caravel is one of Newfoundland's most prized tourist attractions. *Ye Mathew Legacy's* website does not include information about the colonial plunder, including Indigenous genocide and environmental collapse, that was ushered in via this event. The doctrine of *discovery* is a colonial delusion that, until recently, was celebrated through the statutory holiday "Discovery Day," instituted in Newfoundland and Labrador in 1997. In 2020, a pandemic triggered lockdowns across the globe. A captive audience witnessed the May 25th televised lynching of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man. Only then was the name of this holiday finally changed. It is true that its days were numbered as it had been under increasing scrutiny by Indigenous groups and, more recently, by city council (Gushue, 2020). Even though Discovery Day is no more, the colonial mythologies that produced it along with the white innocence and the delusions it upholds have not ceased. This is evidenced by the contrast between the celebration of Cabot's ship the *Mathew* on view in replica in the museum and the opaque silences shrouding the story of the nineteen slave ships constructed here. I had previously followed rocks. Now I follow trees, compelled by the silence that led me to this photo of the endless wooden structures produced from trees that had once lined the bay. Thinking through trees, I read the land through a

recognition that the tragic story of the ghost ships and the people they carried is linked to the extraction of trees.

## PLANTING PEOPLE

We leave Ryan's Premises to visit Mockbeggar's Plantation, where I will install my work. The word "Mockbeggar," especially when paired with plantation, has an ominous ring. Mockbeggar is an Old English term used to describe a place that appears to be wealthy but in fact, is impoverished, thus deceiving beggars (OED, 2021). The term "plantation," which often refers to land where crops or trees are planted, may be used in reference to the planting of people and is synonymous with the word "colony" (Pope, 2012, p. 2). In Newfoundland, planters were British colonizers who set up permanent fishing operations like Mockbeggars and brought workers to live on the island. The planting of people began in the early seventeenth century. Cupids or Cupers Cove, one of Britain's earliest colonies, was formally established in 1610 on Newfoundland's Avalon Peninsula by John Guy via the London and Bristol company (Evans, 2013, p. 27). The first European child was born that year. Permanent communities took root in Keels and other outports north of Bonavista by 1625, but the fishery's migratory phase, which was ushered in shortly after Cabot's stumble upon the island, did not yield to widespread settler colonies until the eighteenth century (Evans, 2013, p. 30).

In the early days of the migratory fishery, workers arrived through a variety of arrangements. Many hailed from the west coast of England: "Villages such as Shaldon near Teignmouth and Kingswear near Dartmouth were inhabited almost exclusively by families dependent on the Newfoundland fishery" (Handcock, 2000, n.p.). Cadigan (2009) writes,

The servants worked for shares and occasionally, if they were very skilled, for fixed wages. Cash was always in short supply, but servants were happy to take part of their pay in the tobacco, wine, and other beverages that merchants came by easily in the cod trade. (p. 51)

Fishing was a difficult and precarious life and Newfoundland was a harsh environment in which to survive as a worker in the fisheries. New England merchants, who regarded Newfoundland as a source of “continuous supply of immigrant labor, well adapted to the maritime activities of New England,” were always on the lookout for workers in search of new opportunities at the end of the season, indentured servants for sale, or those who had been abandoned by ship owners in order to free up space on vessels bound to market with profitable loads of fish (Lounsbury, 1930, p. 608).

We climbed the external stairs to the second floor of a red clapboard building, entering what had once been the fish store of Mockbeggar’s Plantation. The house and its several outbuildings date back to the early eighteenth century and are amongst the oldest buildings still standing on the island. This former fishing operation is now a provincial heritage site.

The entire second floor consists of one continuous space, where cod was once graded and stored. Colourful flags representing Britain, Canada and Newfoundland and Labrador are draped on the aged and peeling white wooden walls. Roughly hewn beams run across the ceiling supported by hefty posts that reinforce the building's strength. By the twentieth century, Newfoundland’s majestic white pine, some upwards of eighty feet tall and three feet in diameter, had been intensely logged until their shortage made them no longer commercially viable (Cadigan, 2009, p. 8). Today, it would be difficult to construct such a building from trees grown

on the island. The floor of this building must have groaned under the weight of the beams and the thousands of pounds of fish that were sorted here and shipped to destinations across the ocean. This centuries-old space, sparsely furnished with a table and a few wooden barrels covered by tattered burlap, has served a variety of purposes. Rows of church pews pushed against the walls are a reminder that it was formerly in use as a church. Behind the pews, an arched window frames a view of the sea. It is a rare sunny day. The winds are calm. Whales spout in the harbour, their tails playfully slapping the water in the distance. On this shore I found a piece of driftwood, a relic of the trees that once lined this bay. I gathered debris washed by the ocean and used these materials to fashion a walking stick that will, along with the rock, accompany my futuristic character as she enters the present in both *Afronautic Research Lab: Newfoundland* and *Nave*. The stick also accompanies the ancestral character who emerges from the sea in *Nave* providing a through line between these two characters across time.

## PERFORMING SILENCE

On August 17, 2019, the Bonavista Biennale opened, and participants were invited into Mockbeggar's fish store to experience *Afronautic Research Lab: Newfoundland*. The story I told here through this artwork is a story that these walls had been here to witness. The artwork was an installation that included a projection of the film that presents my performing body walking across the land. I perform a character who arrives from the future in which this history has been reckoned with. The character enters this very room carrying the rock and the walking stick I described earlier. She lays the rock on the floor, slowly, reverently, closing her eyes in silent prayer for the 5,798 people who were imprisoned in the holds of the ships made in Newfoundland; the dead bodies of 740 of these people were thrown overboard, their bones

becoming one with the ocean. She rises from the floor, leaving the rock and the walking stick as remnants of this performance. She walks to a long table where she examines books and archival documents. Sounds of the sea that had been in the background of the piece rise to a crescendo as she unfolds a large map of colonial Newfoundland. She pauses, contemplating the map, then exits the frame leaving the table and its contents for participants who will enter the room to examine.

As the public entered the space, they encounter the rock and the stick that lie on the floor surrounded by 19 small white cards, each with a simple schematic of a ship that resembles a gravestone. The name of a ship constructed in Newfoundland along with the date of its construction is written on each card.

The film of the performance was projected straight ahead on the wall. Participants were led by attendants to sit at the table where the character had laid out the documents in the film. They were invited to examine a map, books, and other archival materials. These present documentary evidence of the slave ships constructed on the island. They also highlight the social and economic entanglement of Newfoundland's cod plantations with Caribbean plantations revealing that cod was exchanged for items made by enslaved people such as rum, salt, molasses, and sugar.

During the presentation of the artwork the room was kept deliberately dark. Participants were provided with flashlights and magnifying glasses to create the experience of searching through a dark and silenced past. Sticky notes and pencils were left on the table so they could write and attach messages to the laminated surface of the documents. The comments, which ran the gamut from shock and horror to doubt, show that colonial delusions have been exposed. Participants wrestled with a new reality that contradicted what they had believed.

One participant grappling with the possibility of the complicity of their family in the story of the slave ships wrote,

My heart is broken. This is part of our past completely unknown to me. My great-grandfather owned sawmills and his before him. All loggers. Did the trees they harvested (sic) build these ships?

Another participant tried to distance Newfoundlanders from the violence, writing,

I think it is presumptuous to say that slave ships have been built in NL. Were they purpose built as such? I think not. They might be more accurately described as trade ships that carried different types of cargo. Salt fish from Newfoundland, rum and molasses from the Caribbean, humans from Africa. I would be surprised to learn that ships were built by Newfoundlanders per se. No doubt they were financed by Bristol.

I read this comment as an attempt to force the monstrous delusions of the colonial world into rationality but their argument backfires since the interchangeability of slave ships with merchant ships, in fact, provides evidence of the ubiquity of the trade in enslaved Africans as part of the transnational colonial economy. Furthermore, the idea that African people carried in the cargo holds of these vessels were fungible (Hartman, 1997; Spillers, 1987) commercial objects, amongst other types of cargo, also reveals Newfoundland's participation in a monstrous and dehumanizing system.

*The Afronautic Research Lab: Newfoundland* struck a chord and sparked public discussions, debates and media attention throughout Newfoundland and Labrador and beyond. What was most striking about this project, however, was the silence of Newfoundland's

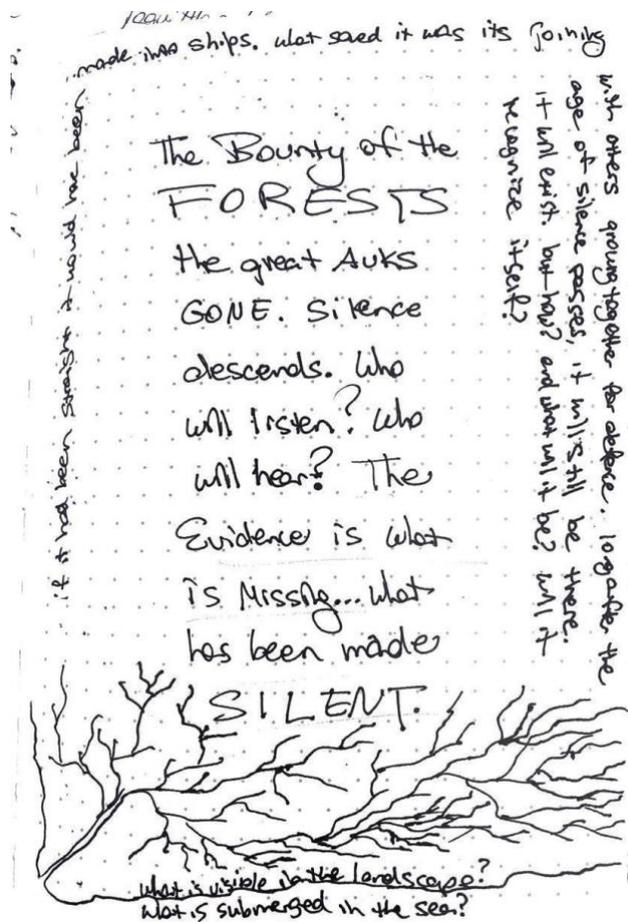
historians and archivists. This once again reminds me of Trouillot's (1995) argument that silencing the past is an active process. He argues that if silence was not constantly produced and maintained, it would disappear. To remain in place, the false and nostalgic mythologies of Newfoundland as a land discovered by intrepid and celebrated Europeans requires a constant production of silence by the guardians of history.

Since the *Afronautic Research Lab: Newfoundland* was presented in Bonavista in 2019, the world has changed. The very public, globally witnessed police murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, resulted in a cry for justice heard around the world. The term “anti-Blackness” has entered the popular lexicon and is now the lips of politicians and heads of cultural institutions. I created the film *Sarah* as part of this dissertation to mark this moment in time and my response to it. Suddenly there are more eyes on my work and on the works of many other Black artists. *Afronautic Research Lab: Newfoundland* has made its way into the collection of two museums, and a producer from CBC Newfoundland has reached out invite me to participate in a podcast exploring Newfoundland's connections to transatlantic slavery. The Toronto Biennial has commissioned *Nave* for their 2022 iteration of their event. I am elated, but I am also wary – and weary. Does this flurry of activity transform the configuration of power that is at the heart of this history? Or is this response yet another expression of the doctrine of discovery? We, who are the targets of anti-Blackness, have always known and named this experience. For us, anti-Blackness is not a new discovery. The long struggle over the production of historical silence is not over but while there are eyes on my work, I intend to continue the process of unsilencing the story of the slave ships constructed in Newfoundland and bringing to memory the people who were entombed within them. Unsilencing is a process of creation that confronts silence by revealing the colonial mythologies it conceals.

My next stop is Trinity, an outpost 53 kilometers south of Bonavista. I have chosen to travel to Trinity because when the slave ships I seek were constructed in Newfoundland Trinity was a hub of shipbuilding. This was a time when as Evans (2013) exclaims,

Practically every cove and harbour in Newfoundland rang incessantly with the sounds of axe and saw and the hammering of caulking irons and the noise of a multiplicity of other tools, many of which were fashioned by the shipbuilder himself. (p. 207)

On this leg of this journey, my search for the slave ships takes me into the archive following the *Sarah*, a brigantine constructed on this mournful shore.



*Figure 14: Journal, May 19, 2020.*

## CHAPTER 4 | TRINITY: INTO THE HOLD



*Figure 15: Painting of Benjamin Lester's fleet of ships in Trinity Harbour, 1795. Used with permission from The Trinity Historical Society Archives.*

*Imaginary ships made thinkable through poetic knowledge*

*Imaginary people perceived through spiritual attunement*

*Portals between past and future*

*Opening into the infinite*

*(Journal, September 10, 2020)*

I'm looking at a 1795 painting depicting Trinity harbour full of sailing vessels of various rigs and sizes. It hangs in the dining room of Lester-Garland House, now a provincial heritage

site overlooking Trinity harbour. The vessels in the painting were owned by prominent Bristol cod merchant Benjamin Lester and this painting is meant to display Lester's immense wealth and power. Many of these vessels were locally constructed for the transatlantic trade by shipwrights such as Charles Newhook whom Lester brought from Europe to Newfoundland. Whole communities were involved and implicated in the building of ships, as Rediker (2007) explains. Shipwrights oversaw the operation of tradespeople including carpenters, tinsmiths, rope makers, masons, sailmakers, blacksmiths, oar makers, riggers, painters, and finishers. Glaziers installed windows. Coopers made barrels to store and transport goods and supplies. Ships were heavily armed, especially in times of war and gunners were hired to supply the arms. Caulkers pounded oakum, which was unraveled hemp between boards to make the vessels watertight (Rediker, 2007, p. 54). This painting is a portrait of the harbour in the eighteenth century when the slave ships I seek were constructed. Large ships, the size of the slaving vessels I am searching for, had been built here. Since the colonial trade was fluid and intertwined, Newfoundland's merchants were entangled indirectly and directly in the transatlantic trade of enslaved Africans. It could not be otherwise.

This image is overshadowed by the assumptions underlying this location (Berger, 2008). The use of perspective directs the image of ships in the harbour to the eye of a single individual spectator who is, so to speak, the dominating presence, the master surveyor. The viewer is immersed in a cartesian world in which mind is separate from body and nature from "man." I am not, however, the privileged white bourgeois individual viewer of this scene whose possession of this painting reinforces his command of power. I am Black and female and inadmissible to this site in the moment of the painting's making. I reference this artwork only to disrupt the illusion of power it offers. When I look at this image, I do not see the impressive power of the merchants

whose property floats on its marine platform, rather, I see the entanglement of the image with the journey of my ancestors in the holds of such ships. I open the frame that holds this image in place. I take charge of the image, freeing it from the perspective that governs it. Interpreting it as a Black woman who is from another place and time, I disrupt its power and invert its meaning.

In this chapter, I enter the stage of my research-creation I referred to in Chapter One as *immersion*. Moving from land to sea, guided by my Afronautic methodology, I enter *immersion* by following the voyages of the *Sarah*, a slaving vessel made in Newfoundland and owned by prolific Bristol merchant James Rogers. I use my imagination to board the *Sarah* in hopes of gleaning even a glimpse of the captured Black lives it carried. I follow the ship's voyages through the Slave Voyages database, an online repository in which over 36,000 slaving voyages are compiled. As well, I reference David Richardson's (1996) edited volume *Bristol, Africa and the Eighteenth-Century Slave Trade to America Vol. 4: The Final Years 1770-1807*, a compilation of Bristol's slaving records in this time period, and Duke University's archives, which holds extensive records pertaining to slave merchant James Rogers. Here, I map my encounter with this past.

Amongst the entries in these databases are nineteen sailing vessels built in Newfoundland for the transatlantic trade of enslaved Africans, as stated previously. These vessels were registered in London, Liverpool, Bristol, and Seville. They sailed from European ports to the West African coast where they were loaded with captives who were trafficked to numerous ports in the Caribbean, Charleston, and Mississippi. Although these records are here in the archive, Newfoundland's historians have yet to acknowledge the existence of these ships and have failed to produce knowledge about them for future generations. Then, and now, the people concealed within these vessels are shrouded in silence and omitted from the annals of this storied place. As

an artist of African descent whose ancestors were transported from West Africa to the Caribbean in the holds of ships such as these, I take on the challenge of pushing past the deafening silence to insist on remembering and honouring the sacred lives these vessels contained. I do this by entering the archive but for me, these archives are not the holdings of objective facts. In the presence, is the unwritten absence of my ancestors. I enter the archive as if entering the hold of the ship. I enter holding the hands of those Black artists and writers whose courage has taken them here before, contorted as Wilson Harris writes in the acrobatic contusion of the limbo, or as Brathwaite the poet-historian writes,

long dark night is the silence in front of me

limbo

limbo like me

stick hit sound

and the ship like it ready

Stick hit sound

the dark still steady

Limbo

Limbo like me

long dark deck and the water surrounding me

long dark deck and the silence is over me

limbo

limbo like me

Stick is the whip

and the dark deck is slavery.

(Brathwaite, 1967)

## DESCENT INTO THE ARCHIVE



*Figure 16: Diagram of slave ship. From book 'Observations on Negro Slavery'. National Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington, D.C., USA. Licensed under CC.*

As I plunge into the archive, I am reminded of a recent trip to the Caribbean side of Costa Rica where I witnessed the bright faces of children emerging from a scuba diving session in a community program set up to teach them about marine archeology and to prepare them to help with the investigation of what is now thought to be the wreck of two Danish slave ships just off the coast. As the children, some of whom may be descendants of the people trafficked in these ships, learned about this submerged history, one little girl demanded to know why the Danes had imprisoned 500 Africans in these ships. The question of this innocent child who was literally diving into the wreckage of this unimaginable history haunts me as I propel myself towards the archive/hold of the *Sarah*, a 154-ton brigantine (or brig), a two-masted vessel constructed in Newfoundland in 1788.

176	San Firme S	de L. Fano	220	Boston	86	Bilboa	14	Lo Bilboa	A I
7	Joseph Bg	J Bafaldua	100	Irish	80	T. Viouris	10	Bilboa Br	E I
8	Miguel Bg	A. Revilla	170	Whitby	80	M Chvere	13	Er Bilboa	E I
9	Vincente Bg	Maranga	100	Spain	78	Rofimont	12	Lo Bayon	E I
180	Sandown S	W. Snow	138	French	81	St Barb & c	13	Lo. Tricy	A I
1	Sandwich S	M. Gage	195	Rhd Isl	74	S Enderby	15	Lo SFish	E I
2	Bg	D. Jones	110	Pool	72	T. Hogg	10	Wales Li	E I
3	Santa Anna	Philip	112	For'gn		J. Sivale	10	Li Spain	E I
4	Catalina	Lanzobal	120	Spain	77	DEruis de	10	Sand Lo	E I
5	Rita Bg	T. de Silva	120	Oporto	81	Oporto	10	Du Oporto	E 2
6	Theresa St	M. Ruez	100	Bilboa	84	Du Garthy	10	Lo Bilboa	A I
7	Santissimo Sa	P. Simoes	200	Portgl	79	J. Simoes	12	Wa Subs	E I
8	Trinidad	Cucculla	90	Spain	88	Capt.	10	Lo Bayon	A I
9	Bg	F Gonfales	80	Spain	86	G Gnfales	10	Lo Bilboa	A I
190	Sappho Bg	C. David	200	Shields	85	Hrcastle	11	Lo Ptrbfg	A I
1	Sarah Bg	T. Andrfn	120	Sandrid	86	Capt. & C.	11	Amfr Hl	A I
2	Bg s	Bentham	172	Lancfr	88	S Simpson	15	La Jamai	A I
3	S d l	Chpman	345	Whitby	42	Chapman	16	Lo Ptrbfg	E I
4	Bg	P. Dwyer	220	Livrpl	85	POMEaly	13	Co Liffn	A I
5	S s j	Fletcher	361	Livrpl	84	Walker & c	15	Li Philad	A I
6	S s & d	T. Gurner	302	Nwcfli	84	Jones & C.	15	Li Grnlc	A I
7	Bgs C	Goodrich	157	N'land	88	Rogers & c	12	Br Africa	A I
8	Bg	J. Palmer	106	Yrmth	84	Palmer & c	10	Ya Rouen	A I
9	S s	W. Potts	200	Dutch	82	Seyer & C.	12	Lo Hndrs	E I
200	S d	Rutter	250	N. Yrk	68	Guillaum	15	Lo Grnlc	E I

Figure 17: Excerpt from Lloyd's Register of Shipping, 1790. HathiTrust.

I see the *Sarah* on records generated by Lloyd's of London, the preeminent company that registered ships and underwrote voyages for the transatlantic trade of enslaved Africans. Lloyd's, founded in 1688, was the dominant company registering voyages of the transatlantic trade of enslaved Africans. It was not until George Floyd was murdered in May 2020 and protestors spilled onto streets toppling monuments to empire that Lloyds finally made the following statement acknowledging their legacy:

We are sorry for the role played by the Lloyd's market in the eighteenth and nineteenth Century slave trade. This was an appalling and shameful period of

British history, as well as our own, and we condemn the indefensible wrongdoing that occurred during this period. (Lloyd's, 2020, n.p.)

The *Sarah* was owned by James Rogers and Company and funded by a group of investors with interests in both the Newfoundland cod trade and the transatlantic trade of Africans. There are no documents that tell me whether the *Sarah* was purpose built as a slave ship, also known as a *guineman*. As Redikker (2007) notes, by 1750, some ships were built solely for the purpose of slaving while others were modified merchant ships, known also as merchantmen, that were adapted for carrying and trafficking people (p. 53). There are records of the *Sarah*'s first slaving voyage in 1789 shortly after she was constructed, and this voyage was followed by two back-to-back slaving voyages in the following two years before she was wrecked.

Whether purpose-built or not, ships for both the trade in enslaved Africans and merchant ships were interchangeable, since “in any given locality, the slave trade was never an isolated sphere of activity...a ship that carried slaves on one voyage could carry wine or grain on the next” (Harms, 2002, Loc. 19). Carpenters, hired as crew members on these ships, made constant alterations to the vessels during the journey transforming them to suit different purposes as needed (Rediker, 2007, p. 66). The slave ship then was a part of the everyday landscape of eighteenth-century life.

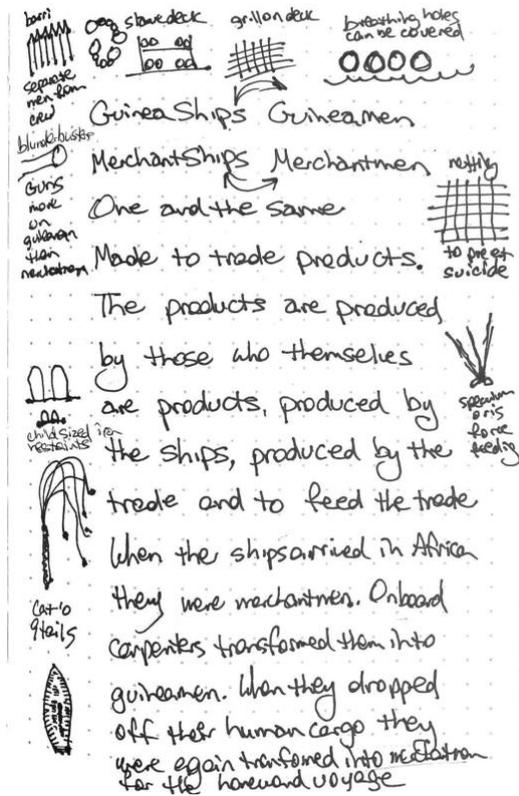


Figure 18: Journal, May 19, 2020.

## FROM NEWFOUNDLAND TO BRISTOL

The *Sarah* made her way from Newfoundland to Bristol, but there are no records of her journey to this place that Kenneth Morgan (2003) describes as “a bustling gateway of empire” and a major trader in the transatlantic trade of enslaved Africans (p. 1). Since Britain used Newfoundland and other colonial possessions as a source of extraction, building the *Sarah* in the colony and transporting her to the metropolis was an unremarkable event.

The *Sarah* is being groomed and prepared for her impending maiden voyage. She is one of six vessels constructed in Newfoundland that launched from Bristol. Richardson (1996) notes that the 130-ton ship the *Antelope* carried 403 people (p. 62). Most of the victims in the tiny

schooner *Maria* were children (p. 170). Those imprisoned in the ironically named *Friendship* endured both a grueling Middle Passage of 83 days and the terror of a fire onboard after a lightning strike (p. 211). The *Betsey* was captured by a French Privateer, and the 243 people inside her were taken to Jacmel, St. Domingue (p. 230). The *Morningstar*, also owned by Rogers, was abandoned off the coast of West Africa (p. 220). In the small *Roebuck*, 355 people travelled for an unimaginable 100 days across the Atlantic (SlaveVoyages, n.d.).

*I am watching an online meeting in which Bristol's city council is voting to institute a bill for reparations in connection to the transatlantic trade of enslaved Africans. They voted overwhelmingly Yes! There were just a few objections. 47 voted for the bill and 12 against. History was made. This nonmonumental historic wrong was addressed. Those who objected appeared uninformed and comfortable in their ignorance. The conservatives amongst them wanted to play down the harm that this ongoing past continues to produce in the present. I am interested in this event because of Bristol's historic socio-economic connections to Newfoundland and the entanglement of these two places through the construction of slave ships and the trafficking of people. Noting this connection brings to the fore the everywhere-ness of this legacy and the fact that white supremacy is as ubiquitous as the air we breathe. As Sharpe would say, it is the weather.*

*(Journal, March 9, 2021)*

Bristol was not the only port from which ships made in Newfoundland were launched. They also sailed from Liverpool, London, and Charleston. *Friends*, a 200-ton ship constructed in

1763 in Newfoundland by Poole merchant Peter Joliffe Jr., set sail from Liverpool on December 28, 1778, arriving at Cape Coast castle to begin trading on July 9, 1779. After she left Trinidad's coast carrying 25 captives, the ship was wrecked (Slave Voyages, n.d.) The sea became a graveyard for the people who were trapped in its hold.

Two years after the wreck of Joliffe's ship 130 Africans were jettisoned alive from the slave ship, *Zong*. This famous case went to trial in 1783, but the charge was not murder. On transatlantic slaving voyages, people in the holds were insured as property. The case of the *Zong* did not hinge on the violation of human lives. The legal system did not register Black lives as human lives. Since these humans were legally deemed property and property could not be murdered, the case focused on whether the business was entitled to compensation for their losses (Philips, 2008, p. 191).

I try to prepare myself for what I may find as I search for the *Sarah*. I see a plethora of bills for items that she would carry – beads, bracelets, hats, household goods, lace, shirts, and fabric. These would be traded for Black lives.

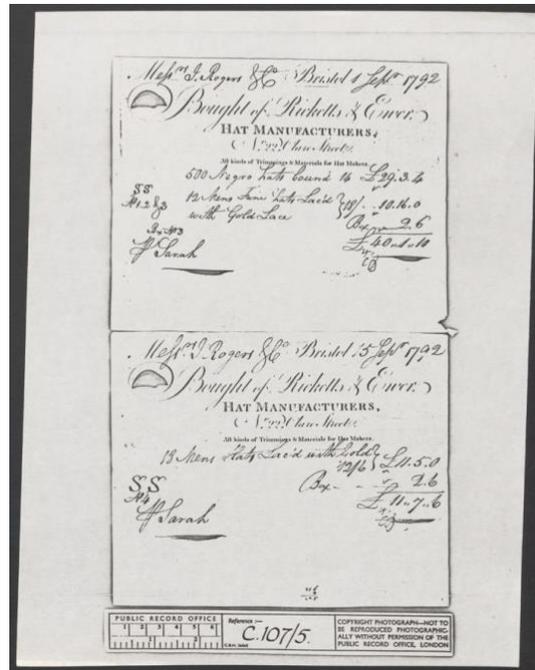


Figure 19: Receipt for "Negro Hats" trimmed with lace for the brig, Sarah, 1792. James Rogers Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

Even though I am aware that terror, the hallmark of enslavement, was in full effect on slave ships, it still sends shivers through me when I find a receipt for chains and handcuffs. Rediker (2007) describes, “vicious forced feedings, whippings, casual violence of all kinds, and the rape of women captives” was commonplace (p. 7). Tools of torture such as Iron collars, cat of nine tails and ropes for hanging were also routinely used to quell the inevitable resistance and uprisings of captives (Rediker, 2007, p. 16).

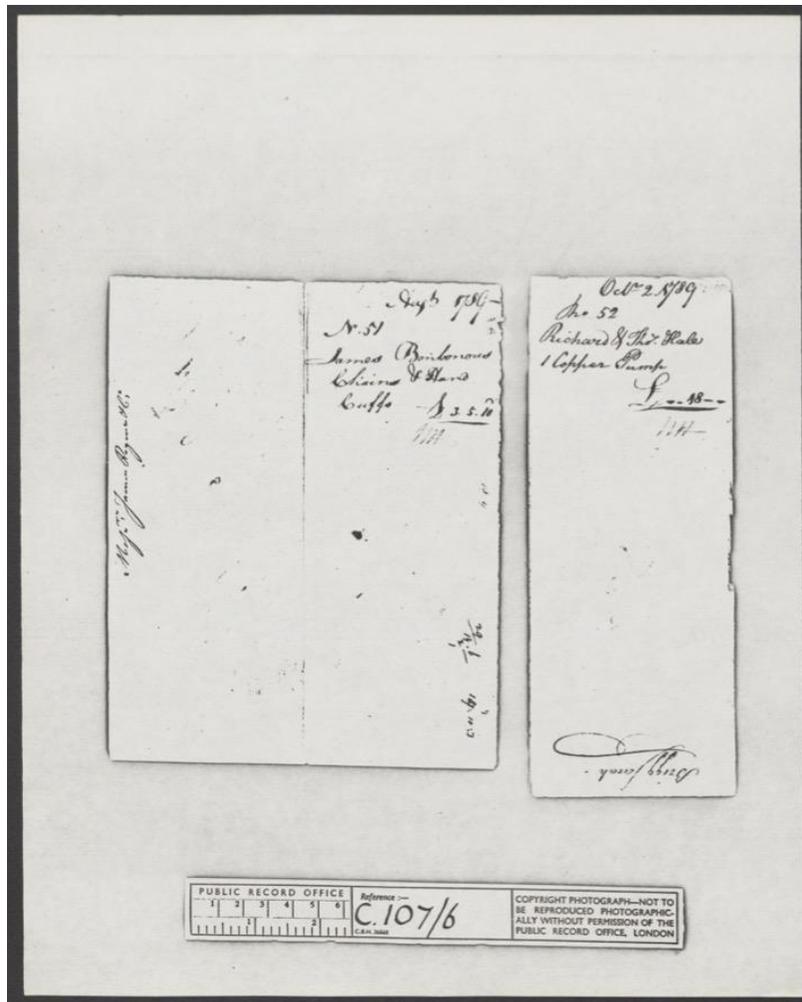


Figure 20: Receipt for chains and handcuffs for the brig, Sarah, 1789. James Rogers Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

Violence was built into the design and function of the slave ship itself, which Rediker refers to as a “mobile, seagoing prison” (p. 45). Architectural plans of *L'Aurore*, a slaving vessel that left France in 1784, four years before the *Sarah* was built, have been used to produce a 3D animation that is presented on the Slave Voyages database (Emory Center for Digital Scholarship, n.d.). The clean, neutral lines of the computer visualization trace the carceral geography of the ship as it leaves the harbour on her first voyage. I see her newly built and

gleaming before death, disease, terror, resistance and struggles for freedom take place inside her belly.

Two sets of chains run vertically along the main deck. The floor was fitted with a wooden grate and a few small breathing holes were cut into the sides of the vessel. These accommodations were made to bring air into the fetid dungeon below where captives would spend up to 16 hours per day. Netting woven from ropes encircled the sides of the ship to prevent distraught and defiant captives from hurling their bodies into the sea (Rediker, 2007, p. 71). The barricado, a wooden barrier wall topped with spikes and mounted with swivel guns, spanned the width of the ship, dividing the upper deck into two main sections. Enslaved men are feared by the crew, so they will be shackled together in pairs. Hand to hand. Foot to foot. When they are brought up onto the top deck, they will be imprisoned behind the nine-foot barricado. The iron chains on the deck will be threaded through the shackles on their ankles. Captives will be constantly surveilled by armed crew members. Women and children will be unchained and kept separated from the men.

In the animation of *L'Aurore*, the grate on top of the hold lifts. The dungeon gapes. Separation by gender and age will continue in the hold where people will be stowed as cargo under the main deck (Rediker, 2007, p. 234). As the video explains, each person occupied a space 14-18 inches wide and 30 inches high in a space so tight each person had to lay on their side. But there is more. To maximize profits, an extra platform was constructed between the decks on some spaces, making the height of the deck only 14 inches (Emory Center for Digital Scholarship, n.d.). What was it like to survive being ripped from family, friends, and community? What was it like to be thrown into this dark, fetid, and suffocating abyss and pressed against the racing hearts of fellow sufferers to be alive yet entombed for what would

seem like an eternity? The liminal space of the hold/womb/tomb is the birthplace of the African Diaspora. Joanne Chassot (2015) references African cosmologies to present the “impossible time-space of the Atlantic” as a limbo time “with no beginning or end” (p. 92). As Calvin Warren (2016) observes,

The captive lives outside of metaphysical time, without a future, without an accessible past (natal alienation), and in a present overwhelmed with the immediacy of bodily pain, psychic torment, and routine humiliation. Time is terror. (p. 60)

I leave *L'Aurore* to board the *Sarah* on her first voyage. She will arrive in Grand Bassa on the Windward Coast on December 7, 1789, then on to Bembia and the Cameroon River on December 18 (Slave Voyages, n.d.). The *Sarah*'s arrival resulted in the departure of 229 adults and 27 children, forced through the Door of No Return and banished from these shores to face the terror that awaits them in the hold (Richardson, 1996, p. 157). I search through the archive in vain to learn who they are. There are no names. Those who enter are reduced to a number. They are stripped of their clothing, their hair, their identities. The dead occupy the space between the categories: *Total Embarked* and *Total Disembarked*. There is nothing to mark the hold as the hallowed place where the modern world was birthed. I sit with this grief.

## BELOW THE DECK

The hold beckons me. I turn away. I do not want to enter. But I must. This is a haunted and hallowed place. The restless spirits here demand justice. This is the place I seek. And yet this place no longer exists in the material realm. Like Brand's (2001) observation of the Door of No

Return, the hold is “a place, real, imaginary and imagined” (p. 19) The ruins of slavery are nowhere yet everywhere; the molecules circulating in the Atlantic Ocean, the ghost forests along Newfoundland’s barren shores and the ballast carrying rocks, soil, and seeds between shipbuilding ports crosspollinating geographies throughout the Atlantic world.

Again, the hold whispers my name and I recall a talk by M. Jacqui Alexander at the University of Toronto’s William Doo auditorium on March 23, 2012. Every ear strained to hear Alexander softly proclaim that we are all connected to this transatlantic history in some way or the other and we must all go into the hold of the slave ship. Turning towards the hold, I see a small, frightened child standing alone. It is Equiano. My heart bursts open as we embrace. Equiano (1789/1967), who was captured at the tender age of 11, recounts his life story recalling chilling details such as the terror he felt during his first experience on a slave ship:

I was soon put down under the decks, and there I received such a salutation in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life. So that with the loathsomeness of the stench and crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat, nor had I the least desire to taste anything. I now wished for the last friend, death, to relieve me. (p. 26)

Equiano was amongst the youngest on the ship that carried him from his homeland, but most captives are young. The optimum age is 7-25 years of age, according to the testimony of an ex-slave trader (Conrad, 1983, p. 29). Elders and infants were slaughtered or abandoned. Only the strong were chosen. Paul Lovejoy (2006) tells us that towards the end of the trade, captains increasingly packed the holds of their ships with children whose small size enabled them to

maximize their profits (p. 198). On the 50-ton schooner *Maria*, a small vessel that was constructed in Newfoundland in 1785, for instance, 94 percent of the 80 people it packed into its hold were children (SlaveVoyages, n.d.).

Like Equiano, most captives were victims of raids in the continent's interior. Villages were attacked and razed to the ground. Equiano (1789/1967) tells stories of the resistance of his village, which was already on high alert in response to threats of violence due to the bloodthirsty trade in human flesh. Out of necessity, adults trained to fight to protect their families and Equiano recalls climbing a tree and witnessing his mother expertly fending off attackers below. Like many abductees, Equiano was sold several times on his long walk to the sea which for some, took weeks and in his case, months. The millions who perished on the walk left a "trail of bleached bones that led from the hinterland to the sea" (Hartman, 2007, p. 30).

Those who survived the journey to the shore were often further detained in fetid prisons called barracoons while awaiting their fate as merchandise to be purchased by slave ship captains. According to Radburn and Eltis (2019), a medium-sized slaving vessel could carry 259 people and was on average about 24 feet wide and 86 feet long (p. 3). The masts, sometimes rising upwards of 60 feet, surpass the height of any other human-made structure. Equiano (1789/1967) expresses amazement as he thinks back to his first sighting of the slave ship that would transport him across the Atlantic:

The first object which saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast was the sea, and a slave ship which was then riding at anchor and waiting for its cargo. These filled me with astonishment, which was soon converted into terror when I was carried on board. (p. 25)

Captives brought onto ships are examined like cattle. They are housed in a temporary wooden structure built on the deck by the ship's carpenters while the captains fill their quota of prisoners, which sometimes take months.

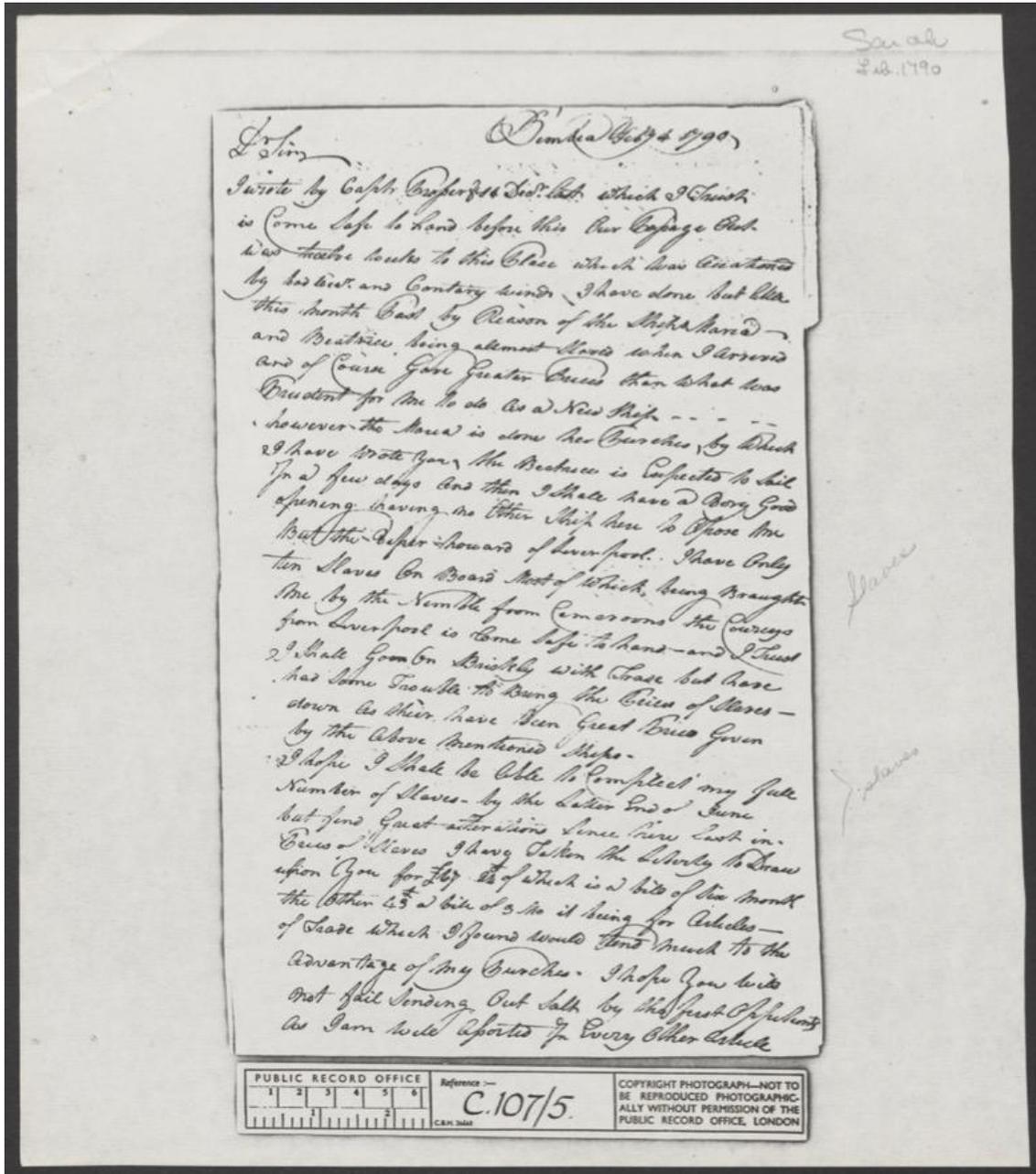


Figure 21: Bembia. Entries in trade book for the brig, Sarah, 1790. James Rogers Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

Next is the harrowing and suffocating Middle Passage journey across the Atlantic, which, as Lovejoy (2006) explains, could take months, especially in the early days of the trade. Middle Passage survivors and their descendants joined millions whose unfree labour as Eric Williams (1944) explains, was central to the production of global capitalism (p. 52).

*Walking through ashes. No notice of the living. Abandoned aspirations.*

*Where are our dreams?*

*(Journal, May 30, 2020)*

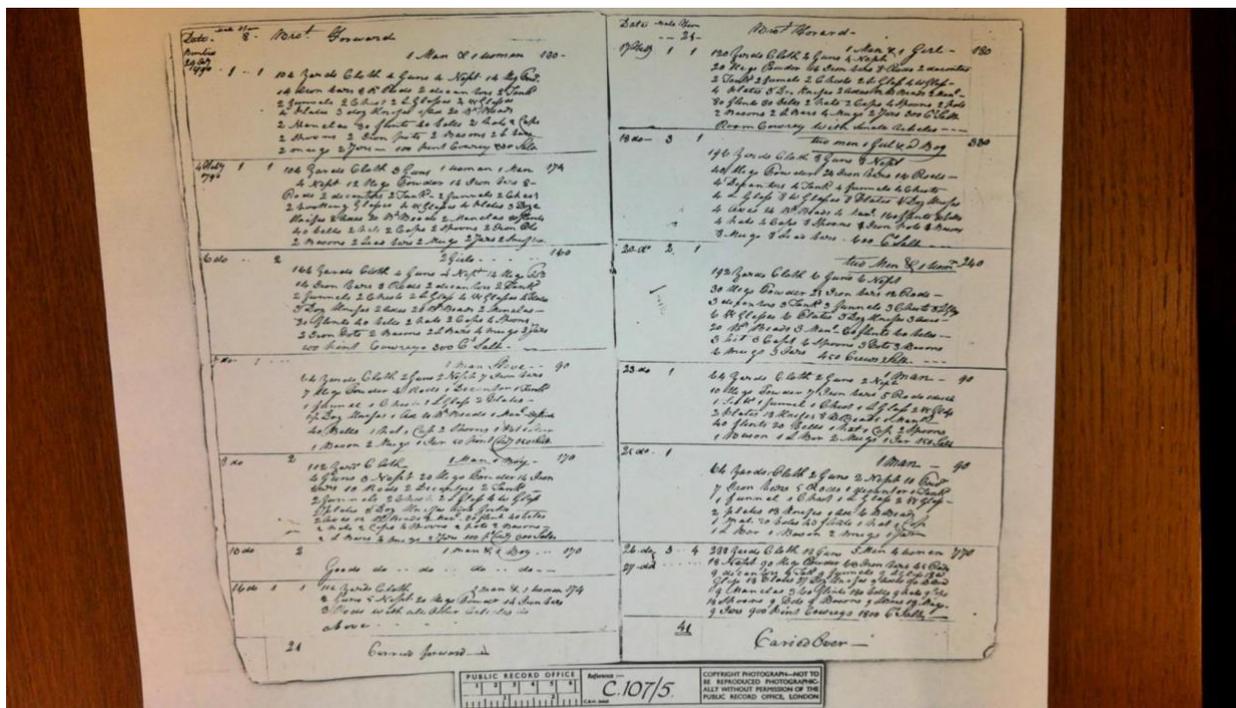


Figure 22: Bembia. Entries in trade book for the brig, Sarah, 1790. James Rogers Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

Contemplating the sale of Africans to Europeans brings me to some of the most heartbreaking documents I encountered in the archive; the trade books, which were kept by captains of the *Sarah* to record the multitude of goods that were exchanged for the 641 people who filled the hold on her three voyages. On December 18, 1789, two girls are exchanged for items that include: cloth, iron bars, mugs; paltry European goods. I am bereft. Instantly, I am transported back to my first trip to Senegal when I tasted bitterness and anger as I faced the rupture at the door of No Return. Grappling with the knowledge that these young girls were exchanged for paltry European items becomes even more devastating since their names are missing yet the names of the things they were exchanged for are recorded. I share Hartman's (2007) despair as I probe the records, trying to "reclaim the dead, that is, to reckon with the lives undone and obliterated in the making of human commodities" (p. 6).

I continue my journey through the archive/hold of the *Sarah*. Amongst the records I find dispatches that her captains sent from the ports they visited.

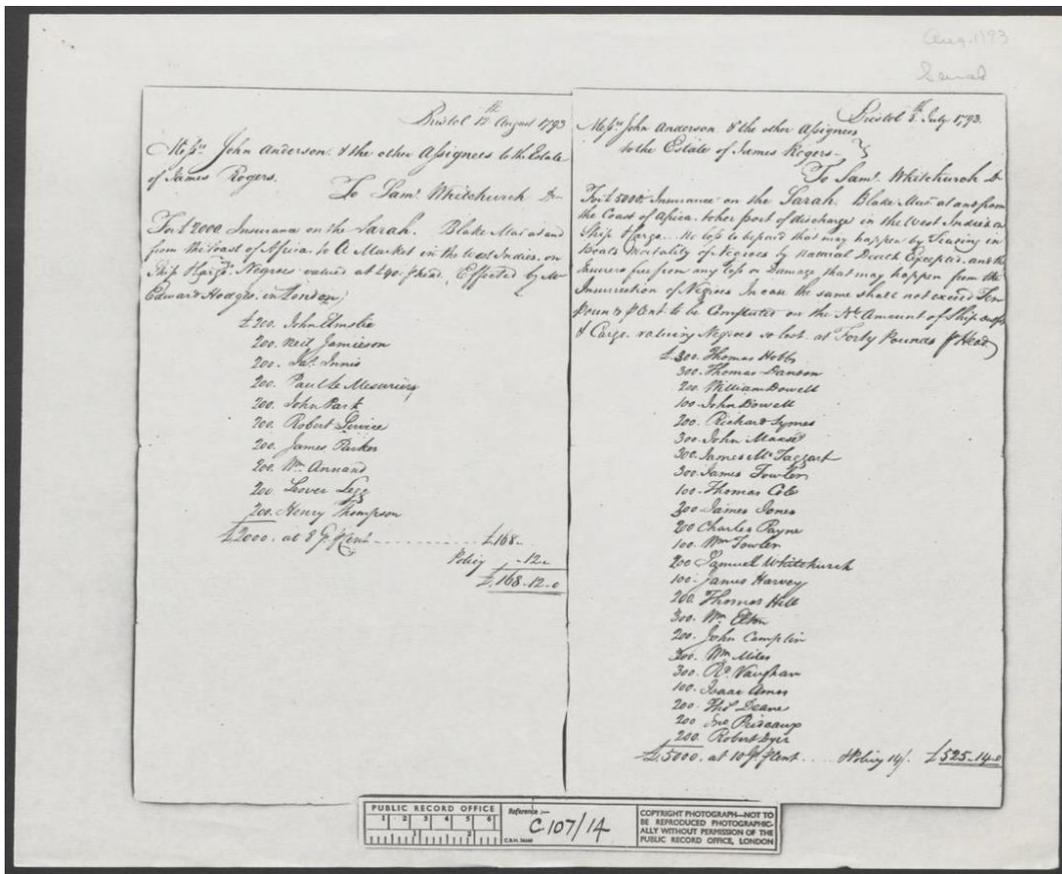


Figure 23: Insurance for the ship and cargo of the Sarah, 1793. James Rogers Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

Insurance records signed July 8, 1793, and August 12, 1793, list negroes as cargo insured at *forty pounds a head*. I focus my attention on the clause that *renders insurers free from any loss from damage that may happen from the insurrection of Negroes*. This marks the hold as a place where revolt and striving towards freedom was expected. Black resistance and self-making in the face of extreme violence continued before, in and beyond the hold.

Recalling Vincent Brown’s (2009) provocation to pay attention to often overlooked struggles from the holds of slave ships from Chapter One, I search for incidents of insurrections that took place on the ships constructed in Newfoundland. My search leads me to the *Fly*, a 44-

ton schooner built in Newfoundland in 1781 and recorded as intercepted by Africans who liberated those who were held in captivity onboard (Slave Voyages, n.d.). The escape of those imprisoned on the *Fly* affirms the understanding that those who were imprisoned in systems meant to curtail their lives envisioned possible futures.

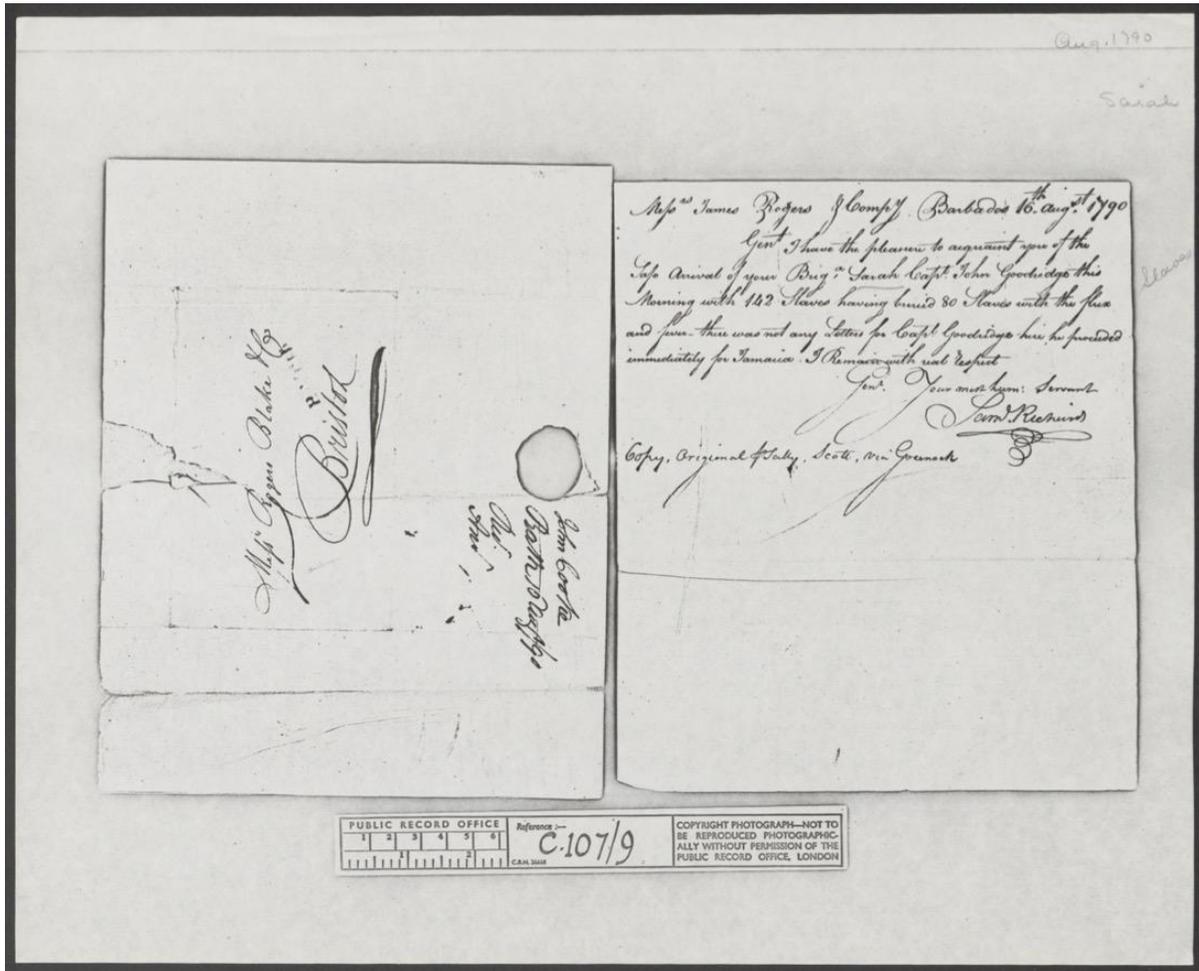


Figure 24: The *Sarah* arrived with 142 slaves, 80 died en-route to the Caribbean, 1790. James Rogers Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

During the grueling Middle Passage on the *Sarah*'s first voyage in 1790, flux and flu invaded the hold. Disease spread between weakened bodies pressed tightly together on and below the wooden platforms, the living shackled to the dead. The bodies of 80 people whose lives were lost were thrown overboard without due respect for rituals, rites or ceremony, to join the almost two-million victims of the trade who lay in the vast, unmarked watery grave of the Atlantic.

Messrs James Rogers & Co. Jamaica, 8 Sept. 1790

Gentlemen I have the pleasure to enclose your Sales of one hundred & forty one Slaves, received from Capt Goodrich of the *Sarah*, and although the Slaves are not of the Country preferred here, which are eboes, from Bonny, I hope You will acknowledge the Average to exceed any made in this part of the Island. I also enclose my acct" Currnt with bills, on Mr. Jacks, for the Balance as trustee V Eighteen months Sight, although your letter of 6 April fixes the Bills to be at 12, 18 & 24 mo"s S"t, hope you will allow Mr. Jacks acceptances to draw (?) that time, the House of Messrs Parkinson & Barrett do not draw at less than 15, 21 & 27 mos - I Shall be happy if Capt Goodrich is Sent for a Cargo of real Eboes<sup>1</sup>, to Consist of Young people. I think if he arrives here by the first of May I Could turn them to good account, I am with Respect,

Gentlemen

(Letter from John Fowler to James Rogers and Company, 1790, Jamaican Family Search Genealogy Research Library)

Emerging from my immersion in the archive/hold, I am burdened by the unbearable weight of what Veena Das (2015) refers to as “poisonous knowledge,” the extraordinary violence that seeps into our daily lives (p. 54). We are all connected to this story, albeit in different ways. Just as I recognize myself as living in and as the afterlife of slavery, I think about descendants of colonizers and enslavers living in/as the afterlife of violent conquest, death, and plunder. Even as this violence is disavowed, its residue is present. We carry this knowledge with us in our bodies, in our bones. The facts leave a ghostly trail. I have followed this trail of entangled geographies, first on land then making my way into the hold of the *Sarah* I followed her deadly Middle Passage journeys across the ocean through the archival records.

I slowly gather my multiple selves. Breathing. Remembering. Allowing what has transpired to emerge and take form.

*This story is not just history but geography, a Black geographic story that begins in Newfoundland and spreads across the Black Atlantic.*

*(Journal, July 1, 2020)*

## CHAPTER 5 | A NEW CARTOGRAPHY: ARTMAKING AS WORLDMAKING



*Figure 25: Film still from Nave (2022). Filmed by Esery Mondesir.*

*What did the first breaths of this new world feel like? What gave way for this world to emerge?*

*(Journal, July 27, 2020)*

In this chapter, I process the experiences and knowledge I gained during my descent into the archive. As I explained in Chapter One, my research-creation process encompasses five overlapping stages; the stages of *incubation*, *epiphany* and *assembly* are reflected in this chapter. During *incubation*, a plethora of ideas begin to emerge, some of which are eventually incorporated into the final artworks. I share the emergence and development of ideas here by including drawings from my journals and notes on epiphanies that appeared along the way to provide direction for my artworks.



Figure 26: *Mapping Sarah's Journey*, by Camille Turner (2021).

To imagine the geography, I covered on my journey through the space of the hold, I mapped (Figure 26) the voyages of the *Sarah*, the vessel constructed in Newfoundland for the transatlantic trade that I followed through the Slave Voyages database. The ineffable horror of what transpired on the *Sarah's* three journeys cannot be captured by the simple lines that trace the paths through which lives were abducted. What emerges, however, in this map is a way to visually connect Newfoundland to the triangle of the transatlantic trade.

In response to encountering archival evidence of the aforementioned ship, the *Fly*, in which Africans on the coast liberated those onboard, an animated film entitled *Fly* formed in my imagination. At the edge of a calm sea, a group of Black people wade into the water. Together, they look up and their bodies rise into the air and soar above the water into the sky. This is perhaps looped, and people continuously arrive, look up, and fly. This reminds me of the mythical story of return known as *Ibo Landing*, a legend of a slave ship arriving off the coast of America. The captive Africans onboard walked into the water en masse, still chained together. Instead of walking toward land, they walked away from the shore to their deaths. Some say they flew home to Africa; others say they returned by walking on the bottom of the ocean.

Similarly, a film entitled *Hands* emerged in response to my sorrow of not being able to recover the name or identity of a single soul who was imprisoned on the slave ships constructed in Newfoundland. I imagined Olaudah Equiano speaking from his experience as a child who was forcefully abducted and carried on a terrifying journey in such a ship. In thinking about the labour that those brought to the Caribbean were forced to perform and how they were linked to Newfoundland's economy, I found Mary Prince, who wrote about her experiences as an enslaved worker in a salt mine in the Caribbean. Newfoundland's extractive cod industry depended on salt from the Caribbean. I wove these ideas together through an imagined installation. The sound for the installation consists of excerpts from Equiano's and Prince's life stories, read by numerous voices that seem to be in dialogue with each other. The visuals for this installation consist of Black hands of various sizes and ages reaching out towards each other across the blackness of time – hands of parents, children, babies, lovers, grandparents, and friends. Young and ancient hands emerge from darkness and strain towards each other. When they touch, they lovingly

embrace, then they are pulled apart by force. The hands never cease striving towards each other, reaching, grasping, yearning.

A film entitled *Sarah* formed in my imagination through reflections on current events that were happening around me as I was immersed in the archive. The film is autobiographical and emerged from my dreams. During its making, I would wake up, as I report in my journal below, with full storyboards in my head.

*I woke up with a full storyboard in my head. A film is making itself through my dreams.*

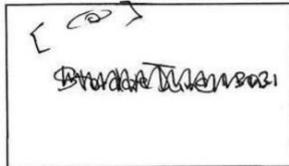
*(Journal, June 12, 2021)*

I faithfully drew the storyboards and eventually made a version of the film, which is included as part of this dissertation. Below is a description of the film as it emerged in its various iterations as well as through journal entries and storyboards as they tumbled out of my imagination.

It is 2020, a global pandemic is raging, and the world is in lockdown. The researcher is in her apartment trying to work, but George Floyd has been brutally assassinated, and there are protests all over the world. The researcher is watching broadcasts on the news and is grieving. She is researching slave ships constructed in Newfoundland, and as she works, she can see the connections between the horrific killings of Black people including George Floyd and the plights of the 5,998 people that were carried in these ships. She is following one ship – a brigantine called the *Sarah* that made three voyages from Bristol to West Africa and then to the Caribbean. She is haunted by the archive. She dreams about the people in the hold of the ship. They stretch

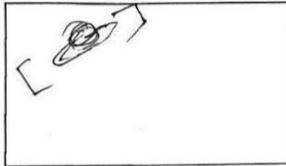
their hands towards her. She reaches out to them. She cannot reach them. It is as if they are in a different dimension, separated by a barrier. She wakes up sweating and, afraid to go back to sleep, she makes herself some tea and sits at her computer watching YouTube videos. She is obsessed with UFOs. In news reports, the US military admits that UFO sightings are quite frequent. They report that the ships maneuver through air in multiple directions, accelerate rapidly, and submerge into the ocean, clearly exhibiting technologies that are far beyond the capabilities of terrestrials. They refuse, however, to believe that these mysterious vessels could be from other stars. The researcher is intrigued and gleeful. She imagines Afronauts coming to earth in vessels like these. She wishes they would take her away with them to other stars. Clearly, here on Earth, Black folks are in danger. Surely there must be a better place where Black people can live in freedom.

Sarah  
page 1

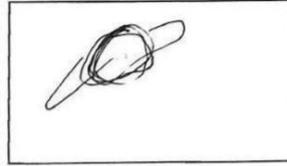


Wofford

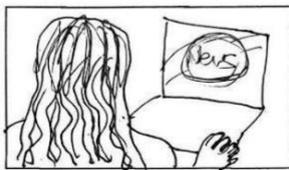
In the 21st century earth became unlivable for Black life so we left to live amongst the stars



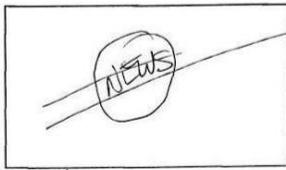
Our Elders wanted us to have a fresh start so they reset time



Now, 1000 years later we have returned seeking answers about this silenced past



Night OTS researcher watching news about problems of anti-Black violence on computer

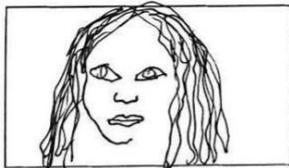


C/O computer News about pandemic anti-Black violence

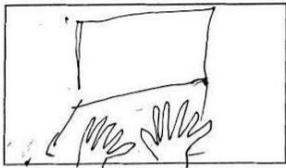


She is taking her hands off her face

Wofford  
As soon as we perfected our listening devices we heard a sound. We followed the sound to its source



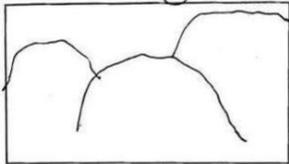
We found ourselves on 21st century Earth. She is the source of the sound that drew us here. She was calling our name.



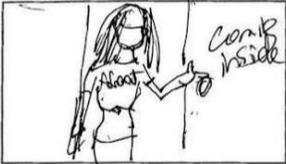
She summoned. We followed. We are here to observe. To listen. To learn.



When we saw the earth for the first time we were astonished. We didn't expect it to be so beautiful. The rocks the trees, the water



We came to learn the truth about why our ancestors left.



Comp inside

Our geologists said the earth was uninhabitable. Our historians told us to look forward. We are a new people. No need to look back. But there we leak in the silence



But nobody could explain the dreams that woke us up in the middle of the night. We were haunted by unspeakable terrors. We need to know what happened. We came to learn the truth.

Figure 27: Journal, June 12, 2021.

Sarah page 2

clw on screen as researcher goes to slavevoyages.org  
 clw on screen sad date  
 she's watching video of animated slave ship

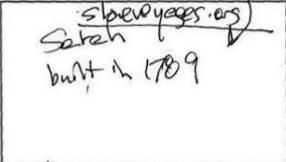
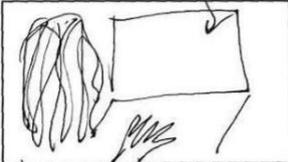
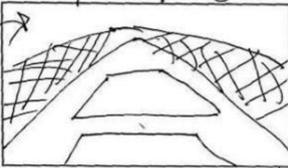
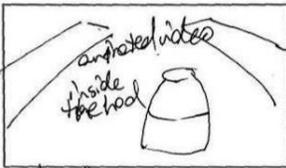
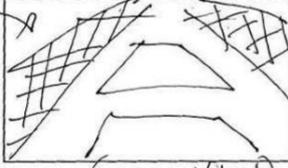
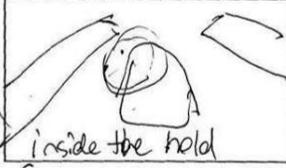
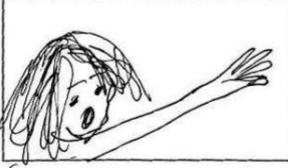
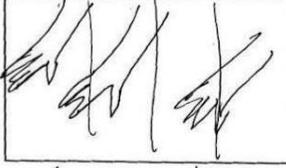
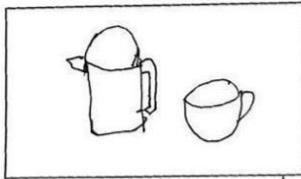
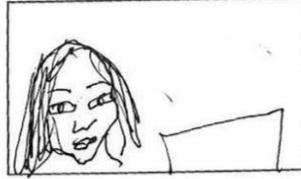
		
<p>(V) She's writing about Sarah, a ship built in 1789, long before space travel was invented. Unlike our ship, Sarah could only travel by water by catching the wind.</p>	<p>(V) We learned that Sarah was a slave ship and there were thousands of others like her</p>	<p>(V) We found out that millions of people were abducted and trafficked across the water on these ships</p>
<p>animated video the hold opens</p> 	<p>animated video inside the hold</p> 	<p>she rises for her chair and goes to lie down exhausted</p> 
<p>(V) Day after day we watched in horror as she assembled the evidence of this crime.</p>	<p>(V) At first we wondered if the people were returned to their homes and if those who committed these crimes were brought to justice</p>	<p>we had found our people and now we had answers to our questions but we could never have imagined that our people had endured such</p>
<p>animated video sister nurses as hold of ship opens</p> 	<p>inside the hold</p> 	<p>nightmare sequence hands reach out see as face 12)</p> 
<p>(same video of hold)</p>	<p>(murmuring voices slow motion inside hold)</p>	<p>she had to see the loss. She had Justice. But she was exhausted terrible things were still happening</p>
		
<p>(slow motion researcher in darkly lit room reach towards hands behind bars)</p>	<p>(hands reach out)</p>	<p>(she wakes up screaming terrified)</p>

Figure 28: Journal, June 12, 2021.

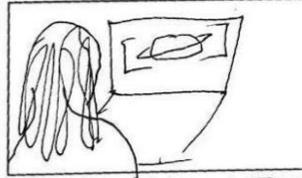
Sarah  
page 3



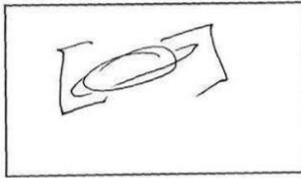
she rises from bed and pours herself some tea



she comes her tea to her desk and opens her computer. It is night & i've see glow light on her face



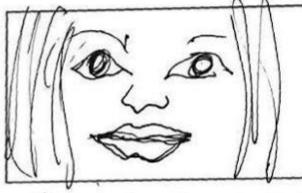
she watches UFO's reported. News states that UFO's sightings are more frequent



UFO on screen with UFO



UFO closes her eyes & opens eyes. VO: Researcher I closed my eyes and saw the message. Come beam me up. I'm ready.



VO: surely there's a star where Black people can live in freedom. As I sent my message I thought about the people while held.

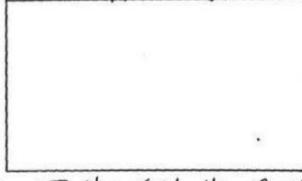
Extreme UFO on eye overlay hands reaching through bars



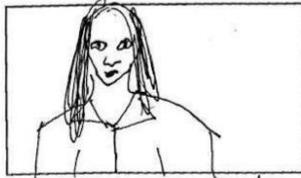
VO: were they sending me messages through my dreams? How could I have sensed them?



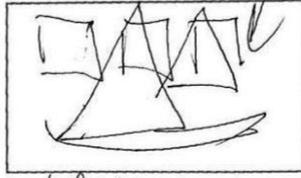
Remember she looks up. I realized at that moment that if the Astronauts came to rescue me they might be had the same problem.



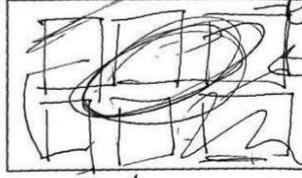
I thanked them anyway. Just knowing they were there for me is enough.



Zoom presentation by researcher talking about her history on Sarah



VO: that we wish we could have helped her rescued her. we hope she makes it across to the stars to live in freedom



Zoom presentation continues researcher speaking about her research

Zoom window goes dark speech

Figure 29: Journal, June 12, 2021.

As noted in Chapter One, epiphanies can emerge at any time during the research-creation process. They can be triggered by an image, a feeling, or anything that produces a sudden and vivid realization. I had such an epiphany when I learned from reading Evans' (2013) book *Master Shipbuilders of Newfoundland* that shipwrights in eighteenth-century Newfoundland were also some of the first builders of the towns. Due to their building techniques, the naves of churches resembled the shape of the holds of ships. As Evans asserts, and Jordan Bennett, a Mi'kmaq artist whose work I wrote about in Chapter Two confirmed that looking up into the naves of these churches is like looking down into the hold of a ship. This realization produced a major shift in my work. The Church was an instrument through which the enslavement of Africans was justified and sanctified. European heads of state and churches funded slaving missions, and churches owned enslaved Black and Indigenous people. I decided to flip the meaning of the nave of the church, repurposing it to represent the hold and act as a stage for Middle Passage memory. As soon as I decided on this concept, ideas came quickly. Below are some of the ideas I sketched and wrote.

2017  
 25  
 7 UTRP UTRP 2020 2/20/21  
NAVE  
 What if Nave does not actually exist  
 in the real world? What if it is  
 a ghost church at the edge of  
 the world in Trinity? A place  
 created to mourn the dead? A place  
 for reckoning and imagining...  
 What if this place is a hold  
 of a slave ship turned upside  
 down. A virtual place? A place  
 out of time. How does one create  
 Nave? How does one enter? Who created  
 it? It's an Afrocentric Intersection  
 a ghost ship. A ghost church.  
 A ghostly unthinkable apparition, an  
 experience



perhaps of  
 these  
 ships  
 behind?

a place surrounded by water as a place of loss  
 and memory to celebrate the history of the African people

Figure 30: Journal, March 4, 2021.

March 4, 2021

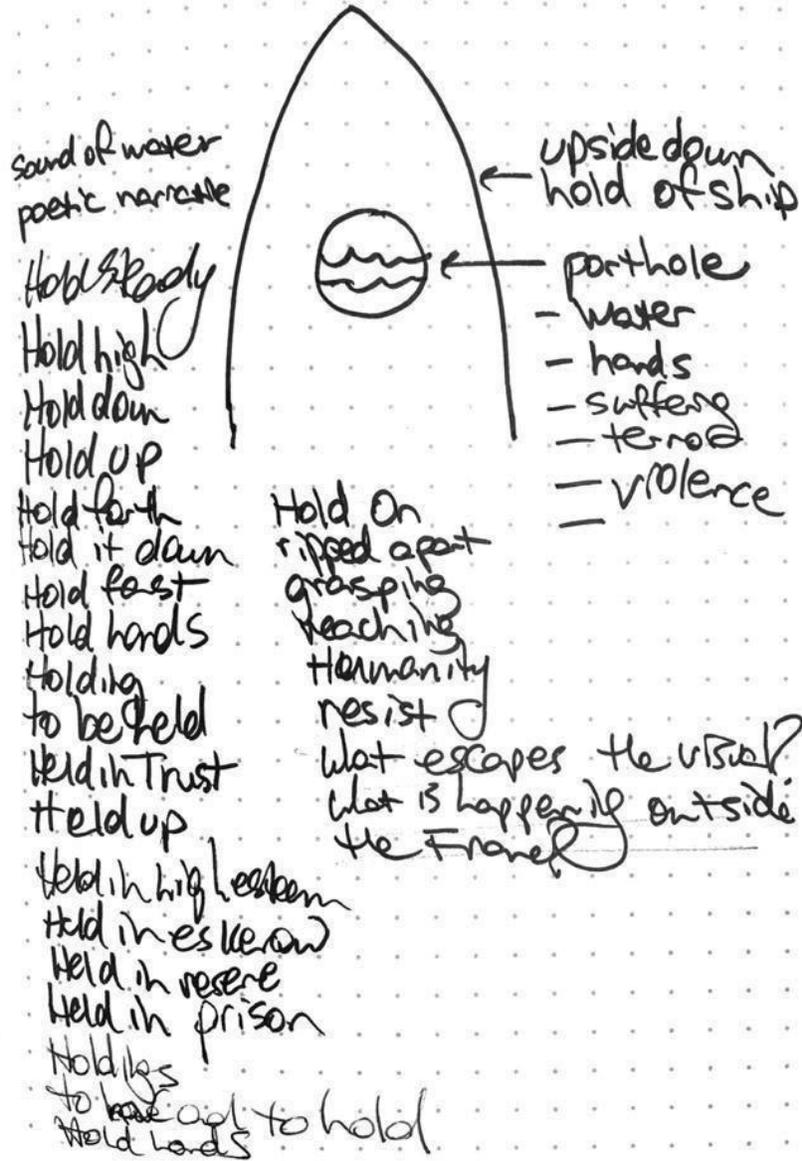


Figure 31: Journal, March 4, 2021.

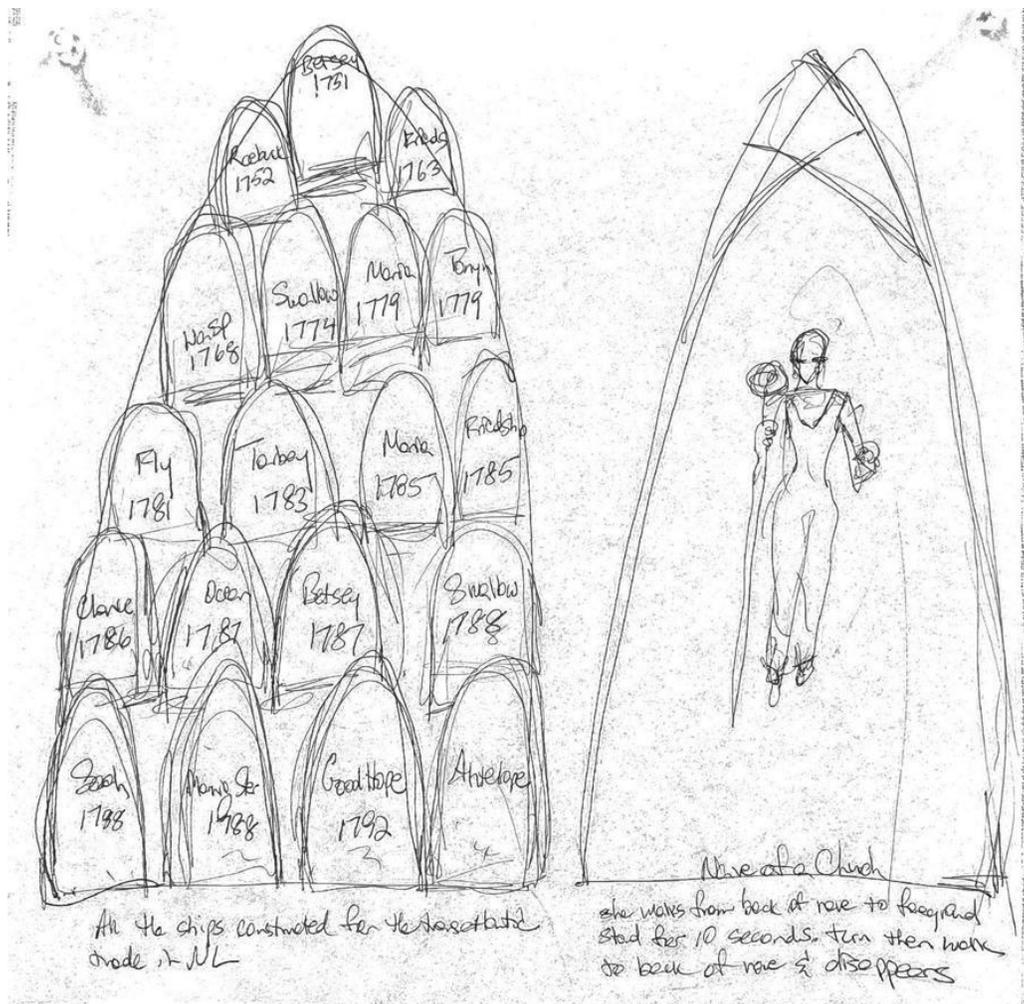


Figure 32: Journal, March 5, 2021.

In Figure 32, the shape of the nave becomes the frame for a graveyard full of tombstones. Each tombstone is an arched shape, much like the shape of a ship. Their arrangement fits into the nave's outline. Each stone bears an engraved name of one of the 19 slave ships constructed in Newfoundland, along with the date of its construction. Inside the nave of a church, a figure dressed in white slowly walks towards the viewer until she fills the frame. She performs a ritual to honour those in the hold. She turns and walks away.

To create this work, I decided to revisit the character I had created in Afronautic Research Lab: Newfoundland, described in Chapter Three. As I imagined it, the character would enter the church carrying the rock and the walking stick from that piece. As I planned to shoot this video, several epiphanies occurred that profoundly changed what I was creating. I could not return to Newfoundland because of the lockdown due to the pandemic, so I found and secured a church in Toronto with a beautiful nave. When I went to see the church with my cinematographer, however, we realized the nave was made of stone. Materials matter. They hold significance. It was not just the shape of the nave that I wanted. I needed it to be made from trees, just as the naves built by shipwrights would have been. Hence, I had to postpone the shoot while my assistant searched for a wooden church.

I try to welcome delays because they often open the way for serendipity. As I waited for a church to appear, by chance I came across Agwé, a Voudoun loa (deity) whose domain is the sea and who is said to be the protector of enslaved Africans crossing the Atlantic on Middle Passage voyages. Those who died were brought to Ginen, which as Jenny Sharpe (2020) explains, is Agwé's underwater lair and another word for Africa (p. 73). We found a wooden church, and I gathered symbols pertaining to the loa to bring his presence into the performance. As mentioned in the Preface, I included a small wooden ship to visually represent Agwé and a conch shell, an instrument used for calling him. I planned to enter the nave/ship/hold to perform a ritual pouring of water and salt as libations to represent the salty waters crossed by the ancestors.

At this point in my process, I did not have the overall project in mind. I executed each bit of the project as it emerged. As I prepared to shoot this video, I spoke with my friend Emilie Jabouin, a performer of Haitian descent, who was studying Haitian cultural forms. She sang a song to me in Haitian Kreyol that seemed perfect for the piece. The rough translation is:

*Since from Africa they've been*

*testing me*

*I am the root*

*Since from Africa they've been*

*testing me*

*I am the rock*

*I come out of the water, I fly like the air*

*When they try to catch me, I turn to smoke*

*Once they know my name*

*Once they know who I serve, the sky will crack*

*I am the root*

*I am the rock*

This song evokes an ancestor who survives and triumphs over the Middle Passage and its ongoing effects. Laurent Dubois and Jacques Pierre (2013) argue that the lyrics about turning to smoke references Makandal, the Haitian revolutionary leader who was tied to the stake to be burned in 1758 by French colonizers. Makandal has become mythical, and some legends say he escaped death by flying away (Dubois & Pierre, 2013, p. 3).

Jabouin offered to perform the song as part of the soundtrack for my performance, but because of the importance of this song and the way it spoke to the emerging work, I decided to shoot her singing the song separately. Her offer to sing expanded into her performance of

movements she choreographed to accompany the song. The character she evokes is a spirit who is summoned from the water, so I filmed her performing beside the water. She wore white clothing, and the bottom half of her face was painted blue. These are the colours of Agwé. The initial delay in shooting enabled the emergence of this important link to the Middle Passage that centralizes resistance and the Caribbean.

Another epiphany occurred as I listened to closing remarks by Dionne Brand (2021) at the conference *A Map to the Door at 20*, which celebrated her book *A Map to the Door of No Return*. Brand explained that when she wrote the book, she had not yet visited the Door of No Return because she did not feel it was necessary at that time. Later, however, when she finally visited the Door, she suddenly recognized that despite the abject violence of the Door and the terror that it represents for those who were forced to exit through it and their descendants, she had returned and was, in fact, still alive. This, she recognized as a miracle. Brand's articulation of her experience at the Door made me think of Verso 55 in the *Blue Clerk*, in which Brand visited ancestors at the Door as a pilgrim visiting gods. She describes what she recalls as a fleeting moment, when the spirits that imbued the place rose to greet her, marveling that against all odds she had made it back through the Door. She writes, "they felt happy for us, we were still alive. Yes, we are still alive, we said. And we had returned to thank them" (Brand, 2019, p. 223). Brand's epiphany at the Door sparked my own. Despite the impossibility of survival, we have survived. This idea provided me with a new perspective from which to understand that the work I was creating transcends the violence of the hold. Through this piece I was giving thanks to, caring for, and reclaiming ancestors. Drawing inspiration from Brand's poem, and guided by my Afronautic methodology, I imagined a future time, a liberated future. Anchoring myself to that

future, the hold became a transcendent place in which this history and our place within it could be processed and imagined differently.

This epiphany clarified for me what I was creating and helped me make decisions about what to include and what to discard. I had already decided to use the nave of a church to represent the hold, and I had recorded performances of both characters, but until I heard Brand speak, I had not recognized the resonances between the way I chose to depict the hold and the way Brand imagined the Door. Brand writes, “the castle was huge, opulent. We went like pilgrims” (2018, p. 223). Now I noticed that the church’s opulence mirrored that of the castle. I now recognized the two characters I had developed as pilgrims: one from the future and the other from the past. Both converge in the nave/hold. I had been trying to decide whether to record a voiceover, perhaps Equiano’s story in which he wrote about his experiences in the hold. I wanted to do that to make it clear that the nave was in fact a container for Black memory and represents the hold. Instead, I made the decision that rather than evoke Black pain, I wanted to evoke healing. I discarded the voice over to center, instead, the rituals and ceremony the pilgrims performed and the miracle of Black life despite, and beyond the hold. Like Brand’s poem, *Nave* represents a sense of futurity arising from the rupture. The dance and song remind descendants of Middle Passage survivors of the strength of our ancestors, and in turn, of the strength in our own inheritance.

*Nave*’s assembly took place at different time periods and in various geographic locations. In addition to filming in Toronto, I needed Newfoundland’s marine landscape, so I found a cinematographer based in Newfoundland to shoot the outside of a church by the sea in Newfoundland. During the stage of my research project that I referred to above as *assembly*, all of the elements in the piece came together through editing and sound. I decided to make water,

both sonically and visually, the predominant element of the installation. The ancestor is called forth from water. The time traveler pours salt and water. The Newfoundland church faces the ocean, so the soundtrack is layered with its rumbling din. I hear in the movement of the waves a steady resounding murmur of an ancestor's voice rising, fading, and echoing in and out of focus. Beckoned by the force of the ocean's drone-like sound, I decided to create a three-channel projection to braid these three scenes together. At times, a scene will take up all three screens; at others, all the scenes play together, allowing overlaps between the past represented by the ancestral character, the future represented by the time traveller, and the present represented by the church in Newfoundland.

#### WHERE THE TRAIL LEADS

The Afronautic journey that resulted in this exhibition began in West Africa as I gazed across the Atlantic through the rupture of the Door of No Return and confronted myself as if I was peering back from the other shore. Haunted by this history of abduction and enslavement, a history that is silenced within Canada's narratives, I searched for ways to embody and represent this entangled and difficult past. Like NourbeSe Philips, I wanted to represent the unrepresentable. Following the path that Bushra Junaid opened by unearthing slave ships constructed in Newfoundland, and guided by my own feeling of being haunted, I walked across cliffs and bays listening to the land, the rocks and the sea. As I walked, I connected the present to the past and future. Attuning my body to silence, I encountered ghost towns, the entanglement of genocide and ecocide, Indigenous dispossession, barren shores that were once covered by great stands of pine and centuries-old wooden buildings that had warehoused fish that fed enslaved people in the Caribbean in exchange for goods made by their unfree labour. Descending into the

archive/hold, I travelled on the Sarah, one of 19 slaving vessels constructed in eighteenth-century Newfoundland, a place long since configured as innocent. The records kept by captains of slave ships chronicled the sordid details of the trade in Black flesh. Money changing hands on voyages in which 5,798 people were abducted from West Africa and trafficked to the Caribbean was recorded as a regular business transaction. Emerging from the terror of the archive, I contemplated the ordinariness of the world produced by this extraordinary violence. My artworks bring to the fore histories that are silenced and suppressed despite their ongoingness in our everyday lives.

As I walked along Newfoundland's eastern shore on my journey to unmap the space and to reveal the underlying histories of colonization and enslavement, material traces and ideas from each of the places I visited made their way into the artworks. At Keels, a tiny outpost community that is emptying out, rocky cliffs referred to as the 'devil's footprints' mark this place as a borderless location where the supernatural is ever-present and the dead mingle with the living. Here, I encountered rocks that contained stories of the land, and I realized rocks are witnesses to crimes of the past. I thought about the rocks that were used to ballast slave ships. When the ships arrived on the coast of West Africa, these rocks were dumped on the shores to make room in the cargo hold for the people who would be loaded in. In *Afronautic Research Lab: Newfoundland*, a time traveller who is from the future, from the age of awakening, finds the rock in West Africa. She brings it into the present time, which she refers to as the age of silence, and back home to Newfoundland. In *Nave*, the time traveller brings the same rock into the nave of the church, where she lays it on the altar and performs a ritual of remembrance. The rock, as a stand-in for people in the hold of the ships, brings the story home.

In Bonavista, I saw a photo of fishing flakes lining the Bay and realized that this shore had been full of trees that were extracted to feed the fishing and shipping industries. The trees held life that is now gone. I found a stick washed up on the shore. The stick was a reminder that forests now gone were the source of the wood that was used to feed extractive colonial economies that are linked to genocide and ecocide. I fashioned this stick into a walking stick that the time traveller takes with her on the journey. The stick accompanies the time traveller in *Both Afronautic Research Lab: Newfoundland* and *Nave*. It is also brought by the ancestor figure in *Nave* to bridge time.

Trinity, a major site of shipbuilding in eighteenth-century Newfoundland, became the entry point of my journey into the archive via the hold of the *Sarah*. In the archive/hold, I encountered the violence and terror my ancestors endured on their Middle Passage journey from West Africa to the Caribbean.

These artworks are dedicated to ancestors who survived the journey across the Atlantic to author a new world, to those of us who are their descendants and are still striving and surviving in the wake of slavery, and to those whose bones have become a part of the Atlantic. This project has transformed me by sharpening my awareness and giving me new senses to perceive what has been around me all along but went unnoticed. Through my Afronautic methodology, I have unmapped the innocent white settler landscape of Newfoundland to reveal how it is entangled with the rest of the extractive colonial world and how its production depended on the transatlantic enslavement of Africans. Newfoundland is an unlikely place for such an investigation. As a child, I learned about Newfoundland in elementary school through playful folk songs with Newfoundland place names such as Fogo, Twillingate and Morton's Harbour. As well, I learned about it through my Caribbean culture, as my Mother never fails to make saltfish

and ackee with Newfoundland cod on Sunday mornings. Newfoundland's entanglement with Senegal's Door of No Return caught me by surprise and gave me new insights, new eyes to see the ways that this story underlies the modern world.

I have learned from this project that for those of us whose ancestors were forced through the Door, this fabled place represents unimaginable and unresolved grief, loss and rupture that cannot be assuaged, as Brand confirms (2001, p. 26). And yet, we live the miracle of Black life in and despite slavery's wake, dreaming new ways of being in the world. This was a traumatic story to carry, but following its lead, I created *Afronautic Research Lab: Newfoundland, Nave,* and *Sarah*, three artworks that gesture to the future through their focus on Black self-making and dreams of liberation.

It is my hope that Afronautics will become a useful tool for those interested in gaining new ways of seeing beyond what has been made visible and that this dissertation will help to carve out space for the Black Diaspora in Canada.

## CONCLUSION | WALKING THROUGH TIME AND BETWEEN WORLDS

This dissertation, which consists of three artworks – *Afronautic Research Lab: Newfoundland* (2019), *Nave* (2021), and *Sarah* (2021) – accompanied by this writing, present a journey. Together, they excavate, rupture, unmap and unsilence the narratives of colonial Canada, revealing its entangled links with Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean.

I was guided by my ancestors as I undertook this journey. By ancestors I mean the ancestral memory of Africans who were violently uprooted by the Middle Passage and scattered across the Atlantic. Because of the rupture of this violent history, I cannot trace my ancestors through the official records, yet I rely on their guidance through what Morrison refers to as “what the nerves and the skin remember” (1995, p. 99).

My journey began as I followed the spectral trail that maps their forced migration and dispersal, from their African homelands across the Atlantic. I walked the streets of Toronto following in the footsteps of Peggy Pompadour, an enslaved Black woman who had arrived there more than a century before me. I found myself in Saint Louis, Senegal, standing in a holding cell where adults and children captured for the transatlantic trade had been imprisoned. I travelled to Senegal’s Île Gorée and peered through the Door of No Return, which, as Brand (2001) notes, is “mythic to those of us scattered in the Americas today” (p. 18). I walked along Newfoundland’s eastern coast and followed the trail of slave ships that had been constructed on the island. Walking with this past, I confronted spaces that feign innocence but which, in fact, have been shaped by histories of violence that repeat across time and space. I found myself in dialogue with Mi’kmaq artist Jordan Bennett and learned that Newfoundland – Ktaqmkuk in the Mi’kmaq language – is a site of both Indigenous genocide and ecocide. As European colonizers

established themselves on the island, they scarred and altered the landscape, deforesting the land. They used the trees to build ships to transport across the Atlantic both the wealth they had extracted from the oceans and the people they had extracted from their homelands. The Beothuk, one of the Indigenous nations on the island of Newfoundland, was decimated by the violent encroachment of these invaders. By the early nineteenth-century, the Beothuk nation had been declared extinct.

In this dissertation, I have argued that my work exists within a community of Black artists, curators and researchers. Collectively, this community confronts and complicates narratives of the Canadian nation, including the multiple silences that obliterate Black bodies and obscure the specificity of transnational entanglements and contemporary legacies. We make meaning from this incomprehensible past to create space for the memories of those who were here before us, those who are currently here, and those who are yet to come.

My major contribution in this dissertation is a meditation on nineteen slave ships constructed in Newfoundland for the transatlantic trade of enslaved Africans. These ships were first brought to my attention by artist/curator Bushra Junaid. Although present in archives and referenced by researchers, when I started my research, these ships had not yet been explored. What I have produced here is not meant to be an exhaustive history of these ships. As an artist, I aimed to produce an affective engagement with this history through my creation of artworks. In my writing, I have mainly focused on the *Sarah*, a vessel built in Newfoundland in 1788 that undertook three slaving voyages between 1789 and 1793. I have examined the context in which shipbuilding took place in Newfoundland – the communal nature of the production of ships whereby whole communities, by necessity, were involved and implicated. I have also looked at the vessels themselves, the conditions onboard, the trading of European-made goods for Black

bodies, the terror and violence that was built into the design of the ships, and instruments and practices of torture that were used to quell resistance. By engaging with Equiano's writing, I have gained insights into the experiences of captives onboard.

Throughout, I have used my Afronautic methodology to descend into the archive, through the hold of the *Sarah*, and to experience through critical fabulation what we need to re-member (Mackey, 1980) in order to put the fragments together, to heal and transform and to glimpse the future. This process arose through the stages of my research-creation process – discovery, immersion, incubation, epiphany and assembly – which I have discussed in detail alongside the artworks that I have brought into being for this dissertation.

The three media artworks I have created – *Afronautic Research Lab: Newfoundland, Nave*, and *Sarah* – embody subjunctive memory, which serves to illuminate the complicity of Canada within the violent worldmaking project of colonization and enslavement and within its ongoing legacies. These works bring to attention a responsibility for enacting reflection and accountability. As Honor Ford-Smith (2011) insists and demonstrates through her work, knowledge and memory can be impetuses for generating dialogue and healing.

I have created these artworks by walking through time and between worlds. I am alive with the weight of this history, of the stories I have been tasked with telling, and of the responsibility I hold as a descendant of those who were carried across the ocean in the bellies of these ships.

*This is a collective dreaming.*

*I call on what the oceans remember.*

*I call on the waves to divulge their secrets.*



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