still, unfolding

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Abstract

Together with my Master of Fine Art thesis exhibition, *still, unfolding*, at Zalucky Contemporary (Toronto, Ontario), this dossier constitutes the following accompanying components: a comprehensive artist statement, documented artwork, an interview with artist Erika DeFreitas, and a curriculum vitae. These components contextualize my subject-position, and outline theoretical research, motivations, and reflections that drive my work. I expand on the diasporic experience, politics of knowledge, and the autobiographical genre as they are linked methodologies in the retrieval of immigrant histories. The fusion of autobiography and fiction becomes a hopeful approach in challenging forgotten or omitted history and confronts the expectations that immigrant artists provide an insider role to a culture. Meanings, practices, and memories are re-inscribed in the diaspora; my practice recognizes the everyday negotiation between resistance and surrender to the colonial through material considerations. Concepts of aesthetic fragmentation and the value of found materials explored in my artistic practice through collage are informed by memory work and trauma theory to emphasize the continuous state of arrival for nomadic people.

**Keywords:** autobiography, diaspora, memory, postmemory, collage, trauma, translation, trash, trace, repetition
Lay Summary

People who move to a country different from their origin bring with them culture and tradition that is adapted to their new host country. By translation and transformation, migrants show many different ways that their culture and traditions from their homeland survive. My research is focused on how these traces can be seen in the everyday. I use collage, textile, photography, and digital media to recognize what is overlooked in history. My own experience of migration and family history inform my art practice; at the same time, because I work with memory work, my work is aware of its unreliability and limit. Even though something is lost in every retelling, translation, movement, something is also to be gained.
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To every diasporic artist and thinker who came before me, thank you.

For those who dare/have dared to speak and act knowing the impossibility of expressing the depths of what you have experienced. Thank you.
For those who dare to behave differently. Thank you.
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I. Coming

Rather, the return to a denied heritage allows one to start again with different re-departures, different pauses, different arrivals.¹ (Trinh T. Minh-Ha)

when the plane never lands

This story started long ago, and will, by no means, end with me. Because they were there, I am here. Yet I do not belong here, nor there.

Turning twenty forced a re-examination of my social and spatial disposition, the dissonance between place of birth and major social displacements thereafter. At twenty, I had lived half of my life in the Philippines, and in Canada for the latter half. In the official bridging of time and place, between here and there, inside and outside, past and present, I find myself re-navigating strategies of selfhood. It is in this closing of boundaries—spatial, social, and temporal—where new arrangements emerge amidst movements of contestation and ambivalence. I pause, I arrive to depart and return. I start, again, at different arrivals towards other departures.

Today, along with my younger brother, mother, and father, I find myself in Toronto. My mother’s socioeconomic aspiration for her children compelled her to leave her homeland and look for economic possibilities elsewhere. Because they were there, I am here. For some, leaving home is necessary and migration brings forth possibilities. My family’s economical migration narrative is concerned with maintaining Filipino traditions, connections to the ancestral land, and feeling collectiveness with Filipino friends and family who are also here, as it is concerned with adjusting to Canadian ways. The increased mobility due to globalization that granted our

presence here also results in a hyper-proximity between different ethnicities and brings forth new encounters. To borrow the words of Zora Nealson Hurston, “I remember the very day that I became colored... I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background.”\(^2\) It is through encounters with others that my racialized identity emerged, and the migrant becomes aware that colour matters. It is under such historical condition that I am attentive to the restrictive and exclusive structures that define limitations for ways of doing and becoming that do not uphold white ideology. Respectively, it is important for me to contextualize how and why I find myself here, responding to histories I have inherited, before I can even begin to speculate why I do what I do in my artistic practice. This first section provides historical context, unweaving different arrivals in which my personal history is entwined; the second section examines autobiography as a method of knowledge-making for diasporic people, threading together singular strands of histories; and the third complicates, tearing what is put forward in previous sections and explores how theoretical conflicts perform in my artistic practice. I believe that the end (let’s say that it’s art) is connected to the beginning (let’s say that it’s history). Or rather, there is no end and no beginning but that my artistic practice weaves in and out from the same cloth that is forever unfolding. *This story started long ago, and will, by no means, end with me.*

While colonialism is evident in deliberate stealing, torture, and enslavement of people in many corners of the world ravaged by empires, the violence of colonial subjugation is also inscribed in the flesh and mind, invisible to the eye, except to those who *feel* them. Through new encounters on new land, the colonized subject is exploited and inculcated into white colonial norms. The beauty that was revealed of the place and culture of my ancestors becomes the

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burden of shame that I was eager to consign to oblivion. Sara Ahmed argues that the subject’s relation is reconstituted for “the encounter is ontological prior to the question of ontology.”³ It is through my encounter with others that I become the other other. Such encounters carry traces of asymmetrical power from past encounters wherein colonialism still permeates and I become the subjugated other. W. E. B. Du Bois considered a similar double-aimed struggle to satisfy irreconcilable positions. Du Bois speaks from a Pan-Africanist perspective focused on the experience of Black bodies in widespread prejudice and racism across the white world. My borrowing of the Du Bosian double consciousness and reference to writings on Black trauma throughout my paper is not an effort to equate my experience of difference to that of Black people nor does it intend to match Asian struggle with Black struggle. I adopt his concept of double consciousness as I feel that it encapsulates a similar consciousness of the body that I am aware of—one that is attentive to internal conflicts based on “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.”⁴ The attempts to cohere competing thoughts, coming from one part of the world and living in another, can produce shame; these new cross-cultural encounters privilege imperial Western hegemony and estrange us to the past before coming here, a past that is not the past. This is the sensation of double-consciousness, an inward looking of oneself that is aware of difference in relation to white hegemony.⁵ It allows for a forgetting of the ‘other’ part of ourselves while living a double life caught between the white world and the other world, the world of colour. Notwithstanding, the Du Boisian concept of double-consciousness simplifies contemporary existence to binary “two-ness” wherein worlds can triple, quadruple, and easily multiply certain bodies to subjugation when including the intersections of gender,

⁵ Ibid., 8.
class, sexuality, religion, and ability, for example. Caught in between, I find myself (re)searching for my place.

In the blurring of boundaries, theorists and writers who lived and are living in varying experiences of the diaspora, such as Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Audre Lorde, and bell hooks (to name but a few), have elaborated on a similar struggle that Du Bois reflected on, detailing the harmful psychological and social effects of colonial racism. As I dig at scraps for alternate histories in my artistic practice, the scarcity of resource specific to Filipino migration and trauma has also directed my research into other diasporas to aid in describing my personal experience. My thought-processes predominantly borrow and learn from Black diasporic thinkers in addition to Asian, Palestinian, and Holocaust theories on trauma, diaspora, and cultural politics. By adopting a diverse history of struggle, it is not my intention to collapse varying traumatic experiences of diverse marginalized communities; instead, I aim to emphasize anti-colonial and anti-imperialist solidarity between groups, as well as internationalist strategies and bridge alliance based on connected struggles. “They say every snowflake is different—but the blizzard, it covers us all the same,” writes Ocean Vuong.⁶ Rooted in personal experiences, these artists, writers, and thinkers demonstrate that regardless of varying experiences, displaced psyche and body of colonized people share a collective anxiety in the diaspora.

I look towards Sara Ahmed’s theorizing of difference and what it means to “live it” everyday where diverse body relations intermingle. Ahmed argues that bodies are oriented in certain directions, “affecting how they ‘take-up’ space, and what they ‘can do’.”⁷ “At home” are the bodies that dominate the institution. Whiteness inhabits spaces unnoticed. Colonialism

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⁶ Ocean Vuong, On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous a Novel (New York: Penguin Press, 2019), 180.
shaped histories that favour white bodies in white spaces. This is the same ground that I find myself navigating.

I am stopped.

“History is what we receive upon arrival.”

Racialized bodies follow the trajectories of those who look and feel like them. Racialized bodies do not extend their reach because colonialism shaped histories that favour white bodies in white spaces; racialized bodies inhabit social space differently. Consequently, the diaspora is not without a hybridity that is entangled with asymmetrical power. These contacts leave traces that becomes the power-inflected spaces of the diaspora.

If colonialism involves temporal and spatial dislocation that transform colonizing and colonized subjects, the phenomena of globalization is a new form of inherited colonial legacy in the contemporary imagining. The effects of colonialism are reformed and new borders are constructed through the paradoxical sensation of globalization. My work attempts to preserve the quality of imbalance in original contact to demonstrate its presence rather than provide a resolution. In navigating multiple geographical and cultural terrains, I am interested in the everyday negotiation between resistance and surrender to the colonial. The experience of migration does not begin and end with movement from one place to another. Living in a diaspora is a heterogeneous reality in the postmodern, transnational moment wherein perpetual awareness of being out of place is a familiar condition. In searching for a community post displacement, the diasporic experience contests notions of purity and authenticity. Post-migratory distress is predicated on impure and impermanent experiences: the migrant cannot simply return to a place

8 Ibid., 154.
and time to recover the originary. Although concerned with the homeland, the diasporic relationship that I am interested in is contiguous where, instead, new kinds of social, economic, political, and cultural exchange develop among the transnational community, as well as between the land of origin and new host country. As a result, diverse modalities of mixedness, never landing, characterize this new condition.

*endless, stir*

We are one and multiple, an I and an us, establishing different connections and passages beyond our bodies. We do not only represent the singular, but our work is bound to the communities that cross our particularities, hence our sense of belonging is always in flux. Our art is in direct relation to what came before and what will come after; therefore, it is always cross-cultural and cross-generational. Our explosive dispersal contains memories, postmemories, and histories that are documented and remembered by individuals and by the collective, all of which are a testament to loss as well as resuscitations of received traditions, culture, and heritage. Singular roots holding on to soil so that we do not wash away. Starting anew, in a different land, is an opportunity to rethink and consider the diaspora as an arrival for a complex understanding of identity, family and inheritance, nationhood, and other ways of being and living, where new forms are re-imagined and consider the endless possibility of arriving. We are on a diasporic flight to undetermined dislocations. Mixedness resists fixed existence and easy categorization to emphasize a continuous state of becoming. To go beyond. Practice unbecoming. Yet to become.
II. Crossroads

The struggle of memory against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting. (Milan Kundera)\(^9\)

locating the non-place

It may be argued that geographical dislocation is a familiar plight for many people worldwide, that continuous movement is a common experience. While this is true, I suggest that the artist whose migration narrative is an act of uprooting and regrounding deeply entrenched in transnational capitalism and colonial violence might experience this movement in an extraordinary and intensified way. It is increasingly apparent that nomadic subjects wish to bridge ties across transnational and transcultural networks and resist assimilation to their host country. To cultivate the need for transnationality, systems of knowledge must move from the centralizing terrain of Western hegemonic practice of knowledge and tend towards the transnational, diasporic, and confront new forms of colonialism.\(^{10}\) In order to decenter knowledge, it is crucial that this process not only require that the people of the West relinquish its presumption of expertise, but to also open up what we consider as legitimized knowledge, thus opening ourselves up to other ways of knowing and being.

To challenge and move away from legislative or archival documents of Euro-American hegemony, I adopt the autobiography genre not as a way to represent one’s own Filipino culture in a Canadian context, but to confront the limitations of historical, social, and personal

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remembrances and the impossibility of recovering history. This way, autobiography not only defines a framework but it is also a methodology; by incorporating family photography, oral histories, personal belongings, popular cultural productions or ‘low art’, and domestic work, I examine and offer other possible notions of remembering and collecting—ones that are detailed with holes, then stitched carelessly to stress marks of (mis)translation. In complicating the task of retracing and excavating history, my work seeks to acknowledge the difficulties of understanding a knotted past, wherein through the untangling, I intend to preserve the indeterminate experience of history as well as my encounter with it. Before I complicate the role that autobiography plays in my practice, I must first illustrate the necessity to adopt autobiography, and therefore work through my diasporic, racialized, female body as an entry point in examining history and decenter imperial narratives. Through autobiography, my body becomes a source of individual and cultural memory, seeking to find new forms for diasporic memories.

Considering the uniqueness of every migration, it is paramount that the stories I tell through my work demonstrate an awareness of my subject position, thus I start with localized experiences of oppression and of multiple subjectivity to decenter and refocus dominant narratives. My situated knowledge does not attempt to be decontextualized, ungendered, disembodied, or so-called objective knowledge. I am attuned to geographic and cultural specificity rather than universalism. I am not the first female or artist of color who takes refuge in the autobiography genre; I follow a lineage of writers and artists who “writing from a representative space that is always politically marked (as “colored” or as “Third World”) they do not so much remember for themselves as they remember in order to tell. When they open the doors of the abode to step out of it, they have, in a sense, freed themselves again from ‘home.’ They become a passage, start the travel anew, and pull themselves at once closer and further
away from it by telling stories.” My story starts with my body, an embodied experience coming from what I know, yet my practice recognizes the limit of “living in a double exile – far from the native land and far from the[ir] mother tongue.” I am away yet I am there, allowing myself to be pulled in at a distance. At the same time, as Trinh T. Minh-ha points out, the subjective flux of migrants and exiles, the impossibility to stand at one position, achieves a dialectical journey across generations and cultures:

With exile and migration, traveling expanded in time and space becomes dizzyingly complex in its repercussive effects. Both are subject to the hazards of displacement, interaction and translation. Both, however, have the potential to widen the horizon of one’s imagination and to shift the frontiers of reality and fantasy, or of Here and There. Both contribute to questioning the limits set on what is known as “common” and “ordinary” in daily existence, offering thereby the possibility of an elsewhere-within-here, or -there.

Edward Said has similarly reflected on the multiple perceptions of an exile subject:

The essential privilege of exile is to have, not just one set of eyes but half a dozen, each of them corresponding to the places you have been… There is always a kind of doubleness to that experience, and the more places you have been the more displacements you’ve gone through, as every exile does. As every situation is a new one, you start out each day anew.

Here is where I have never been. Narratives of displacement of refugees, exiles, and émigrés embody a double-consciousness that is localized, yet encompasses multiple temporalities and locations, emphasizing conditions that traverse several generations, shifting contexts of colonization, and complex positions. To possess knowledge tied to the experience is a privileged perception; however, this is a position of contradictory experiences, shifting selves

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12 Ibid., 28.
13 Ibid., 28.
14 Edward Said in Trinh, Elsewhere, within Here: Immigration, Refugeeism and the Boundary Event, 34.
and negotiating knowledges, a half-dwelling where both pain and strength coexist. Gloria Anzaldúa calls this place a consciousness of the borderlands. For Homi Bhabha, it is the transitory, liminal state of hybridity. It belongs everywhere and nowhere, neither/nor, an ambivalent self in constant to-and-fro across boundaries and edges. These invisible zones of transition, a non-place, are the fertile border spaces in which forms and ideas of self, place, and culture are transformed. Here is where we have always been.

The stories of people caught between worlds take on what Marianne Hirsch calls “triangular looking,” a distancing device that gives a perspective of simultaneously being in and outside of the event. Along with individual memory, we also carry with us “postmemory,” which Hirsh defines as “traumatic memory that precede[s] birth but define one’s own narrative… and [is] powerful as to constitute memories on their own right.” Although Hirsch defines postmemory in relation to the Holocaust, I adopt the word for colonized and disenfranchised people as their experience also resonate through time, where historical legacy is tangible and still physically experienced today. Postmemory is a space of remembrance based on belatedness, where a new generation of children of immigrants equally remember the suffering of family and community members that preceded them. More importantly, because postmemory is “identification at a distance,” the witness can understand the experience from a distant position, identify the disaster, and start to work through the resultant trauma. As a result, displacement and accepting the dread of the return are the first steps in transforming cultural memory across temporal, spatial, and cultural divides.

19 Ibid., 8.  
20 Ibid., 8.
Personal stories and scholarly discourse which include memories and experiences transferred from one generation to another are evident in the writings of Trinh, Said, and Hirsch, and elaborated further in my interview with Erika DeFreitas about her artistic practice. They demonstrate that “the contents of an individual’s past is the material of the collective past.”

Thus, starting from the body and the personal is necessarily cultural—a means to arrive at the collective memories of the past, as well as shape the communal experience today and in the future. Therefore, autobiography is not only individual exploration but a collective process as it is an “engagement with the social and cultural memory” that moves beyond the limits of colonial archival records. The individual works of refugees, exiles, and émigrés make up a series of dots that establish connections and draw the lines leading to the rest of their histories.

To be entangled in this particular hybridity and the duty of its undertaking is far from a peaceful encounter. The exploration of individual history is a process of reconnection with often traumatic experiences of social history. The diasporic experience is simultaneously global/local as it is personal/social. Diasporic thinking is not about ‘here’ nor ‘there’, ‘then’ and ‘now’. The nomadic subject with multiple homes, without a home, and in between homes, is a fissure in the historically pure, linear, and hierarchical traditional structure of Western knowledge. If the archives, museums, and institutions house white knowledge, the diasporic home is not fixed under a roof, a sentimentalized physical place of safety and refuge. Instead, it dwells on “the relation between place, migration, belonging/unbelonging, gender/ethnic identity” and identity struggles.

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22 Ibid.
24 Ann Hua. “Diasporic Asian Feminism: Bridging Ties.”
mere survival, they are obligated to rectify and reinforce unraveled seams wherever they may find themselves. Dwelling, for nomadic subjects, look towards elsewhere, everywhere. One that that we might yet inhabit. Building materials are found in multiple temporalities and dislocations wherein new ideas of home are constructed by forcing migrants to locate home elsewhere, everywhere.

This story started long ago, and will, by no means, end with me. Because they were there, I am here. Yet I do not belong here, nor there. Simultaneously, I displace my body in the present to position it in the non-place, all place.

*infliction*

As children of immigrants situate themselves on their settled land, there is also an increase of interest in memory to avoid the social amnesia of social and family histories brought on by the attempt to assimilate to the host country. There is an expectation that learning about a history that was before here is the beginning of accepting the new trajectories in a globalized condition. In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Shoshana Shulman emphasizes the importance of return:

To *seek* reality is both to set out to explore the injury inflicted by it—to turn back on, and to try to penetrate, the state of being *stricken, wounded* by reality [wirklichkeitswund]—and to attempt, at the same time, to reemerge from the paralysis of this state, to engage reality [Wirklichkeit suchend] as an advent, a movement, and as a vital, critical necessity of *moving on*. It is beyond the shock of being stricken, but nonetheless within the wound and from within the woundedness that the event, incomprehensible though it may be, becomes accessible.²⁵ [emphasis by author]

Sometimes, in order to move forward, healing and transformation require the process of going back through memory work. In this section, I want to highlight a system of oppression that reinvents itself, focusing not on the original trauma, but on the pervasive, indirect ways that the colonial project is an open wound that refuses to heal. Thus, the need to return and rework by later generations. To notice the re-staging, re-appearance, and related forms of colonial violence in the everyday is important to my thinking and work as I attempt to visualize daily acts of negotiation and resistance in the anti-colonial struggle.

For now, when I think of family members that have similarly spread and seeded themselves in cooler soil, I do not feel that I have a village to go back to. And when I cannot feel the heat, it is as if I have lost the past to remember. For some people, one only needs to open a history book to find themselves back in time, again. I find little comfort in the books and pictures that assume to know us. To recover what is lost and risk spilling in the cracks of our memories, I am aware that I must perform remembrance daily (even though, perhaps, this might be a futile exercise that will only end with me). Who else will remember and mourn, but those who dwell on the feelings that surround recollected events?

Proma Tagore calls the way that the past materializes on the body a “presence-ing,” a word that she uses to expound on a common motif in literature that acknowledges the injury inflicted by the past (i.e. Sethe’s scar on her back in Beloved). Presence-ing physically records the past and appears in the present, followed by recognizing the scar in order to fully receive the past. Similar to Hirsch’s notion of postmemory, Tagore’s presence-ing demonstrates the ways in which witnessing occurs in indirect ways and manifests in a multifold of forms. Evidence of presence-ing goes beyond documents that record the harms and ask for reparation; they can be

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recognized in the folds of clothing that bear the everyday movement of weighty bodies, and they
can be traced in faded photographs without caretakers or a museum to house them. As my work
bears witness to some forgotten wound that traces the movements of the present to moments of
the past in anticipation of confronting the injury, it also recognizes the trace of movements that
open up space for diasporic futures.

In the need to return, children living in the diaspora bear a heavy load in the search for
meaning in the disjunctions of time and place for healing to begin. Dori Laub explains that “a
new generation of innocent children removed enough from the experience are needed to create
meaningful remembrances that uncover and re-speak difficult histories.” Their personal
relationship is a tool to demand a meaningful relationship to histories of violence in order to
offer productive means to unlearn and relearn the ways in which we understand the past and the
ways that the past continue to persist in the present. They also say that if you cannot find
yourself in history, you must make one—with or without the traces of the past. When you can
feel the pain but cannot see the wound, that does not mean the blow did not happen.

before the past

In engaging with history, the personal can also be a tool to challenge the permanence of
truth, as an individual’s attempts at representing historical truth is already a futile endeavor.
Having operated in at least two regimes of power and knowledge, people in the diaspora cannot
objectively critique their cultures; in fact, what this disjuncture offers is a suspicion of
power/knowledge and truth. Writing about how intercultural artists navigate their roles in
creating work about their homeland in their new country, Laura Marks insists on “preserving the

‘radioactive’ quality of the original contact rather than explain and resolve it.”

In other words, it is important that artists discredit the ‘authentic voice’ of speaking about or of their culture and dispute their role as insiders to a culture. To prioritize one’s voice replicates the domination that perpetuates colonial discourse, so “intercultural artist[s] must undo a double colonization since the community is colonized by both by the master’s stories and its own.”

In this respect, it is important that my work establishes a rupture in the flow of political continuity of power through the failings of the personal to emphasize knowledge as partial and contested.

Marcel Proust argues that the effort to remember through discursive, rational thinking, which he calls voluntary memory (mémoire volontaire), is a futile endeavor, whereas the spontaneous, sensorial experience of involuntary memory (mémoire involontaire) evokes the spirit of the past. Although Proust claims that the method of voluntary recovery does little to uncover “the vast structure of recollection,” I attempt at the encounter. But an event stuck in historical flux is what I am after. I propose that it is in the gaps that I can begin to recover what was lost. Walter Benjamin writes that “truth escapes the moment one attempts to catch it.” I do not think I could, even with the help of madeleines soaked in tea or the voices of my mother and all of my ancestors, recover and acknowledge the sense of loss that I experience. What I can do, with the remains that I remember and forms of willed creation, is to document the effects that the past has had on me, while attempting to fill the rest through fiction, fabulation, imagined stories, and other possibilities. Here, in the gap, interval, and liminal is a space in which to conceive

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29 Ibid., 65-66.
31 Ibid., 64.
imagined histories through layers of discursive representations and aesthetic representations. Knowledge is neither located, nor hierarchal, in one culture or another, nor in the individual or official histories, but is instead perpetually formed and performed within the threshold of belonging. Access and egress are established in the ambivalence of this boundary—a suspended space where one is neither inside nor outside, with nor without, but is simultaneously on, with, against, and in between zones of possibility. For individual and historical excavation requires construction from irrevocable histories; in the gaps of forced remembrance is an open past and promise of the future.

The present is the threshold in which previous histories can be negated and begun anew. Refugees, exiles, and émigrés are the convergence of the manifold of time, place, and memory, and it is in the diverse self that individual, subjective, as well as social knowledge are found. Multiple and embodied subjectivity has a complex relationship to understanding what it means to speak about unspeakable moments that continue to confront people many generations later. It affirms an intimate relationship with a subject that can have significant repercussion for many groups of people and encourage a conscientious move backward and forward in time. In addition, Hirsch, Tagore, and Shulman outline the important role of later generations of migrants in telling the story of their journeys. A personal relationship with the past opens a different route to the future, perhaps by getting lost in the side streets and alleyways. Through the failings of objective knowledge, what is remembered of history and culture is not lost nor diminished; it is through this collapse that the fluctuating nature of knowledge is preserved, in constant shift. Yet by considering the nuances of migratory movements, my practice is not only focused on the celebratory optimism of survival in the host country, but also on how the old home survives in unexpected forms in the new home. There exists a simultaneous presence, where in the spatial
dislocation, traces of the old appear in the new. Here, points of arrival become terminals for departures.
III. Detours

The stories of subaltern women, it seems, are located in and across the silences, gaps, and fissures of these multiple translations and transactions.33 (Proma Tagore)

(in) tend to fail

As much as my work explores the power in the personal, it is also concerned with the formal features of the autobiographical genre and other strategies in the retrieval of memory. My work maps a complex relationship between truth, fiction, and autobiography to examine dominant ideologies through issues of interpretation and authorship. Memory work is a subsoil in my practice; however, because trauma is involved in dispersion, fiction and imagination fill what memories and recollection cannot access. This entails multiple acts of translation wherein memory turns away from the linearity of history to “a history of mnemonic traces, each endlessly recited, reiterated, recombined,” and therefore, doing history differently.34 By examining the ethics of memory and trauma theory in acts of remembrance, I am attentive to the instability of truth as memories are experienced by the collective and individual.

In theorizing diaspora through memory, Ann Hua highlights the role of memory as a strategy for social justice by opening up history and recalling the forgotten or suppressed.35 Remembrances, particularly by women, show how memory can be sites of self-recovery and community-building in the diaspora, moving us to new ways of articulation and recognizing how living memory shapes and informs the present. Like Hirsch and Shulman in particular, Hua proposes that it is by confronting the past and its remaking through acts of memory that survivors

33 Tagore, Shapes of Silence, 137.
can begin to transform traumatic events. The process of remembering, however, can be problematized through the product of that act: memories. Memories are personal and secondary revisions, fusing personal biography and history of the community—the occasions that we experience and what we relate to the larger community. Considering that official history and personal memory as partial epistemologies, I have become interested in how memory work can be a strategy in identifying gaps, opening history, and reworking a past that has been suppressed or forgotten. How grand, historical narratives implicate personal histories is often lost in the delivery of events. Nevertheless, how events are culturally embedded, remembered/forgotten, shaped, and articulated adds to the perception of the memory of individuals and the collective.\(^{36}\) Letting memories build and grow through time to be untangled. This way, it is not only the survivor who is needed to work through the trauma; the culture needs to respond accordingly to what has happened, similar to the way that children of survivors extend the experience of colonial trauma and transform the memory. Therefore, in art, the viewer also participates in transforming memories of trauma. Yet the truth of events is incomprehensible as personal memory complicates the remembrance and understanding of the past through trauma. Trauma leaves gaps, and the intelligible nature of trauma does not allow understanding of the event. Through trauma, the past is accessed by resituating and rethinking the possibility of history, “permitting history to arise where immediate understanding may not.”\(^{37}\)

Toni Morrison writes, “What makes it fiction is the nature of the imaginative act: my reliance on the image—on the remains—in addition to recollection, to yield up a kind of a truth. By ‘image,’ of course, I don't mean ‘symbol;’ I simply mean ‘picture’ and the feelings that

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accompany the picture.”

Guess work to re-construct the remains is influenced by the feelings that accompany the picture, working from the image to the text, not text to image. Mystery leads to the truth. Morrison, who wrote almost a century after emancipation, felt that it was her job “to rip that veil drawn over ‘proceedings too terrible to relate.’” She gains access through fiction that embraces autobiographical strategies “to fill the blanks that the slave narratives left.” In accessing the interior life through literary archeology, digging at the site where people have left evidence, Morrison hopes to find not facts, but “the revelation of a kind of truth.”

In the forgetting, the withdrawal of images and senses, like removing colour or the way that tsinelas become worn out over daily use, new forms appear; to take away by small, consistent movements does not cast objects to oblivion but instead, it transform them, where such actions might make space where the subject can exists comfortably. The act of removal simultaneously opens up new space. To resist epistemic violence, I am telling you my story. I haven’t forgotten, but in order to remember I must also forget and tailor from that forgetting. The memories of migrants, however, are incomplete and mostly unwritten; thus, the remembrances undertaken must hold on to what has been left out or forgotten. My archeological site is cratered with holes and silences, still there is much to uncover. Through acts of remembrance, I am only becoming. Yet my personal concerns do not stop with my body; this is, in part, a story of all uprooted subjects who “sometimes feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools.”

Whatever the feeling, my work aims to help build a collective memoir of peoples whose narrative-lines and life-lines intersect with mine.

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39 Ibid., 91.
40 Ibid., 93-94.
41 Ibid., 95.
42 “Tsinelas” is Tagalog for slippers, which are ubiquitous objects in Filipino households.
43 Rushdie, Imaginary Homelands, 15.
discursive forms with collage

When an artist chooses to collaborate with chance, one blurs distinction between artistic production and everyday life. I find comfort in found materials and collage method when challenging historically colonial practices of knowledge, art history, and artmaking. Creating a new understanding of what already exists, by coupling and pasting, is an attempt to reroute their intended function. This inherent aspect of collage incorporates chance with the artist’s decisions as a strategy to undermine cultural hierarchy, aesthetic, and intellectual intention—all of which are concerned with creating a space of possibilities. Collage allows a specific type of disidentification in its nature of transgressing against aesthetic norms, and consequently undermines aesthetic norms.

Techniques of collage resonates in patchwork, assemblage, and montage, which I have explored in my practice to cultivate defiance in various aesthetic languages. Through paste-up images, the connection between entities is uncertain and ever-changing since the construction of meaning becomes dependent on the viewer’s desires for the relations between object and image. The artist births new truths with collage, but as collage is a process of continuous and multiple, the artist’s truth swims amongst a pool of possibilities. We can even extend this idea: that due to the nature of collage, the artist’s truth is subordinate to that of the viewer. The gesture of collage is simply indexical, a world-building exercise, a guiding hand to showing multiple point of views and possibilities. Confusion and disorder of all senses are collage’s major goals, which reflect a commitment to multiplicity, perpetually confusing essence. The experimentation that collage demand from the artist is transformational desire. Like leaving the homeland, the “chaos” and “confusion” by juxtaposing disparate elements lead to their continuous interaction where
confusion and chaos become productive and create the desire for new ideas of place, homing, and being.

**in the echo: trauma, translation, and trash**

My autobiographical approach is through a language and aesthetic of fragmentation, blurring boundaries between biography, fiction, and history because the narratives that I am working with are characterized by fragments and gaps. Through layers of mediation, translation, and mistranslation, I do not offer a straightforward representation or an authentic testimonial voice of a subject. The implication of history and the discourse of trauma in the present recognize multiple temporalities, and therefore, can be extended to hybrid, plural existence. Furthermore, the marginalization of our narratives has forced me to dig at scraps, bits and pieces in the memory of my body, my community, and mainstream history. In this context, the practical necessity of using waste or unwanted material has driven my artistic strategy towards thinking about and around fragmentation of recollections. “Garbage becomes a form of social karma, the deferred rendezvous between those who can afford to waste and those who cannot afford not to save what has been wasted,” writes Ron Stam in his essay “Palimpsestic Aesthetics: A Meditation on Hybridity and Garbage.”

To challenge master narratives, I locate a political potential in mythmaking with the scraps that I uncover, while recognizing a fertile emptiness in the absence.

Cathy Caruth argues that the unintelligible nature of trauma makes accessing the past difficult because trauma “does not simply serve as a record of the past but precisely registers the force of an experience that is not yet fully known.”


Memory and Trauma,” Ernst Van Alphen claims that “events [become] traumatic when they are not experienced”\textsuperscript{46} because of the limitations of language and representations used for understanding the event at that moment. Trauma is the experience of gaps, intervals, and latency, where the point of experience is incomprehensible and postponed to later moments. Like Hirsch’s notion of postmemory, the temporal nature of traumatic memories is based on belatedness and displacement. They appear even after the person who experienced the memory has passed, over and over, repeating, looping, in distant time. The possibility of rethinking history is found in these gaps. The return should recognize “the problem of listening, knowing, and representing [w]hat emerges from the actual experience of the crisis.”\textsuperscript{47} What does it mean to tell a story that is still unfolding? Trauma lends itself to a disorientation that can be a point of departure that allows other representations and interpretations of history.

Experiences of trauma during times of disaster create nonlinear stories where outcomes are what needs to be told, as well as what is remembered or recalled. This type of storytelling is usually incoherent coherent, emphasizing how trauma feels, but not what it was like. In “Wounding Events and the Limits of Autobiography,” Marlene Kadar encourages finding the ‘mark’ of autobiography in unexpected forms, especially in unfinished separations.\textsuperscript{48} For Tagore, as I explained earlier, colonial trauma and violence are tangible in the physicalizing of bodily damage. Often, what is left by and from people who document trauma are fragments of recollection, more moments left untold than explained. Unedited drafts, scraps scattered, work incomplete, ‘I’ underdeveloped, without an opportunity to evolve. The development of the self is


\textsuperscript{47} Caruth, Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History, 5-7.

postponed as the victim dedicates their strength to record the moment of struggle. The necessity of impossible narration is embedded in the incomplete remembrances as a way to articulate unfinished experiences.

The incomplete and continuous work of remembrance is explored in *at what time* (Fig. 6), a series of drawings and notes on rice paper depicting what I remember of the village that I grew up in in the Philippines. Some of the drawings were made before I visited the village in the summer of 2019, some were made a few months after the visit, and some are copies and interpretation of my brother’s drawings as he participated in the same exercise. An amalgamation of remembered stories, sketches of streets and architecture, and even recalling dreams that took place by multiple people and multiple periods are depicted. These drawings are evidence of incomplete remembrances of a place by multiple people with varying experience. The stories told are fragmentary in their accounts, catching the memories—which move quicker, and only last for a fleeting minute—than the hands that document them. At the same time, the remembrances undergo renditions as they are copied and re-drawn by me, the artist, on another sheet of paper. The process of memory-making and writing alternate through the consolidation of the drawings and memories, the exchange between participant and artist, and the edits by the artist who decides what remains in the final compositions. These recorded memories are not only residuals of the liminal recollection of a place too far away in memory. They also undergo selection processes and reworkings, participating in a multiphase activity of excavation, falsification, and selection. In many cases, autobiography is both historical and formal. More importantly, it follows an impulse to create and find form for expressions.

A similar process to sustain indeterminate remembrance transpires in the video installation *from here* (Fig. 11). The video component is a montage of quotidian scenes of the
Philippines taken by a static phone camera, a black screen separates each footage. Subtitles translate some phrases heard in the background. Subsequently, I added phrases so that, as a whole, the combination of translation, mistranslation, and addition, create a prose poetry. In other words, I chose what to translate from the background, then filled the gaps to transmit and transform them into new context and usage. The words are not bound to the time and place in which the videos were taken but move across new imaginings. In the context of the full installation with multiple screens, the images of Philippines travel across new and old technologies in real time, as well as juxtaposed with black screens that, in turn, reflect the existing space in which the installation is located. Now and then, here and there, real and imagined converge.

In the video work *notes* (Fig. 5), the incomprehensible nature of trauma, forms of (mis)translation, and detritus are adapted to further displace the viewer and engage with a suspicion of visuality by shifting physical and digital boundaries. *notes* is a multi-channel video installation that engage with acts of recognition, recollection, and refamiliarization through phone footage of my travels in the Philippines in August 2019 (the summer in between my MFA years), my cousins’ videos from separate trips, and as well as other footage of Asian countries. The installation highlights visual and sound in an attempt to reconnect to a distant place, deliberately limiting the viewer’s perspective to draw attention to the loss of other sensual cues, focusing on the failure of absolute experience. Overlapping sequences on multiple screens are edited to merge and mess with net of caught memories. The viewer is never allowed to be concerned with only one image; as history multiplies, the present is disordered and reorganized. *notes* challenge the trust given to artists, especially artists of colour, to tell the viewer the ‘truth of their culture.’ The pictures edited together come from varying sources and varying intentions.
and presented as one, where the making and unmaking of images shift boundaries in endless constructions. *notes* confront my expectations of the Philippines, quickly establishing that, despite being in my homeland with people who look just like me, I am only a visitor.

The cinematic medium is already a hybrid of all art forms, amalgamating picture and sound to exist in another space. Through the cutting in montage, I follow what Charles Musser and André Gaudreault call the “second layer of narrativity,” in which the cutting “facilitates motion, elongating, restructuring, and hyperbolizing it.”[^49] I relate this to a traumatic psychological disposition where nothing is entirely grasped. Image falls. Image imagined in a psychological disposition. More importantly, questions of representation and history (time), and the personal and trauma (movement) are inherent within it. Through film, the sequential flow can be disrupted where simultaneous, superimposed spatiotemporalities can be presented as one.

“Cinema embodies the inherent relationality of time and space; it is space temporalized and time spatialized, the site where time takes place and place takes time,” says Robert Stam.[^50] It allows for “multiple channels for multifocal, multiperspectival historical representation of the palimpsest… Cinema mingles diverse times and spaces; it is produced in one, represents another, and is received in another.”[^51] There is an engagement with translation in film that only multiplies with each frame, which is further complicated by the introduction of found archival footage and home videos. Stam further defines the role of existing videos as not only using what is excavated but that the mixedness of format signifies a hybrid identity:

> This “negation of the negation” also has to do with a special relationship to official history. And those whose history has been destroyed and misrepresented, as those whose very history has been dispersed and diasporized rather than lovingly memorialized, and


[^51]: Ibid.,
as those whose history has often been told, danced, and sung rather than written, furthermore, oppressed people have been obliged to re-create history out of scraps and remnants and debris. In aesthetic terms, these hand-me-down aesthetics and history making embody an art of discontinuity—the heterogeneous scraps making up a quilt, for example, incorporate diverse styles, time periods, and materials—whence their alignment with artistic modernism as an art of jazzistic “breaking” and discontinuity, and with postmodernism as an art of recycling and pastiche.52

For people in the diaspora, landfills become excavation sites for the irretrievable loss of the past. They operate in endless negotiations enmeshed in simultaneous resistance and surrender within the gaps and fragments that make up history.

at what time and notes are some of my most recent works which attempt to explore a discourse of trauma, (mis)translation, and the discarded. The connection between these ideas was first examined when I began to work with salvaged denim as a primary material in my practice. In hole in my pocket (Fig. 1) and flutter (Fig. 2), for example, the patchwork technique is vital in reinforcing the complexity of remembering and memorializing, where memories are constructed and redefined, passive and active, projected and received. In these works, fragmentation and sequencing are reinforced in the textiles where mending does not lead to a smooth surface, but in grooves and infinite sutures. A disconnected coherence, like syncopated rhythm, is fundamental to the pattern. The action of joining disparate elements, a collage work of time and experience, is knowledge embedded in materials and techniques that is reminiscent of a resourcefulness familiar to migrant families who find themselves stitching up new homes. Mixture as a way to suture the wound between different ideological positions, between Canadian and Filipino worlds. The technique of patchwork design in my textile work, or collage in paper, assemblage in sculpture, or montage in film, is a particular mode of creating that values adaptation of existing materials and reverberates in our received memories, belongings, and culture.

52 Ibid.
My outdoor installation *as it seems* (Fig. 4) similarly engages with perception of trauma in a formal manner by only using a specific part of the structure of the denim trousers: the seams. Although the work of joining smaller pieces to create a unified whole is still present in the process, this work further investigates the lack of knowledge about mundane materials by tearing and turning denim inside-out. Viewers are forced to pay attention to the stitching and fray that give the commonplace material of denim its recognizable identity. This is a way to pay attention to what is in the background; paying attention to the details that are often lost or ignored. This destruction, however, only refers to a history, which is akin to the immigration experience, unable to be fully grasped as a whole of familial histories, cultures, traditions, and language due to uprooting and regroundings. The harm done to colonized people to feel ashamed and forget about the story of their people and culture augment the collective experience of trauma, as the means to interpret processes become blurred. Yet artists, especially non-Europeans, are readily trusted with the role of translating and are expected to engage with materials and techniques valued for their foreignness. *hole in my pocket* and *as it seems* are an engagement with (mis)translation where acts of misusing and deliberate incorrectness are utilized as subversive tactic to mislead. My ambivalence in representing experiences to its fullness arises in the misuse of materials and playing with the potential of politics in abstracted forms. In the loss of visual content and context, something else emerges in the mistranslation or purposeful contamination. In a lecture at The CUNY Graduate Center, Bhabha argues for translation as a “moment of transition” where the displacement of angle of vision produces anew.”

He continues,

> In translation, we live with a past that refuses to die, but being confronted with a future that will not wait to be born. In between them lie the perils and the pleasures of the present; it’s the infinite struggle of labour of translation that allows to maintain

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53 Homi Bhabha, “Translation and Displacement,” (The Graduate Centre, CUNY, May 26, 2006).
precarious balance in the afterlife that is the condition of our communal existence and
language and literature that sustains us in our work and in our words.”

To return to Mark’s demand to undo a double colonization and alluded by Bhabha in the quote
above, the process of opacity and misdirection is a calculated “ruse to protect [them] against
casual consumption.” To fail in the expectations of my duty as an artist, then, goes beyond
representations of trauma; it is a resistance to Western hegemonic practices to make sense of
what refuses to be understood. In art, this is considered a technique of détournement, hijacking
hegemonic narratives and material condition. In the diaspora, it is the power-inflected space in
which I work.

As I aim to recover traces of unacknowledged past—a hole within a hole—my practice
recognizes movement in stillness. What (and who) are understood to be passive only stir
unnoticed, leaving hints of existence. A motion, nonetheless. Moments do not have to be grand
gestures; they only have to be movements, always evolving beneath the abandoned, forgotten,
and omitted. Trash is a landfill of trace where I encounter scraps that carry and becomes buried
memories and an indication of seasons taken place. Collaging found materials is a purposeful
index of subaltern histories, which lead to alternate histories carried by objects. Trash also risks
contamination in the white cube and resists fetishistic or auratic relationship of the objects. Trash
and other abandoned objects and people disrupt the ivory tower that is the art world’s claim to
radicalism.

In my practice, the use of found material is about mining for trace. At first, I was
interested in the colour of denim representing the blue water crossed to be here. Denim reminds
me of movement across the sea and within the body. They are objects that represent one side of

54 Ibid.
the world, made in another, then transported to the culture and people that they were made for, leaving a trace of unacknowledged repercussions that allowed all of us to be wrapped in them. Denim represents the “radical freedom” of Western individualism, masculinity, and cultural mutiny wherein wearing a pair of denim jeans means embodying Western ideologies. However, through its creation—from weaving, washing, dyeing, stitching, marketing, purchasing, shipping, wearing, tearing, donating (back to the country of its origin), and throwing—contemporary denim embodies colonial ideology, globalization, transnational capitalism, and environmental racism, damaging the same communities pillaged centuries before. The production of new jeans contrasts its mythical iconography. Perhaps it is a good representative of the Western world, after all. With this narrative in mind, in addition to thinking about denim’s materiality where lived experience easily materializes on the surface, denim is an intimate index. Notice the way that the denim relaxes with every wear, the routine shapes territories of articulation for past movement and time. For example, sometimes you can tell a pair of denim is old and worn by multiple people in the way that multiple iterations of knees, of varying height, are cast in the material. A perfect pair is one that fits around the body, a hand me down rarely meets the joints. The material, acts of translation through repetitive action, and debris intersect to show that repetition, or movements overtime, no matter how small, construct new outlines. A material with a complicated history can transform. This is not to glorify denim’s complicated history, but to understand that it can be shaped anew. As working with garbage is mining for traces, the process of bleaching simultaneously removes and reiterates new trace. To remove by the means of the bleaching process, for instance, is a process of forgetting, which opens a capacity for transformation and new opportunities. Denim also has a natural process of whitening over time, which I emphasize by using bleach to highlight this slow movement of change. I
would like to think that if my denim works were left out on their own, they would fade from the light that shines every morning and the passing of time that wear them. No matter how small, repetitive action over time corrupts the collective, constructs new frameworks, creates new patterns, and configures new contours.

Ahmed’s theory of affect and phenomenology contends that existing social and environmental phenomena dictates lived experiences. Her research posits that bodies are directed towards and are in proximity to certain objects because they are received even before arrival. Repetition is defined by structure; the structure is sustained through repetition or compliance. In what can seem like an ongoing loop in confinement without exit, Ahmed suggests that this same repetition can also encourage deviation; just as the repetition of violence has created habits of normalizing (even validate) the oppression of certain people, repetition of resistance can also change this habit.\textsuperscript{56} Yet repetition is consistent, intentional actions that become habits, making the invisible visible. It leaves marks that trace events. The power in minor changes—perhaps in the slight bend of a line, an anomaly in a repeating pattern, the practice of fracture, disruption of sequential flow, perversion of material, incomplete translation, or deliberate forgetting—is based on the disruption of prevailing arrangements in order to initiate unfamiliar and overlooked insistence. While forms of existence and insistence are infinite, what is important is that they continue to appear and shift. That relations adapt. They are particularly bountiful in the mundane and abandoned. Intertwined in the wreckage, they establish new roots and routes to elsewhere and everywhere. \textit{This story started long ago, and will, by no means, end with me.}

Works Cited


Supplementary Bibliography


IV. Documentation of Art Practice

**Figure 1.** *hole in my pocket*, used denim, thread, canvas, screenprint, newsprint, mylar, 2019, 48” x 384”

**Figure 2.** *flutter*, textile, screenprint on textile, thread, mylar, plastic, video, 2018, 78” x 59”
Figure 3. *breath*, used denim, 2019

Figure 4. *as it seems*, used denim, thread, galvanized wire, safety pins, 2019
Figure 5. *notes*, video, 3:14 minutes, 2019-ongoing

Figure 6. *at what time*, pencil on rice paper, 2019-ongoing, 9” x 10”
Figure 7. *at what time* (selected images), pencil on rice paper, 2019-ongoing, 9” x 10”
**Figure 8.** *in search of a lost time* (detail), found fabric, photographs, books, magazine clippings, wood panel, screenprint, newsprint, mylars, developing paint, film, video

**Figure 9.** *as it seems (Howardena)*, used bleach denim fray on found cotton, 2020, 10’’ x 10’’
Figure 10. *loop*, salvaged denim, thread, 2020

Figure 11. *from here*, video installation: Panasonic BTS901Y, iPad, camcorder, speaker, 2020
Figure 12. Left to right: at what time, pencil on rice paper, 2019-2020
untitled (refract), mylar, photograph, thread, grommet, various found objects, 2020
that could dream about a thought, bleached salvaged denim, thread, 2019-2020
this is a window, salvaged denim, wood, mylar, thread, various found objects, 2020
Figure 13. *loop*, salvaged denim, thread, 2020  
*at a distance*, denim, thread, photographs, cyanotype, grommet, mylar, various found objects, 2020  
*turning a wet page*, glass, found frames, mylar, 2020
Figure 14. **Top:** loop, salvaged denim, thread, 2020  
**Left to right:** at a distance, denim, thread, photographs, cyanotype, grommet, mylar, various found objects, 2020  
follow, salvaged denim fray on found fabric, 2020  
**Floor Left to right:** turning a wet page (series), glass, found frames, mylar, 2020  
they said look up, rice paper, denim fray, magazine clipping, mylar, tape, leather  
from here, video installation: Panasonic BTS901Y, iPad, camcorder, speaker, 2020
V. Interview with Erika DeFreitas

Days before my advisor, Christof, suggested that I interview DeFreitas, I had recently seen a group exhibition, *Common Place: Common Place*, at University of Toronto’s Art Centre a week prior. Projected on one wall of the gallery was DeFreitas shifting in a metal patio chair. Her body unable to sink comfortably into the chair. The video-performance in the show left me dislocated. I had seen her name before. In fact, I had seen that face before. Sure enough, when I typed her on my Instagram I was already following her. I finally connected the face, name, and works.

We often take for granted these three things in which we recognize and remember artists. Most of the time, we only recall one. In DeFreitas’s work, they strategically come together as her practice offers the personal to speak about larger concepts of mourning, loss, postmemory, inheritance, and objecthood. Erika DeFreitas was born in Toronto, with ancestry in Guyana. Her mother came to Canada in 1970 and has continually been featured in her work. DeFreitas is a conceptual artist who works in a range of mediums including drawing, textile, sculpture, and video. DeFreitas’s works are connected through what she says as “what she knows,” starting with and through the body. In turn, the personal process in creating her work has resulted to the archiving of particular histories and familial biography, a result that she does not take for granted. Reflecting the autobiographical approach in her work, our conversation was personal and critical in thinking about narratives in art and history.

We jumped into the interview quickly and became comfortable with each other easily. DeFreitas ended by graciously asking me about my practice and I took the opportunity to ask for some advice for my upcoming second year. To me, her words, during and after the interview, are as generous as her works.
Interview Transcript  
August 17, 2019

**RL:** Your body is present in many of your work: (a) your hands in videos and photography collages using images from varying resources (eg. *studies for gardens* - each form is the fixed snapshot of a process & *studies on how to move water* - arrangements and compositions) that seem to guide the narrative; (b) in photography and videos where you become the subject (eg. *vocabulary for hands in mourning* & *I am not tragically colored* - after Zora Neale Hurston), can you speak about the role of your body in your practice?

**ED:** My practice began with a strong grounding in performance art and so I’m really drawn to thinking about process and gesture. I speak often about my body in my work as a way for me to think about the body as object and allowing my body to become subject. I’m framing my body myself, as a woman and as a racialized person in my artwork. In a way, I am choosing and controlling that representation. When I started depicting my hands in my work, I was thinking about it more as an assertion – as in *I’m here and I’m present in the work*. My recent work, where my hands are interacting with objects, exist as both still photography and video. I’m interested in the still versus the moving image and the transitions and moments in time where the slightest of gesture poses a question or resolves an action.

**RL:** You call yourself a conceptual artist and conceptual art can almost look anything and your practice is involved with many medium/media. For me, your works are connected through the personal, sentiments, and emotions. You make affect visible in your work and give legitimacy on individual experience. All of these are acts that are in conversation with art history (a history that has always preferred cis white male stories, “universal stories”). Are you consciously attempting to subvert the conventions in art history?

**ED:** I wouldn’t say that it was a conscious attempt to subvert conventions, but more of an attempt to find my place in the narrative of art and its history. I was introduced to Adrian Piper’s practice early in my undergrad education and it was the first time I saw myself in a work of art. Learning about her work helped me to see that I can take up space. I believe that by being present in my art and working intuitively are subversive acts in themselves, and all I’m consciously doing is existing.

**RL:** Talking about art history, your piece *very strongly may be sincerely fainting (hands in art history)*, a collage of hands that look “more yours than what are mostly attributed as the hand of the artist.” Is there a connection here?

**ED:** That body of work is the beginning of a greater project that I’m creating. I’m collecting images of the hands of women in art history and popular culture, as well as images of the hands
belonging to women artists. I am thinking about ways to reframe and highlight people who historically have been rendered invisible – whether because they are women, Black women, or women with a disability. In a way the focus on the hands of these women references the subject becoming. I’m thinking about ways to speak to or from the margins. There is a fragment of a sentence that I remember Gertrude Stein writing, “act so there is no use in the center.” I’ve been asked about my position as someone perceived as existing in the margins versus the center – whether it be as an artist living in the suburbs vs. the city, or as a racialized woman. Existing in the margins is a good place for me, but I do question who defines what becomes the center, because from where I sit in the margins, is my center.

**RL:** You have works such as *every tear is from the other* that does not physically depict your body, but still refers to it. The absence of the physical becomes present through the tears, and it’s still *yours*. By using your body, can we read your work as personal or biographical?

**ED:** My work originates from personal or biographical narratives, but it is not my intention for the work to remain in that space. I start with what I know, but it’s never *just* about what I know. I want to be challenged by my research, my experiences, my relationship to objects and to people, and by my histories, to address things that are greater than the personal. For example, when my mom becomes a subject in my work, it’s never just about our relationship. The work becomes about familial relationships, communication, gesture, ritual, or the spectre of inheritance. It is also important for our bodies to be in the work because my ongoing interest to genuinely explore the concept of loss is a thread that connects these works together and it is something I feel deeply in the anticipation of losing my mom.

**RL:** I was touched by your description for *holding one’s breath* (November 8, 1973 - August 1, 1975) where you talk a bit about your diasporic narrative that has led you to a land “where [your] ancestral identity continue[d] to become fragmented.” In the work, you embroidered sentiments from your grandmother’s letters to your mother. What does it mean for you to share these deeply personal familial writings to others—in the gallery space?

**ED:** I never met my grandmother and I’m sure that these letters were written with the intention of only my mother reading them. I was given permission from my mom to read these letters. For this work I selected fragments of narrative that weren’t divulging so much of the personal that it felt invasive. The fragments say just enough that anyone who has experienced a longing for a loved one, could relate to what they read. What is hard to see in the documentation is that I hand-embroidered over the text only leaving a sliver of text visible. This was an act of further displacing the narrative. I think that removing the appropriated text from the context of the letters where they were written and altering them in the ways that I did, made them less personal and more relatable to people who can identify with this idea of distance between two loved ones,
who are writing from different lands, and writing about cultural or environmental differences, all the while engaged in the shared experience of loss.

To bring this work into the gallery is to be able to place my grandmother and my mother in a history. It’s important to have their histories present because these are two women whose histories could easily become irrelevant. How many women’s histories are absent? So many, but it’s not just about their histories. It’s about the history of people who left their home and their family to attain a better future. It’s about migration and a dislocation because of a relocation. Why shouldn’t this type of work live in a gallery space? Whose history should or shouldn’t be accessible in that space? This makes me think about museums — what objects are considered artifacts and who does that naming?

RL: This way, it’s from you giving it, it’s not taken away from you (like how some artefacts come to be in museums). It’s being presented as yours. There’s an agency there, (in doing it on your terms).

ED: Agency is important and I’m always thinking about it. It can be complicated. Here I am using my grandmother’s words written to my mother. I received my mother’s permission to use the narratives I selected, but it would never be possible for me to receive my grandmother’s. It is important for me to be aware of my approach so as to not exploit the narratives of these women I admire.

RL: I use a lot of familial photographs and writings… and I keep thinking about how much can I give, or how much do I give to this gallery space.

RL: I was reading this quote by Derrida because I know you’re a big fan. In his last interview Learning to Live Finally he said, “I have always been interested in this theme of survival, the meaning of which is not to be added on to living and dying. It is originary: life is living on, life is survival [la vie est survie]. To survive in the usual sense of the term means to continue to live, but also to live after death.” I think of this when you talked about the image of your mother and grandmother in a book and your exhibitions. Can you speak about survival or survivance in relation to the works with your mother, as well as your work in general? To me, your work is oriented towards the future rather than here.

ED: I do think a lot about Derrida and his idea of survivance. In my video The Truth of Lineage, I can be seen collecting my mom’s tears in a vial as she cries and when she stops crying, I drink her tears. We then alternate actions. In thinking about survivance and in an attempt to make the impermanent permanent, I thought that by drinking my mother’s tears she would then conceptually dissipate in my body. When watching the video, I started to question if through the repetitive action of drinking and then crying, cycling and recycling — could it be possible that the
tears I am releasing belong to my mom? When I first considered this, I thought that the work failed in this beautiful way. Now, I realize that it speaks to Derrida’s theory of survivance because the cycling and recycling of tears allows us to both to be present and absent at the same time. There is also a renewal and continuation.

Your observation about the work being oriented toward the future is exciting because despite tapping into the past as a way of learning, uncovering and discovering, I am interested in possibilities and I feel like the idea of possibilities is linked to futurities.

**RL:** Do you think this is one of the reasons that you gravitate towards your mom — because she was the one who experienced that diaspora, the moving? Do you think this is why you keep going back to working with your mother?

**ED:** I was a student in the MVS program at UofT from 2006 to 2008. During my time there I was encouraged by my supervisor to consider working on something where I could really benefit from having the support of my professors and mentors. It was then that I decided to research and learn about concepts of loss and mourning. Since I was a child I have experienced a strong fear of losing my mom. I never imagined that this fear would be something to influence my practice. Over the past 12 years of working with my mom, I have approached these ideas of loss by looking at the varying ways one experiences it and that includes looking at loss through the lens of migration. Because we’ve been working together for a period of time, the photographs and video become a document that also records us sharing space, our relationship, and how our bodies have changed over time — we’re both aging.

**RL:** You’re making sure to preserve her.

**ED:** In a way we are creating an archive. I think about how many women artists have done just that: created an amazing archive of the relationship between them and their family, between them and themselves, between them and objects or with a place. It’s quite fantastic.

**RL:** These images and videos throughout the years document the memories created, through this, you also make memories together. Thinking about all the documentation, I wonder if you doubt your memories in the way that you’re documenting your time with your mother. I think about this because I think a lot about how unreliable our memories are and forgetting seems inevitable.

**ED:** Memories seem so fragile and impressionable. I’m working on a project that has become my attempt to locate Baudelaire’s partner, Jeanne Duval. Very little information about her exists. I’ve been thinking about Jeanne and the ways that others are telling her story by piecing together information found in written accounts by men like Baudelaire and Felix Nadar. Her story is
being compiled by the memories of others, but one can’t easily determine what is accurate because there have been multiple occasions where a memory of one has conflicted with the memory of another.

**RL:** Are you working with an archive?

**ED:** Not an official archive, but one that I am developing. I went to Paris and photographed the street she once lived on, there is the poetry Baudelaire wrote about her and the sketches he made of her, there is a painting by Manet that might be her—just bits and pieces.

Months before arriving in Paris, a friend sent me a link to an article about Jeanne Duval and that she had been painted out of a painting upon Baudelaire’s request. While visiting the D’Orsay in Paris I felt a need to stand in front of a painting by Gustav Courbet. I stood there for quite some time and couldn’t figure out why I was feeling this way. It wasn’t until I left the gallery that it occurred to me that I had yet to find the painting I read about. It turns out that the painting I was standing in front of, was the painting with Jeanne! She is barely visible, but she is there.

**RL:** The presence/loss is there in the painting, again.

**ED:** The specter! We are haunted all the time by things we so easily dismiss but are so very present. Our ancestors haunt us through our bodies: by how we look or the traits we may carry.

**RL:** By sharing personal stories/histories your body becomes a site of vulnerability. Works such as *and every tear is from the other* and *a most difficult one* offers the viewer what most people would not want to document. Similar to looking for Jeanne Duval, can you speak about your process of creating artwork out of loss?

**ED:** The feeling of loss is so visceral. I almost feel like I was born mourning, as though it is something I do often. I mourn the loss of people I don’t even know. I don’t know how much of that is innate, or how much of that is learned as a racialized person…mourning the loss of people in our community every day. So much of this grief is an awareness of us being living beings whose life inevitably must come to an end.

**RL:** You mentioned mourning for the community, I keep thinking of the rejected letters, you practicing your breath, emotional labour, anxiety—all of these are experienced by all but mostly and more often by those whose daily lives are made difficult by being from a particular community. I think the breathing work (*to practice the study of breathing*) was really poetic. I felt that, that’s a lot of work. Do you have any hopes in how audience see or experience the work?
ED: For the most part, I hope that it can resonate with someone in a meaningful way which could be in the questions that may arise, or maybe just because the human experience is relatable.

RL: For me, there was a sense of celebration in being able to breathe, but also a ritual: this is what we have to keep doing. I felt like you were singing and I had to go in and sing with you.

ED: There’s that video, or the video documenting the movement of my feet and my mom’s feet while we are seated. Many people who have watched that video mentioned to me that they became hyper aware of their movement and that awareness made them uncomfortable. With the breathing video, some people found themselves naturally adopting my breathing patterns. In a way, that’s kind of what I’m hoping for the work to be - a mirroring of what’s out there.

RL: This is where I think Sara Ahmed’s essay comes in for me. Her essay “Orientations Towards Objects” uses Edmund Husserl’s metaphor of a table to demonstrate the relation between body and objects. Where Husserl focuses on the table that allows him to write his philosophy, Ahmed directs our attention to everything else in the background that has allowed him that time and privilege to focus on the table and in writing. When I think about the tear work or the rejection letter, these are all work that highlight women and emotional labour. I think that your work directs us to “the background.” Can you speak about the importance of this? What does it mean to look at all these other things and not just the table?

ED: I guess I’ve never thought about my work functioning in the way you described, but I think you’re on to something. I can see this idea of the background and the table as being parallel to my interest in histories and the narratives that are told. What does it mean to shine a light on the histories that have not been told but are integral to the existence of the dominant narrative? I don’t know if I have the answer, but at the moment I think that it means a way of seeing and being seen.
III. Curriculum Vitae

education
2014-2018 Queen’s University, Bachelor of Fine Art Honours, Kingston, ON
Minor: Art History
2016 Bader International Study Centre, Herstmonceux, UK

solo exhibition
2020 *still, unfolding*, Zalucky Contemporary (MFA Thesis Show), Toronto, ON
2018 *(un)do.*, Ontario Hall (Undergraduate thesis exhibition), Kingston, ON

group exhibitions
2020 *Anew*, Curated by Harper Wellman,
Cohen Commons, Western University, London, ON
2020 *To Dwell, To Remember*, Curated by Adi Berardini,
Cohen Commons, Western University, London, ON
2019 *Re: UNION - 25th Anniversary Exhibition*, Union Gallery, Queen’s University, Kingston, ON
2019 *what we might become*, Art Lab, Western University, London, ON
2019 *A Museum for Future Fossils*, Art Lab, Western University, London, ON
2019 *Pacing*, Satellite Project Space, London, ON
2019 *selson blue*, Curated by Liza Eurich, Art Lab, Western University, London, ON
2018 *Overdue*, 12 Cat Arts Collective, Kingston, ON
2018 *Course of Action*, The Union Gallery, Kingston, ON
2017-2018 *Print Pulse. Art and Media Lab at the Isabel Bader Centre for the Performing Arts*, Kingston, ON; Dr. Robert and André Rhéaume Fitzhenry Studios and Atrium University, Hamilton, ON; W.K.P Kennedy Gallery with Nipissing University, North Bay, ON; Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY
2017-2018 *Modern Yule: Show and Sale*, Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre, Kingston, ON
2017 *Surface*, The Union Gallery, Kingston, ON
2017 The Juvenes Festival Gallery, Kingston, ON
2016 *Reveal*, The Union Gallery, Kingston, ON
2016 *Self-3*, The Union Gallery Off-Site Exhibition, Kingston, ON
2016 *Drawn In*, The Union Gallery, Kingston, ON

awards
2019-2020 Ontario Graduate Scholarship, Western University, London, ON
2018 Western Graduate Research Scholarship, Western University, London, ON
2018 Faculty of Arts and Humanities Dean's Entrance Scholarship, Western University, London, ON
2018 Faculty of Arts and Humanities Chair's Entrance Scholarship, Western University, London, ON
2018 John Cameron O Memorial Award in Fine Art, Queen’s University, Kingston, ON
2014-2018 Dean’s Honour List with Distinction, Queen’s University, Kingston, ON
2017 Margaret Craig Scholarship in Fine Art, Queen’s University, Kingston, ON
2017 John Cameron O Memorial Award in Fine Art, Queen’s University, Kingston, ON
2014 Excellence Scholarship, Queen’s University, Kingston, ON

selected texts
2020 Interviewed by Adam Mulder for Museum Studies Collective, 2020
2020 *To Dwell, To Remember* Exhibition Catalogue, London, ON
2018 *(un)do.* Exhibition Catalogue. Queen’s University, Kingston, ON
2018 An essay responding to: *Come out, wherever you are* (a series of mixed media work) by Leyla Chisamore, The Union Gallery, Kingston. ON
2016 Featured Artist in The Queen’s Journal, Queen’s University, Kingston, ON
curated projects
2018 same as/different from - Queen’s BFA Alumni Print Show, Union Gallery, Kingston, ON
2016 Bookshelf Selection: Between Two Worlds, Union Gallery, Kingston, ON
Mentored by Ellyn Walker

fundraising and special projects
2019 Boardroom, Work featured in collaboration with a project by Patrick Cruz, London, ON
2018 Cezanne’s Closet, The Union Gallery, Kingston, ON
2017 Winner of Queen’s University International Photo Contest 2017, Staff’s Pick, Kingston, ON
2017 Film Reverie was a part of a Video Screening Event at The Union Gallery, Kingston, ON
2017 Cezanne’s Closet, The Union Gallery, Kingston, ON
2017 Nasty Women Project, California, USA
2016 Performed in Nadia Myre’s A Casual Reconstruction, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston, ON
2016 The Art Thing (Auction), Queen’s University, Kingston, ON

art publications
2018 Collective Reflections, Queen’s University, Kingston, ON
2017 The Undergraduate Review, Queen’s University, Kingston, ON
2017 Collective Reflections, Queen’s University, Kingston, ON
2017 Free Lit Magazine: Truth or Dare, Kingston, ON

artist writing
2019 “Black Determinism: Movement, Trauma, and Aspiration in We Are From Nicodemus.”
McIntosh Gallery, London, ON
2017 “A Review of To Spoil the Party, to Set Our Joy Ablaze.” Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre Syphon, Kingston, ON
2017 “Séance: An interview with Rebecca Anweiler.” Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre, Kingston, ON

published articles
2018 “Can Artists Really Save the World?” panel has no easy answers, The Queen’s Journal, Kingston, ON
2017 “Columbus” is a quiet, captivating debut, The Queen’s Journal, Kingston, ON
2017 Living through a lens, The Queen’s Journal, Kingston, ON
2017 100 minutes, 100 years, two artistic spaces, The Queen’s Journal, Kingston, ON
2017 “This Time Tomorrow’s” slow win, The Queen’s Journal, Kingston, ON
2017 Agnes obtains early views of Kingston, The Queen’s Journal, Kingston, ON

artist talk
2018 For the exhibition Surface, January 17, The Union Gallery, Kingston, ON

selected experience
2018-2020 Teaching Assistantship for Foundation of Visual Arts VAS 1020
Western University of Ontario, London, ON
2019-current Fundraising Co-Chair, Board of Directors, Forest City Gallery, London, ON
2018-2019 Vice-Treasurer, Board of Directors, Forest City Gallery, London, ON
2019-2020 Student Representative, Spencer Gallery, Weldon Library at Western University of Ontario, London, ON
2018 Studio Assistant for Stonecroft Artist-in-Residence Tau Lewis, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston, ON
2016-2018 President, Board of Directors, The Union Gallery, Kingston, ON
2017-2018 Committee Chair, BFA Graduating Show, Queen’s University, Kingston, ON
2017 Communications Coordinator, Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre, Kingston, ON
2016 Life Drawing Instructor, Queen’s University – Queen’s Expressions, Kingston, ON
2017  Staff Writer, The Queen’s Journal, Kingston, ON
2016-2017  Museum Docent, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston. ON
2014  Tour Guide and Presenter, Fine Art Program Open House, Kingston. ON
2015-2016  Vice-President, Board of Directors, The Union Gallery, Kingston. ON
2014-2015  First Year Representative, The Union Gallery, Kingston. ON
2016-2017  Docent, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston. ON
2016-2017  Co-Editor-in-Chief, The Undergraduate Review, Kingston. ON
2016  Co-Chair, The Art Thing (Queen’s BFA Art Auction, independent), Kingston. ON
2016  Graphic Designer, The Undergraduate Review, Kingston. ON