The following individuals certify that they have read, and recommend to the College of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis/dissertation entitled:

**HOME TURF: RE-EARTHING FAMILY NARRATIVE**

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Abstract

At the same time as my father’s deteriorating health, the culmination of a long process of development in the neighbourhood my family had lived in for 40 years occurred. Through periodic transfers between home and hospital, we witnessed the uprooting of trees, the construction of roadways and subdividing of properties, including our own. Our house was soon marked for sale and redevelopment, and our affects moved to a new location following his passing.

These materials, an archive of ephemera, photos and letters that tell the story of our family from their journey from Denmark and eventual settling in Canada, now sit in cardboard boxes and Tupperware containers. Using these personal ‘affects’, I am engaged in a long-term performative engagement, using them as a lens to interrogate larger conditions urban development, migration, colonial histories, logics in which our history is implicated. These are teased out of the contents of the material and texts in my family’s collection. Familial objects, gathered from my mother’s archive are mailed to our former address. As this house no longer exists, the materials are redirected, wearing the imprinted marks of the journey.
Lay Summary:

Through my studies, I have developed an artwork that utilizes personal narratives as a lens to interrogate larger settler / colonial narratives, teased out of the contents of the material and texts in my family’s collection. These items are enclosed in envelopes, and mailed to our former home. As this house no longer exists, the material will be returned to the house it is sent it from, now marked with the markings of the failed journey.
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There are countless people I would like to thank for their care, guidance and friendship. Many of whom are named in this text, and others, while not named, are nonetheless there.
This work is dedicated to land I have had the opportunity to be on, and to move through.
What is left to forget?

Language has swept us all away.

(Hollis, Groundwater 64)

Dear Reader,

*Home Turf* is an iteration of an ongoing artwork concerned with the Jonsson family home, located at 528 30 Ave N.E., Calgary, Alberta, from 1972 to 2013. Over a period of 10 years, and at the same time as my father’s deteriorating health, a corresponding process of development in the neighbourhood culminated in our eventual departure from this home. Through periodic transfers between home and hospital, we witnessed the uprooting of trees, the construction of roadways and the subdividing of properties, including our own. Our house was soon marked for sale and redevelopment, and our effects moved to a new location following my father’s passing.

The packing and move was understandably quick, and we’re still now making our way through the material. Using these personal effects (which are also ‘affects’), I’ve been involved in a long-term performative engagement, using them as a lens to interrogate larger conditions of urban development, migration, colonial histories—logics in which our history is implicated. These materials, an archive of ephemera, photos and letters
that tell the story of our family from their journey from Denmark and eventual settling in Canada, now sit in cardboard boxes and Tupperware containers.

I'm using this project, part of my MFA through the University of British Columbia Okanagan (UBCO) as a way to support this effort of organization. This is a dual purpose, for my family but also for me to understand and work through my history. I'm trying to connect this violent rupture to the history of my family's trajectory of migration from Denmark to Calgary, via Montreal, and various cities in Ontario. How do I make a place for this narrative within an artistic and an academic context? Where is it at odds? These are my concerns through this work.

*Home Turf* uses personal narratives as a lens to interrogate the overlapping conditions and logics of land use, development, and migration, in which my personal history is implicated. For my methodology I am following the concept of biotext, as identified by Joanne Saul and practiced by poets such as Robert Kroetsch, Daphne Marlatt and Fred Wah. These writers use their particular subjective locations and histories as the locus for writing that intersects with, and counters, dominant narratives that inscribe the landscape. I am interested in the tension of performative acts and material; the residual, unspoken, and informal information that resonate from the material. In pursuing this activity through strategies of
artistic inquiry, I am following artists such as Peter Morin, Vera Frenkel and Victoria Stanton, whose use of performative strategies to engage with and intervene in economic, colonial, and bureaucratic structures outline and unravel these structures’ oppressive tendencies.

*Home Turf* continues an ongoing interest I have in transposing personal family narrative into locally based sites, where the incongruity highlights historic and economic overlays and conflicts in the landscape. It also implicates my position as a descendent of immigrants entangled within a settler colonial narrative.

The project comprises one hundred mobile sculptures circulated through Canada Post, Various national Postal Systems, and by hand (fig. 1-100). As part of this project, I have gathered materials from my mother’s archives, collating them in individual envelopes, and also including in each envelope natural materials from the site, such as grass, twigs and stones. Going through the books in my mother’s collection, I would draw quotes from each, typed along the top of each envelope. The envelopes are sent to 528, but as this house no longer exists other than as a street address, the materials mailed to that ghostly domain are redirected.

Complementing these mailed sculptures, over the course of the year I have been writing letters (fig 101-121), which have become a method to work
through the development of this piece. The letters featured below are a re-
alignment of these letters, reproduced as the following five chapters that 
trace the journey that the project took.

Thank you for taking the time to follow this work.

All Best,

Tomas
Dear Virginie,

When living in Toronto, I would regularly visit a labyrinth located in High Park. I would walk along the circuitous route that lay before me, carrying a question, or a thought that needed resolution. As I moved back and forth towards the centre, I would reach near places I had been before, but only by approximation. I felt this journey take place in my body, and in the environment I was moving through. The thought moved through me as I moved.

As part of the 2015 Summer Intensive at the University of British Columbia, Okanagan, Dion Kazsas conducted the first iteration of the Earth Line Tattoo School. As I listened to his speaking on the school, I realized a shift in my thinking, and recognized the spiral as another, more generative path. The next day, I received a hand poke tattoo from Dion, on my left forearm, of a spiral, the concentric rings expanding out in three cycles (fig. 122).

As my project developed, my writing as a performative practice has been following Fred Wah’s concept of “garden-path sentences” (Wah, False Laws of Narrative xv), continually drawing out and articulating ideas into a practice. I am using the convention of generating vernacular narrative within conversation.
Going through this process has been a personal excavation too. Slowly, I’ve attempted to draw in more of my embodied sense of the place; to build, by gradual degrees, a knowledge of the site, imparted in even smaller degrees within the text. Perhaps this comes through as a tacit understanding, an interface that can be accessed by others through their own experience. Where I’m living, understanding this place, what writing can tell about a place. I’ve been drawn to the poetic practice of biotext. The ‘bio’ in biotext “blurring the boundaries between autobiography, biography, history, fiction, and theory, and mixing prose segments in with poetry, letters, essays, and photographs... a form of writing that considers the relation between self, nation and self-narration” (Saul, Writing the Roaming Subject 81–102). Using literary conventions, the authors working in this way situate themselves in a complex set of relations, forces and conditions, and write routes through these.

My project is a performative biotext utilizing personal archives as source material. This rupture, the loss of 528, has become a significant context for me to explore the complex intersections of the personal, social and economic values that inform a place.

Going through the archive, I’ve been collecting the cast-off detritus and including these in the envelopes. On the exterior of the envelopes I include fragments of texts drawn from books in my family’s collection. These books
are an assortment made up of books brought over from Denmark and those they’ve collected since. These fragmentary texts provide a disjointed correspondence to the material contained sealed within.

I’ve been thinking of the material I’m moving through, the mass of materials from my mother’s archive, the books we have on the shelves, the stories they tell. I want to let them speak, on the land, and also to let them exist, disseminate there. This project is an attempt at remembering, a memorialization, but also an attempt at breaking down this memory. I want to understand the borders of this, the personal, butted against the larger, impersonal, abstract forms that shape it.

I find a similar approach in Tami Spry’s work—what she refers to as *autoethnography*. For Spry, this inquiry, “concentrat[es] on the body as the site from which the story is generated, thus beginning the methodological praxis of reintegrating my body and mind into my scholarship” (708). In the letters that I’ve written for this project, I’ve endeavoured to situate myself in relation to 528. I see this in a similar way to what Fred Wah identifies when he “asks readers to imagine a scenario where they are reading the poem as the poet is writing it” (Wah, *False Laws xiv*). My presence is less as a character in the story and more as a performed engagement, a subject that is performative and in process within the text.
The Ledger, a long poem by Robert Kroetsch, can be understood as a literary spatial field, not needing to be read in a linear way. Kroetsch’s work is similar to that of other writers working in biotext who “employ a range of innovative textual strategies, not merely to write about their own lives, but also to work through the experience of displacement rather than seeking simply to reflect or represent it” (Saul, 4).

Ultimately what I am doing is text-based, a way of reading a place. I want to consider how words are used, applied to a place. I want to find out what can I do with these words, this mass of documents.

I’ve been thinking of Shawn Wilson’s writing, which you introduced us to in your class through his book Research is Ceremony. Wilson’s writing also doesn’t follow a linear process, as opposed to the convention in academic writing. In his writing, he moves back and forth between different forms of writing: academic and personal letters to his children. He recognizes and is drawn by a feeling that the story he wants to tell needs to fit within the paradigm he is exploring (14). Nadine Tafoya (qtd in Wilson): “Stories go in circles. They don’t go in straight lines. It helps if you listen in circles because there are stories inside and between stories, and finding your way through them is as easy and as hard as finding your way home” (14).
Using a similar circular thinking, I have been formulating the imagined space of the installation. This will be in a library space, amidst local history and archives, where selected elements of my mother’s space will be installed, in the same way her house has been populated by the residual elements of the former home, the organizational structures; white binders with clear plastic sleeves containing decades of correspondence, and records. Our encounters, sitting at the living room table (built by my father), sifting through boxes of archival material. Or sitting at the kitchen table (purchased from Ikea) over coffee, talking through family matters, or on the couch, over a glass of wine, where I am able to hear her memories. How these stories come out, through innocuous conversation, suddenly opening up into potent moments; how history resurfaces.

I’m interested in the space between the spheres of the personal and the academic. When choosing to pursue this program of study, I wanted to give myself space to consider this history, to understand currents of thought and practice that have addressed similar violence. I also feel affinity for Wilson’s observation that writing to an anonymous, abstracted reader is not satisfactory.

“In an oral tradition,” Wilson notes, “this problem is overcome by utilizing the direct relationship between storyteller and listener. Each recognizes the other’s role in shaping both the content and process” (8).
In Wilson’s writing, he has organized his document structure as distinct sections, differentiated by typography. For myself, I’ve decided to follow this path all the way through. I’ve been writing these letters over the course of the year. Each of these was written in a moment, a short period of concentration. Now, I’m pulling the content of these letters together, letting them mingle and breathe a bit more. I’m also turning them toward you, and towards Karis, Peter, Ashok and Stephen. Addressing you all in turn.

In your class, we engaged in a reading of Rob Pope’s writing on creativity. He outlined the limits of language as a defining, containing structure, however necessary it is. Pope draws attention to the fact “that the spaces ... between, signaled through typographic convention (dot dot dot), are a space where we can insert ourselves, where I can insert myself, in the text” (168-194).

...

All Best,

Tomas
Dear Ashok,

When we moved my mom to her new house, I noticed how important it was to set up the artwork, the furniture, and I remarked to her that it looked more like the old house than the old house did. My mom brings this up often, and I can see she really feels this. As much as she, we, loved that house, so many conditions that together created this feeling had fallen away. What I think reinforced a feeling of longing was the speed at which changes took place, and the way that they did. These are common changes, but the tempo is key. It’s these conditions, these speeds that I want to think about. Also now, the void, not a void, the full, living space that is the vacant lot.

I’m thinking about the artworks in the house, of the painting of the Greenlandic freighter arriving with supplies. The painting was from Farmor, a wedding gift to my mom and dad. A copy of Emanuel Petersen’s original, an artist whose work we also have in our collection. My mom mentioned that Georg and Helle (my Aunt and Uncle), and their children spent some time in Greenland, and that she hoped to visit, but that the journey would have been too long. They would have had to fly to Denmark first, then there. She also mentioned that someone from Dad’s family was there, in Greenland, and as a result of the war had to stay as it was unsafe to travel. Niels (another uncle) was there too, to make money, working at
the radio station. I remember hearing about this, but not the other stories.

This painting has travelled with my family from Denmark to Canada. I’ve collected documentation of this, showing the painting in its different homes. I haven’t been able to find one from 528. This is the kind of moment, movement that I want to keep tracking.

In some respects, this feels like a direction, a material, that I don’t actually want to address, at least not directly in my thesis; perhaps I’m shedding this from my work by writing about it, finding a space that needs expression, but not necessarily critical exploration. Even writing this now, I’m of both minds. Can I somehow choose both?

In October 2016, at the Audain Gallery at SFU, I saw Dana Claxton’s exhibition *Made to be Ready*. The exhibition title upends the “ready-made” as a cultural artifact, instead looking at the spiritual and social lives of objects as a process of resistance against colonial structures. I think this is still a challenge to consider in relation to the concept of collecting and is something to consider in terms of the collector in question—what are the conditions, impulses of this individual; how are they implicated in this process?

I’m thinking of the exhibition at Studio 111, of yours and Ayumi’s
belongings, the space that was created. When you had to suddenly leave your home, the subtle, but still violent push that necessitated movement. The way the space that was set up with your collective belongings opened as an opportunity to draw light to this. The transgression I made, the erasure of a life. A violence I became complicit in.

I’m interested in erasure poetry... the absence, the fragment, meaning, repackaged, redistributed. Carried back and forth. Somewhere in the boxes of our archives exists a photo, or maybe it's a film, in which I, at age three, pour the contents of one cup to another, and back again. Over time, both vessels are empty (I have this on good authority), while the contents—orange juice—spill over the table where I was sitting.

Some time later, I began a collection of bottle caps, drawn from my walk to and from school, over a period of about a month. I collected them in an ice cream bucket, and stopped once I had reached the top. I still have this collection, and thinking back on my motives, I can’t say I had a rationale for collecting them, except I was interested in the variety and repetition. It was a game.

The work I’m doing feels like it is closely aligned to both these acts, the spill being the area I am interested in, the mass of bottle caps collected, but to what aim; what does this collection mean to me? I think it signifies the
impulse I had, and this is why I still keep it.

I see a similarity in what I’m doing with this work, recognizing the “beguiling singularity and differentness” which Baudrillard identifies as a compelling motive for collectors (10). Beyond this, the works I’ve produced have become a body, a container of memory, a residue, and an articulation of a death, an attempt to keep the house alive in myself.

“To write in poetry is to move past the comfort of a ruled discourse; in order, to move on, beyond order, the complete thought spills over to an excess and residue of language in which my ‘marked’ body dissolves into unsure relationships. – remarked” (Wah, Faking it 17-20.)

The connections I’m making are not always perfect, but they function as influence. The writing I’m doing will go around them. I’m resisting connecting the dots, but also wanting to put some legibility together.

I’m interested in the trace the shelf will leave on the site of 528. I’ll also have to take a photo of the trace that is left by the shelf, the imprint on the ground. How it is covered, what this will look like over time.

I’m thinking about Amy Malbeuf’s installation at Alternator. In the corner of the gallery, a turf of grass brought over by car from her parent’s home to
the gallery. I want to collect brambles, material from the site of 528, maybe by the borders of the property. This also makes me think of Haruko Okano’s foraging on the campus of UBCO during the 2016 Summer Intensive in Kelowna. She enlisted participants to collect this all and place it around her body, leaving a trace in the landscape.

In December 2016, I attended the Thirst Days event at VIVO Media Arts Centre in Vancouver, the theme being "as you live here" conveyed through a number of videos addressing future imaginations of the spaces we live in, and through which opening possibilities of compassion, empathy, inclusivity. In one video, Phinder Dulai explains his research into archives and public records as a strategy to undistinguish colonial structures. He talks about the interconnectedness of the migrant experience, guest settlers (sometimes uninvited, and sometimes unwelcome), stories brought and grafted on a landscape of stories thousands of years old.

As part of the Summer Intensive in Kelowna in 2016, I was witness to a performance by Charles Campbell. As we sat gathered in the white-walled gallery, Charles Campbell entered the space, his head obscured by a light blue and brown patterned geodesic assemblage. Removing this and placing it on a plinth, he obtained a phone, headphones and papers, and sat at a small table, an empty chair across from him. He engaged in a conversation with someone on the other end of the phone. We were only privy to his side
of the conversation as he spoke and listened in calm, but intent
concentration. Over the course of this interview, the subject was gradually
revealed: A retired police officer recounting an incident in a neighbourhood
in Jamaica where he had shot and killed a person. Charles pulled out the
story through a compassionate interrogation, attempting to divine the
residual effects of this moment on the officer. “How did you feel after
that?” “Was anyone in your squad injured?” The call is a recording, an echo
of an earlier encounter Charles had with the individual. A person he came
to know through work that eventually developed into a friendship. The
conversation takes place on complicated terrain; details of the incident are
carefully teased out. There is no antagonism or pressing of guilt.

The exchange ends without resolution. There is no remorse or redemption
for the crimes that have been committed. Charles removes the
headphones, places the mask on his head and walks away.

I was able to sit close, to watch him, while he was listening to the audio of
the interview he had conducted earlier. Watching his face closely, reading
it for a response. This physicality, his presence, was so powerful. This
performance moved me to shift more of my thinking towards a
performative aesthetics.

As the cultural geographer Doreen Massey has written, “if time unfolds as
change then space unfolds as interaction; space is thus “a product of relations-between, relations that are necessarily embedded material practices” (63).

The letters are still important, and there should be a component of this in the space, the envisioned space at the realization of the project. But moments are needed. Performed acts, the letters are residue I suppose of these times, and that is partly it.

So, considering me at this moment, preparing this text, being present through the act of writing, it’s not just about the words, it’s about holding on to the connection in this moment, and then when you receive the letter, or, as is more likely the case, when you don’t. Holding on to the anticipation of response, which won’t be realized.

...  
All Best,  
Tomas
Dear Karis

Before leaving for a residency on Toronto Island, I took a blank notebook with me from my mother’s house. On the plane, as I started to make notes on work I wanted to explore, I realize one of the pages is not blank. Three pages in, and for 10 pages, a detailed inventory of every purchase my mother and father made in March 1983 was itemized. This inventory became the score for my performance produced during the residency. I purchased each item, or found an approximation if needed. At the final day of the workshop, I had a performance where I read the list—in Danish—and distributed the objects to the assembled audience. The inventory was a way of sharing, but also concealing.

“The home as concept evokes a stereotypical image of private confinement, a container of secrets, as in the relations between the words for home and for secret in several European languages (German Heim and Heimlich, as well as Swedish hem and hemlig)” (Borggreen and Gade, Performing Archives/archives of Performance 413).

When making decisions on what to keep, and what not to keep, from our family’s collection, and how to negotiate this with other members of my family, I’ve been preoccupied with the conflicting desires to impart information, and to honour familial privacy. It helps to think of this as two
separate, but related processes, with different obligations and intents. I hope that they can still speak to each other, and that there is a way to draw from the personal, internalized work, even obliquely, in a way that can be understood, but not formally made visible.

It is a difficult balance to maintain, the desire to want to impart information, and to be cognizant of the desires for privacy, but this is also the tension that I want to engage with. Intimacy requires this tension, and I’m thinking of how spaces of art and writing afford and also counter this. I’m cognizant of my relationship, and obligation to family story. How “[r]evealing a secret often involves disclosing another person’s secret, hereby betraying a confidentiality and denying this person the right to decide whether or not to reveal a personal secret” (Borgreen and Gade, 407).

I notice this when talking to my mom about this work, and her concerns about my airing of our particular stories, her resistance to this. I feel that I’m taking liberties, translating personal, private information, or insight, into an economic exchange. To avoid providing banal, safe details, rather than delving deeper and imparting meaningful truths and conditions. I want to know how to foster an emphatic connection without fully revealing or displaying in an overt way. How to approach obliquely? Not showing, not telling, but creating the suggestion, exploring the lines in between.
In her presentation at the 2016 Summer Intensive, Cathy Mattes referred to the kitchen table, and the conversations she would have there with her mother, as a methodological space. I similarly think about my mom’s kitchen table in Calgary, where I situate much of my “studio practice” and writing for this project. I’ve had many conversations with my mother over this table, as I unfolded the project with her. We had a discussion about the mailing aspect; she is still very uncomfortable about this, and would definitely prefer me not to, while I stubbornly held on, trying to argue my case. I’m reasonably confident that I won’t be called out by the postal service, or greatly inconvenience the carrier with these occasional letters, but at the same time, I do want to acknowledge her position.

She knows that I am collecting stories for my studies. I’ve told her that I want to go through the material gathered in the bins that I’m now facing. When we sit, it’s at the end of a long day. She’s helped prepare my brother for his day program, getting him dressed, his lunch prepared, waiting for the bus to pick him up. After he’s gone she’ll have done the dishes, the laundry from the night before, perhaps a quick nap and then facing the administration of the day: doctor appointments, meetings with his caregivers, conversations with my siblings, grocery shopping if there’s time. I usually come every other day, in the early evening, enough time to share time with them both. When my brother goes to sleep, we usually
have an hour or so, a glass or two of wine. We talk about going through the boxes, but by that time, she is too exhausted. We make plans for another day. Perhaps the next week. She wants to go through, to sort them, but also their weight is overbearing, and she sometimes (increasingly) wants to get rid of them. She’s suspicious of my motives... or more accurately, is concerned with who will see this material. How will it be displayed? I assure her that I will be careful with it, that I won’t expose anything embarrassing about our family. We will go through them together; I will make sure that anything she wants kept private stays that way.

I’ve explained the project several times. Some of the words are smooth from repeated delivery, but there is still a hesitation. I have an idea, a sense of the structure, and what I want to explore, but also heavy doubt. That I’m reaching, bending this material towards a narrative. I’m resisting this, but also setting towards a particular path.

I want to tell the story of our old house, how we came to leave it: that we were evicted, taken advantage of in a time of crisis; that a larger economic crisis of the city followed like an echo. We are now in a house that, as I say, and she’s agreed, is more like our old house than our old house. The former carved away when the neighbouring houses made way for roads, the wild hill behind our property paved.
When writing the letters, I purposefully left off my mother and father’s names, and this was a fatal flaw in some respects, but in the end, ideal; as painful as it is to not receive, to send something that won’t make it back.

It is likely they will be destroyed. I had originally thought that I would destroy them, but by happy accident, the postal system intervened. As I understand it, the collection of letters now sits in an archive in Mississauga, and will eventually be destroyed. Like the bookshelf, they are absence, erased.

I’m thinking about how certain writers find home, or create it? Or dispel it. The narrative weave that overlays landscape. The colonial project is a narrative construction, and I am interested to know how to break from it, achieve an understanding, in a bodily, rooted way, where these words come from.

One way, as Daphne Marlatt makes clear, is to understand language biologically, “less a line than a web, which we spin, sound volley along. by which we are held, told, spun into larger and larger reaches of meaning” (53).

The ways I can think of words, in a biological way. What does the story taste like? Gleaned moments from a reading in Vancouver. The meal that
followed. The taste of rice pudding on my tongue.

...

All Best,

Tomas
Dear Peter,

One of the two poplars outside of my mother’s house recently died. It was a long decline, the tree had been in poor health, while the one just two feet away was thriving. Jessie pointed out that the tree needed as much dirt beneath it as the circumference of the branches above. Over time, we came to realize that the new coating of asphalt and the white stones placed along the fence had choked off the water from the roots of the tree.

My dad’s punchline to a joke comes to mind as I’m writing this; “it was the Ash’s fault.”

I called 311 to report it and two weeks later the tree was removed. I feel I should hold on to the stump. Not in mourning, but still a pause, a reflection of our relationship to site.

In 2015, I took part in a project called Wreck City in Calgary. It was organized by a group of artists, based around a house gallery called 809. Located in the city’s Sunnyside neighbourhood, the houses along the block were all slated for demolition. Somehow, the gallery organizers were able to convince the developers, Batistella, to give them access to all the houses to hold a pre-demotion art event. Over one hundred artists were given access to the houses and were able to transform them into wild
installations. I was one of the artists selected, working with the fireplace in the backyard of 809. This was around the time of our move from 528, shortly after the death of my dad.

Sometime earlier, workers from The City arrived on our property and started cutting down the large spruce trees in the backyard. My mom watched, shocked, as the 60-year-old trees fell. But she stayed inside. It turns out they had made a mistake and had cut down the wrong trees, meaning instead to cut the trees in the front yard.

We kept the wood for fires and as stumps to sit around the pit. At the time of the move, I brought some of this to 809 for a controlled burn, between the hours of 5:28 - 8:09 PM, a space to have a conversation about the eventual loss of spaces that we care about.

The overall event was a spectacle, and I have conflicting opinions about it, but am glad for the opportunity to have had this small space for a shared mourning process.

Sometime after Wreck City, another project by the same organizers took place at the King Edward School. Here an historic sandstone schoolhouse was again given over to artists to engage with. The summer prior I had been part of a residency on Toronto Island, organized by Victoria Stanton,
called “Between Intimacy and Architecture.” In this performance-based workshop, the six participants learned and developed techniques to engage with site. We formed a strong bond and became a collective—the 6 of hearts—named after a performance where we made a house of cards.

We worked in one of the classrooms in the King Edward School, building collaborative and independent works over many hours. Day after day, I brought material from my dad’s school. His lesson plans and administrative forms. I ripped the pages and put them in my mouth, drinking water and moistening them until they turned into a pulp. I shaped these into letters on a chalkboard, like large spitballs. The phrase read: *What I am, so will you be. What you are so once was I.*

I’m thinking a lot about conversations I’ve had about 809 Gallery and Wreck City. I think it is true that the focus was less about the physical houses, the material aspects of the works, than it was about the social relationship of the space, the people that were part of it. Of course, it’s closely aligned to the physical architecture, but I think the emphasis on this was wrong, and echoed in subsequent iterations of this project at The King Edward School, and the Car Wash. These projects followed the wrong trajectory, and I think got caught up in some of the more unfortunate aspects of the Wreck City ethos, of engaging in a material and process-focused practice which simultaneously, if unintentionally masked the
processes and implications of gentrification. I wonder if it could have been redirected to looking at the dynamics of the relationships formed, the time and labour spent; less on the shell and more of the essence.

If I’m thinking in the same way here, is there something from this that I’m not fully addressing in this work, for 528? Am I overemphasizing the space, in its physical reality, even in the mailing of the letters, the material of the archive, the furniture, the paintings? What about the underlying conditions of exhaustion, the reticence of my mother to look at the archive, to delve in? Maybe there’s more to that that should be explored.

I’m also thinking about ghosts, in a way, as a kind of surplus, or latency. Something stirred up, a tension, an anxiety, a resistance.

I’m thinking of what Camille Turner said during her talk as part of the 2016 Summer Intensive in Kelowna: “step into stories ... experience is felt ... lost in translation when putting into language ... words are inadequate.”

These observations, fragments that I captured in my notes, have really turned me around on my thinking about this project, but, in another way, also keeping me on the path I want to go on. I’ve been struggling with envisioning the realization of this work, and in particular knowing that the realization in many respects needs to be set now, and then carried
forward. So, some tinkering and adjusting can take place, but within an established aesthetic framework. I’ve been struggling with this aesthetic, which is based on the organizational strategy of my mom, of her correspondence, which she files within white binders, in plastic sleeves. I had intended to have printouts, on regular printer paper, not as a denial of aesthetics, but in close emulation of her methodology. I’ve also been resistant to adopting an aesthetic simply for the sake of aesthetic—handwritten, typed, specific fonts, etc. I realize these decisions need to be made, but at the moment I’m hesitant. I’m hoping the answer will present itself.

Stepping into stories; the importance of embodying stories. The way Camille does this, through her performative walks, and the histories explored on sites that are actively engaged in forgetting. Words are inadequate; the presence needs to be felt. It is also true that words are inadequate, sometimes, because there aren’t words that can reach a particular feeling, or condition. Language leads the reader and writer (both actual and imagined) down a particular path, like this letter, intended for a particular person, but also something like a confessional, a diary.

I’ve been back at the site of 528 again recently. After a long negotiation, I was finally granted permission from the current site owners to deposit the shelf on the site for a period of time. There were a lot of caveats, largely
concerning any visibility that might affect the aesthetics of the site; somewhat humorous, given how overgrown the site was. In the end I was able to convince them to let me leave the uninstalled wood on the site. Furtively, I brought the constructed shelf, which they allowed. I will be picking up the shelf again soon, which will bear the imprint of the site. It will contain the language of the space. I’ve been thinking of the work of Jordan Scott and Stephen Collis who buried copies of Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of the Species* throughout the interior of BC for a year. Following this, the books were exhumed, co-mingling with the environment (Scott and Collis, *Decomp*).

Our house is now gone. Torn down to make way for an ambitious development that never materialized. Now it is an empty pit. Not empty—it’s overgrown with plant life, surrounded by fencing. I didn’t ever want to see it again, but one day while driving with my sister, she took us there. Ultimately, I’m glad she did, giving us the opportunity to see the overgrowth, the trees still standing, the gazebo visible past where the house once stood.

I’ve continued, sporadically, to go through the material effects of my mother’s archive. Going through, we have sifted and amassed a large pile of detritus material, and I’m very interested in this material in particular, which holds no value to her, but still carries some resonance, a value in
outline. Sifting through, we organized material into three piles: items to keep; items I wanted to hold on to; and items to discard. The discard pile was largely bills, invoices and ephemera (church newsletters, articles, and some of my homework assignments, oddly enough). Some of these undesired items I would sneak into my pile, or more rarely, into the keep pile as an indication of its kind, or if there was a particular quality to it—for example, if it was annotated. The discard pile was quite large, and I think this gave my mom a sense of satisfaction; that we weren’t just sifting through and rearranging all the materials, only to return them to a box. We discussed what to do with the material. I suggested burning it, and she agreed. I didn’t mention that I planned to keep the ashes, in envelopes, and possibly mail these back to the house.

I am thinking of elements, such as fire, of water, and of earth. It falls in line with my ongoing series of works that employ familial narratives, using the ephemeral and physical materials as a way to break open new meanings, glean a different understanding.

Representing the discursive performing body on the page requires an enfleshed methodology, and surely, an expansion of form in academic writing. Embodied writing must be able to reflect the corporeal and material presence of the body that generated the text in performance. Emancipating the body from its erasure in academic
scholarship would, necessarily, affect stylistic form. (Borggreen and Gade, *Performing Archives/archives of Performance* 726)

Through my studies I was able to meet and learn from authors such as Mark Giles and Tamas Dobozy. Both of their writings have provided me with insight into my work, in consideration of how stories about family are told.

I think of the characters in their two books: Mark Giles’ *Seep* (2015) and Dobozy’s *The Beautician* (2009); how the protagonists carry the archive, how it manifests within the academic context.

Dwight, the protagonist in *Seep*, returns to his hometown to research and tell his origin story as part of his master’s thesis. Dwight is a “former archivist in the corporate library of Integrated Horizons Corp (IHC)—formerly International Hydrocarbons, formerly Industrial Heat and Coal, and originally Prairie Mountain Light and Power (Giles, 21).

How to intervene in my own text? I want to avoid stepping into what Giles describes as a “shadowy nostalgia...The W.O. Mitchell narrative, the Kinsella narrative” (Giles, *Seep* 22). I’m trying not to tell the story. What is here is not what I want to tell. I’ve resisted going into the history found in official spaces, forensically looking for some clues. What I’m offering up
instead: some small stories; veiled allusion; and crafted subtext.

In *The Beautician*, the protagonist engages in a long negotiation with Hollo (the beautician) over the secret content of his archive, amassed during his time as a censor in Communist Hungary. The protagonist wishes to incorporate Hollo’s archive into his studies, but does not recognize the implications of doing this. In the end Hollo relents, and provides him with the archives—but only after they have been burned—in the form of ashes.

“Of course, you tell yourself things,” he continued, “stories to redeem your betrayals.” At night, after work, early in the morning, he’d think of the writers who’d written these books, the hours they’d spent, the excitement and inspiration, and it felt to him like the only fitting tribute to her, the only thing those books could now realize, as if the beauty that was their aim was Adriana herself, for if they were going to be destroyed, and they were whether Hollo did it or someone else, then at least they should go to that, the very thing they’d tried to accomplish and which their destruction would testify to—a love outside the ideology hemming them in, as if one secret could hide inside another, buried deep, the loss of those books covering up something else the regime had missed. (Dobozy, 111)

I tell my mother I want to send letters to the old house, filled with the ephemera from her archive that is within each Tupperware container.
These letters will come back, returned to sender. She’s concerned that this will be an irritation to the post office, or worse... will we get in trouble? I’m hesitant with her discomfort, and guiltily aware that I’ve already begun the process, which she soon finds out. I transcribed a text from one of our conversations, where she walked me through her collection. I sent one hundred copies of this transcript, with addressed envelopes to a conference in Montreal. I asked participants, through instructions (I wasn’t able to attend in person) to comment and post these in return to the old house. In the end I received three. I didn’t read them, although I’m deeply curious to see what they say. However, there is an uncomfortable feeling that holds me back. A feeling that I’ve somehow betrayed a trust, that I’ve started down a path that will only inflict more and more discomfort on my mother.

I’m reminded of the protagonist in, The Beautician, his interrogation of Hollo’s archive and of his past: the parallel of his dragging this archive through the filter of the university and the Hungarian social community. While I don’t anticipate such an explosive revelation through my family’s history, I sense a similar resistance to bringing the collection into the process of review. I question my motives. I wonder if, as in Dobozy’s story, burning these envelopes is the better decision.

I’m also thinking about Vera Frenkel’s video work, Once Near Water: Notes
from the Scaffolding Archive (2007). In this work, an unnamed protagonist inherits a collection of photos of scaffolding. On the instruction of the archivist who compiled this collection, she eventually destroys it. The fictional archivist of scaffolding, through her correspondence with the narrator, states: “Do what you want with this: Grieve, Reminisce, Advocate, Act.”

My father was infatuated with water. The books in our collection (some that I gave him) reflected this interest in poetic and scientific forms. Water changes from liquid to steam. Water flows. I once bought my father a book on water, but like many of my interventions into that bookshelf, I don’t think he even opened it. I can’t say I blame him. I pulled it off the shelf recently and discovered that it doesn't have the water in it—none of the flow that delighted him in stories, or turns of phrase. He was quiet, but full of joy. You had to be able to recognize it, and wait for it.

I keep going back, keep drawing from, keep drawing in.

Peter, I’m thinking of you washing books.

“I like the water in it” (Wah, Faking it ’74).

I’m thinking of the water that my parents and siblings crossed to reach
here. The bridge my grandfather built. I’m thinking of the many, many
times that artist-run centres in Calgary have had to rescue their archives
from flood damage.

Divya Mehra’s exhibition at The New Gallery in 2016 was called *It’s gonna
rain*. It changed in concept following the sudden death of the artist’s father.
After his death, the piece shifted to be a memorial to him, an architectural
space to be destroyed through a gradual but unrelenting flow of water.
I want to somehow acknowledge what is happening to 528. After the house
is gone, how it can speak to, break open the space. Is it possible to take
control away from the narration? These stories are mundane pieces. These
bones, fragments, pushed and pulled together, rubbing and breaking
together, shards, what do they mean? Excavation, an incomplete picture.

My installation at 528 will consist of the shelf, unburied from the property.
While I build this, I’m holding questions: What is in the landscape, what is
my knowledge of it? What information do I hope to receive from it?

Am I in the process of erasing, or reconstituting?

I am working with Jen van de Pol on what has become an ongoing
investigation of presence on land, navigated through the guest book. We
responded to a guest book that we discovered in Sooke, Vancouver Island.
We also purchased a new, empty guest book and used this to explore the landscape—the book became a conduit for our encounters with land. A further project may be to work with the site of the old house. A site I’m no longer host of, and, depending on whom you ask, an uninvited, unwelcome guest. Or maybe, I—we, are welcome. Maybe the site can be changed—Can we invite ourselves? How far can we extend this invitation?

Peter, I think of your process of burying books as a way of publishing. The books we had in our family collection reflect land, but a particular narrative, the current of my family story, how it is told. Breaking it down, pulling fragments—the land, language. Not an overlay. What the words say in the mix. How it is carried. A jumble. Brittle papers carried for so long, moving from place to place to place. Reading these pages over and over, pulling into currents, ways of understanding.

In the fall of 2016, I witnessed a reading of an exhibition by Tania Willard and Heather Caverhill at Presentation House Gallery in Vancouver. The exhibition, Nanitch, was drawn from a collection of photographs from the Uno Langmann Collection, and featured early photographic representations of British Columbia. At the discussion following the launch of the exhibition, participants were each provided with a text drawn from primary sources that were connected to the photographs, as well as some tidbits from contemporary scholarship. As a group, we took turns reading
the texts aloud, when it felt appropriate. In the end, as a group, we had
stitched together an interpretation of the exhibition and our
understanding of it.

I also want to enact a form of *stichomancy* with some of the
aforementioned materials. I approached this through the texts, pulling
these at random from the shelves and typing on the top of the envelopes.

In one of the books I found an envelope tucked in, which marked the page I
drew from. The envelope is stained along the creases where the glue holds
it together, but otherwise blank. There’s something inside that I can see
when I hold it to the light: a folded paper, but I can’t determine what it is.

I’m thinking of Peter von Tiesenhausen’s fence, installed in intervals on his
property in Northern Alberta. Every year, a new section is added, forming
a line in line with his age. It is a telling of the story of his life through
material, the ongoing effort; the material deteriorates – but in a generative
sense. The stories I’ve inherited, drawn from. Getting out from under the
narrative, in a performative way, breaking it down to allow a new story
out, a new way of telling. Where these stories crack against myself, exist
and drawn in, a biological process, absorbing, digesting, fragmentary
remains, where the blood still flows from it. A past evaporated. The dry
brittle paper connected to biological process, brought back into caring.
Young wood carved & painted, will, stand tall mid dark the branches
weave now, locus abandoned as a burnt out house

To represent, flaunt (taunt) the
would-be EVENT, whistling in the
deep wood

“As it is, they lean precariously, tottering in every
wind...destined to crash down, one by one,” while

sometimes, finally, trees grow up around them.
Wave trains of thought that oscillate between naming and transition.

(Marlatt, Liquid (i) City xii)

... All Best,

Tomas
Dear Stephen,

In May I contacted the developer, the son of a friend of the family, who originally purchased the site of 528. His original intention when purchasing the site was to build a seven-unit complex on the half-acre property. The completion of the sale was aligned with the collapse of the economy, and as a result the development stalled. He later sold it to a larger developer, who over the past four years has sat on the property, awaiting more favourable conditions before realizing a development. The site has in the meantime taken on a different production, as wildlife and flora have grown on it.

Over a period of months I engaged in phone and email correspondence with the current owners of the site, explaining my interest in accessing the site to install a bookshelf. After some setbacks, I was surprisingly able to gain permission to install the bookshelf. Over the past two months, this bookshelf has rested on the site, gathering knowledge from the environment.

I was also able to start experimenting with the typewriter and envelopes. There have been a few happy accidents that have helped move my process forward, thankfully slowly. I had originally planned to write out a larger section of text, approximately a paragraph, but after working on one piece,
a typo forced me to stop at a fragment, a more poetic solution.

I started writing on the envelopes, using the front of the envelopes, to include fragments of text from the books in our collection. The choice to use the business envelopes came about through a happy accident while I was at my mom’s house. We were having coffee, and she went to get the mail, and when she came back she gave me an envelope, saying that this is something that I should use for my art. The envelope was addressed to S. Jonsson / Current Resident, and was sent from Hometurf Lawn Care to our old address. The envelope was addressed to our old house and had markings from the redirection. It also came in a windowed “business style” envelope, and all of these details really felt like a breakthrough. I had started writing on smaller envelopes that I had been given, and while I liked using these and how these came to me (a gift from a friend), the windows provided an unexpected solution to how I could simultaneously include, but not fully disclose the contents, the archival detritus. The window gives a glimpse in, but still obscures and protects the contents, and our history. This tension is key to what I want to accomplish in this work.

A few other synchronicities also came into play for this from my two recent trips to Vancouver Island working with Jen Van de Pol, the first being my discovery of a Danish typewriter at a thrift shop in Sooke. I left this with Jen, as I wasn’t able to fit it within my luggage. When I went back the second
time, Jen showed me and told me about an artwork she had made while at Goddard College. She had rolled this print in a tube and had included a small branch that all participants had received while in the program. When she finally unpacked it, a few months after returning, she realized that the branch was still green and that the water had seeped through the print. She liked the effect of this on her work, and still has it installed. I knew I had to include organic matter in my envelopes as well. The window to the envelope allows this pairing to be immediately apparent. I also hope that there is a similar effect on the archival matter, that there will be mingling between the materials.

Another happy coincidence was how well the format of these larger envelopes fitted within the typewriter. As a result, I decided to have a single line of text along the top, which, when pulling quotes from the books in my mom’s collection, gives me a parameter to work within. As I was working on the envelopes, it occurred to me that I could approach my thesis in a similar fashion. Using a laptop instead of a typewriter, I would pull sections from my readings in an intuitive stichomancy approach (borrowing from Peter Morin) and developing from these encounters, in what would eventually form my thesis.

I recall the many evenings my mom, dad and I spent in the living room. Each of us sitting in near corners of the room. We would dip into books on
occasion, reading selections. The 1954 edition of Funk and Wagnall’s encyclopedia was a common selection that we would draw from. Some would lead to others, in non-sequential fashion. Sometimes a word or a subject would lead to a new course.

Estonian artist Jaan Toomik, while in residency in France, would visit a hill at dusk to witness the sunset. He would bring a bottle of wine to drink while watching. Once he finished the bottle, he would take a photo of the sunset. These photos each ordained the empty bottles, which would sit on the shelf of the gallery, a residue of the private performance.

In my exhibition at the FINA Gallery in 2016, I adopted a similar approach. I would sit at the table, alone at night, with a bottle of wine. I poured myself a glass, and also one for my mother (not present). I would then drink, and go through the contents of a box of archival materials, recounting these as if speaking to her. This audio, the empty glass, the empty bottle, and a full glass, sat in the gallery as audio of my conversation played from within the box. A corkboard on the wall featured an assortment of these materials.

Considering the aesthetic conditions of the letters, I was faced with the choice of adopting a typewriter, a handwritten, or a contemporary form using a computer. You raised the question about the aesthetic of this work. I approached this with some hesitancy, as I wanted the decision to be based
on more than a surface aesthetic; for there to be a meaning to it, rather than a shadowy nostalgia effect, or affect. I could see this aesthetic decision as a nod to the material reality of a lot of the correspondence in the boxes. Initially my resistance was to remain true to the current reality and conditions that were employed in our house by my mother. The emails that she would studiously copy and file in white binders, each by their sender.

These letters are important, as a way of working through the development of the project. The letters have become, at least to my mind, a methodological structure. I approached each as a performance, trying to write these in the moment, and so in their build-up, formulation follows, as a search, a roundabout exploration, that hopefully leads to an accumulation, in a sense an accumulation. In a way, they are preliminary, not the artwork itself, but the way of thinking of it. Rather than send these to the house, as proposed, I shifted towards sending the material that we sifted through.

My hesitancy extended to the mailing of the letters. I held onto these for some time. I’m not sure what the hesitation is exactly, but I feel I need to step right with this, and there is still so much I need to understand about my reasoning in taking this action before I commit to it. I need to make sure I am on the right path.
Is there a reason in showing this in such detail, or is leaving out perhaps better? I don't want to tell the story. I want to put together, and then take out. The stories don't belong here. I want to keep them just below the surface, knowing that they are here, “a yelping pack of possibilities” (Wah, False Laws of Narrative ?4).

I’m inclined to maintain the structure of my Mom’s collecting process—white binders, each page in plastic sleeves, on wooden shelves. I have a vision of the display, in a gallery, or another institutional setting; a space that can be explored intimately.

Is the craft in the form of these letters? I’m still finding my way through them, still a bit of a contrivance. As a form of research, I want to create a document that works like a letter, but also a space for something else. As I’m writing this, I’m oscillating between two potential readers: you as an imagined reader, like a diary, and you yourself. Who else will read this, and what will they read into it? What criticisms, interpretations, and connections can they draw from this? I have some ideas of where I want this to lead, points I want to emphasize. I’m preoccupied with anticipation.

I think that it is a limitation of language that leads to misunderstanding,
misconceptions of these relations. What else could speaking mean, what else could listening mean, that doesn’t necessarily constitute a language, but still a form of communication, communion. When I’m thinking about the house, the space we lived in, what is it that is imparted? Is it a vehicle for communication, is there a way it conveys meaning, through its use? Is there some transmission that communicates? What does that space convey in support of its survival? I know it’s an external, abstract space, and I resist the dangerous urge of personification, but still there is something in the familiarity of the space, one which we occupied for so long that the rub of its borders and ourselves blur. Not just the house, but the land that we shaped, that shaped us. It’s still there, still familiar, and also still there as a feeling.

These letters, and the collecting, is part of this process. As I write, I carry forward questions, of the installation and of the letters: How will this be made accessible? Who will read these? Or will they be concealed still in their envelopes? I carry and form a mental picture of the installation—binders on shelves—but in terms of their enactment, is this going to be individually activated? A performance for a larger audience? Will it be ongoing? What will happen to the letters afterwards? I’m inclined towards burying them, or burning (or both?), but there is still a tension. I would like to hold on to them somehow, and likely will keep an archive of the letters as an electronic document. I also hope to collect them in an
embodied sense, to have a memory of this interaction, writing this on the fly and trying not to compose in advance. When I start this, slowing down my writing, thinking more carefully about what I’m about to say, I force myself to speed up, to stop self-editing. I’m trying to think of this as a performative gesture, holding a space. I think the letters are partly this space, that through the process of the writing that comes through and circles around the project. Once it starts slowing down, I think about how to lead to an ending of the moment, when presence breaks down.

Therefore, if one is thinking in place and truly engaging each situation, even those of one’s own creation - as in writing or art making - there is a requirement that you not only enter into such spaces, move around in them, examine and try to make sense of their interiorities and exteriorities, but that also, miraculously, through a combination of thought and action, you find a way out, knowing that there can be no real resolution to the questions posed, only a process of framing and reframing, which inevitably moves the investigation forward. (Becker *Thinking in Place* 26)

How much more should I say? How am I addressing this, revealing and not revealing in the letters?

For Kuhn, family secrets form narratives of identity within this
kinship group that are based as much on what is openly told about the family as on what is omitted. Behind family ideals such as intimacy, support, and solidarity exist a number of other stories that are only told within the family, lied about, or not mentioned at all. (Borggreen and Gade, *Performing Archives/archives of Performance* 12).

The letters are a cleared space, associated, but not spoken. An omission and an erasure. A past evaporated.

...

All Best,

Tomas


Figure 1  Tattoo by Dion Kaszas