

**Possessed: A Genealogy of Black Women, Hauntology and Art as Survival**

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indicating approval of the  
Major Research Portfolio**

**Dedication:** sun rise, son set. son rise, sun set.

## **Gratitude**

### **To whom do I owe the sitting into myself as artist?**

I am endlessly grateful to you, all of my ancestors, for coming when I called, for leading when I was lost, for showing me the way.

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## **TABLE OF SUBSTANCES**

**ABSTRACT / 8**

**FOREWORD / 9**

**PROLOGUE / 17**

**SECTION 1 An Aesthetic of Survival / 22**

**SECTION 2 Walking with Soucouyant:  
Theorizing the Haunted Liminal / 34**

**SECTION 3 Playing with Jumbies:  
Towards a Carnival Aesthetic as Method / 45**

**SECTION 4 Mama I Playin' Mas':  
What I Created / 51**

**SECTION 5 Ash Wednesday:  
Mas' Done / 73**

**Appendix / 76**

**Bibliography / 77**

**Image List**

*Salt: A Still Performance / 62*

*The Sixth Company Battalion / 69*

*Blue Birth Beloved / 72*

## **ABSTRACT**

Survival; art; hauntology; liminality; carnival;  
Self-portrait; auto-ethnography; (in)visibility

An auto-ethnographical portfolio, *Possessed* comprises three photography installations and an essay. I employ family archives and self-portraits to understand the exceptional humanity of black women.

Black women in the diaspora are positioned squarely in a fixed liminality– the in between space of hybridity and fusion where we are both invisible and hyper visible.

In the liminal space, a ghost emerges which I explain as a haunting– the theory that the memory of violence and trauma can haunt.

These ghosts help us to survive by allowing us to create art. Art herein is understood as any form of creation. We create things that protect us; we create ideas that we teach to our children that enable them to survive; we create possibilities of the future and new memories of the past. The haunting then is a source of profound invention.

Carnival is an example of the haunting aesthetic that comes from this space. I use mimicry and costume found in carnival aesthetic to create autobiographical writings and performance based photographic works – *Salt: A Still Performance*, *Sixth Company Battalion* and *Blue Birth Beloved*.



## **FOREWORD**

*“Like the dead seeming cold rocks, I have memory within that came  
out of the material that went to make me.”*

*– Zora Neale Hurston*

### **The Story**

It is 2012: I am gifted a family archive. Almost like a coming of age, on one of my mother’s annual visits back home to Trinidad & Tobago, my cousin sends a book and I receive it while waiting for my mother to take the last mango out her suitcase.

A green cardstock cover envelops a photocopied text entitled, *Two Among Many: The Genealogy of Bashana Evins and Amphy Jackson*. Though published in 1993, the text inside looks manual, as if typewritten; it begins with the telling of couple Bashana Evins and Amphy Jackson – “ex-slaves” brought from the USA to Trinidad after the war of 1812. The author, John Hackshaw, continues by listing the names of progenitors to the African couple. My family name would head the list and send me on a journey to find her.

I grew up a child hating family tree exercises in grade school; I couldn't even recall the names of my grandparents. It would only take 20 odd years for me to grow into a woman who now held the stories of over 200 years of names, back to great-great-great-great-great-grandparents. My yearning to know more about this lineage led me to Trinidad, during Carnival, to the site where much of the story takes place. I

dove into the text and confronted it with questions of its origin, the narratives it held and withheld, the names I hadn't known and why had it taken so many years to learn of its existence.

## **The Toiling**

What is omitted when our history is written? How does this omission occur? How does one get the power and means to produce "history"? What would an intervention into this power source look like? The challenge, I soon discovered, was that working with history through an archive, only allows a certain type of story to come forward, others are almost routinely missed.

I approach the material through self-portrait photography, auto-ethnography and autobiography. This multi-disciplinary, self-reflective methodology, is a deliberate statement insisting that there are never too many ways or moments in which a Black woman's story can be told. My methodology encompasses the use of embodied knowledge, intuition, oral history, journaling, ritual, futuristic imagining and silence. This juxtaposition of traditional academic methods practice with epistemological approaches common to African-Caribbean popular and sacred customs is intentional because I aim to produce a type of knowledge that is innately of, and speaks to, Afro-Caribbean<sup>1</sup> women.

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<sup>1</sup> In the *Physics of Blackness*, scholar Michelle M. Wright, in the likelihood of many Black studies scholar, urges readers to move from defining Blackness as a "what", when it is most critically understood as a "when" and "where" (2015). I think it is important to acknowledge that 1) my work cannot and will not speak to the experiences of all 'Black' people and 2) I also come from a very specific cultural, social, political time which will be reflected in my work. The terms 'Black' and 'African' are used broadly throughout this work; I am specifically utilizing traditions and experiences of Afro-Caribbean women who have migrated to North America, most poignantly, Canada. These are transnational narratives that cross the continent of Africa, to slavery in the USA, to settlement in the

In *Possessed: A Genealogy of Black Women, Hauntology and Art as Survival*, I work with the Black body through visual art, performance and archive, as a mapped geography, positioning all my work at this site, recognizing that the Black body has been both exploited for its labour while also being written out of space. In rejection of this, I centre on the body as a space itself.

I have been interested in this work since I have known myself, it has shown up in different iterations in my life using the language of the spaces I am immersed in, but at its foundation, I've always been asking: how is it that we are able to move through this world with such fierce resolve?

### **The Reason**

This purpose of *Possessed*, while it alludes to the fantastic and abstract, is not an attempt to make better or mythical the atrocities we have experienced through history. It is an attempt to understand how we use this history now. For me this is an important consideration because I otherwise get stuck in thinking we are forever in survival mode, which is only partly true.

This project has taught me that what we cannot remember we must name and create. What does not exist, that which we need to live, whether artifact or concept, we must make. We do so using what we have: fragments of memory, imagination and the possibility of conceiving a particular type of future. I am not naïve enough to believe that this is

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Caribbean to migration to Canada - reflections of people who are both fixed and in motion. In the same sense that they transcend boundaries, time is also remixed as I delve into my life now in Toronto, my childhood years, the years of my mother migrations to Canada and the years of my ancestors dating to 1776 and the transatlantic slave trade (Weiss, 1995).

entirely healing, for me it is not. What it is instead is a process of naming that which haunts me/us and expose how we transform it.

Here is where visual art, performance and autobiography have given me a lens to value intangible and embodied knowledge<sup>2</sup> that are critical to capitalism's function, but not 'commodifiable' enough to warrant either real economic interest nor investment. Along with journeying, to carve a historical route leading forward and backward, this matrix of work is intended to expose, complement and complicate the ways in which survival is understood for Black people as a whole and Black women in particular.

Avery Gordon defines haunting as an alteration of time where what appears to have been concealed from the past is no longer avoidable and becomes present. It demands your attention, stating what you have "repressed, blocked or confined" is still alive, near and producing a distinctive "something-must-be-done" (2008, p.14) feeling. For me, this is clear when as an adult I am faced with a constant feeling that I am dumb, dirty, poor and criminal. I have to urgently ask where did I learn these things? Who taught me this? Where was this enforced? And how might I push back against its power? I know that if I, as the person writing and conscious of the haunting, can too be haunted, then this is a possession that can consume. Because this is so real, I must tell how we create from it.

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<sup>2</sup> Embodied knowledges are social meanings encoded in the body (Taylor, 2003).

My portfolio includes the following elements:

I. **Salt: A Still Performance**

An eight-part self portrait performance-photography series captured February, 2015 in San Fernando, Trinidad & Tobago.

II. **Sixth Company Battalion**

A four-part performance-photography series captured March 2015 in Scarborough, Ontario. (1 Image here included, please see Crossroads Exhibition for entire collection)

III. **Blue Birth Beloved**

A five-part self-portrait performance-photography series captured June 2015 in North York, Ontario. (1 Image here included, please see Crossroads Exhibition for entire collection)

IV. ***Possessed: A Genealogy of Black Women, Hauntology and Art as Survival***

A coffee table photo book containing the collection of above mentioned image series and an essay informed by this visual art.

I began with *Salt*, the ancestral spirit who emerged through my photography and became a guide through whom I answered these questions. Poet and lawyer, M. Norbese Philips, journals in her book, *Zong!* (2008) of her own journey through an archive of a slave ship and court case by the same name; "Our entrance to the past is through memory," she tells us, "either oral or written. And water. In this case salt water. Sea water." I would read this and need no affirmation, the water that brought

me *Salt*, would be the same current bleaching the bones, at the base of the “sea water”. These are the same bones that the slave ship *Zong!* were responsible for then floated over. The Salt of my work also comes from the phrase, “suck salt outa wood’n spoon,” a Jamaican proverb that is synonymous with persistence, survival and endurance, usually used in reference to a difficult situation. In the images Salt appears as a figure that could or could not actually be there, she is to be understood as the haunting personified. The pictures represent both the everyday and the past to bridge the connection between these times.

The second series, *The Sixth Company Battalion*, was named after the 6<sup>th</sup> Company – the troop of African people in the Colonial Marine Corps who fought in the war of 1812, allied with the British, and were granted land along with other African Colonial Marine Corp troops: Companies 1 through 5 in Trinidad. This is the group that I am descended from. Today there is still a community called the 6<sup>th</sup> Company, whose descendants live off the 16 acres of land granted. This community would have joined a growing immigration population in Trinidad who also would have received land years earlier due to the King of Spain’s Cedula of Population settlement policy, which gave any Roman Catholic settler land in Trinidad (Williams, 1962). These images feature my mother and two of her five sisters poised as soldiers in uniforms from the war. The images offer a de-colonial, gendered incursion in the archives of Canadian, Caribbean and familial history.

The final image series is another self portrait set in which I embody the Blue Devil, a

carnival character that emerges out of slave rebellion and emancipation. These images feature three characters, which collectively share the identity of Beloved, a ghostly character from Toni Morrison's novel of the same name, The Blue Devil of Trinidad and the ancestral character from the *Salt* photo series.

In the images there are three bodies. They are intended to offer the viewer an interpretation of which body could be which character, as for me they all represent the three identities, collectively. This final paper theorizes this work. Each image series marks a different time frame in my journey.

*Possessed* is based on the family history of a particular group of Black loyalists, who became freed people of colour, in the twin islands of Trinidad & Tobago. It is an autobiographical account that reflects a larger historical context. I dramatize and materialize this history as a meditation on survival and an exploration on the ways in which the unresolved troubles of the past haunt present day life in incredibly complex ways. While my definition of haunting is dependent on the work of Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx* (1993) and Avery Gordon's interpretation of it in *Ghostly Matters* (2008), I further their ideas by locating the haunting as a site of creation existing in a liminal space and using my own art practice and family to experiment and learn from. *Possessed* is a surrender to transformation.

I am serious about, and driven towards, a language that records with reverence, as much as with mystery, the modes in which we, as diasporic African people, have been and are able to survive. This portfolio charts this by mapping the histories that



have produced my own life – womb to womb to womb. How we gain access to this knowledge of survival is the basis of this work and the reasons why it must be both personal and intuitive, scholarly and affective.

## **PROLOGUE**

*January 5, 2015-*

*I've been writing since I was eight. And I now have almost 30 journals filled with stories of birthday parties, notes from friends, early year poetry, tales from travels, current events and some public news. At a young age, I learned quickly to document and archive, somehow trying to compensate for the absence of pictures from my mother's childhood, in other ways filling a void in little Black girl's narratives. Over the years, these journal pages have safe guarded much, but not everything. There are times when I am afraid of writing. Let me repeat: There are times when I am afraid of writing, because there are times that I am afraid. This year, I am dedicated to understanding this. Remembering that writing is fleshy, vulnerable, inside-out stuff for me. I am mindful to not swallow the blue pill whole while jointly experimenting with the thought that shedding light on fear might make one fear/less.*

### **On our Interior Lives**

Narratives of ex-slaves are recognized as one of the first forms of literature written by freed African people of the 'New World'. These writings served as testimonial narratives of the genocide and brute violence of the transatlantic slave trade; however, they do not operate in the same tradition as the Western autobiographical text. The Western autobiographical form privileges the making of an individual (Braxton, 1989). By chronicling their lives the writer is distinct, important and a self-proclaimed person, an actor who acts on the world by writing about him/herself in it. The slave narratives ask for a different understanding of self-narration (Morrison, 1995).

These narratives operate as a form of communal testifying of the experience of slavery, documenting with the factual reference and emotional distance required for the stories to be read as real, credible and authentic. According to Morrison, “In shaping the experience to make it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it, they (the authors) were silent about many things, and they ‘forgot’ many other things” (1995, p. 91).

In her essay, *The Site of Memory*, she writes of the style and purpose of slave narratives stating they were crafted to say two distinct things: First, “this is my historical life – my singular, special example that is personal, but that also represents the race” and second, this text is written to persuade the reader, “who is probably not Black” that the writer and other Black people, “are human beings worthy of God’s grace and the abandonment of slavery” (Morrison, 1995). These narratives bear the weight of asserting humanity of those for whom it was denied. They are words that are written for their lives not just about their lives. Morrison positions her work to offer a telling of the “interior life”, which is missing from the very records the ex-slaved, wrote themselves. This is a space we need access to in order to offer the claim that survival is deeply entrenched in sacred, unmappable realms. The telling of interior lives then lends us the opportunity to explore an epistemology rooted in memory, symbolism, process and superior will (Alexander, 2006) creating new ways of knowing that structurally are not recognized nor perhaps recognizable by a White, capitalist, patriarchal, secular system.

I am writing against this backdrop. I am recognizing two Black storytelling traditions – one written to tell not only the story of an individual, but is in dialogue with a community, intending to reflect a broader transnational story of Black women narratives and two, a Black storytelling tradition which recognizes, unveils, values and tells the interior lives of those who have been relegated to marginal and invisible statuses.

### **I is a Long Memored Woman<sup>3</sup>: I Am Given a Book**

*Early in the 1790s or late in the 1780s an African girl child is born free in of the United States of America. She, named Bashana (sometimes spelled: Bachannan), was the only child to a father who fought as a Red Coat, an ally to the British in the American Revolutionary War of 1775 (Hackshaw, 1993). Bashana would be the first woman's name that I am able to recall from my family ancestry.*

*Two Among Many: The Genealogy of Bashana Evins and Amphy Jackson* published in 1993 by John Milton Hackshaw details five generations of my family history tracing back to my fifth great grandfather who fought for his liberation in the American Revolutionary war as an enslaved African man. His daughter, Bashana Evins, was born free and purchased the freedom of her lover and later husband, Jim Jackson. After Jim's liberation he changed his name to Amphy (I'm Free). There were British naval commanders who proposed to the British government that with

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<sup>3</sup> "I is a Long Memored Woman" is taken from Grace Nicholas's poetry book of the same name.

enough Black troops fighting with the crown, the Americans would be uneasy and the potential to incite revolt in Georgia and the Carolinas would increase (Huggins, 1978). This idea frightened the British as it meant that any riots in the USA could spark further uprising in the British West Indies and with the memory of the Haitian revolution still fresh in mind, the British were fearful of arming Black soldiers. Eventually due to a chronic shortage of manpower, the British fleets eventually began enlisting African men, who had escaped the brute violence of slavery, into the Corps of Colonial Marines. Amphy Jackson fought in the war of 1812 as part of the Corps of Colonial Marines, allied with the British, under the promise of land and better opportunity in a British colony.

After the war's end, Amphy Jackson and Banshana Evins boarded one of several British ships, amongst a mass of seven hundred other freed African people, bound towards a British colony island, Trinidad and Tobago, on August 20, 1816 (Hackshaw, 1993; Huggins 1978; Weiss, 1995). My family became settlers, in another land that was not their own. Each British boat was named after military companies, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6. Once on the island the communities created were called Company Villages 1 through 6. My family settled in south Trinidad in a community now called 6<sup>th</sup> Company Village.

Together Amphy Jackson and Bashana Evins had several children, one of whom was Isaac Jackson. With his wife he had Rodney Jackson, who had Elaine Jackson, who married Hilary Jordan and had my aunties, uncles and mother, Carolyn

Jordan.

The families in the Company Villages represent an exception; they were freed Black people in a moment of enslavement of the majority. This would have created a cultural difference between them and the majority population. Partially how this manifests is in a distinct naming of these land grant holders as *Merikins* (Americans), which also lent itself to the maintaining of a collective identity. Today, the families who were given land in the Company Villages still live there. Many people in Trinidad and even in the villages themselves do not know the history of the *Merikins* but are familiar with the cultural traditions that come from the community specifically the Shouta Baptist religion and traditionally trained stick fighters – a martial art form indigenous to Trinidad. These observations I could not have learned from a book, they only revealed themselves when I traveled and asked and even then gaps persist. My question then is, what do we do with these absences? What can we learn or create from the spaces of omission? In what follows I begin to make sense of the unseen in this story.

## SECTION 1 An Aesthetic of Survival

*“... amnesia is the true history of the New World.”*

*– Derek Walcott*

This trans-disciplinary analysis draws on the theories of social and critical thinkers with the art-based discoveries found in mas<sup>4</sup>, photography and fiction.

I make sense of how we create from what is unseen as unseen people ourselves. I draw on the foundational work of scholars such as Victor Turner (2004), Avery Gordon (2008), Jacque Derrida (2005), Tina Campt (2012), Toni Morrison (1993, 1995 & 2004) and the visual art of Sojourner Truth through Darcy Grigsby (2015) to argue that space is possessed, altered and recreated in concrete ways by black female bodies. Those at the margin transform the centre and the centre is unable to function without it.

These writers and artists are employed as the foundation from which I weave my own autobiographical discoveries. Reading the literature on Black feminist studies and (in)visibility coupled with critical studies and anthropology through an analysis of art creation gives new meaning into how space is possessed (both through ownership and spectral possession) in complex ways by Black female bodies. What follows is to be understood as making sense of what has come from my own art and what also informs it.

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<sup>4</sup> Mas is short for masquerader, a colloquial word for revelers in Trinidadian Carnival.

## **Road map of paper:**

*Possessed* consists of five sections and three performance-photography series.

Section two, is steeped in theories of liminality and hauntology, on which this work relies.

I expand on Avery F. Gordon's work on the haunting (2008) by situating hauntology into the sphere of the liminal I argue that it is in this space that our lives are made possible. Section three deepens the theoretical foundation by applying it to the history and performance embedded in Caribbean carnival, drawing on traditions from Haiti, Trinidad, Jamaica and Toronto. The final section, four, delves into the performance based photography created through this project as an example of the carnival aesthetic to address the questions I began with. This work should be read in sequence. What comes after is dependent on what came before.

## **On Visible/Invisible:**

*"My country needs me and if I were not here, I would have to be invented."*

– *Hortense Spillers* (1987, p.65)

This Spillers quote provides a telling example. This quote is an equation speaking to the mechanisms that produce the invention of the invisible Black woman. On one side, "my country needs me and if I were not here..." we are given a moment



to imagine what the world would look like in the absence of the Black woman. It's a pause that is not unfamiliar. Black feminist artists and scholars have offered several writings on the disappearance of Black women, a physical absence that goes undocumented and a metaphorical absence that is simply a pedagogy of unseeing. We learn and teach how to make some bodies invisible when necessary and visible or hyper visible in other instances. Tiffany King (2013) writes about the disposability of the New World Black woman, the one no longer desired for the production quality of her body. She is no longer needed to make a new slave and therefore has no capital, read: usable, value. But when her body is desired as a sexual object, or as a scapegoat, or as the cause to 'mal-adjusted,' 'criminal,' 'misbehaved,' children and Black men, she is seen. The other sides of Spillers quote, the second part of the equation, "... I would have to be invented," reminds us of this history, of the history of Black women's labour and function in this "country", where in spite of her 'unseenness', she occupies a space that, had she not been there, her absence would need to be filled. It is not difficult to imagine that this invisible body then gets omitted from places of power, history, and the archives that document it. But before we are invisible, we must first be erased.

Haitian anthropologist and social scientist, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, in his text *Silencing the Past*, (1997) agrees. He writes: "The past does not exist independently from the present ... the past is only past because there is a present ..." Trouillot argues that the production of history relies on an uneven distribution and unbalanced contribution by groups who ultimately have unequal access to power,

and therefore, to such means of production. He recognizes the past as a conglomeration of fact and fiction, claiming that it is the invisible forces of power that create this history and maintain the narratives it benefits from. Because we can never uncover a pure true recollection of the past, what becomes urgent is an investigation into not that which is absent or silenced from history, but that which is silencing and creating absence.

**in/vis/i/ble** *adj* 1. *unable to be seen; not visible to the eye.*

**vis/i/ble** *adj* 1. *able to be seen; 2. able to be perceived or noticed easily; 3. in a position of public prominence.*

McKittrick writes about the invisibility of Black subjects as a place of un-mapping where Black populations are rendered un-geographic. She suggests that we need a language that works towards understanding the erasure of Black bodies and histories from land in a new way that affords the possibility of an interpretive alterable world. According to McKittrick (2006, p. xiv), “Blackness is integral to the production of space,” Black women must be understood as a part of traditional geographic spaces in order to rearrange and construct a different way of understanding the production of space.

Erased, invisible, un-geographic, unwritten, exceptional, non-human. These are ways in which Black women have been deemed wretchedly supernatural. There is a

spectrality to Black women, a ghostly presence that requires invisibility in order to create a geography in which a white, male, capitalist project can be written upon.

What does survival look like for the woman for whom both invisibility and hyper visibility are realities?

Is this an aesthetic of survival? Art is the process of creation and can be employed to assert one's humanity and create one's own visibility. By art I mean creation itself – a way of moving, a forewarning for a child, a way of speaking, a way of existing – code-like symbols of survival.

### **On Survival:**

Audre Lorde begins the first page of her biomythography, *Zami A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), with the question: “To whom do I owe the symbols of my survival?” (p.3) she asks this of herself, and answers with an exhale of interlaced memories on her family and her community.

To whom do I owe the symbols of my survival? As she asks this question out loud, it becomes an invitation for us as readers to approach and consider that we too have symbols of our survival and our memories of it are important enough to be asked out loud in a text that is as much about Audre Lorde, its author, as it is about you

and I and our survival. To whom do you owe the symbols of your survival? To whom do I owe the symbols of my survival?

*Elementary school days: We, my brother and I, are finally old enough to walk to school by ourselves. We don't hold hands, though we probably should, because I still don't quite get the rules of the road. I step to cross, he pulls me by my knapsack, "Didn't you see the indicator?" His 10-year-old self knew more than the two years age difference should afford, but I was clueless. "What is an indicator?" He gestures to the inside of the car and explains the driver makes a choice which direction to go, they flick a stick and the little light flashes on the left or right side inside the car. "How did you see all the way inside the car," I ask, "in front of the driver to that little tiny light?" He sucks his teeth, confused as to how I can be so slow and continues to cross. He would teach me first that the things that threaten me are found as often outside, as within.*

Years later, I am entering my teens. In my brother's room a picture of a Black super hero is pinned to an otherwise deserted wall. The hero has his five fingers clenched into a fist and raises it to the sky motioning to take off. I assume one of his powers is flight, though his heels barely surface the ground before he is grabbed by a group of police officers. The speech bubble above his cloaked shoulder reads "... but I bet this never happens to superman." Though, I was the dark skinned little girl who received, with regular ease, the dark-skin-little-black-girl name calling (midnight, tar, darkie, ugly, etc.) I wouldn't realize until then, how little their thrust epithets had to do with just me.

Studying International Development Studies in my undergrad, traveling and interning with organizations around the world and being entrenched in the community services sector in Toronto, I learned a pedagogy of need, where people are taught how to recognize 'poverty' with their eyes, learn that communities need you, that there is a deficit of wealth and skills in some places amongst some people and others (usually white, mainly women) are the only remedy. Witnessing my mother and other newcomer women navigate through this type of structure, by creating and advocating for themselves what they needed, taught me a different pedagogy, one of survival. I have over a quarter century under my belt of collecting symbols of survival. I would see them in the magical way women in my family could laugh through tiring conditions, the decisions they made that time has yet to make easier, the courage, the leadership, the determination they showed me, and now the stories I've collected that are spoken testimonies answering the unasked question of how it is that we have survived, even though it has felt dangerous to do so. These symbols are important because they are cultural markers that can be passed onwards to others. Identifying them reminded me that our bodies are perpetually "wanted" or "feared" or existing in some form of extreme that seems to bypass the marker of human and therefore in order to stay alive these encoded symbols must be communicated.

The container that holds the belly of my art stems from a need to qualify a state of 'survival'. What does it look like? How do we complicate it? Where do I/we/she/they fit? Does it fit?

**sur/viv/al** *n.* 1. the state or fact of continuing to live or exist, typically in spite of an accident, ordeal, or difficult circumstances; 2. an object or practice that has continued to exist from an earlier time.

Art and the creative process are ways in which survival is practiced and examined. In this work art creation represents a form of living. As a creation process it honors the ways in which Black women are constantly constructing themselves and the environments in which they/we are able to exist in. With this, I put myself through my own artistic process as a laboratory through which I tease apart and expose how art creates oneself, even amongst the liminality of (in)visibility, and is jointly a means of understanding this. For a Black Afro-descendent woman, survival as a process has existed before it became survival as a function of capitalism. This is a particular area of knowledge that wasn't commodifiable or commoditized before. Today, it is repackaged in the language of innovation. Processes, rituals and daily practices once performed as a part of everyday existence are capitalized and now refer nearly exclusive to science, tech and business models. Communities and people of colour are only considered as recipients of innovation through projects and businesses under the label of 'social entrepreneurship' aimed at bettering the underprivileged, the 'at-risk' youth and/or the priority neighbourhood resident, with a total disregard to acknowledging what has already been done in these

communities.

Frameworks such as Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) and Community Economic Development (CED) aim to recognize the assets innate in a community, but still maintain an external, agency-based, ethnographer approach. The strategies employed by communities and women giving them life cannot be reduced to the discourse of a development-centered framework. In my early effort to find language to articulate the essence of survival, I have worked closely with these frameworks. I've since found the idea of community economic development limited. I don't reject CED entirely; though I do reject the approach it takes. This is because it often misses a careful consideration of how the prescribed needs of capitalist material survival interact with the often invisible, emancipatory and cultural practices of community and self-survival.

If survival is understood as pursuing a life in threat of extinction or disappearance, then moving beyond survival is an existence without threat of violent annihilation. What remains is the shadow, a haunting memory, of 'survival'. A memory that possesses and fuels. To further understand this idea I explore the life and art of Sojourner Truth.

Badass women's activist, abolitionist, orator, mother and entrepreneur, Sojourner Truth is known most popularly for the speech, "Ain't I a Woman?" She left her legacy inscribed in the archives producing an agency and a will that people, more than a century after her death, continue to enunciate (Grigsby, 2015). Less popularized, but equally as important, are the visual archives Truth also produced. Had she not spoken with the poise and vexation her words commanded, had she not posed for a lens and flash to record her image, today we may never have had her name to call.

At a time when emancipation was actively advocated, Truth, traveling and lecturing on women's rights and freedom, began commissioning photographers to capture her portrait. In the sepia colour tone, common of early photography, Truth had her image made and mounted as a *carte-de-visite* – a small reproducible print mounted on card stock and traded amongst friends and family. Perhaps understanding the currency of the visual document, she sat in over 14 different sessions with half a dozen photographers (Grigsby, 2015). She advertised sale of her picture in newspapers, letters and sold copies during lectures.

In 1864, after years of creating her own, what I would call, self-portrait, Truth copyrighted her name and image and added the phrase, "I sell the shadow to support the substance," to the bottom of each *carte-de-visite*. Her portraits are now in public and private collections across the USA (Grigsby, 2015). There are people who now own these images in family albums and collections.



In spite of her image in public and private collections, her words are a reminder that *she* sold her image, she owns it, you bought it because she *chose* to sell the picture, just the picture – the shadow, the substance, she is clear, is not what is for sale. The value of this cannot be underrated. This Black woman, a woman who escaped slavery by running with her youngest daughter (Grigsby, 2015), crafted an image of herself declaring to the world, the power she holds over her mind and body, she owns herself – she is possessed.

**shad/ow** *n.* 1. a dark figure or image cast on the ground or some surface by a body intercepting light; 2. shade or comparative darkness, especially that coming after sunset; 3. a specter or ghost: i.e. pursued by shadows

**sub/stance** *n.* 1. a particular kind of matter with uniform properties; 2. the real physical matter of which a person or thing consists and which has a tangible, solid presence.

“I sell the shadow to support the substance.” The “shadow” of Truth is a ghost. The “substance” is her life. What is sold is the specter of herself, used as currency. She has created her substance from her shadow, from her ghost, and made it a livelihood.

By commissioning, copyrighting and inscribing her image, Truth, reminds us “she is not and never will be anonymous” (Campt, 2012, p. 82). Truth left a narrative,

one undeniably fraught with agency, providing an important story for us to begin to answer: How do we create from the haunting?

The dangerous likelihood is Truth's shadow only became profitable *because* of her haunting. What she experienced as an enslaved African girl and woman – the memories that possess her – inform the fire and urgency in her speeches; her words were the testimony and resistance to this trauma.

We are the future of this picture. Her shadow is also part of the medium, the photograph, which is permanently a shadow of the image it has captured, and a future is always ensured of this type of material object. The time when this image was taken a photo could never have been imagined to hold the type of timelessness that is now common in photography in the digital era. When printing pictures were the norm, the materiality of an image was clear: it was captured, printed, touched, placed, moved and eventually discarded. Materiality now means images are seldom touched or discarded, but viewed and interacted with, almost everyday on a virtual plane. What remains in the future of Truth's picture, is the shadow of a shadow, a type of meta-haunting. Truth makes herself into the tactile incarnation of her ghost and in turn initiates a thinking of our own.

What haunts you? What happens when we confront the jumbies<sup>5</sup> of our memories? What fear, imagination and possibility might they strike in us? How do we/have we, transform(ed) what may frighten us to what keeps us alive?

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<sup>5</sup> An Afro-Caribbean word for ghosts or spirits. They are often seen during Carnival as stilt walkers.

## SECTION 2 Walking with Soucouyant: Theorizing the Haunted Liminal

*"We will not have come to terms with the past until the causes of what happened then are no longer active. Only because these causes live on does the spell of the past remain, to this very day, unbroken."*

*-- Theodor Adorno*

### The Haunt

Writers, artist, griots, folklorists, seers, mothers, religious leaders and storytellers have told mystical, mythical, religious and cautionary tales and truths about that which haunts, forever. While I grew up with stories of Caribbean ghosts like Soucouyant<sup>6</sup>, Moco Jumbie<sup>7</sup>, Douen<sup>8</sup> and La Diabliesse<sup>9</sup>, it wasn't until I heard the

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<sup>6</sup> The Soucouyant is a shape-shifting Trinidadian folklore character who is a reclusive older woman during the day. However at night, she seeps out of her wrinkled skin, hides it for safe keeping and assumes her true form, as a fireball. She flies across the dark sky in search of a victim, Caribbean children know they have been sucked by Soucouyant if they wake with vampire like marks on their skin. The only way to trap her is to put salt or rice at the front of a door, which she must count before she can enter the house.

<sup>7</sup> The Moco Jumbie, originally a spirit or ghost figure found throughout West Africa (Hill, 1972, p 12) emerged as a carnival figure who walks on stilts and dances with a jig.

<sup>8</sup> Douen are said to be scary looking lost children in the woods who lure other children, who have not been baptized into the forest. It is said to prevent a Douen from luring your child you must Christian them and never call their name out loud in a forest or whistle in the Savannah late at night (2004, Besson, p. 58)

<sup>9</sup> La Diabliesse is a beautiful seductress of Trinidadian folklore. She is half woman born human but her dealings with the devil have made her half demon. She is said to have one cow hoof and a half of her face twisted which she covers with a low sweeping wide-brim hat. She lures unfaithful and wicked men into the forest and vanishes until they become lost and never seen again (Besson, 2004)

word “hauntology” that I became seduced by the specter.

The phrase hauntology first appeared in Jacques Derrida’s “Spectres of Marx” (1993) where he extended Marx’s claim that Marxism would continue to haunt Western society from beyond the grave. Critical theorists have broadened Derrida’s definition of hauntology to a manipulation of temporalities in which the past plays into our current world to allow space to respond “to the present in terms of the past” (Wolfrey, 2001). Hauntology has been described as postmodernism and meta fiction. The term has been used to explain that a story calls for the invocation of ghosts to create space for the return of something or other. Hauntology has been described as the state of being in the presence of a figure “which is neither present, nor absent, neither dead nor alive” (Davis, 1989). Others suggest that there is indeed a hauntological dimension to every socio-cultural moment (Fisher, 2014).

Sociologist Avery Gordon’s definition of haunting differs from those of other theorists; she defines a haunting as an alteration of time in which what appears to have been concealed or distorted from the past, such as slavery or colonization, becomes present and no longer avoidable. A haunting is a present-day visitation from the past, demanding attention by stating that what has been “repressed,

blocked or confined” is still alive, near and producing a distinctive “something-must-be-done” feeling (Gordon, 2008).

A haunting must not be understood as a division between times – now, then, tomorrow – subjects and objects, knowing and not knowing. Gordon describes a haunting as more complex than a binary in its disturbances; a haunting impels us to turn and look and listen and eventually act. Whilst socially hidden, a haunting remains alive and tugs at the emotions and subconscious. To be haunted is to have something stay after the physical form of that something has died; the physical form lives through a person or the spaces surrounding the person

Gordon’s analysis falls short in its absence of a passing from ‘what is’ to ‘what if’. It is the ‘if’ that is so critical to situating hauntology in relationship with Black women; the ‘if’ offers possibility, imagination, creation, art, agency – offerings central to the ways in which we move, understand and craft ourselves within the world. Avery Gordon (2008) finds examples of hauntology as applied to women of colour in the texts of Toni Morrison and Luisa Valenzuela. Literary works by Toni Morrison (2004) offer examples of the ‘if’ by creating characters such as *Beloved*, who come from the past, exist in the present, and offer new possibilities for the future. I am most interested in the ‘what if’.

I therefore complicate Gordon’s definition of hauntology by troubling the victim-of-the-haunt narrative; I assert that both the haunted and the haunting have agency. I

insist that: 1) The haunting asks to be respected as an entity. It wants to be engaged in creative work. Meaning is constructed from our creative work with the haunting, a site of trauma as well as of ancestry; 2) The presence of a ghost does not obliterate the agency of the memory keeper. Both ghost and keeper of memory are political agents. Ghosts move through our oral, visual and written histories in complex, varied ways; they are at once tied to triumphant memories as well as violent memories. It is important to consider that an unacknowledged ghostly agency represents a second violence; we allow space for the rationalization of harmful acts in distancing those who caused harm (e.g. slave masters) from their humanity; 3) Given that the haunting work against constructed temporalities, what haunts may not be a retrievable memory, but rather a possibility of a future reoccurrence founded upon an initial happening; 4) The haunting's scale of impact ranges from the individual to entire groups and societies.

The haunting does not only exist in reference to the history of slavery; the haunting also exists in the massive institutions that originate from this history. For example, the prison industrial complex (PIC) is structurally reminiscent of slavery in its over population of black and brown bodies. The fear of incarceration can play out on a small-scale in the conversation between a mother and her child. It is a haunting that has a mother pull off the hood of a jacket from her son's head before he leaves the house; it is a haunting that has her ask him to not drive at night in a car filled with other Black men; it is a haunting that has her ask him to not be left alone in a White person's house, even as a child, lest something go missing. These strategies emerge

from places the mother did not create, places that ask that she relay hauntings to her child. These strategies may be informed by the possibility of a haunting rather than the memory of a past haunting. Historian Saidiya Hartman (2003) offers insight, “One can say that the *possibility* of being property is one of the essential elements that draws the line between blackness and whiteness” [my emphasis](p. 188).

The argument that the past haunts us is by no means new. In fact, Black scholars have necessarily taken up this argument, particularly in relation to the transatlantic slave trade and its current manifestation. Within black studies – a more African American tradition of Afro-diasporic scholarship – Afro pessimists, a term used in relation to the work by Saidiya Hartman and other writers, argue that the operation of white society is contingent on the brutal violence of the history of slavery; the history still continues and without a dramatic event equal in size to slavery, it always will. Hartman posits it as “obscene” to make ease of a brutal history, to take “the narrative of defeat into an opportunity for celebration” (2008, p. 185) and “still find a way to feel good about ourselves”.

Afro pessimists say we must rewrite the current racial social order or continue to be subjected to the trauma of seeing an African past that continuously reoccurs and haunts (Marriot, 2007). I do not disagree – we cannot make better the abhorrent racist, White supremacist violence of the middle passage and I do not intend to do so. I ask to instead acknowledge and understand the complexity of this history: to claim that we are perpetual victims of a destructive past is to disregard the ways in which

we have exerted our agency to craft lives for ourselves and our children. The language of permanent victimhood denies our agency and craft

How do we make sense of daily experiences which continue to exist in relation to a destructive haunting? I propose that the first step is to locate the haunting.

### **Locating the Haunting**

In the widely cited text, "Betwix and Between", Victor Turner (2004) laments on the in-between period characterized by the rites of passage process presented by Arnold Van Gennep in his text *Rites de Passage*. Van Geannep presents the process as, "rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age." (2004, p. 235). He characterizes the rites of passage process as trifold: Separation, the moment of symbolic or physical detachment from either a group or location; Liminality, an in-between phase in which the initiate's position and identity transitions; and Integration, the phase of entering a state in which the initiate has a new identity and is reintegrated into their original community. I am most concerned with the middle stage, the liminal period.

My experiences of living in South Africa and hearing stories of *Ulwaluko*, the transitional rites processes of Xhosa boys transitioning into men, in moving through my own rites of passage, with an eldership circle in Toronto, in addition to my personal experiences of witnessing the rites of passage process, have cultivated an



understanding of the liminal period as a space in which many things are once true. Liminality is neither here nor there; it is the moment 'in between' separation and integration in which one has neither their new nor old identity – you are neither visible nor invisible. For initiates the site of liminality is a foreign space, a symbolic process with a structured beginning and end. There is a way out; there is a ceremony leader experienced in leading the process of integrating adults into community. Liminality is characterized by indeterminacy, ambiguity, hybridity, and a potential for subversion and change.

I am most interested in the hybridity of liminality as well as the potential liminality carries for subversion and change. I argue that those living in the Black Atlantic exist in liminal space. This liminality would begin at entry into the slave ship, a geographical and motioned symbol, characterizing a physical site of the 'in-between'. Turner writes that during the 'in-between' phase the occupants may be "stained black", forced to live in the company of masked or death representative others, dwell amongst "the dead or worst still, the un-dead" (i.e. the haunting) and have their names stripped. The characteristics of the liminal are recognizable to many, even those moderately familiar with the racist violence of the middle passage: cultural differences meshed under one socio-economic title of "Black" or "Negro", slave ships with dead bodies and African names changed to White Western, colonial ones as markers of property. Turner suggests that unique to this in-between site is an inability of the larger society to recognize, visibly and socially, the occupant of the liminal. He argues that society does not have a structure to recognize the non-

girl or non-woman and so she becomes invisible.

Here I diverge from Turner and employ an understanding of the liminal as neither visible nor invisible, but rather both. There is a layering, a hybridity and a constant in-process transformation that exists in this space. Homi Bhabha (2005) argues that the use of language to understand hybridity as political is important to grasp the nuances of the experience of those for whom hybridity is a form of survival. Bhabha's writing suggests that colonial authority operates by splitting complexity into simple binaries. For example, the colonial project recognizes non-White bodies as 'Others', as surplus populations, and thus, exploitable. Bhabha's project suggests that grasping hybridity opens space to challenge binaries in which one side always holds more power than the other. He theorizes that it is through the understanding of this hybrid space -and by extension of the colonial project- that the presence of this colonial authority becomes visible.

I employ the liminal site as a space to understand and locate the co-existence of transformation, (in)visibility, and the haunting, where multiple or conflicting characteristics, such as an African-Canadian-Caribbean identity, or a body that is both invisible, and visible, can be equally true. Those existing within the liminal give rise to transformation by occupying multiple ways of existing in the world. The liminal allows me to recognize that the history of violence and separation doesn't end there with us as victimized initiates; we are instead actors who transform and claim the spaces we are in. We are in a constant state of flux. I suggest that we reimagine transformation in the liminal as transformation of the liminal. I

have begun this reimagining by associating the liminal with the sacred – not a far removed idea, as those that are ghostly, the haunting, exist in the in-between.

### **The Liminal as Sacred**

Jacqui Alexander (2006), in her book, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, talks about this in-between space she calls “The Crossing”, and recognizes it as a part of an African cosmological system. In the final section of *Pedagogies of Crossing*, Alexander speaks on how sacred space journeys and transforms, manifesting in different variations depending on the social, political, cultural contexts in which it is embedded. In other words, the crossing of Alexander’s text tells us that the liminal, while instigated through rites of passage, can duly be understood as a spiritual and metaphysical site.

Alexander writes, “African-based cosmological systems are complex manifestations of the geographies of crossing and dislocation. They are at the same time manifestations of locatedness, rootedness, and belonging that map individual and collective relationships to the Divine.” (p. 291) Alexander speaks of a hybridity in the in-between site, both fixed and dynamic. This hybridity is one of many means of understanding how we can be part of a racist system that erases, disregards and criminalizes Black bodies while jointly growing, building, creating, loving, defying and defining for ourselves what our spaces will look like and how we will

negotiate with the ghosts within them. I purport then that what is liminal is sacred and what is sacred is liminal.

I propose a different understanding of liminality, altogether: I propose liminality is a site of magic. That liminality is incited through a form of separation does not mean that liminal space did not exist prior to the separation. My argument requires an understanding of what is liminal in an African context. For example, the crossing in Alexander's text is linked to the Congolese Kalunga, a liminal space materialized as a cross symbol that represents birth, life, death and afterlife intersected at a threshold. Alexander writes, "By the time these energies began to plant themselves on the soil of the Americas, bringing different consciousness of culture, language and region, they had long undergone various journeys and transformations" (p. 291). Black people transform this space, using it as a source of power and in turn transforms surrounding environments.

Without liminality, structures such as the economy would be incapable of functioning.

White, patriarchal, colonial, capitalist society denies that transformation inside the liminal transforms that which is outside of it. However, without liminality, structures such as the economy would be rendered incapable of function. Bodies existing in the liminal are socially invisible by the capitalist exploitation of labour.

Structurally, an economic site exists that benefits from the fruits of her labour, something of her that can be seen. Invisibility then is an invention of the state—one that the state has a stake in maintaining. An invisible Black woman represents a citizenship and history that can be denied. Her body represents a capitalist function; she has no voice, no face. She is a shadow.

I am reminded that either I was not supposed to be here or my immediate presence is invisible enough to go unnoticed even as I am being sold (to).

Here it is the possession that saves us. The possession is the site of the liminal; it is both political and sacred. It is the space that enables hybridity to exist as a means to undermine colonial power. It is the site from which we exist which is transformed by our very bodies and in turn transforms the centre. I propose that the creation which comes from this site is one of subversion and liberation and can only be understood through the haunting, the space omitted from archive and undetectable to white, patriarchal, capitalist, secular social structures. What follows uses Carnival as an example of this.

### SECTION 3 Playing with Jumbies: Towards a Carnival Aesthetic

*"Our common ground is never muddled and obscured, no matter how demonic the disguise, never are we among aliens." – Avery Gordon*

My mother wasn't allowed to play mas. Good, Christian, well-brought up, girl children, simply didn't do those things. My earliest memory of playing mas was in San Fernando, Trinidad; I must have been around six years old. We were costumed as clowns with chalky white painted on our faces, a rainbow coloured duster as a staff, and a mop head, hiding our hair below, crowned the outfit. We looked liked white-faced Rasta clowns. When we, my brother and I, were young she always made sure that we understood and were exposed to our culture and history and knew well the country she loved so much that she left for us. It wouldn't be till I was much older that I could appreciate with reverence and humility the privilege my mother afforded us to play mas in Trinidad even as Caribbean children growing up in Canada.

My mother put us in mas even though she was taught not to participate. Why? Why was it so important to her that her children participate in something so deeply entrenched in bacchanal<sup>10</sup>, in cultures of resistance, of revolt, of freedom and play that her own mother forbade? I don't think she could not have. My mother is Carnival. In my early childhood I can remember her defiance of the barriers to employment posed by the Canadian immigration system, the humour she carried

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<sup>10</sup> Bacchanal is a Greco-Roma God who is the lord of festivities. Colloquially, the term bacchanal is used to express excitement and bad behavior.

through difficulty, the politics she sought to understand, dissect and feed back to us, and the surrealism and mythology she prized as a source of knowledge. It would be some years later that I would realize my mother's insistence in returning annually to Trinidad with us, and teaching us about Carnival – a ritual so deeply embedded into the fabric of Trinidad – was rooted in a source of knowledge that would come to inform my sense of self.

Understanding the history of Carnival as both an aesthetic and an intervention is important to understanding Carnival as a form of methodology. Carnival is a performance-based aesthetic that shares recognizable similarities wherever it is celebrated across the African diaspora. It is mythological, surrealist and poetic; it is ancestral memory, political satire and personal revelation through a spectacle of grotesquery, sexuality and mimicry, from our fantasy, mythology and nightmares.

In what follows, I enlist Carnival as an example of creation from the haunting by providing an exploration, through my creative process, of how I used the Carnival aesthetic as a method to trouble what is archived dissecting how I, as an artist, create from this site.

### **On Carnival**

Russian philosopher Bakhtin's work on Carnival (2011) is widely cited as instrumental in deconstructing this public art form. As characterized by Bakhtin, Carnival

is a public space where the social world and utopian imaginations intersect. The body becomes an incarnation of freedom through its use of the extraordinary. It is a moment when everything is permitted, bordering life and art. He suggests Carnival offers an idea of alternative ways of living where what is imagined becomes material and real, a space in which birth and foul behaviour can coexist and anything is possible. Ancestral realms are evoked and what is dead comes to life, what is past becomes present or reimagined. The Carnival is without rule and is a site of endless possibility.

Carnival in its traditional manifestations is organized chaos, incited by memories of slavery and revolt. During Carnival, all things are possible – regardless of any socio-economic qualifier, the previously invisible, become Gods. Carnival brings to light what is hidden but permeates in the judicial, political and social systems, as a form of corruption or normalized injustice, and makes it visible, tangible, approachable, comical, ironic and alive.

During Carnival, the spirits come to walk amongst us. The haunting has multiple origins and a great many ways of manifesting – the direct, material form of Carnival is an incredible form to expose.

Carnival provides us with a way of knowing because it exposes what is invisible and allows an interweaving of often-disconnected concepts. Through Carnival masqueraders combine contemporary politics with mythological figures and current events with deep-seeded histories by creating a liminal space to do it. The hybridity



that we see in a Carnival procession is a mix of cultural traditions often bringing the past forward in digestible ways.

### **Carnival as Method**

As a Trinidadian woman, I grew up with the absolute privilege of having Carnival surrounding me: calypso, soca, steel pan, extempo competitions, queens, kings, kiddies, whining, masquerading, chipping, juking, *jouvert* morning, Carnival Sunday, bands, playing, jumping, sections, moko jumbies, fancy sailors, blue/black/red devils, family gatherings and shit talking surround the Carnival spirit. It is an embodiment of African, Asian and European sensibilities, brought with, adopted and maintained by Africans crossing the middle passage. Indeed it is a spirit. There is a necessary magic that is honoured during Carnival. How bold and creative can one be, becomes central to social, political and cultural life. In fact, the idea of imagination is met with such high regard that to create during Carnival is an expectation, not only of mas artists, but also of school children from the youngest age of enrolment. All my practice is in a sense Carnival, because I think a lot of my life is.

In my artistic process I played with the idea of invoking ancestral bodies both as spirit (i.e. *Salt*) and as imagined human experiences (i.e. *The Sixth Company Battalion*). Performance was used as a means of assuming a character that could go beyond what I could express as myself in a picture; I wanted to create images that felt impossible outside of that moment, but lead to a freedom that only is found during Carnival. The disruption and unity that Carnival commands becomes a

process, through conversations with family members, that bring us together to learn more of what this performance can teach us of our own histories. Each phase of producing the images, from sourcing inspiration, to speaking to my family members individually to garner their support, to searching archives to explore ways in which I could insert myself became a moment of preparation to play mas, which in my photography, became the images themselves. Through the process I learned of 3 dynamic pillars which feed my Carnival method: 1) The use of art creation and personal liberation methodology, SORPLUSI, created by d'bi young anitafrika; 2) The auto-ethnographical enunciation and exploration and 3) Prioritizing Black women's narratives, both those living and those who have transitioned as ancestors.

I used the principles of SORPLUSI to delve further into my understanding of Carnival. In the acronym of SORPLUSI, each letter corresponds to a principal and a set of actions. The principals that I employed in experimenting with Carnival as a method were: Self Knowledge, Political Content and Context and Sacredness. Self-knowledge and mastery became central to this work. I realized that I must follow what has been uncovered as my purpose in order to create art that functions in the realm of the impossible. Through Political Content and Context, I position myself in multiple locations, understanding the power I hold as a creator, a scholar and a sister/daughter/niece. Finally, Sacredness, this principle I could not escape, even if I very much desired to. I was constantly brought back to the sacred, which guided me through the creation process.

Autobiographical writing helped me find my characters, it helped me to figure out which elements of Carnival were urgent for me to play with. I found sexuality, grotesque, mimicry and haunting to speak most to me. This came out of the work I was doing in exploring myself, who I was in relation to my work, and the position my family narrative assumed in the context of Black Caribbean women's history.

Each one of these elements were not only important aesthetically, but also were critical in initiating my own process of transformation, mainly because I was uncomfortable, unsure and afraid to venture to the places they asked of me.

I did not evoke the narratives of Black women and Black women ancestors; they called me. This work never occurred to me as knowledge, I had not imagined the creation of art that explores archives and invisible spaces and stories and women, could really constitute knowledge. I was driven here, and I moved to and through the work like a vessel. When I resisted and tried to find ways to produce work that was safe and comfortable I was drawn away and back to this calling, this haunting, 'something-must-be-done'.

The Carnival method is contingent on the use of a body. A Black woman's body in this instance is central to the work. From Carnival aesthetic we confront the body as unavoidable, as holding stories and history, as an actor and agent capable of unfathomable things. In this regard we are able to approach the Carnival in ways

that we are not able to approach, understand or interact with people and ideas that we find in our daily lives. I have seen this in so many places of my work that I have even found that Carnival is the awkward laughter my mother gives me when I ask her a difficult question that she can't answer. It is making something approachable that was not before and turning it into something you create. Carnival is a mutation of the haunting into something that is created or at its very least, invites creativity.

To use a Carnival aesthetic as central to my artwork means that my body must be visible in all my images. What follows offers a detailed account of my process and my the images.

#### **SECTION 4 Mama, I Playin' Mas: What I Created**

*"As someone whose sense of identity is located in hidden histories, I make art to create a visual place to inhabit... I see my work as a way to 'write' history as we live."*

– Melinda Mollineaux

Because my mother is Carnival, some part of me must have been birthed looking for grounding in my own type of liminal space. Through my art, and the process of creating this specific trilogy of photographic work, I've found that it's exactly the liminal that has characterized all major formative experiences in my life, perhaps even a range of liminalities that overlap and fade in and out of each other. What I have learned, from recognizing myself in this crossroad, is I often agonize over balancing and try to hold everything at once as I stand on an invisible line or I

choose and walk to a side, which I have invented and imagined to make a choice. Partially, the creation of this work represents its own type of choice, a choice to move from the liminal, experiment with the invocation of my own ghosts and test where this aesthetic of Carnival would take me.

My mother's history with photography is one of the reasons her image was so important to be captured now. Because of the inaccessibility to and cost of a camera, a Caribbean culture that is not necessarily favourable to picture taking and a slew of other reasons I'll maybe never be privy to, my mother has a single image of herself as a child. In an interview multimedia artist, Roshini Kempadoo on her image series, *Ghosting* (2004) – which gives a sonic narrative to plantation landscapes around Trinidad – offers further insight into the complex role the history of the photograph plays out through her work in the Caribbean. Kempadoo states that as an artist this pushed her to think about who she is taking photographs of, who will benefit from them and what benefits she could receive as photographer. She additionally notes that there are many reasons why “there is an absence of women's experiences in the archive” and therefore, part of what my family and my work does in front the camera is an act of intervening into the archive, both our mental one and the physical tactile archives. The conversations that took place off camera, before the camera and from behind the camera brought these elder women into a process of creating versions of themselves, creating new archival material – new stories for the future's past.

This section begins with a reflection on the *Possessed* collection, a compilation of the

3 photo series. I provide an overview of the relationship between the images to each other and to the themes I have written about in the preceding pages. Next, I explore the photographic traditions from which this work responds to and relies on. What follows is a detailed account of the work, series by series, making sense of the choices made to create these images. The photographic works include: *Salt – A Still Performance*, a eight-part series shot in February 2015; *Sixth Company Battalion*, a four-part series shot in March 2015 and currently on exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario; and *Blue Birth Beloved*, a five-part series shot in June 2015.

My objective when I began this photographic work was to answer the question of survival. I did this by putting myself into the hypothesis that we survive through creation and watching how this became true for me as I birthed myself, metaphorically and psychologically, both in front and behind the lens, I created a visual-based rites of passage process in which I put myself through using performance self and familial portrait photography. While vastly different in appearance, each of the three image series share similar undertones through the methodology I employed to create them. Like Carnival, my photography is mythological and political, it is real and it is fake. The portraits correspond to different Carnival archetypes – the ancestor or spirit, the fancy sailor, and the blue devil band.

As a collection they all are based on histories I uncovered through learning about my family history. *Salt* explores the history of women in my family, moving around

sites in our hometown of San Fernando, Trinidad, to places that share cultural, social, economic and familial significance. *Sixth Company Battalion* uses the history of Trinidad to bring forward questions of colonialism, power and gender. The ole mas character, the Blue Devil, in multiple iterations speaks to the multiple manifestations of the haunting.

Together they use costume, juxtaposition, haunting, performance and historical and personal narrative to weave together a form of Carnavalesque (BAKTIN, 2011) bio-mythology. Each image represents a different moment in the process of coming into myself as an artist and a woman – a different stage of my rites of passage.

Separation was initiated when I began the journey to find the stories hidden in the lines of my family history text. On some pages, names were strikethrough; on others names were added with arrows pointing in different direction. On some pages names that were missing, disappeared entire lives, entire families. Even in an archive so close and intimate, mistakes are made and people go missing. What then do we make of archives that are intended to recount entire societies? Liminality, the stage in which the in-between consumes, I took myself from in front the camera and instead captured a photograph of my mother and two of her five sisters, to make visible Black elder women, on their own account. This image was the basis of my transformation; it began conversations amongst women in my family about our history recounting names and stories dating back as far as they could remember. In the midst of these narratives what I found were stories of their collective and individual hauntings and together we created from this. Finally, Integration, the last

stage in the rites of passage, the step intended to introduce the initiate back into their community, having had surfaced, changed, grown new in some way. This stage I call Transfiguration, a complete change in form or appearance, and it is where the Blue Devil emerges. The figure of the Blue Devil, which will be discussed in detail in the final subheading of this section is a character that assumes the form of the masquerade; it transforms and adapts to who you need it to be.

### **On photography**

There are incalculable ways of seeing. What is true about a Black woman photographer (such as: Renee Cox, Nona Faustine, Lorna Simpson) is true about no other photographer. Black women taking pictures are black women pausing, framing, choosing and materializing what they see. There is no other way to look through the eyes of a black woman and even then the lens and our own perceptions distort it. That being said, what we learn from photography is not a still record of moments and events, what these images give is, as feminist and photography historian Laura Wexler offers, a “record of choices” (Campt, 2012, p.6). In this instance, these images represent a record of my choices and those of my mother and aunties who chose to participate and those who chose not to. There are a multitude of questions and decisions embedded in the stillness of these images: *Is Anique a real photographer? Will I participate? What day shall I make myself available? In whose house will we do this? How can I support my daughter/niece? Does this project make sense to me? Do I care to convince my sister to also come? Who will see these? How will I look?* I know that I have asked a lot of my family. Even when they are not



in the images what is captured is deeply informed by the time they spent combing through memories with me, which is pertinent because the women you see in this portfolio do not like taking photographs.

Playing with a type of inverted retro futurism, by creating images that are depictions of the future's past, is a result of creation through liminality and hauntology. A form of creation where there is no clear distinction between time and space, as temporality goes against the tension that the haunting provokes. Social scientist and technology writer, Nathan Jurgenson (2011) speaks of photography in this style as faux vintage. He writes, "[the photographs] ask viewers to suspend belief about the authenticity of the simulated nostalgia ... and see the photo as being authentic and important by referencing at least one idea of the past." While these images help us to remember and rewrite past events as real and authentic, they simultaneously as Jurgenson urges, "divorce us from some degree of experiencing the present in the here and now," (n.p.) and work against its intention by suggesting that it is only the past that can be reimagined, but not the future.

Central to this point is the assumption embedded in our contemporary visual culture, where much is cybernetic, track-able, possess-able, and see-able, that memory and history are contingent on what can be seen. I don't dispute the visual bias ingrown in this present-day time, but I do recognize the reality that there are those who are photographed and still rendered un-nameable, ending up piled in vintage stores or posted without permission on someone's blog labeled as a "found"

picture – a term for images in which the subjects are called euphemisms of invisible like “anonymous”. This tells me that to be seen is still not enough, to be archived and invisible is real and so even with these efforts, I recognize that those who are deemed un-rememberable by history, I and a camera may have little power to override.

The neutrality of an image is always a farce. I am incapable of capturing something that does not politically hold meaning, even if that meaning is the simple fact that I am behind the camera granting me both a position of power and distance, with an object in between to signify this, separating myself, the seer from the subject, that being seen. This is important for me to understand because this collection required that I be both photographer and subject, or I be the photographer of my mother and aunts, the women who raised me. Since what was captured in all the series are either overtly political (as is the case with *Sixth Company Battalion*) or subtly so, as with the other series, thinking about the way in which we were positioned was very important; understandably so, what has been created are performances of hyper visibility. This is particularly the case in *Blue Birth Beloved*, in which my own body is seen in three separate depictions, one of which is nude.

Nicole R. Fleetwood (2011) writes of photographer Renee Cox’s nude self-portraits as a creation of a counter-narrative to the mainstream ideas of the Black female body. Fleetwood furthers that Cox’s work, in part, creates a way of imagining archives that speak to different audiences, undermining conventional meanings that

are projected onto the Black woman's body. My use of nudity, similarly to create a different representation of the naked Black body, was also used to incarnate the spirit of the character, Beloved, from Toni Morrison's novel of the same name, who emerges from the water as a literal reminder of the past. Morrison's novel is inspired by the true story of a Black enslaved woman, Margret Garner, who escaped slavery and upon being captured, killed her daughter rather than send her back to slavery (2004). In Morrison's novel, the murdered child is unnamed, but her tombstone is marked 'Beloved'. She appears in the story as a woman, who has lost her memory, but everyone around her can sense uneasiness, a history she carries in her bones that calls for acknowledgement and confrontation of the past. Beloved is a literal personification of the haunting; positioning myself in homage of this woman creates a work that is as much about the onlooker's experience of the finished project as it is about the transformation of its author.

Photography as a medium lends itself to multiple experiences, which often begin before the image can even be imagined, much less captured. What follows offers more on the possibility of each series, its haunting origins and a detailed account of each work. (Trouillot, 1997)

### **Salt: A Still Performance**

- Images shot in San Fernando, Trinidad and first exhibited at The Watah Mowak Gallery, Toronto, Ontario as part of the Audre Lorde Works in Progress Theatre Festival, 2015.

- The series was originally developed during the Watah artist-in-residency program under the mentorship of d’bi.young anitafrika.
- Photography assistant: Kristal Ramsay.
- *Salt*, the poem first printed in *Black Solo: A Watah Anthology of Contemporary Canadian Monodrama*, 2015

*Salt is the buoyant solvent that keeps boats afloat  
 That keeps arrivals happening  
 That keeps bodies coming That  
 keeps bodies going That keeps  
 bodies sinking  
 Salt as scarring, flesh eating (moon timed) tides  
 Salt as rolling over bones  
 Salt as preserving memories  
 Salt as rusting archives  
 Salt as healing  
 Salt*

*Salt* refers to the phrase, “suck salt outa wood’n spoon,” a Jamaican proverb synonymous with acts of survival and the ability to find ways and alternative means in response to any need. It references the salt-water ocean that has the bones of Black bodies melting. It references the salt fish, a staple of Caribbean cuisine that begins its life as cod off the west coast of Canada. It references the mineral that both rusts and cures, a paradox allowing us to appreciate the magic in its complexity. It references a line in Toni Cade Bambara’s novel “Salt Eaters” (1992) that has never left me, an elder Black woman healer asks a young Black women who has survived a suicide attempt, “Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well? Only an affirmative response brings with it the power to transform and be well.” *Salt* tells us

that there is no shortage of references to the grainy sodium diamond in Caribbean literary and cultural traditions. This photo series invokes the mineral salt, to speak on themes of survival and arrival and its intricate link to Afro-Caribbean diasporic experiences.

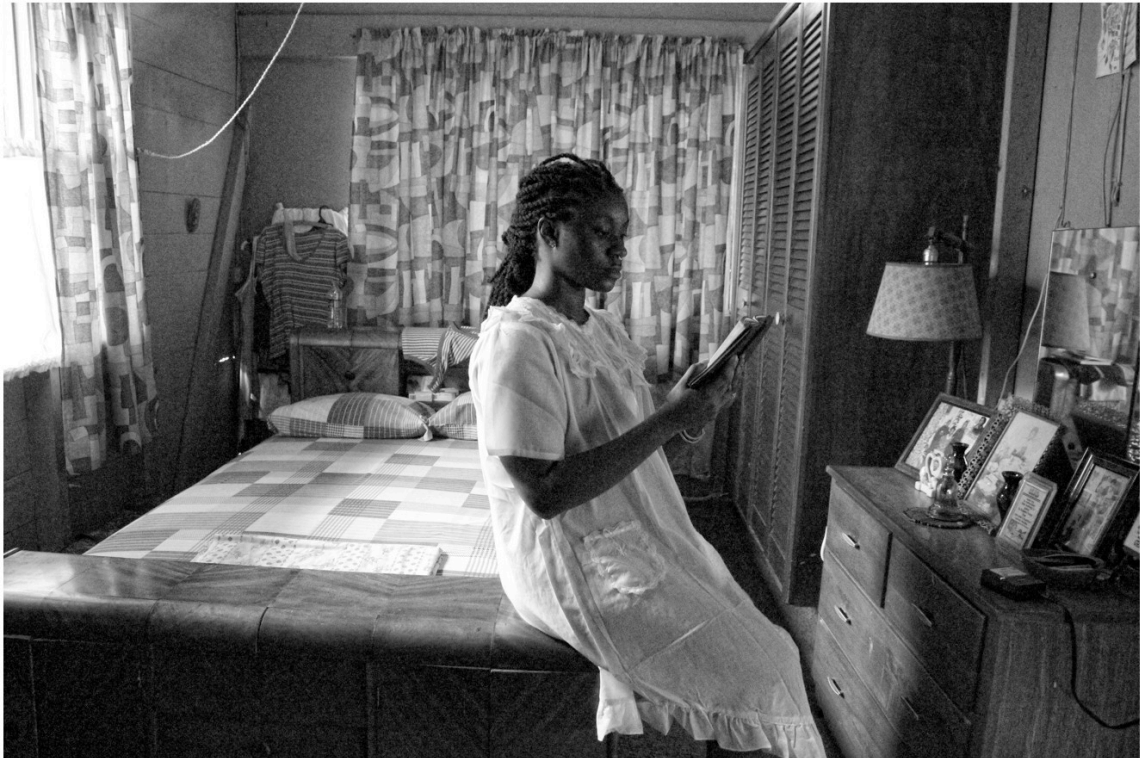
Each one of the images in the self-portrait series represents different locations – cultural, social and economic – where women’s labour is expended in both seen and unseen ways. The white clothing – a duster jacket, typically worn by Caribbean women – is chosen to connect me to an elder woman figure. The connection between my body in this clothing and certain features on my face, like my nose ring, are intended to represent the collision of time or the continuation of time. The past as the white garb, the presence as my living body and the future as the accents on my body and digitalization of the camera as medium. The still, straight posture – a deadpan facial expression – is a reference to colonial images where the subjects’ faces were often neutral and not smiling.

I chose monochrome imaging with the intention of reducing visual stimuli in the images, making the woman as visible as possible. What I had not anticipated is the ghosting effect that would emerge. The image itself haunts and, as the first series in the trilogy, it set me on a path towards understanding how haunting appears, behaves, and is built upon. This aspect wasn’t intended, but it shows how this woman can look ghostly, almost transparent, but cannot be missed. She is this presence that’s always there even when there are attempts to make her invisible. I

began the shoot with the intentions of capturing places of survival because the interviews of elder family members led me to think about what survival looked like. It is fitting then that what survival looks like is both visible and invisible, but clearly present.

In this series you can see two generations of men (my uncle and his grandson) on the porch of the house my mother was raised; a kitchen, a bedroom and a corridor of frames inside the house my grandmother built; the San Fernando wharf where fish are sold and bought and buses to the capital city are caught; a marketplace with an elder woman in the likes of my grandmother who sold ground provisions for her livelihood; the Fon Claire steel pan yard, of which my family is deeply involved and the veranda of an old house, across the street from the home where my mother and her siblings grew up.







## **The Sixth Company Battalion: An Infiltrative Memory**

- Images shot in Scarborough, Ontario, 2015
- First exhibited in the Art Gallery of Ontario, part of group exhibition, Scratch and Mix, 2015.
- Photography assistant and mentors: Isa Miguel Ransome, Ella Cooper and Aisha Bentham.

6<sup>th</sup> Company is the name of one of the 6<sup>th</sup> British marine troops of ex-slaves who fought in the war of 1812, allied to the British Crown against the United States of America. During 1814-1816, the Corps of Colonial Marines' companies 1 through 6 were given British land grants of 16 acres each to settle in Trinidad. My family descends from this history of war and slavery. Today, there still exists a settlement of families living on their 16 acres; the ancestors of my family lived in 6<sup>th</sup> Company Village. A few months before capturing the images, my mother, aunt and I traveled to Trinidad and visited the Company Villages; it was the first time my own history had felt so palpable.

I created a fictional name of *The Sixth Company Battalion* to give space to the women who also are part of this history.

I started working on *The Sixth Company Battalion* through an exhibition that was commissioned by the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO). I initially proposed to do an intergenerational photo exhibit, *Arrival*, where I would ask 10 young, Black Torontonians

women, 'How did you arrive?' In this initial idea the participants would have conversed with elder women in their families (mothers, aunties, grandmothers) to learn what decisions, sacrifices, and histories brought them to this place called Canada.

This purposely gendered narrative of migration and history seeking aimed to bring forward a new meaning to first or second generation 'Black Canadians' insisting we hold onto the depth and diversity of these stories. It required that I too participated in this process. I soon realized the depth of seeking it would require and made a decision to narrow in on the history of my family, a story, which at the time, I was still only marginally familiar with. I thought about where I would start my story and what parts I would choose to visualize. I had been doing this research on my family history and the image that kept coming up to me was the story of 1812. Though new knowledge, I recognize the privilege I carry in being able to trace my family history back so far, and to an event that enables new ways for understanding Caribbean-Canadian history. It felt important that I produce an image that offered this story to the world. I thought about how I could create a photo that allowed me to complicate the history, bringing forward the tensions that tugged at me when I tried to write it. It became important that I did visualize it because writing it withheld and corrupted what I wanted to say about this record.

Positioned in this piece is a centering of Black women in an attempt to ask where do we see these women represented in history? What do archives from this time tell us about the visual lives of Black women? For me, it was important because the archives become the way that we remember history. The women in the images – my mother and two aunts

decorated as heroes – created what I have begun to call an impossible picture. It would have been impossible for Black women to be in a military costume in this way and had they been in a war, fighting, their image might still remain undocumented. I wanted to document them to pronounce the knowing that they too fight, wage, resist and sacrifice in their own wars, in wars that there are no medals for. The tradition of dressing like an ancestor in photography is not a new one, but the importance its carries for black and diasporic people cannot be underrated. This particular soldier imagery sits at amongst soldier images such as photographer Raneé Cox' Red Coat and photographer Cosmo Whyte's Head Boy.



Choosing the enlarged print size and the bold colour, as opposed to monochrome, were also deliberate choices. Knowing this work was to exhibit initially in the AGO, it was important to me that the women felt life-size and commanding, real. Each woman looks at you. In this way, they became their own infantry of memory. This I saw most in my mother and aunts when they offer to take out of town guests to see the exhibit. There it is witnessing that these images instigate a provocation for a performance by both the seer and the seen.

### **Blue Birth Beloved**

- Images shot in North York, Ontario
- Images first exhibited in The Mowak Gallery as part of the Word! Sound! Powah! Monodrama Festival, 2015.
- This piece was originally developed in the Watah artist-in-residency program under the mentorship of d’bi.young anitafrika. Photography assistants: Erin Howley & Alvis Julian

This series is about the birth of the Blue Devil, a character representing resistance, transformation, the grotesque, power and sexuality, who parades through the streets of Trinidad howling, whining, screaming and threatening to stain onlookers with her blue skin. It is about the birth of Beloved, a haunting, a memory, a presence calling for something to be done. This series is about closing a trilogy bringing back the ancestor of *Salt*, wearing the same house dress, this time coated in blue.

Overarching the theme of this series is a connection to the Blue Devil, a traditional Trinidadian Carnival masquerader whom I have explored through performance work at The Watah Theatre. Like all ole mas characters, the Blue Devil emerged from historical events particularly the Canboulay riots of 1881 (from the French *cannes brulées*, meaning burnt cane). Blue Devils originally used molasses, a by-product of burnt cane, to cover their bodies. Post emancipation, freed Africans used drums, public parade processions, dance and mockery to create a festival that is recognized as the precursor to what we now call Carnival in Trinidad or Caribana in Toronto, Canada.

I could not have birthed myself in this powerful way unless I had gone through this journey of trying to understand survival through the act of creation, and the ultimate creation is the birth of me. I, of course, was first born, but I also own my birth by creating it again and therefore entering a process of redefining my own humanity.



## **SECTION 5 : Ash Wednesday: Mas Done**

I began *Possessed* after having been gifted a book detailing my family history. The stories in this book moved me to ask what might be missing. As I am keenly interested in the presence of Black women across time and space, my questions of this archive took me on a journey towards woman-centered oral history, autobiography and the question of what happens when things are left unseen. It brought me towards crafting the stories of survival belonging to myself and the women in my family. What does the archive omit? What is at stake because of this omission? How can we understand the omission and position ourselves within it?

During the course of asking these questions I traveled to Trinidad, the place where much of my story and many of my ancestral lines stem. In Trinidad, the archive became a tool to uncover a repertoire, a legacy of cultural traditions (stick fighting, folklore telling, religious practices, symbols and language) that were maintained but absent from the family archive. In trying to make sense of this I sought what is at stake in the invisible spaces; why they are important and what can we make of their existence.

What is missing in the book is the very answer to that question. What is missing are the intangible, invisible shadows that facilitate the creation of survival techniques. The haunting is what is missing. What is not recognized is what lets Black people survive is only accessed through the things that haunt us. I proposed that the liminal



spaces in which Black women's (in)visible bodies exist are sites of creation. Making sense of these spaces help us reveal the expectations of society on the invisibility of the Black woman. She is invisible, but her body still moves as a necessary part of society's functions. She is invisible, yet had she really been absent, something would have to be invented to fill the void.

I explored this idea through Carnival, understanding it as a form of creation that emerges in the liminal spaces that haunt.

Furthermore, I experimented with hauntology and the liminal in my own art practice, using self and family portraits to understand how one confronts ghosts and creates within this in-between space. What resulted was a set of three Trinidad- and Toronto-based photography series that employ the Carnival aesthetic to bring forward ghosts.

I have come to the conclusion that an understanding of the haunting can only be accessed through a respect for the possession it grants us. While the haunting is incapable of being understood, the haunting is not something to shun or fear; it is a travelling companion that aids in the transformation of our surrounding environments. The haunting privileges fusion and hybridity as ways of operating, understanding, and manipulating the world; as more than simple signifiers of identity.

In positioning the haunting as a sacred site, *Possessed* carried me on a journey towards understanding myself as an artist, Black woman, daughter, community member, and as the future of those who have passed. *Possessed* brought me towards self-possession. Where we go from here is the crafting of our futures – a work I propose to assume the tradition of Afro-futurism.

This work hasn't been easy. At times I've had to fight myself to stay the course, not only because it has been difficult, emotionally, mentally, physically draining work, but also because it takes real focus to remember: Yes, this knowledge is important; yes, these stories are important; yes, this work makes sense because it tells me something more about the world I too exist in as a Black woman. Even as I write, we forget that this type of knowledge is valued.

To be possessed is to assume the risk in doing work that is so gravely intimate and woven into our very being. To be possessed is to name the erasures in one's history and place oneself in those erasures in ways only imaginable to the possessed. Imagine: to be possessed is to not fear the dark, the ghost, the unknown; to be possessed is to instead prize these elements as magic possessions.

**Appendices:**

**1. Human Participant Consent documents**

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