

**SUM OF THE PARTS**  
**ART AND THE ARCHIVE: THE STATUS OF THE DOCUMENT**

by

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## Abstract

In her 1992 publication *Atget's Seven Albums*, Molly Nesbit opens with an introduction subtitled *The Document*. She compellingly defines the document by situating its relationship to photography, the archive, and visual art. Nesbit's tremendously important identification of the intersection between art and the archive is where I will situate the focus of this paper. Through this intersection, I will demonstrate a rereading of the status of the document by considering the extended relationship between art and the archive. In particular, I will look at the status of the document as artwork and the ways in which contemporary art of the 21<sup>st</sup> century comes to stand in for the document. I will establish this point by examining the ready-made subject of archival structures as well as the overlapping spheres of the document and art. I will perform a rereading of the status of the document by tracing its trajectory from the discourse of empirical facticity to a more complex dimension of mnemonic production. This rereading will consider the document and memory as resources available for extraction and activation. Throughout, I will set specific limits for this research by positioning previous scholarship in relation to a selection of films and performances by artists Deanna Bowen, Felix Kalmenson, Divya Mehra, Krista Belle Stewart, and Casey Wei. Within these limits, I will examine the politics of these artists' works with attention to formalism and historicity.

## Lay Summary

*sum of the parts* | *Art and the Archive: The Status of the Document* brings together a selection of films, performances, and installations by artists who activate personal histories drawn from familial and public record. Deanna Bowen, Felix Kalmenson, Divya Mehra, Krista Belle Stewart and Casey Wei present compelling excavations of the past in their work by drawing from familial, historic, and archival sources—visualizing narratives of race and class, and espousing their recognition within official records. Each film and performance provides a framework for a larger narrative of archival complexity—offering a visual key to examine discourses on the commodification and construction of historic record in relation to the business of archival storage, preservation, and dissemination within the public realm. In mining the potential of the private and public archive, these artists interrogate the visual and material nature of historical reference and activate immaterial records.



## **Preface**

This thesis is original research conducted by Jennifer Jackson.

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## **Dedication**

To all of the artists who shared their stories: Your words stay with me.

## Foreword

In the spring of 2018, I began a research fellowship at 221A Pollyanna 圖書館 Library in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. The purpose of the fellowship was to extend my MA Art History thesis research and to host *sum of the parts*, a curatorial research project which brought together a selection of films, performances, and installations by artists who activate personal histories drawn from familial and public record. Deanna Bowen, Felix Kalmenson, Divya Mehra, Krista Belle Stewart, and Casey Wei present compelling excavations of the past in their work by drawing from familial, historic, and archival sources—visualizing narratives of race and class, and espousing their recognition within official records.

Each film and performance provides a framework for a larger narrative of archival complexity—offering a visual key to examine discourses on the commodification and construction of historic record in relation to the business of archival storage, preservation, and dissemination within the public realm. In mining the potential of the private and public archive, these artists interrogate the visual and material nature of historical reference and activate immaterial records. Research associated with *sum of the parts* formed a new collection at 221A Pollyanna 圖書館 Library.

My thesis is a reflection of this research with each artist representing an accompanying chapter.



## Chapter 1: Introduction

In her 1992 publication *Atget's Seven Albums*, Molly Nesbit opens with an introduction subtitled *The Document*.<sup>1</sup> She compellingly defines the document by situating its relationship to photography, the archive, and visual art. Nesbit's tremendously important identification of the intersection between art and the archive is where I will situate the focus of this paper. Through this intersection, I will demonstrate a rereading of the status of the document by considering the extended relationship between art and the archive. In particular, I will look at the status of the document as artwork and the ways in which contemporary art of the 21<sup>st</sup> century comes to stand in for the document. I will establish this point by examining the ready-made subject of archival structures as well as the overlapping spheres of the document and art. I will perform a rereading of the status of the document by tracing its trajectory from the discourse of empirical facticity to a more complex dimension of mnemonic production. This rereading will consider the document and memory as resources available for extraction and activation. Throughout, I will set specific limits for this research by positioning previous scholarship in relation to a selection of films and performances by artists Deanna Bowen, Felix Kalmenson, Divya Mehra, Krista Belle Stewart, and Casey Wei. Within these limits, I will examine the politics of these artists' works with attention to formalism and historicity.

### 1.1 Art and the Archive

The terms and conditions of Nesbit's apt triumvirate—document, art and the archive—begin with the 19th century advent of photography. Nesbit details the troubled status of early

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<sup>1</sup> Molly Nesbit. *Atget's Seven Albums*. Yale University Press, 1993. (p14-19)

photography as having been formally inadequate and therefore forbidden from occupying a position within visual art discourses. She cites Baudelaire's famous condemnation of photography in his salon of 1859 where he declared that photography's place was the archive, not the salon, and that photographers, like archival clerks, were in the business of making "exact records of things that might disappear." Early photography was relegated to the empirical status of the document. It efficiently came to be associated with the defining terms of the document and the framework of the archive as a sum of parts to a greater whole. This relationship to a greater system, the archive, is where Nesbit identifies a potential for the document to transition from a general state of facticity to a charged position of activity. Nesbit establishes that the document, like the archive, cannot exist within general terms. In order to be activated it requires a job. The document is charged by this job and shifts from a position of inactivity to activity within its given framework. This charging of a document or an archive is deeply intertwined with the status of document as artwork and artwork as document. The terms and conditions of the document as artwork and artwork as document mark an ongoing transition in 21st century artistic practices. Through this paper, I will expand on what is historically unique about this shift, whereby artwork skirts the position of historicized document.

## **1.2 Artworks**

The six works that I will focus on in this paper include the video work *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, by Deanna Bowen, films *A House of Skin*, 2016, and *Neither Country, Nor Graveyard*, 2017, by Felix Kalmenson, the performance *DIFFICULT PEOPLE*, 2016-2018, by Divya Mehra, the performance *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, by Krista Bell Stewart and films *Murky Colors*, 2013, and *Vater und Sohn/Father and Son/父与子*, 2014, by Casey Wei.

Through a compelling excavation of the past, these artists draw from familial, historic, and archival sources, visualizing complex narratives of gender, race, and class, and espousing their recognition within official records. Each film, video, and performance provide a framework for a larger narrative of archival complexities that are central to my paper—offering both a visual and textual key to examine discourses on the commodification and construction of historic record in relation to the business of archival storage, preservation, and dissemination within the public realm. In mining the potential of the private and public archive, these artists interrogate the visual and material nature of historical reference and activate immaterial records.

### **1.2.1 Deanna Bowen | *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010**

Deanna Bowen is a descendant of the Alabama- and Kentucky-born Black Prairie pioneers of Amber Valley and Campsie, Alberta. She was born in Oakland, California in 1969 and currently lives and works in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Her family history has been the central pivot of her autoethnographic interdisciplinary works since the early 1990s. Her broader artistic/educational practice examines history, historical writing, and the ways in which artistic and technological advancements impact individual and collective authorship.

Bowen's 20-minute colour video work *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, is a recorded oral performance that recounts the journey of the Bowen family from its earliest documented history in Clinton, Jones County, Georgia in 1815, as told by Bowen herself. As the central figure in a black room, Bowen begins her monologue with the First Known generation: her great, great, great, grandparents. She starts,

Details are few, I barely have dates...

I don't know their names.  
I don't know their parents' names.  
I don't know if they had siblings.  
I don't know when they died.

I do know that my great, great, great, grandfather was born somewhere in Africa and my great, great, great, grandmother was born in the state of Georgia.

As she says the words “Africa” and “Georgia” they appear on the screen in white cursive script, mirroring her speech. She continues to speak the names of each known generation. Africa and Georgia are the only place names that appear on the screen, but family members’ names appear intermittently as she moves through time. The script is populated in relation to historic markers, such as Eli Whitney’s patent of the cotton gin; the number of slaves and free Blacks registered in the United States of America in 1850; the year that British Columbia joined the confederation; when Martin Luther King was shot; and Apollo 11 landing on the moon, among others. As the work chronicles the lives of Bowen’s family members—by retracing, reclaiming, and reactivating a record of their history—it assembles multiple dimensions of the archive, where reading and looking become a political act. In the absence of official record, *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, resourcefully occupies narrative strategies both within and beyond the archive, expanding what is historically unique about Bowen’s family history and, as an artwork itself, coming close to occupying the status of the document.

### **1.2.2 Felix Kalmenson | A House of Skin, 2016 | Neither Country, Nor Graveyard 2017**

Soviet-born, Toronto-based artist Felix Kalmenson’s *Neither Country, Nor Graveyard*, 2017, is a 60-minute two-channel video in memory of Kalmenson’s family migration from

Leningrad, USSR, in 1989, and a record of their<sup>2</sup> return to Saint Petersburg, Russia, 27 years later. When their family left the Soviet Union, they were stripped of their citizenship. Presented with no opportunity to ever return, the family hired a videographer to film them, not in intimate familial spaces, but in central tourist sites. *Neither Country, Nor Graveyard*, 2017, features this original footage alongside a mimetic scene-by-scene remake, documented by Kalmenson during their return to Russia in 2016. Interruptions of time and space are featured as Kalmenson encounters commercial film sets, congested traffic, and transformations of the city's landscape as it transitioned towards the global politics of neoliberal capitalism. Intercut with ruminations of family members on the conditions of life in the late Soviet period, the film is accompanied by images that signal the optimistic framing of a global centre constantly under construction. With visions of past and contemporary Russia, *Neither Country, Nor Graveyard*, 2017, reasserts a basis of cultural legitimation—initiating and constituting a close reading of post-Soviet societies.

Kalmenson's *A House of Skin*, 2016, is a 16-minute video work that charts the complex role that mass-produced concrete highrise apartment buildings have played in defining the landscapes of post-soviet experience, both in the diaspora and the country of origin. The work problematizes the grand narratives that have accompanied both the formations and failures of the modernist architectural and social project, and introduces ruptures that inscribe vernacular ways of being and telling. The work reexamines these architectures, not as totalizing spaces, but as affective frameworks within which various narratives of social and family life are inscribed with violence, struggle, migration, and displacement. Drawing together disparate fragments—LiveLeak and YouTube footage from Russia and 'Little Moscow' in North York, Canada;

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<sup>2</sup> At their request, Kalmenson will be referred to as they throughout this paper.

segments from Soviet cinema; contemporary Russian propaganda films; and artifacts from Kalmenson's family archive, the work pieces together a delirious narrative that charts the coexistence of bodies and buildings.<sup>3</sup>

*Neither Country, Nor Graveyard*, 2017, and *A House of Skin*, 2016, call the social and historical contexts of the document and archive into question. Rather than visually affirm historical reflections, Kalmenson radically forefronts a concern with the mediation of histories and contemporary narratives by political, institutional, and corporate bodies, and how the field of these communications serves to redefine publicness, sovereignty, and power.

### 1.2.3 Divya Mehra | *DIFFICULT PEOPLE*, 2016-2018

In her work as an artist, Divya Mehra speaks to the challenging, and often isolating, experience of growing up in the Canadian Prairies. Since 2016, Mehra has begun compiling a series of nonlinear short stories and poetics that trace these experiences with a specific focus on race, violence, death, and the service industry. Mehra's performative lecture *DIFFICULT PEOPLE*, 2016-2018, borrows from traditions of comedy, the monologue, and the artist talk, coupled with documentation from her social media streams and text messages. The script and visual material of *DIFFICULT PEOPLE*, 2016-2018, is ever-changing. Each iteration includes overlaps, additions, and omissions. Recontextualizing references found in music, literature, and current affairs, Mehra contends with contemporary expressions of societies formed by colonial roots. The performance of *DIFFICULT PEOPLE*, 2016-2018, addresses the long-term effects of colonization and institutional racism.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.felixkalmenson.com/a-house-of-skin/>

#### 1.2.4 Krista Belle Stewart | Potato Gardens Band, 1918-2018

Krista Belle Stewart is a member of the Upper Nicola Band of the Okanagan Nation. She produces work that bears rich knowledge, relationships, intuition, and complexity, and is expressed through the rearticulation of ongoing projects and processes which never close, remaining open to ongoing negotiations of resources, contexts, publics, and institutions. *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, is one such work. The site-specific performance responds to circa 1918 wax-cylinder recordings made by anthropologist James Alexander Teit of Stewart's great-grandmother, Terese Kaimetko. In June 2018, Stewart performed these recordings back to the land where the original Potato Gardens Band songs were composed—Spaxomin (Douglas Lake), Syilx (Okanagan) territory (British Columbia, Canada)—for the first time. In honor of her great-grandmother, Stewart performed the recordings to an intimate group of family members—many of whom had never heard the recordings before.

In accordance with familial protocol, Stewart's performance was a simultaneous act of withholding. The sacred songs of Terese Kaimetko were played to family in the geography where the songs were first sung, then live broadcast from the distance of a hilltop, through an intermittent cellular signal, transmitted to a 85" flat screen monitor, and viewed by an audience at 221A Pollyanna 圖書館 Library located in Chinatown, Vancouver, British Columbia.

The performance of *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, extended to include the loan of a familial document to the Pollyanna 圖書館 Library *sum of the parts* research collection. A three-gallon utility bucket comprised Stewart's contribution to the archive—25 pounds of soil from Spaxomin (Douglas Lake), drawn from Stewart's maternally inherited land. Currently, its contents remain entrusted to Pollyanna 圖書館 Library in wait of future activation.

Together these two gestures further Stewart's precise and meaningful interrogation of archival materials, structures, and systems. They operate in citation of historic colonial erasure and foreground the relationship of Indigenous identity within and beyond the traditional confines of archival address.

### **1.2.5 Casey Wei | *Murky Colors*, 2013 + *Vater und Sohn/Father and Son/父与子*, 2014**

*Murky Colors*, 2013, is an expansive 47-minute, multi-narrative colour video based on a suspense spy novel written by the artist's father Menjin Wei. Through documentary and appropriative strategies, Wei explores the personal and political processes involved in adapting her father's novel to a made-for-Hollywood screenplay. Wei herself plays all the roles in the film and collages together self-shot and appropriated footage to explore themes of family, memory and history.

A well-known syndicated comic strip in Germany and China by E. O. Plauen, *Vater und Sohn* (1934-37) serves as the entry point of Wei's film *Vater und Sohn/Father and Son/父与子*, 2014. The video essay combines documentary and travelogue footage with appropriated images to trace the migration of Plauen's comic strip as it was contextualized by Nazi and Maoist outlets. As a child growing up in Shanghai, Wei read collections of the comic and assumed it was Chinese. In 2012, she stumbled across an image of it online in German and was shocked to discover its true origins. This led her to travel to Germany and China to conduct interviews with people who have encountered the comic strip in various contexts. By framing some failed utopian political strategies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the lens of this comic, Wei provokes the personal and social narratives embedded within state propaganda.



### 1.3 Archives in Contemporary Art

To understand the unique historical specificity of these artworks, their relationship to the archive, and the ways in which they skirt the status of document, I will consider previous scholarship and exhibition histories focused on art and archives. In particular, I will look at the scholarship of Ingrid Schaffner's publication *Deep Storage: Collecting, Storing and Archiving in Art*, 1998; an exhibition of the same name hosted at P.S.1. Contemporary Art Center, New York and the Henry Art Gallery, Seattle; and Okwui Enwezor's 2008 publication and exhibition *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, hosted by the International Center of Photography, New York.

### 1.4 Deep Storage: Collecting, Storing and Archiving in Art

In the catalogue introduction of *Deep Storage: Collecting, Storing and Archiving in Art*, 1998, Schaffner defines the exhibition's research topic within the terms of "storage and archiving as imagery, metaphor or process in contemporary art." The exhibition criteria states that all works included within the program "involve materials or processes associated with keeping art over time."<sup>4</sup> These criteria are located by Schaffner within three specified sites related to artists interested in archival practices: the storeroom/museum, the archive/library, and the artist studio. She consolidates these locations as sites for the construction of history itself and in turn demands a promise of preservation. In *Deep Storage: Collecting, Storing and Archiving in Art*, the archive is fetishized. It is situated as a place where any material has the potential to "someday be

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<sup>4</sup> Schaffner, Ingrid. *Deep Storage: Collecting, Storing, and Archiving in Art*. Munich: Prestel, 1998. (p10)

deem[ed] tremendously significant.”<sup>5</sup> Schaffner’s attention to preservation within the archive is utopic at best, with a hopeful assumption of unlimited storage expanded via intelligent models of archival aggregation. In *Deep Storage: Collecting, Storing and Archiving in Art*, any and all material is treated as a potential document.

What *Deep Storage: Collecting, Storing and Archiving in Art* fails to consider is the archive beyond institutional authorization and approval. It requires a third-party logic of acquisition, storage, and preservation. Missing from this logic is materials which fail to meet institutional protocol; here I am thinking of the function of memory and testimony presented within Bowen, Kalmenson, Mehra, Stewart and Wei’s artworks. *Deep Storage: Collecting, Storing and Archiving in Art* lacks any reference to immaterial archival traces. The archive in *Deep Storage: Collecting, Storing and Archiving in Art* is verifiably material. It is documented proof of existence. There is no consideration of what to do when the archive breaches its physical limitations. What to do, for example, when the archive problematically affirms dominant discourses—whether social, political, or economic—within universalized terms and conditions. Further affirmation of the material value associated with the archive in *Deep Storage: Collecting, Storing and Archiving in Art* is found in Schaffner’s closing remark, a quote from *Citizen Kane* “you are what you keep.”<sup>6</sup> So what if you keep the wrong things? What if what you keep is never seen? Or furthermore, what if you keep nothing?

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. (p20)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. (p21)

## 1.5 Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art

Okwui Enwezor's 2008 publication and exhibition *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, hosted by the International Center of Photography, New York, situates photography and film as central aspects of artists working with the archive. These materials are not only situated as preeminent forms of the archive, but also as principle vehicles for artworks of the exhibition. Enwezor's catalogue text, titled *Archive Fever: Photography between History and Monument*, opens with a quote from Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourses of Language*, 1972. Enwezor starts with Foucault to convey the complexity of the archive as a concept and goes on to describe two views from which the archive has come to be considered.<sup>7</sup> The first description, what he calls a standard view, is described as dim, musty, old, inert, and historical. The second description, which he assigns as his primary focus, is described as an active, regulatory, discursive system. He continues to define the artists included within *Archive Fever* as those who "appropriated, interpreted, reconfigured and interrogated archival structures and archival material."<sup>8</sup> Enwezor's proposition is thorough and extensive. The conditions which he explores are varied yet always return to the material, evidentiary, documentary, and archival modes commonly associated with photography. Although the works presented—such as Anri Sala's *Intervista*, 1998,—reflect on historical conditions, they continually posit a deep investment in the material record, truth, and proof of these conditions, whereby historical record is supplemented by photographic encounter. What is left unanswered

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<sup>7</sup> There is a large literature on Michel Foucault's understanding of the Archive which I will not go into here.

<sup>8</sup> Okwui Enwezor. *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*. New York: International Center of Photography; Göttingen [Germany]: Steidl, 2008. (p11)

by this empirical facticity is a more complex dimension of mnemonic production—a rereading of the status of the document.

## **1.6 Double Negation: Archival Contradictions**

The contradiction at the core of the archive is its inability to consider the immaterial and often invisible subjective quantum of memory and mnemonic production involved in archival activation. In the archive, fact and memory are at the very least provisionally opposed to each other. This double negation produces tension and friction between archival resources that are material and immaterial, visible and invisible, objective and subjective. The fetishization of empirical documents within the administrative and bureaucratic system of the archive represses any form of visibility for resources deemed precarious—such as memory, and resulting written and oral testimony. This challenge within the archive brings me to Bowen, Kalmenson, Mehra, Stewart, and Wei’s radical commitment to making the enactment of historical reflection within and beyond the terms and conditions of the archive a fundamental strategy within their work. These artists resist the aesthetic instrumentalization and spectacularization of memory by making space for the volatile asset of mnemonic devices within the archive. They advantageously deploy the document as subject and witness, with tremendous attention to the deficits of such deployments and to the slippage of empirical facticity. By way of action they actively reinscribe the body within the archive and in turn history. As such, the document is able to occupy multiple spaces at once and to swiftly change meaning depending on the context of its assigned purpose.

Within this select body of works, the document is always derived from a specific context. However, this does not mean that the document belongs exclusively to the context from which it is derived. Indeed, for a document to be derived from a specific context within the archive, there

must be a way for it to depart from its original context—to demonstrate its applicability outside of the structure.<sup>9</sup> In this sense, the departure from the original context is a precondition of the archive yielding political principles. This capacity to occupy multiple positions brings me to focus on the work of Felix Kalmenson. I will begin by considering the double negation of Kalmenson’s biographic record.

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<sup>9</sup> For more on archival material, history, and remaining open to cause and effects of interrelationships beyond hierarchical knowledge systems, see Walter Benjamin and Ursula Marx. *Walter Benjamin's Archive: Images, Texts, Signs*. Translated by Esther Leslie, Verso, 2015. In this publication Walter Benjamin’s conception of history is detailed as “parataxis-time scattered through space like stars, its course no longer taking form of progress but leaping forth in the momentary flashes of dialectical constellations.” Benjamin opposed the traditional linearity of time where events are homogenously positioned from past to future, preferring instead a system of montage where any moment can enter into sudden adjacency with another.

## Chapter 2: Felix Kalmenson

### 2.1 Biographic Plurality

Kalmeson's biography directly reflects the extended plurality of the document as archival subject. In 1987, Kalmenson was born in Leningrad, USSR. In 1987, Kalmenson was born in St. Petersburg, Russia. In 1987, Kalmenson was assigned the gender of male. In 2017, Kalmenson identifies as they.<sup>10</sup> Kalmenson is Jewish. Kalmenson is a citizen of Israel. Kalmenson is a citizen of Canada. Kalmenson defines themselves as a 'rootless cosmopolitan'<sup>11</sup> whose work variably narrates the liminal space of a researcher's and an artist's encounter with landscape and archive. Their work bears witness to everyday life and hardens the fragile mnemonic vestiges of private and collective histories. Through their work, Kalmenson gives themselves away to the cadence of a poem, always in flux.<sup>12</sup> As within the formal structure of the archive, the categories that describe Kalmenson get harder to define the closer that they are examined. The relationship between signifier and signified is continually exposed to the uncertainty of change. That said, Kalmenson's biographic identification is self-determined. Its plurality exemplifies that, although a subject does not always fully know and does not always fully choose the status of this identification, there is invariably a potential for autonomy, whether internal or externally

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<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, in the Russian language, a subject can be assigned a gender neutral possessive reflexive pronoun *Svoy* (свой). This fluidity to refer back to a subject without gender within language is of great interest considering the experiences of queer people in the USSR and Russia with specific attention to depictions of sexuality in the socialist state. For more on this subject, see historian Dr. Kyle Frackman's 2013 research article "Coming out of the Iron Closet: Contradictions in East Germany Gay History and Film."

<sup>11</sup> Rootless cosmopolitan (Russian: безродный космополит, *bezrodnyi kosmopolit*) was a Soviet pejorative euphemism widely used during the Soviet anti-Semitic campaign of 1948–1953, which culminated in the "exposure" of the nonexistent Doctors' plot. The term "rootless cosmopolitan" referred mostly to Jewish intellectuals, as an accusation in their lack of patriotism, i.e., lack of full allegiance to the Soviet Union.

<sup>12</sup> I owe this important biographical language to writer and curator Maya Tounta who wrote Felix Kalmenson's most recent artist statement. <http://www.ofluxo.net/from-a-body-i-spent-by-felix-kalmenson-curated-by-maya-tounta-at-kim-contemporary-art-center/>

represented.<sup>13</sup> The perception of fixed facts as ostensibly unchanging in Kalmenson's biography, as in the archive, is veritably subject to flux. In biography, as in the archive, things that seem as though they have always been are likely to have been translated from a precursory state. These qualities do not ameliorate the document as device, they merely substantiate the perpetually dialogic state of the document to archive, subject to body.

## 2.2 Triumvirate Triage

In this section I will focus on Kalmenson's films *A House of Skin*, 2016, and *Neither Country, Nor Graveyard*, 2017, as well as the artist produced publication *As Always*, 2017. This triumvirate of works were produced sequentially but will not be discussed chronologically. The film *Neither Country, Nor Graveyard*, 2017, will be a primary focus. The film *A House of Skin*, 2016, and publication *As Always*, 2017, will follow. The works are autonomous, yet when brought together reveal an extended network of association. *A House of Skin*, 2016, is a 16-minute video work that charts the complex role that mass-produced concrete highrise apartment buildings have played in defining the landscapes of post-soviet experience, both in the diaspora and the country of origin. *Neither Country, Nor Graveyard*, 2017, is a two-channel video in memory of Kalmenson's family migration from Leningrad, USSR, in 1989, and a record of Kalmenson's return to St. Petersburg, Russia, 27 years later. *As Always*, 2017, is a self-published artist book which chronicles Kalmenson's digital correspondence while in St. Petersburg. It was produced in compliment of *Neither Country, Nor Graveyard*, 2017, and *A House of Skin*, 2016.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> For more on this subject see Judith Butler's *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*. Columbia University Press, 2014.

<sup>14</sup> The publication *As Always* was first published in conjunction with *как всегда / As Always* an exhibition at Pari Nadimi Gallery from February 9 to March 25, 2017. A second edition of the publication was produced in

### 2.3 Document Dilemma

The dilemma of the archive is a primary concern of Kalmenson's work. Their critique examines the political principles within the archive that are more broadly understood as historic. Kalmenson negotiates the document as a privileged resource where the framework continually returns as a mechanism to consider the critique of the archive. Through their artwork, Kalmenson imparts visibility to alternate versions of meaning for the document within the archive. Kalmenson offers a sense of plurality on how the meaning of a document shifts and changes in relation to the apparatus in which it is housed. They provide an alternate version of what happened, a version that echoes a primary source yet unsettles its confirmed status. The question of primary source material presented in Kalmenson's works also harkens back to historic Soviet policies of sovereign archival control, whereby historic narratives were subject to dramatic shifts, obfuscations, additions, and omissions in direct support of the concurrent politics.<sup>15</sup> Kalmenson prompts the viewer to consider the possibility for an archival polity that not only shelters multiple frameworks but commits itself to alternate forms of document, affording mnemonic and empirical records the opportunity to coexist in a state of flux. Kalmenson's version of activating the document and archive involves complex antagonistic modes of facticity and memory with a function to ameliorate traditional archival forms that already exist.

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conjunction with my *sum of the parts* curatorial research project from March 1 to August 1, 2018, at 221A Pollyanna 圖書館 Library.

<sup>15</sup> For more on historic Soviet archival policy see David King's 1997, *The Commissar Vanishes: The Falsification of Photographs and Art in Stalin's Russia*. Metropolitan Books.



## 2.4 The Diasporic Document

Kalmenson has focused their attention on the subjugation, expulsion, and dispossession of values of populations. For Kalmenson, this is a particular condition of the emigrant and immigrant body—of Kalmenson's body and their family's bodies.<sup>16</sup> This attention is specific to colonized and occupied populations including internal colonization policies acted upon the soviet subject.<sup>17</sup> The document has an innate ability to cohabitate alternate archives or, in relation to the subject of the body, geographies. The internal inequalities of the archive directly correlate with historic modes of colonial expulsion. Kalmenson critiques the historically constituted colonization of knowledge by appropriating the diasporic document within a contemporary global politic in the development of new historical forms which challenge nationalism into a real, tangible, socio-political context. They negate the primacy of the archival framework in a process of dispersion which becomes a condition of thinking through the archival condition. Through this critique, Kalmenson not only appropriates state-authorized records but also introduces alternate forms of record and, as stated earlier, through memory and resulting written and verbal testimony. By appropriating the past, they interrupt and challenge the unifying character of the archive. They dislocate the document and demand a claim for conjunctive disjunction. The challenge for Kalmenson is that the document can never be fully extracted from the discursive field of translation. In order to change original meaning, one is required to believe in original context. These beliefs are instituted and maintained by archival frameworks old and new. The

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<sup>16</sup> For more on the condition of exile and exilic experiences with specific attention to the processes that people undergo as their identities shift from being emigrants to being immigrants see Bożena Karwowska's 2017 *The More I Know, the Less I Understand: Young Researchers' Essays on Witnessing Auschwitz*. Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum.

<sup>17</sup> For more on the subject of internal colonization see Alexander Etkind's 2011, *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience*. Polity Books.

distance between these frameworks amortize original context to eventual use and meaning congruent with the concept of genealogy, which I will consider more in depth further on. In order for a document to become mobilized, its relevance must be established beyond its original framework.

## **2.5 Neither Country, Nor Graveyard**

Felix Kalmenson's 60-minute colour video work *Neither Country, Nor Graveyard*, 2017, is a two-channel video in memory of Kalmenson's family migration from Leningrad, USSR, in 1989, and record of their return to Saint Petersburg, Russia, 27 years later. When their family left the Soviet Union, they were stripped of their citizenship. Presented with no opportunity to ever return, they hired a videographer to film them in central tourist sites. *Neither Country, Nor Graveyard*, 2017, features this film alongside a mimetic scene-by-scene reenactment, documented by Kalmenson during their return to Russia in 2016. The original footage appears to the left of the screen, with the aspect ratio of a VHS camera, and the mimetic footage appears to the right of the screen, with the aspect ratio of an Android mobile phone camera. The proximate placement of this footage creates a spatiotemporal loop of transfer from one horizon to the other. Temporality is crossed and made subject to deviation. Something is lost, something is new, continuity is broken.

When Kalmenson's family left the USSR, there were two immigration options for stateless persons: the United States of America and Israel. They chose to move to Israel to be with their Belarus-born Jewish mother's family. Shortly after moving to Israel, the United States of America closed their stateless persons immigration program. Through a distant relative, the Kalmenson family eventually immigrated from Israel to Eastern Canada. The immigration

process required calculated timing and extensive documentation. Canada was a final destination for the Kalmenson family. As the protocols of citizenship advanced and the family successfully attained permanent national status, the requirement for meticulous attention and care for important documents, records and details waned. With this relief, the documents of their immigration process faded to the background of everyday life.

In 2016, Kalmenson was accepted to a residency with the National Centre of Contemporary Art in St. Petersburg. In order to return to Russia, Kalmenson required their 1989 exit visa. It was believed that the Kalmenson family exit visa documentation had been long lost in the process of immigration from Russia to Israel and Canada. Kalmenson was strictly prohibited from entering Russia without this documentation. In the face of state power, their body was only as good as the documents which came to represent it.<sup>18</sup> With the residency approaching, they made a last effort to locate their exit visa in the family home. After much searching, only their mother's exit visa was located. To their great relief, it included they and their brother's exit visas as dependent minors. To this day, Kalmenson's father has been unable to return to Russia, lacking documented proof of the conditions which surrounded his departure.

Although this narrative, and many others, are not explicitly present within *Neither Country, Nor Graveyard*, 2017, the span of time separating the two channels stands in for documents, records, visuals, and archives which have either disappeared or never existed. As an artwork, *Neither Country, Nor Graveyard*, 2017, calls these social historical contexts of the document and archive into question. Rather than visually reconstruct these narratives,

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<sup>18</sup> For more on the document and the body see Alan Sekula's 1989 "The Body and The Archive." *The Contest of Meaning*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Kalmenson forefronts a concern with the mediation of histories and contemporary narratives by political, institutional, and corporate bodies, and how the field of these communications serves to redefine publicness, sovereignty, and power.

*Neither Country, Nor Graveyard*, 2017, visually performs the sense of dispossession, surveillance, and control imposed by the state. The film performs the nationally imposed limitation of rights to mobility, land, and political self-determination. The document and the ability of the archive to cement state mechanisms of control are key concerns for Kalmenson. The maintenance of control instituted by political archives directly implicates the bodies of the Kalmenson family. Kalmenson's films and publication antagonize the legitimizing claims of state politics. Contesting the hegemony of the dominate state is a critical position in fracturing the affirming modes of archival control and inducing politics of plurality and difference.

Much of my knowledge of Kalmenson's work began with speculation, which was later confirmed through extensive conversation. The details here are the result of these dialogues. In accounting their family's departure from the USSR, Kalmenson prefaces that no one in the family had imagined the country's imminent collapse. Kalmenson details the process of leaving as a moment where the precarious identity of their family within the nation was thoroughly dismantled through the destruction of the family's identification documents. By departing from the USSR, Kalmenson and their family betrayed the nation state and eternally committed themselves to an act of treason.

The practice of making a video prior to their departure is one that Kalmenson describes as common among citizens who planned to leave, in particular among their family's Jewish community. Their father paid an entire month's salary as a car mechanic in exchange for one day of labour from a cinematographer. This expense was made with the knowledge that upon

departure the family would be required to surrender any economic surplus available to them. They were permitted to take only an approximate equivalent of one hundred dollars per person, so Kalmenson's father defiantly disbursed his final salary towards the filmic memento mori of the family's life in the Soviet Union: Kalmenson's father invested in memories.

As detailed earlier, the film, *Neither Country, Nor Graveyard*, 2017, depicts the family wandering around the imperial landscape of Leningrad, USSR. There is no indication of intimate space. The Kalmenson's lived nowhere near the locations pictured in the film. In fact, the film obfuscates any sense of the distant suburban Stalinist workers block where the Kalmenson family lived. When I asked Kalmenson to identify each of the six figures within the original footage, they established more than familial reference. They detailed their grandmother, the busty one teetering on high heels, as "the one that looks like a diva," their uncle as "a boy band gangster in a street style track suit," and their mother as "like a twelve-year-old gymnast." They and their brother are referred to as "toddler children," Kalmenson being the youngest. Their father is mentioned lastly, as an afterthought, without specific sentiment.<sup>19</sup>

The mimetic scene by scene reenactment of the original family footage was produced by Kalmenson in St. Petersburg over a two-day period. They hired a taxi driver to assist in the production. Prior to shooting the footage, Kalmenson produced a map of both physical coordinates and associated camera movements. They memorized the choreography of the original footage by heart and organized everything based on the initial route. Their motions through the city followed a linear logic of travel and were filmed around the same time of day and close to the same time of year as the primary footage. A number of the sites were no longer

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<sup>19</sup> Felix Kalmenson (artist), in discussion with author, January 17, 2018.

accessible by car and required that Kalmenson recreate the footage as a pedestrian. For these scenes, they slowed the original footage to match the pace of walking.

During the production of the film, Kalmenson considered their actions as a performance. They described the performance as an inversion of physical documentation whereby the exterior environment takes precedence over the body of the performer. For the entirety of the production, they wore a custom t-shirt that spelled the words “I am of two worlds” on the front and “divided inside” on the back, phonetically in Russian to be read in English. It required that the viewer be bilingual in order to understand the message. The conceptual framework for their performance was in part inspired by the many independent and state actors reenacting historic narratives throughout the old city. One such actor is captured within Kalmenson’s footage performing a royal history as Catherine the Great. For Kalmenson, the performative aspect of *Neither Country, Nor Graveyard*, 2017, is just as important as the material outcome of the footage.

It wasn’t until their arrival to St. Petersburg that Kalmenson realized how difficult the method of producing the scene by scene copy would be. Many of the places in the family footage were unfamiliar to them. In order to formally locate each site, Kalmenson spent a number of days walking around the city. It became clear that most of the locations were central monuments. For the sites that they could not identify, they relied on coordinates from their father, a map-minded individual.<sup>20</sup> Beyond the setting of the footage, Kalmenson also journeyed to other sites provided

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<sup>20</sup> In order of appearance the locations in the film include: 1. Tallinn, Estonia, in a park along the Medieval city walls. 2. Driving down Nevsky Prospekt (Невский проспект) 3. In the St. Isaac's Square or Isaakiyevskaya Ploshchad (Исаакиевская площадь), Beside St. Isaac's Cathedral or Isaakiyevskiy Sobor (Исаакиевский Собор) 4. The Alexander Garden, Aleksandrovskiy Garden (Александровский сад) 5. The unfinished bridge across the Reka Bol'shaya Neva (река Большая Нева) (The Big Neva River) Neva River (Нева) as part of the Western High-Speed Diameter highway project (ЗСД, ZSD (Западный скоростной диаметр) 6. The square around the Bronze Horseman (Медный всадник) 7. Under construction office building near the St Petersburg 300 Anniversary Park (Парк 300-летия Санкт-Петербурга) 8. St. Isaac's Square (Исаакиевский сквер) 9. The Palace Bridge (Дворцовый мост) 10. Strelka Vasilyevskogo Ostrev/Spit of Vasilievsky Island (Стрелка Васильевского острова)

by their father's precise coordinates. They visited their family's last address, where their mother used to work, and also locations from their father's childhood. Kalmenson describes that their return to Russia made them feel as though they were a messenger of memory to their estranged father. The original footage obfuscated any attempt to represent the domestic and mnemonic space of the Kalmenson family. There is no contact with the distant suburban concrete soviet apartment block in which the family lived. Kalmenson struggled with this lack of representation and made a formal decision, both within the reenacted footage and beyond, to circumvent this challenge. They did so in two ways: with the production of the publication, *As Always*, 2017, which I will detail further on, and with the inclusion of several interludes interspersed throughout the footage of *Neither Country, Nor Graveyard*, 2017.

The original footage and its accompanying reenactment pause into a black void at the moment each interlude occurs; the footage changes from a moving mimetic scene-by-scene reenactment to stand-still footage of a single location. In these moments, a woman's voice

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11. Saint Petersburg Stadium (Стадион Санкт-Петербурга) from the beach at St Petersburg 300 Anniversary Park (Парк 300-летия Санкт-Петербурга) 12. Trotsky Bridge/Troitskiy Bridge (Троицкий мост) 13. Atlanty gate at the State Hermitage Museum (Государственный Эрмитаж) 14. Palace Square (Дворцовая площадь) 15. Lakhta Center under construction as viewed from St Petersburg 300 Anniversary Park (Парк 300-летия Санкт-Петербурга), Subaru Lakhta Center (Субару Центр Лахта) 16. The Palace Embankment (Dvortsovaya Naberezhnaya) on the Northwest corner of the Summer Garden (Летний сад) 17. The street in front of the State Russian Museum (Государственный Русский музей), formerly the Russian ... Majesty Alexander III (Русский Музей Императора Александра III) 18. The Church of the Savior on Spilled Blood (Церковь Спаса на Крови) 19. View of the Baltic Cruise Ships from St Petersburg 300 Anniversary Park (Парк 300-летия Санкт-Петербурга) 20. Fence of Mikhailovsky Garden (Михайловский сад) adjacent to The Church of the Savior on Spilled Blood (Церковь Спаса на Крови) 21. View of Kazan Cathedral or Kazanskiy Kafedralniy Sobor (Казанский кафедральный собор) from Nevsky Prospect (Невский проспект) 22. Driving down Nevsky Prospect (Невский проспект) 23. Driving down the Fontanka River (Фонтанка) is a left branch of the river Neva Embankment towards Lomonosov Bridge (Мост Ломоносова), Fontanka river embankment (набережная реки Фонтанки) 24. Driving down Ulitsa Zodchego Rossi towards Alexandrinsky Theatre (Александринский театр) 2 Architect Rossi Street (2 Улица Зодчего Росси) 25. Ostrovsky Square (Площадь Островского), Ekaterininskiy Garden - Catherine Park (Екатерининский парк) 26. Construction site on landfill at the western most edge of Vasilyevsky Island (Васильевский остров) near the Bridge of the 'Western High-Speed Diameter' (ЗСД, ZSD, Russian: Западный скоростной диаметр) 27. Zoological Center Tel Aviv-Ramat Gan, Israel.

narrates an oral testimony of events. In place of the original footage, the first interlude begins with the woman's voice in Russian with white subtitles in English to the left of the stand-still footage of a newly built bridge. "In 1972 the borders opened, and Jews could leave if they had an invitation from Israel."<sup>21</sup> There is a reciprocal lower tenor voice engaging with the narrative. The lower voice is Kalmenson and the woman's voice is their mother. They discuss the opening and closing of the Soviet border and the seven-year processes, both success and failures, undertaken prior to the family's departure. The conversation wanders to their mother's memory. She reminisces of an experience with an unofficial synagogue, her first time eating Matzo, and a long past Passover holiday. The interlude lasts two minutes and then the film returns to the location it left off from, a park in the centre city. The inclusion of multiple interludes within the film allows Kalmenson to engage with a selection of memories absent from the original footage. The interludes also provide a method to autonomously include spaces beyond the historic interior of St. Petersburg—to occupy the sprawling space of the city. In particular, Kalmenson features new spaces and state-sanctioned infrastructure projects. This formal decision juxtaposes interiority and intimacy with a distant future—an additional spatiotemporal shift. Throughout the production of *Neither Country, Nor Graveyard*, 2017, Kalmenson took photographs of sites suggested by their father. The photographs were taken with a knowingly broken camera handed down from Kalmenson's paternal grandfather. The resulting photographs were detrimentally exposed to major light leaks, rendering the film impotent to provide any form of visual documentation.

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<sup>21</sup> Felix Kalmenson. *Neither Country, Nor Graveyard*. Film. 2017. Courtesy of the artist.



The camera and their grandfather are visible in the opening scene of *Neither Country, Nor Graveyard*'s, 2017, original footage. The first minute of *Neither Country, Nor Graveyard*, 2017, features only original footage. There is no mimetic reenactment, as this footage was taken on a brief trip to Estonia prior to the production of the USSR footage. *Neither Country, Nor Graveyard*, 2017, ends with only original footage as well. In this final instance, the footage depicts the family's first days in Israel. Both sections of footage were on the original tape that Kalmenson received from their father. The footage in Estonia had been shot on Super 8 film and transferred to VHS. The footage in Israel was shot on a video camera purchased upon arrival. All three films were transferred onto a single VHS tape. This is the tape that Kalmenson digitized in the production of *Neither Country, Nor Graveyard*, 2017. Israel represents an additional site of inaccessibility for Kalmenson. With their secondary citizenship in Israel, they are unable to return without committing to military duty. By abstaining from this duty, they risk serious judicial consequences, such as imprisonment.

## **2.6 As Always**

Kalmenson's publication *As Always*, 2017, opens with the words "I have returned home." The publication was produced to accompany *Neither Country, Nor Graveyard*, 2017, and *A House of Skin*, 2016. It is a slim booklet with a red cover featuring three sets of dispersed conversations, each distinct in tone. The voices within the publication are not identified but, in conjunction with the films, one comes to speculate who each of the three are. One also comes to speculate the method of communication presented within the dialogue. The opening page is diaristic in tone but also makes reference to a recipient, a lost lover, or some such person of exemplary importance. These entries flow through the publication, date stamped as though

digitally sent by email. They are interrupted by smaller blocks of blue cardstock paper with a second one-sided conversation. The one-sided dialogue of the blue page begins, “Thanks, you don’t have to visit these places – I don’t have nostalgia. Don’t waste time on this.”<sup>22</sup> Based on Kalmenson’s descriptions of his father, a stern, empirical tone is hypothesized. Google Map coordinates are provided in the message. A reference to a chick growing up to be a rooster comes to ratify a story told by Kalmenson’s mother. The voice closes, “there is a saying that [the] city has a foundation of human bones.” And then “You can visit the place where you were born,” along with a name spelled in Russian and a specific coordinate.<sup>23</sup>

A third voice appears on long narrow pieces of pale yellow cardstock tightly connected the centerfold of the publication. This voice is date and time stamped. It also features responses. The conversations are not placed chronologically. They reflect intimacy and familiarity in their shortness. The correspondence begins,

How do you feel there? 6/20 10:12am.  
Good  
Feels kinda crazy  
I like it thi8 Though.<sup>24</sup>  
Going to sleep? 6/20 6:17pm  
yup  
pretty exhausted  
long walking day.  
Ok good night  
thanks ma nighty nite!<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Felix Kalmenson. *As Always*. First ed., Artist Book, 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. Typos have been left as they appear throughout the digital correspondence.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

The final pages feature diary entries in the form of emails. The entry is bracketed by a blue page denoting a final word of caution,

Russian people usually good natured ones, but considering that they were abused by the government for millennia, the resentment got imbedded on very genetic level. It might manifest itself as a sudden aggression, especially when drunk. In most cases Russians are “angry drunk” type. Try to avoid or defuse this situation or run as fast as you can.... :)<sup>26</sup>

Returning to Russia instigated Kalmenson having a dialogue with their father for the first time in five years. They reluctantly accepted the emails as a way to access a bit of their father’s history in hopes of accessing some of their own. In conversation, Kalmenson described that it was difficult to reengage. That contact with their father required a constant negotiation with previous trauma. For this reason, Kalmenson decided to keep the correspondence descriptive and short as a defense mechanism. As expected by Kalmenson, their father’s response represented a method of communication typical of Russian state representations of the male gender. They describe their father’s personality and resulting tone as toxically masculine and declarative. Kalmenson sensed that anything they had to say in response to their father was of no consequence. Kalmenson however relied heavily on their Father for details of their familial history as the memory of Kalmenson’s mother had proven elusive, and on occasion unintentionally misleading.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

## 2.7 A House of Skin

*A House of Skin*, 2016, was produced one year prior to *Neither Country, Nor Graveyard*, 2017. With the prospect of returning to Russia seemingly out of reach, Kalmenson turned to visual representations of Russia, Israel, and Canada from freely available online archives. *A House of Skin*, 2016, problematizes the grand narratives that have accompanied both the formations and failures of the modernist architectural and social projects, and introduces ruptures that inscribe vernacular ways of being and telling. It reexamines these architectures, not as totalizing spaces, but as affective frameworks within which various narratives of social and family life are inscribed with violence, struggle, migration, and displacement. Drawing together disparate fragments, LiveLeak and YouTube footage from Russia and ‘Little Moscow’ in North York, Canada; segments from Soviet cinema; contemporary Russian propaganda films; and artifacts from Kalmenson’s family archive, the work pieces together a delirious narrative that charts the coexistence of bodies and buildings.<sup>27</sup>

*A House of Skin*, 2016, represents an intersection between memory and lived experience. In order to navigate the geography of Kalmenson’s childhood memories, Kalmenson consulted their mother. She provided multiple coordinates and, importantly, a memory which led Kalmenson to a Google street view of the family apartment complex in Leningrad, USSR. It was not until Kalmenson returned to St. Petersburg that they realized this location was inaccurate. Kalmenson recounts independently locating the family’s apartment in Israel by wandering the digital streets of Google maps by memory. In *A House of Skin*, 2016, Kalmenson correctly locates the apartment without assistance from their mother, to her astonishment—a memory

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<sup>27</sup> <https://www.felixkalmenson.com/a-house-of-skin/>

uncovered from the age of six. Kalmenson likens their cartographic understanding of space to their father's—a trait Kalmenson believes was passed by blood.

## **2.8 Race, Ethnicity, Religion, and Culture: Distinctions, Complications, and Intersectional Mixing**

Kalmenson's mother is a geneticist. In my conversations with Kalmenson, they have discussed the body as a form of archive. In particular, Kalmenson accepts the scientific findings of trauma transmission which confirm that one's genetic makeup carries trauma from one generation to another. In one of the diaristic emails from their publication, *As Always*, 2017, their voice seemingly shouts,

What the hell does it even mean that I come from here, that I was born here? I think it is the feeling that I had in Riga when looking at a particular bridge at twilight I felt an unexpected affinity for the landscape, something I totally did not understand until coming to a bridge just like it here, under the same climatic conditions, I came to realize it was this place that was heavy in my, my mother's, my father's, and both my grandparents hearts.

They carried that place to me in skin.<sup>28</sup>

Kalmenson takes the position that trauma is carried through the body, and that lived experiences are intertwined with genetic code which is either degraded or added to by experience.

Kalmenson describes, with both certainty of scientific empiricism and poetic conviction, that “The more trauma and conflict a person has in their life, the more epigenetic tags are left... It used to be thought that these are all ‘nullified’ at the birth of a child, but it turns out the most

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<sup>28</sup> Felix Kalmenson. *As Always*. First ed., Artist Book, 2017.

painful and traumatic marks are passed on to the following generations.”<sup>29</sup> Kalmenson tenders that the body is witness whereby the memory is subject to its physical host, that memory to the body is akin to document to the archive—proxy to the systems, structure, and conditions in which it comes to be received and translated. And just as trauma is carried within the body, it is also implicated and enacted through historic narratives sanctioned through and by the archive.

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<sup>29</sup> Sergej Timofejev and Felix Kalmenson. “Sometimes When I Wake up, I Don’t Remember Where I Am.” *Baltic, Russian and Scandinavian Art Territory*, Arterritory.com, 19 Mar. 2018, [http://www.artterritory.com/en/texts/interviews/7339-sometimes\\_when\\_i\\_wake\\_up\\_i\\_dont\\_remember\\_where\\_i\\_am/](http://www.artterritory.com/en/texts/interviews/7339-sometimes_when_i_wake_up_i_dont_remember_where_i_am/).

## Chapter 3: Casey Wei

### 3.1 Murky Colors

Casey Wei's *Murky Colors*, 2013, is an expansive 47-minute, multinarrative color video based on a suspense spy novel written by the artist's father Menjin Wei. Through documentary and appropriative strategies, Wei explores the personal and political processes involved in adapting her father's novel to a made-for-Hollywood screenplay and the resulting video. Wei herself plays all of the roles in the film and collages together self-shot and appropriated footage to explore themes of family, memory, and history.

### 3.2 Familial Fiction: A Father's Memoir

Wei first discovered that her father had begun a writing project on a visit to her family home where she came across a file on his desktop titled "Menjin's story." She asked her father about it and received an ambiguously coy response: the text was just a personal project—nothing too serious. Several months later, on her way out the door from another visit, Wei's father quietly handed her a thick manila envelope. It contained a full manuscript of the writing project he had been working on. The exchange was slightly unusual for Wei as her relationship with her father wasn't particularly close—let alone one of creative collaboration. Matching her father's nonchalant attitude toward the project, she placed the envelope amongst a pile of books and papers in her living room. Weeks later, after a long day of work, she arrived home to find her partner sitting on the couch reading the text. With a push of enthusiasm, she was persuaded to read the text herself.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Casey Wei (artist), in discussion with the author. December 31, 2017.

The novel compelled Wei. Although written under the guise of a suspense spy fiction, it read to her as a text dealing with what she considered to be her father's conflicted and repressed feelings towards the Chinese government. Wei describes her family's experience during the Cultural Revolution as complicated. As was the case with many of their friends and colleagues—her grandfather a banker—their home and history were slowly dismantled in the name of the nation state. For the most part, the feelings of Wei's father had and continue to remain unspoken between the two of them. In fact, much of her family's history remains unspoken. Fear and anxiety hang over any archival documents proving a past prior to the Cultural Revolution of China. The text Wei received from her father was titled *Murky Colors*. Even with the title change from what she first saw on his desktop—“Menjin's story”—Wei assumed that the work directly paralleled the words of an autobiographic memoir.<sup>31</sup>

The motivations of Wei's father in sharing the novel with her were unclear, yet she felt that beyond the boundary of their father-daughter relationship, he understood that she held a certain amount of cultural capital as an artist and perhaps could advise him or connect him with a pulp fiction publisher. Wei pitched her father a proposition that she should turn the novel into a cinematic film. The proposal snowballed into a great fantasy. Both father and daughter projected advancing potential for what was possible working together. The proposition of the film shifted the content of the novel and how Wei's father was editing and writing it. He worked studiously in collaboration with Wei over a two-year period. Even with the subtle shifts in narrative, Wei continued to see the novel as a representation of her father's and his family's life in China and

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<sup>31</sup> Casey Wei (artist), in discussion with the author. July 23, 2017.



Canada. She felt the production of the fictive text gave her father the capacity to begin to reconcile a difficult and unspoken past.

Wei's father first came to Canada on a semester exchange from China. This experience led him to successfully apply to the University of British Columbia and complete a master's degree in descriptive linguistics. Growing up through the Cultural Revolution, Menjin Wei was not privy to a common high school education. He did, however, complete an undergraduate degree in English while in China. On the farm communes, her father had a high standing. With this merit he was accepted to attend university. This was also the case for Wei's mother. Both Wei's father and mother independently decided to study English because they felt that it would provide them the best opportunity to travel internationally. In the mid-eighties, Wei's father went to study at the University of British Columbia in Canada. Wei and her mother stayed behind in China. Her father returned home intermittently, spending limited time with Wei as a child. In 1989, the Tiananmen Square Massacre took place and the Wei family became eligible for refugee status in Canada. For Wei, *Murky Colors*, 2013, is a way to reconcile an unspoken past—a past that lacks narrative, story, documents, and archive. *Murky Colors*, 2013, presented a way for Wei to know not only her father's past but also the past of her extended family.<sup>32</sup>

### **3.3 A Memory is Not a Memory Until Two People Experience It for Themselves**

Wei realized early in the collaborative process with her father that *Murky Colors*, 2013, would not meet the expectations that her father had envisioned. She made a choice to act with creative autonomy in the production of the final video. She and her father continued to

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<sup>32</sup> Casey Wei (artist), in discussion with the author. May 25, 2018.

collaborate, but full control was relinquished to Wei. Her father gave her the gift of his novel. In retrospect, Wei laments that she would like to have done more with the project.<sup>33</sup> Following the completion of *Murky Colors*, 2013, her father continued to work on the novel. He prodded Wei to assist him in finding a copy editor. Wei was reluctant to embrace the editing required in order to transform the text into a commercially viable pulp fiction novel. She felt incredibly attached to the idiosyncrasies of her father's writing and was concerned that the integrity of the work—the magic of her father's words—would be lost in the process of translation.

Reading the novel, Wei imagined all of the suspense spy tropes her father was drawing from. She could picture them in both literature and film. She was impressed and intrigued by her father's method of appropriation and collage. The way that her father wrote provided her with an archetype to work from. Although she and her father were likely referencing alternate models, and neither of them confirmed references, Wei felt that they were familiar enough to access and reenact. She considered her father's personality, humour, and the particular films she remembered him reading and watching: sexy James Bond thrillers and sultry Danielle Steel novels. Without explicit access to her father's memories or experiences, Wei was required to extrapolate a cultural history that she herself had only experienced through fiction and pop culture images. She projected what each of her father's characters looked like in his imagination. Importantly, Wei considered the often brief, yet telling, remarks of her father regarding the state of corruption in China. With both the serious politics and creative impetus of her father in mind, the generic tropes of the suspense spy genre transformed for Wei into the radical agency presented within *Murky Colors*, 2013.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

During the Cultural Revolution, the Red Guard stormed the house of Wei's paternal Grandfather. Force in the form of violence was a common practice of the Red Guard. The trauma of their presence in the family home effected the entire household, including Wei's father. As mentioned earlier, through the revolution the family's livelihood, property and, most importantly, history was stripped away. In order to survive, the family dispersed. In *Murky Colors*, 2013, Wei and her father return to the family home. The footage shows only a photograph of what previously stood on the property—the land now hosts an overpass.

Through the jump cuts of travelogue footage and quick juxtapositions of appropriated Hollywood film clips, the viewer becomes transfixed by the longer documentary-style sections of *Murky Colors*, 2013. In these sections, the history which Wei so desperately wishes to share with her father is briefly made available. The first is a moment where a voice which is assumed to be Wei's father reflects on what life was like prior to the cultural revolution. He describes how the dense area of the city that they are walking in used to be small communities of older houses. Wei asks how many years it took to shift the landscape from suburban homes to cityscape and he responds melancholically, many years. The video cuts back to the parallel suspense spy narrative—then moments later returns to a male voice reflecting on the site of the long-lost family home. The voice directs Wei to take out the picture, stating with certainty that before everything was demolished the house was still there, remaining even after the overpass was built. Wei asks the speaker if he took the picture, to which he responds yes. As he is responding, the photograph is overtaken with appropriated footage of flooding water and crumbling old buildings. As quickly as the visual diversion takes place, the screen returns to a man's hand motioning with his finger on the photograph and stating that previously, there were no trees, only saplings. More crumbling and destruction of domestic spaces takes over the screen. Then, the

footage returns to the site of the home, closing with a shot of Wei's left hand and an older right hand, together holding the picture with a view of the altered landscape situated behind it.

Although the process of systemic historic and archival erasure by the state is not explicitly forefronted in *Murky Colors*, 2013, the parallel of suspense spy novel narrative next to Wei's father's testimony demonstrates the removal of reality and mechanisms for processing difficult emotions. With limited opportunities to resolve his feelings, Wei's father veils the hardships of their familial past within the framework of a fictive suspense spy novel. His willingness to participate within Wei's production of the film and brief descriptions of personal experience suggest the tension of facing an unspeakable past. In *Vater und Sohn/Father and Son/父与子*, 2014, Wei also makes her way to a neighborhood that her father grew up in. Piles of rubble surround one man in a house amongst what little remains and still stands in the area. The site is filled with tourists arriving to view the cusp of total historic eradication and erasure. For Wei, traveling with her father, and making these two films, gave her a small glimpse into her family's past and a sense of a yet to be fully determined history.

### **3.4 Vater und Sohn/Father and Son/父与子**

A well-known syndicated comic strip in Germany and china by E.O. Plauen, *Vater und Sohn* (1934-37) serves as the entry point for Wei's film *Vater und Sohn/Father and Son/父与子*, 2014. Like *Murky Colors*, 2013, the video essay combines documentary and travelogue footage with appropriated images. As a child growing up in Shanghai, Wei read collections of the comic and assumed it was Chinese. In 2012, she came across the comic online in German and was intrigued to discover its origins. This discovery led her to travel to Germany and China to

conduct interviews with people who have encountered Plauen's comic strip in various contexts and to trace the migration of the comic strip as it was contextualized by Nazi and Maoist outlets. By framing the comic strip in relation to the shifting political climate in which it was published, Wei provokes how personal and social narratives come to be directly associated with state propaganda.

### 3.5 Publication Migration

In *Vater und Sohn/Father and Son/父与子*, 2014, the documents that Wei builds upon are drawn from well-established institutions and archives. There is a foundation and gallery—Erich Ohser Foundation & Galerie e.o. plauen—dedicated to the history of the now infamous cartoonist Plauen and his comic strip. In tracing the migration of the comic, Wei was less interested in the archival documents surrounding its publication and more interested in the testimony of others who had personally encountered the work. The film itself features these testimonies alongside interviews with Director Dr. Elke Schulze of the e.o. plauen gallery and the longstanding Chinese publisher of *Father and Son*, Hong Peiqui. These conversations are collaged within a continuous maze of travelogue and appropriated footage. Scenes and sounds bleed into one another with little to no hierarchical standard of delivery. Motifs from the comic strip, which features the day-to-day activities and adventures of the protagonist characters father and son, are echoed in the madness of the assembled footage of *Vater und Sohn/Father and Son/父与子*, 2014. In two instances, one in Germany and the other in China, Wei hires amateur actors to enact the scenes from the comic.

As I have outlined, the idiosyncratic organizational structure of *Vater und Sohn/Father and Son/父与子*, 2014, features multiple layers and dimensions. Each jump cut and juxtaposition is contextualized based on its proximity to the footage that follows. The framework of the film is all the viewer has in determining an overarching narrative. Scenes shift in rapid succession with limited rhyme or reason. It is easy to become disoriented. Anchor points are established by way of repetition. In the sea of visual disjuncture, repeated views of construction sites, museum interiors, and street performers along with a handful of looping songs—including David Hasselhof's *I've been Looking for Freedom* and Claude Channes' *Mao Mao*—give the viewer a sense of recognition and familiarity. For the viewer, the folding accumulation compounds. What remains is a shift from recognition to erosion which leaves a sense of impression rather than detailed comprehension.

### **3.6 Nazi Germany State Propaganda in Maoist China**

The interview structure of strangers on the street follows the same pattern in Germany as it does in China. The hired interviewer asks if the curious individual, happened upon by chance, can remember when they first saw the comic, what they thought of it, and if they happen to know anything about the author.<sup>34</sup> For the most part, individuals remember the comic and the context

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<sup>34</sup> E.O. Plauen was the pseudonym of Erich Ohser (March 18, 1903 – April 5, 1944), the German cartoonist who created the comic strip *Vater und Sohn* ("Father and Son"). In his work for democratic magazines such as *Vorwärts*, satirical representations of Joseph Goebbels and Adolf Hitler earned him the enmity of the Nazis, and he was prohibited from practicing his trade (*Berufsverbot*). He continued to work under pseudonyms, and from 1940, began again to produce cartoons on political themes. He was eventually arrested on charges of expressing anti-Nazi opinions. On April 5, 1944 – the day before his trial – Ohser committed suicide in his cell, no doubt anticipating what befell the long-time friend and associate with whom he had been arrested, Erich Knauf (journalist, author and editor of the *Volkszeitung für das Vogtland*), who was executed weeks later. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/E.\\_O.\\_Plauen](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/E._O._Plauen)

in which they first encountered it. Many from Germany remember it in newspapers. Those asked in China recall encountering it at school or in published volumes. None of the strangers interviewed are old enough to recall the original publishing context between 1934 and 1937 in the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*. One German man recalls seeing it in the newspaper as a small boy in the 1940s. Almost every person interviewed recalls a personal anecdote or experience of relatability. Without fail, as the interviewer holds up an anthology of the comics in book form, the face of those being interviewed cracks into a smile—the comic strip produces an almost immediate emotional response.

### **3.7 Commodification and Construction**

The smallest crevasses of the film are populated with cues to questions regarding the politics of historical construction. Flashes of Nazi and Maoist propaganda confront the everyday travelogue footage and the expected conversations within the given interviews. Between dedicated interviews, the film features a continued narration of prose and poetics. Vision and memory come to be questioned. The concept of Authenticity is denied. The undoing of the imaginary and unimaginable is proposed as alive and moving forward into a position of decay. The frame of the archive and history as containing everything is contested as an edited form. The narrator calls the viewer to consider the size and scope of history and its dependence on photography. Context is situated as a determining factor between forgetting and memorialization. The poetry of *Vater und Sohn/Father and Son/父与子*, 2014, is addressed through tone and

abstraction, where fragmented clips individually come closer to being whole than the entirety of history itself.<sup>35</sup>

Near the end of the film, an email exchange between Wei and her father scrolls over the changing footage of the film. Wei shares the location of the hotel she is staying. Her father responds that the area she is staying in is where her grandfather grew up. That his father, her father's grandfather, bought the three-level house in the city centre where Wei had lived before moving to Canada. He details that there was a high school nearby where he and her mother completed their teaching practicums in 1977. Along with advice to stay safe, he closes the email, "Interesting you would pick that hotel. Maybe some telepathy at work. Of course, the place is no longer what it used to be."<sup>36</sup> Behind the text of the email exchange, the film features footage of the decaying neighborhood. The narrator voice is translated in closed captions that read "Here I am reminded of there." And then "Here I am paying pilgrimage to his past." The footage shifts to the last remaining house in the area. Through an open door, a man is seen blow drying his hair in front of a large screen television. The scene quickly switches over to appropriated footage of a lone house in a desert which explodes, in complete destruction, into nothing.

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<sup>35</sup> Narrator quotes include: "My eyes don't remember catching these frames, but I made them." "This is not a quest for authenticity." "One thought after another is undone faced with the size of that unimaginable imaginary, still alive and moving forward in decay." "The frame that contains everything. Everything, edited." "How big is history?" "Destroy the image." And "Context determines the difference between a grave and trophy." "Poetry as tones and abstractions, fragments closer to the whole than some kind of whole itself." Casey Wei. *Vater und Sohn/Father and Son/父与子*. Film. 2014. Courtesy of the artist.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.



### 3.8 The Texture of Memory

The end of the film features an extended monologue by the narrator accompanied by video footage of a wall-mounted flat screen television. The channels continuously change as the narrator closes the film,

“There is always a taint of perception, a texture of memory.”

“He said a lot of things but what do I remember?”

“Is there a word for a word that does not mean what we think it means?”

“A word that is a lie?”

There are many answers in *Murky Colors*, 2013, and *Vater und Sohn/Father and Son/父与子*, 2014, but what is most intriguing are the unanswered questions—the lack of documents and historicized narratives from which Wei is able to draw from. Her dependence on the fictional literary form of her father’s writing, and the memory and testimony of others, is a compelling form of address particular to artworks of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. *Murky Colors*, 2013, and *Vater und Sohn/Father and Son/父与子*, 2014, summon the viewer to question the relationship between archival frameworks, fiction and testimony, artist and witness. Furthermore, these questions bare the imbricated relationship between narrative and history, art and memory, speech and survival. *Murky Colors*, 2013, and *Vater und Sohn/Father and Son/父与子*, 2014, propose that witnessing, events, memory, and evidence are inextricable from history. In particular, the films make evident the void of archival documentation left in the face of violent withdrawal and eradication of history by the state apparatus.

The entangled bond between violence, culture, the archive, and history posited by *Murky Colors*, 2013, and *Vater und Sohn/Father and Son/父与子*, 2014, is one which cannot be

ignored. These works were written and produced consequent to moments of historic trauma which continue beyond a case for encapsulated history or past. They prove that the repercussions of historic atrocity actively remain through generations of artists, such as Wei, who continue to prod political, historical, cultural, and familial impacts. *Murky Colors*, 2013, and *Vater und Sohn/Father and Son/父与子*, 2014, perform the conscious and unconscious witnessing of historical events and how art inscribes, and artistically bears witness to, “what we do not yet know of our lived historical relation to events of our times.”<sup>37</sup> As Wei has demonstrated through *Murky Colors*, 2013, and *Vater und Sohn/Father and Son/父与子*, 2014, art and literature are a precocious mode of witnessing—of accessing reality—when all other modes of archiving, historicizing, and knowing are precluded.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> I owe this tremendously important language to the writings of Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub. *Testimony Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*. Routledge, 1992. (p xx)

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. (p xx)

## Chapter 4: Deanna Bowen

### 4.1 sum of the parts: what can be named

Deanna Bowen's 20-minute colour video work *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, is a recorded oral performance that recounts the journey of the Bowen family from its earliest documented history in Clinton, Jones County, Georgia in 1815, as told by Bowen herself. The video provides a detailed record of the family migration from Africa to the Americas and the eventual splitting of the family between the United States and Canada. It is told by Bowen who, through her own oral testimony, singularly enacts ways of seeing, interpreting, describing, and historicizing her family record. With cumulative cultural-historic force, Bowen chronicles the lives of her family members. She retraces, reclaims, and reactivates a record of their history with attention to their lived experiences. These experiences both confirm what is already know, what has been seen, and what one has learned to see while communicating histories that have been taken for granted. Through these experiences, Bowen combines conflicting meanings where experience not only becomes a central subject but also a form of documentation within the archive. In Bowen's *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, oral testimony—the act of speaking—is the site of history's enactment. Within *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, the family's historical explanation becomes inseparable from Bowen's verbal testimony.<sup>39</sup>

*sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, assembles multiple dimensions of the archive, where reading and looking become a political act. It connects the fragments of an untold

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<sup>39</sup>I owe my understanding of experience and history to Darby English's 2007 description of feminist and labour historian Joan W. Scott's 1991 "Evidence of Experience," essay on historiography, found in *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*. MIT Press, 2007. Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience." *Critical Inquiry*. Vol. 17 No. 4 (Summer) The University of Chicago Press, 1991. p 773-797.

familial history in pursuit of producing a greater whole. At the time of the video work's production, Bowen was distinctly aware that the history she was speaking to was one that had yet to be historicized within a Canadian and American context. Being mindful of the fact that her familial heritage was much larger than a 20-minute time frame was a determining factor for Bowen's development of specific strategies which would expand the video work beyond the confines of its temporal frame. In the absence of official record, *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, resourcefully occupies narrative strategies both within and beyond the archive. The act of orating her family history required concession to the fact that she could name only what she knew at the time of the work's production, and that all the details that could be named would amount to what she considered a sum of parts. Bowen was keenly aware that the narrative of her ancestors was one of many.

## **4.2 Archival Facts and Figures**

In order to produce *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, Bowen literally became a part of the work. She is the lead protagonist guiding the viewer through a familial history that spans nearly 200 years, beginning with a transatlantic journey from somewhere in Africa to Clinton, Jones County, Georgia and beyond. The narrative expands its geographic reference in trace of the Bowen family's forced, and eventually autonomous, migration. Each family detail is accompanied with a historic marker. The 1815 birth of Bowen's grandparents is situated 196 years after the first Africans were brought to Virginia and about 21 years after Eli Whitney patented his cotton gin. As the genealogy continues, from first known generation to seventh generation family members, the demand for mnemonic aid presses the viewer. The overwhelming tally of details is structured to give the viewer a sense of the complex historic

relationship between each detail. In order to exhibit the plurality of her family's situation, Bowen employs the specificity of undisputed historic facts, such as: in 1850 there were 3,204,313 registered slaves and 434,495 free Blacks in all of the United States; that in the State of Alabama, there were 342,844 slaves; that the county Bowen's family lived in averaged about 7000 slaves, and of those 7000 slaves, four were free. She continues that a decade later the number would rise to 44. Beyond expanding the specifics of a single-family narrative to include the bodies of many, the citation of these numbers sets a stage for the subject position of Bowen's family to be validated and verified by third-party-authorized institutional reference. It makes the Bowen family visible and knowable in relation to verifiable historic figure and, in turn, offers a compelling claim to be understood and represented in parallel to details taken from what Bowen defines as the predominantly white archive of the Americas.

The divisive strategy to include historic markers throughout the oral testimony of her family history marks a broad point which alleges the viewer's complicity in the reproduction of already mobilized knowledges of and from the white archive.<sup>40</sup> As previously stated, the majority of historic markers detailed by Bowen are derived from institutionally verified white histories via white archival documents. The dispersed nature and resulting lack of centralized archival records of Black history make it difficult to pin down and formally historicize. In the face of authoritative institutional resistance to Black histories, Bowen confronts and forecloses continued dismissal through a direct alignment with the white archive. She disarms the incredulous demand for truth and proof from white audiences through direct confrontation of the

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<sup>40</sup> The use of the term 'white archive' is drawn from Deanna Bowen's artist talk at 221A Pollyanna 圖書館 Library on June 23, 2018.

white archive. In *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, Black history in the Americas is undeniable. Bowen suspends the disbelief of white audiences with materials from their own archives—white archives which witnessed Black bodies. This strategy assures the rightful acknowledgement of Bowen’s family history and ramifies the testimony that makes up *sum of the parts: what can be made*, 2010.

As the names of each family member are spoken by Bowen in *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, they appear on the screen. The appearance of each name recalls a reciprocal document from which it was lifted. The characteristics of the fonts shift as time moves forward. Handwriting eventually evolves to the block lettering of typed text. One comes to question the location from which these names have been lifted. Bowen cites the documentation of her relatives’ names as having come from a varied source of records including property documents of slave holders, land deeds, newspaper ads and announcements, marriage licences, birth certificates, and family bibles. As for the family names that don’t appear, they, like many Black bodies in the Americas, existed without documentation.

#### **4.3 Archival Autonomy**

The formal decisions made in the production of *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, are important and worthy of attention. Bowen originally traveled from Canada to the southern United States in pursuit of producing a traditional documentary featuring her familial history. She worked with a small team including a camera person recommended by her long-distance American relatives. In an unexpected turn of events, the camera person claimed sole rights over the entire extension of footage. To this day, Bowen has never accessed the footage contents—much of which prominently featured her in intimate conversation with blood relatives.

The exploitative withholding and eventual total loss of autonomy over this footage was devastating to Bowen. In the face of significant loss, Bowen refused to be deterred from telling her family's story. She made a choice to tap into alternate wisdoms of memory keeping—oral traditions familiar to the way her family had come to carry their past, through the telling and retelling of stories. Beyond the generations named in *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, Black communities of the Americas have historically had a troubled relationship with the archive and in turn have come to rely heavily on the act of oral storytelling to keep track of their history. *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, stakes a direct claim in affirming the method of testimony in pursuit of archival authority. Bowen entitles the testimony of her family and her retelling of her family's history by situating it in direct parallel with the status of institutionally sanctioned archival documentation.

Content for the *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, script resulted from Bowen's ability to intimately connect with her American relatives. Conversations and connections from her original trip to the south gave her access to family photographs, bibles, and many other important familial documents. She visited small town archives and discovered hardcopy records directly related to her family. Through this aggregatory process, she discovered her great grandparents' marriage license, a critical document which gave Bowen her great grandmother's maiden name. This discovery is highlighted in *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, "Her maiden name was thought to have been Thigpen, but discover of her marriage license shows that her family names as actually Gregory."<sup>41</sup> For Bowen, the discovery of her great grandmother's maiden name was an archival stroke of luck. It led to a public library in town where a librarian

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<sup>41</sup> Deanna Bowen. *sum of the parts: what can be named*. Film. 2010. Courtesy of the artist.

was in the ambitious process of accumulating material to create and extend local Black family archives. Bowen describes the experience working with her southern Black female relatives and the Black librarian as a great collective effort. Digging through the archives together with her family was a remarkable and generous journey for Bowen—one which both confronted and confirmed the memories and testimony of her Canadian family.<sup>42</sup>

The labour of Bowen, her family, and the librarian speaks to a greater question, and in turn problem, of the archive. What happens when there is no shortage of archival material but rather a shortage of those willing to examine the material? The answer to this question lies in Bowen's dedication to *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010. When there are no historians, and in turn no history from which to connect, artists step in. It is the 21<sup>st</sup> century artist who examines the archival evidence of histories past. It is the artist, such as Bowen, who determines their history beyond their name. It is the artist who confronts the official registry and status of the document within the archive in telling the stories that are worth talking about. Bowen is one such artist who confronts the erasure and denial of Blackness in the archive. She has examined the letters in ledgers, diaries, court documents, and baptismal records, that have been separated and in fact barred from culture itself.

The overwhelming amount of detail encountered in *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, strikes a great desire to transcribe Bowen's testimony. Watching and listening to Bowen perform details from each familial generation, one struggles to keep track of each known part. As she reads the story from a folder of papers, the accumulative effect of names, dates, and relations

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<sup>42</sup> As presented in her Artist talk at 221A Pollyanna 圖書館 Library on June 23, 2018.



expand to survey a great distance of time. Pinning these details down by memory is complicated if not impossible. Without a written structure of the family tree it is difficult to connect the names and dates. To trace them through a written document has the potential to offer a sense of containment. The viewer comes to desire a systematized and structured representation of Bowen's words in order to read and commit to memory the myths and stories associated with each of her family members. It is this desire and privileging of the written contained archival impulse which Bowen continually negotiates in critique of the political principles within the archive that are broadly understood as historic.

#### 4.4 How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness<sup>43</sup>

Through *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, Bowen provides a reconstruction of Black history, a version that echoes primary sources yet unsettles previously confirmed contexts. *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, was a method for Bowen to explain to her family about the research she was doing regarding their migration from the south into Canada at the turn of the century. As the central figure of the video work, Bowen appears in a black void. There is a timelessness to the formal choices of the work. It is reflective of a fascination of Bowen's, with the black coal colour produced in analogue photography—an interest linked to notions of coming out of darkness. Bowen describes the production of *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, as a process of coming out of a historical and archival void.

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<sup>43</sup> Darby English. *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*. MIT Press, 2007.

#### 4.5 Archival Strategy

Bowen was strategic in every aspect of producing *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010. She ensured that the video production was partnered through a commission for Vtape, an artist run, not-for-profit distributor of video art located in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. In doing so, she ensured that the final video would be forever intrusted to the longstanding institution. She had faith in the collection's ability to maintain a continued digital repository, including her work. By placing the work within the Vtape repository, Bowen conceded to a number of personal assumptions. She had considered the possibility that her work may never achieve extended notoriety and that, upon her death, her personal archive might get lost. She decided that by inserting *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, within the Vtape archive, it would have lesser probability of disappearing. Bowen purposefully strategized, from the beginning, to insert her family's story into a white generated archive. It was a decisive decision which thoughtfully considered *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, not only as an artwork within a collection but a document within an archive. In addition to Vtape hosting *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, Bowen has also made it readily available online and, since its production, has continued to use her website as an open repository to all of the works that she has produced to date.

#### 4.6 Access and Control

Throughout the production of *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, Bowen continually returned to thoughts about her family. She was dedicated to ensuring that the information that she had diligently collected would remain freely accessible to those named within its frame. She was keenly aware that the history told within *sum of the parts: what can be*

*named*, 2010, is one which lacks extended circulation. Black history in Canada is particularly difficult to access. *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, has been circulated to all members of the Bowen family including those in Alabama. Bowen's decision to actively share the story of her family and to allow the work to circulate freely, without fiscal remuneration, not only contradicts the commercial art market but also confronts capitalist systems and structures associated with global knowledge circulation (such as copyright over journals, articles, and images). Bowen has deeply interrogated the hierarchical systems which allow institutions to usurp control over the circulation of artworks. She sees the proprietorship of histories such as her own as a not only a form of virtual slavery but an explicit subjugation, expulsion, and dispossession of specific populations' values. This dispossession is one which permits institutions and private collections to continually reap the benefits of artists' and writers' past labour, whether through increased art market values, skyrocketing scholarly journal access fees, or continued restrictions on image rights. Bowen antagonizes institutional systems where the production of the artist and writer is siphoned in the continuation of an economy that is kept from beyond the producers' reach. Bowen inserts the historic narrative of *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, into institutions by donating the work to their library collections. The work and its knowledge remain within her and her family's control. This labour of autonomously transferring Black histories to the general public extends to Bowen's practice as an educator—an arena where Bowen has for decades aggressively interrogated systemic racism and bias from within the university system, all with the intent of producing and introducing a curriculum of Blackness in Canada.

#### 4.7 Beyond the Museum

Bowen inserts works such as *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, within the art gallery and museum system as an act of circulation beyond the public reception of the exhibitionary platform. She counts on the art museum and gallery system to do the work of documenting and disseminating the historic narrative found within *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010. She is aware that the gallery will do their own job of securing this documentation within their own archives. She pushes this strategy to its limits as a form of continued publication.

Allowing the work to freely circulate online also ensures that it exists outside the vacuum of the contemporary art system. It is available to a global network of review. Bowen is invested in the act of publishing beyond the hierarchical system of academic peer review. The friction of what can be named at any point in time is one that continues to anchor Bowen's practice. With *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, Bowen asserts her autonomous rights to the knowledge that was available at the time of its production. The video work calls for review, fact checking, and genealogical reprieve. It is a gesture which gives the opportunity for reaction, retraction, and response. It actively encourages the eyes of those wishing to confirm, verify, and validate the truth and proof of its content. While calling for this action, it equally pushes against third party institutional approval. It elicits confrontation through its very title. It occupies an interstitial territory where omission, error, and addition are not only permitted but valued as an integral mark of all artworks, documents, and archives.

#### 4.8 The Artwork as a Form of Publishing

In 2015, Bowen wrote a text for art historian Charmaine Nelson's publication *Towards an African-Canadian Art History: Art, Memory, and Resistance*. The book is due to be published in late 2018. The extended three-year process of academic vetting is one which Bowen cites as inspiration to publishing content through her art practice. The production of *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, and the works of Bowen that have since followed, exhibit the autonomy of the artist to publish beyond an academic process and protocol. *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, was completed in a span of six months. The ability to publish expediently through the production of artwork is one which allows information to be conveyed in the precise moment in time in which it is most needed. It allows for critical transactions to be recorded, substantiated, and inscribed in real time. This capacity for immediate inscription has come to push the terms of 21<sup>st</sup> century artistic production in relation to the archive.

The autonomy of artistic production, as exhibited in *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, is a key factor in interrogating and circumventing the sole proprietorship of archival systems and the documents contained within. Bowen required no institutional permissions to orally confirm her familial history. The formal aspects of *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, deny state systems of sovereign analogue control over identity, memory, and history. While Bowen acknowledges that publication delays are important in the vetting of academic scholarship, she advocates that these delays impede immediate context—the ways in which systems of writing, creating, and producing are structured to systemically control who can put their word into the world. Academic institutions are known for taking a conservative position in delaying radical scholarship and effectively undermining and questioning research that is ahead of the curve. Bowen gets around the conservative constraints of academia through a

process of artistic production which intersects the historic citations of scholarly apparatus, the archive, and the document, with the fluidity of an artwork.

#### **4.9 History and the State Sanctioned Archive**

As detailed earlier, the insertion of third-party-approved historic details draws the audience of *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, into a state of conservative approval. Through these details, viewers are anesthetized into an unguarded state of acceptance. This mediation of approval and denial explicitly points to the systemic state of unconsciousness in the production and dissemination of Black history not only in Canada but beyond. The absolute demand and requirement for continued confirmation by way of familiar historic markers within Bowen's work directly points to systemic racial bias and violence within the archive. The historic markers function in stark contrast to the familial details which Bowen orates. By placing that which is unknown in the company of that which has come to be known—already mobilized knowledge—Bowen coerces an effect of authorization and approval from the glaring suspicions of the hierarchical position of power—a primarily white subject.

*sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, is a work that has faced much resistance from white audiences. This is particular to North American audiences, specifically in Canada, where the history of Black experience, from the introduction of slavery in 1628 to the first wave of Caribbean immigration in the 1950s and 1960s, has been systemically repressed and denied. The suppression of Black history in Canada, beyond well-known narratives of the underground railroad, has come to be a subject within the academic sphere only recently. Robin Winks' 1971 publication *The Blacks in Canada: A History* is an example of the most monumental work to

date of African-Canadian history.<sup>44</sup> It remains as the only historical survey that covers all aspects of the Black experience in Canada. And yet, with this academic confirmation and lasting structure of history, these narratives have yet to circulate widely as a common area of social discourse and discussion.

Calculated obfuscation has been a policy in the manufacture, or lack thereof, of Black history in Canada. This is connected to the extended legal history of racism in the Americas which Bowen continually confronts. As detailed by historian Constantine Backhouse's 1999 publication *Colour-coded: A Legal History of Racism in Canada, 1900-1950*, Canadian discriminatory legal (mal)practices and miscarriages of justice were common and prevalent during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The extensively mapped analysis of this history by Backhouse gives clear and insightful understanding of the continued and inherent strands of racism in not only Canada's legal system but also society. *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, shatters the Canadian mythology of racelessness. It forces its audience to come to grips with historic and contemporary racist policies which many Canadians would rather ignore.<sup>45</sup> The archive as a site of historical recall is directly implicated by these colour-coded histories. The raw material of the white archive comes to constitute knowledge by way of verification and recognition of the past. The act of dispossession of history towards colonized populations by the state apparatus, a legal history, has been employed in the Americas for centuries via acquisition and control of information and comprehensive knowledge. These internal inequalities of the

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<sup>44</sup> Much of the historic markers cited by Bowen can be found within Robin W. Winks' second edition of *Blacks in Canada: A History*. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012. I am indebted to Winks' thorough historic survey of African-Canadians as it proved a mine of valuable information in contextualizing Bowen *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, citation choices.

<sup>45</sup> Constance Backhouse. *Colour-Coded: A Legal History of Racism in Canada, 1900-1950*. University of Toronto Press, 1999.

archive directly correlate the modes of expulsion interrogated by Bowen in *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010.

Paul Gilroy, scholar of *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, 1993, situates the historically constituted colonization of knowledge as imbricated with ideas of nation, nationality, and national belonging. He states that these ideas,

... are extensively supported by the clutch of rhetorical strategies that can be named “cultural insiderism.” [That] the essential trademark of cultural insiderism which also supplies the key to its popularity is an absolute sense of ethnic difference. This is maximised so that it distinguishes people from one another and at the same time acquires an incontestable priority over all other dimensions of their social and historical experience, cultures, and identities. Characteristically, these claims are associated with the idea of national belonging or the aspiration to nationality and other more local but equivalent forms of cultural kinship.<sup>46</sup>

“Cultural insiderism” as it applies to nation, nationality, and national belonging in the United States and Canada is at the heart of archival dispossession. The archives that Bowen interrogates have been subject to the custodial effect of racial discrimination and, as Gilroy points out, erasure by acquisition and incontestable priority over all dimensions of historic experience. Left without scrutiny, these practices implicate a global phenomenon with significant consequences for the relationship between the politics of information and the practices of capital accumulation.<sup>47</sup> And, as pointed out by Gilroy, the themes of these consequences accentuate the inescapable fragmentation and differentiation of the Black subject. The dimensions of social and

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<sup>46</sup> Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Harvard University Press, 1993. (p3)

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.



political differentiation to which these consequences refer provide a frame of reference to the radical importance of Bowen's *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010.

#### 4.10 Genealogy and Familial Testimony

Bowen's calculation in the choice of historical documents and references that populate *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, extends to consider how each detail is historically situated, not only to the names and dates of her family genealogy but also in relation to one another. In speaking of Louis Riel and the 1869 Red River Rebellion, Bowen carefully recontextualizes the historic circumstances of an Indigenous narrative. In doing so, the historic marker provides a further point of departure and continuation of citation. The situation of an Indigenous perspective on the Red River Rebellion sets Bowen up to make connections between Blackness and native American Indigenous heritage. Bowen approaches a family myth regarding the third generation, her great grandparents. She states,

Great grandma Genie was half-Black and half-Cherokee. She was born in Wilcox County, Alabama in 1875.

...

I have no details about her parents, nor do I have any clues about how they came together. The family myth is that great grandma was the daughter of a Chief—which might be true. Though, the likely scenario is that great grandma's father had enslaved her mother, as the Cherokee nation is known to have kept black slaves then.<sup>48</sup>

Destabilizing this familial myth demonstrates Bowen's commitment to not only confronting narratives of the white archive but also those associated within the realm of familial testimony.

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<sup>48</sup> Deanna Bowen. *sum of the parts: what can be named*. Film. 2010. Courtesy of the artist.

The decisiveness and confidence enacted through this questioning ramifies the importance of not only archival address but the ever-important aspect of continued antagonism. Bowen enacts resistance whilst reconciling a challenging subject—the introduction of Indigeneity to Blackness and Blackness to Indigeneity. Bowen exhibits a great deal of sensitivity in constructing the Bowen family history. It is clear that she has taken the time to consider what each member would have gone through and how their life experiences would have shaped their psychology. Her precise research includes permissions and dialogues with a deep sense of connection to the people she descended from. She tells their stories by sitting within them.

In *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, Bowen seamlessly moves beyond interrogating the self-evidentiary claims of the archive to take aim at the structural and functional principles of the underlying use of the archival document. She not only produces an alternate structure, establishing an archaeological relationship to history, evidence, information, and data, which gives rise to alternate interpretive categories, but points to the systemic bias of both impetuses. She dissects the integrity and confidence of the archive as a site of historical recall, as the organ through which we come to know what has been. Her claims produce friction within and beyond the bounds of historic confirmations of unity. Although her testimony is unified, it acknowledges, through its title and its content, the capacity for dissociation, deterritorialization, and destruction. Synchronicity of the work is achieved through this acknowledgement. Bowen does not aim for a singular corpus, rather, she focuses on plurality as a central component of her production. The configuration of *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, is never idealized, rather, it appeals to the knowledge of what is available at the juncture in time in which it is produced.

#### 4.11 Visual Primacy and the Archive

The final decision to produce *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, without explicit visual reference and depiction of the bodies that it comes to represent counters the exploitative nature of documentary photography and film practices. Bowen's refusal to include visual reference to the bodies, archives, and documents cited in *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, is one which marks the departure from the uses of the document and archive in contemporary art as described by Okwui Enwezor in *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, 2008, where the association between photography and the archive is established through the dependence upon visual primacy as a mechanism of knowledge. Enwezor makes a claim for the materialist medium of film as a means to an end in the interrogation of the archive. The general overarching investment in material record, truth, and proof of historic conditions, whereby documents and record are supplemented by photographic encounter, forgoes a more complex and specified dimension of mnemonic production. In Bowen's work, the specific takes precedence over the general. For Enwezor, the artworks that are included within the exhibition *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, mediate public memory. Bowen confronts public memory. There is no generalized singularity within her work. She thinks beyond the generalized terms of filmic production and upends faith in such documents. Bowen's strategy pushes a line of questioning beyond the common archival impulse of 20<sup>th</sup> century artwork.<sup>49</sup> Bowen explicitly acknowledges that the photograph, document, and archive are continually subject to interpretation, manipulation, and ideological force.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> For more on the violence of photography see Susan Sontag. *On Photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975 and Susan Sontag. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.

<sup>50</sup> Bowen is well aware that the containment of a single image lacks any mechanism for historic plurality. She takes a stand against the type of images that have come to represent Black bodies and is explicit about how her formal

#### 4.12 Bound Recollections

The current landing page of Bowen's website<sup>51</sup> hosts a scanned colour photograph of five Black women seated around a table in what looks to be a community hall. The lighting is dim, and the shadowy background of standing and seated figures is obscured by the flash of the camera, which captures the women looking directly at the photographer. The setting appears social, with cocktail glasses, matches, an ashtray, wallets, and papers on the table. The woman at the left of the photograph, dressed in all white with a black jacket, holds her right hand up with a pointed index finger amidst the sassy sway of deterrence—almost saying to the photographer “Now, what do you think you are doing taking this picture?” The woman beside her is also dressed in black, with the left arm of her red and white striped jacket resting on the end of the table. A set of hoop earrings frames her paused melancholic expression. Across from her is a woman in what looks to be a dark navy dress or pant suit. She wears a hanging silver necklace and is the only figure whose face glows in a smile, back at the photographer. To her left sits a woman in a red shirt with white pants. A black purse hangs from her crossed legs. In her right hand, she holds a short, half full glass. The tension of her grasped hand parallels that of her defiantly pursed lips. The last woman, at the far right of the table, is in all black with her hands and legs crossed. Her closed body language and slightly opened mouth speak similarly to the gesture of the woman on the far left across the table from her, as if she is about to say something

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decision to turn away from photographic representations impacts, shifts, and causes friction with these already mobilized depictions. The oration of the Bowen genealogy creates an experience where one can feel, smell, and visualize the experience of the family without explicit visual representation. The black body is placed into a narrative which has historically omitted it.

<sup>51</sup> Deanna Bowen. (2018). *Deanna Bowen – deanna [at] deannabowen.ca*. [online] DeannaBowen.ca. Available at: <http://www.deannabowen.ca/> [Accessed 6 Jul. 2018].

directly to the photographer. All of the women's eyes have been redacted beneath individual black rectangular boxes.

There is no identifying image credit or caption for the photograph on the website. Its vernacular sensibility and snapshot casualness beg for further detail. Without personal insight, the striking photograph remains in a somewhat obscure realm. Details are few. There is no date or time imprint. Based on the materiality of what looks to be a scan of an original image, and the dress of the women, one might venture a guess that it was taken in the late 70s or early 80s. We don't know their names, relations or whether or not they are alive or dead. Without Bowen's testimony we don't know that this photograph contains all of the women that raised her—her mother, aunt and mother's cousins. That these women had a big hand in Bowen's life. That they were at a funeral for one of the first cousins of Bowen's mother's generation. That a number of tragic drug-related deaths had impacted the second generation of Bowen's family in Canada. We wouldn't know that this photograph is a prompt to Bowen for another memory of a different family story that is too difficult to tell. A narrative that is virtually unspeakable.<sup>52</sup>

Withholding the identity of the figures in the photograph ensures a certain level of privacy. The intent of the gaze from the photographer, and most importantly the women looking into the camera, were not looking towards Bowen's current audience and yet through a span of temporal distance they have come to be available to a future tense. The photograph—a singular historic citation—awaits what, in the future, can be named, and a potential sum of additional parts. The way that Bowen's body, voice, memory, and testimony come to represent those of her entire family in *sum of the parts: what can be named*, 2010, ensures the protection and privacy of

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<sup>52</sup> Deanna Bowen (artist), in discussion with author, December 12, 2017.

her relatives. The work confronts the history of the representation of Black bodies and the circulation and sale of Black bodies. In doing so, Bowen controls the use of those bodies for the gain of another—even her own. It also directly parallels the lack of plurality for the Black body within historical narratives. What seemingly appears as a counterintuitive process of withholding makes apparent and visible the discontinuities of the archive and its prized documents.

## Chapter 5: Divya Mehra

### 5.1 DIFFICULT PEOPLE: Race, Violence, Death, and the Service Industry

*DIFFICULT PEOPLE*, 2016-2018, is a personal and rebellious autobiographical performance work wherein artist Divya Mehra speaks directly to the challenging and often isolating experience encountered while growing up and living in the Canadian prairies. Since 2016, Mehra has compiled an extensive personal archive of diaristic digital material. Once-ephemeral content from her social media streams, text message history, dating app encounters, and her online and offline life has come to be a repository for the content presented in *DIFFICULT PEOPLE*, 2016-2018. The visual materials provide reference and citation for the nonlinear short stories and poetics of *DIFFICULT PEOPLE*, 2016-2018, that trace Mehra's life experiences with a specific focus on race, violence, death, and the service industry.

### 5.2 Oral Accounting: Performing Memory

Mehra's 30-minute live performative lecture of *DIFFICULT PEOPLE*, 2016-2018, borrows from traditions of comedy, the monologue, and the artist talk. The script and visual material of *DIFFICULT PEOPLE*, 2016-2018, is ever changing. Each iteration includes overlaps, additions, and omissions. Recontextualizing references found in music, literature, and current affairs, Mehra contends with contemporary expressions of societies formed by contact with imperial and colonial pursuits. The performance of *DIFFICULT PEOPLE*, 2016-2018, addresses the long-term effects of colonization and institutional racism.

Tone and context are important factors for Mehra. The recognizable tropes of satire, trauma, and pain found within stand-up comedy give Mehra's audience a sense of familiarity and in turn provide intermittent relief from the tension of her difficult and pointed subject matter.

Each performance begins with the gathering of an audience. Generally speaking, this audience is primarily white. Mehra's images take priority and command the audience's attention. Her melancholic and relaxing voice accompanies the images with a stream-of-consciousness style of storytelling. The script of one iteration of *DIFFICULT PEOPLE*, 2016-2018, begins,

It was early June and I had taken up a more full-time roll at my family restaurant. I remember telling my Ma she looked really beautiful in her salwar kameez that day. Mid-afternoon, I left the restaurant to do a bank deposit and, on the walk to Portage Avenue, thought about some of my morning interactions.<sup>53</sup>

Mehra goes on to describe her daily encounters. The encounters range from mundane interactions to outright intolerable instances of racism. She details the experience of public grief and softly states "Grief flows very easily into anger and disdain, and creates a soft and radical rage."<sup>54</sup> Without direct citation the death of her father looms as an unspeakable subject. Swiftly, she shifts to an ongoing experience on the dating application Tinder whereby,

The same white man appears in an array of disguises and visages with a fish he has most likely purchased at a local market. I consider swiping right on repeat, just to have a conversation with someone that's no one. There's no matches.<sup>55</sup>

She continues with a question, prompting the audience to pay closer attention to their own implication within her seemingly one-sided dialogue. "Can you overdose on empathy? How about apathy? How do you prevent apathy?"<sup>56</sup> The unanswered question shifts to a long list of

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<sup>53</sup> *DIFFICULT PEOPLE*, 2016-2018. Mehra, Divya. 221A Pollyanna 圖書館 Library. 24 March 2018. Performance.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.



topics for future untold stories. Whiteness is a repeated theme. Two topics for future consideration include: “PhDs in multiple things that unrelate to anything of value and value is defined clearly by the majority (i.e. whiteness)” and “Abstraction as a cultural substitute for whiteness.”<sup>57</sup> Third party authorized archives of nation states and institutions are familiar with the terms and conditions of value as assigned by the majority—defined by Mehra as whiteness. What is less considered is the bias, subjugation, colonization, and management of the structures and systems which come to house archival materials.

### 5.3 The Body and the Archive: Postures and Photographs

*DIFFICULT PEOPLE*, 2016-2018, is an unusual form of archive. It is particular to 21<sup>st</sup> century artistic practices which confront traditional forms of the archive and its relationship to the individual pluralistic body. The excerpts, quotations, and images that Mehra has been gathering are collections of the self. The intensity and insidious recording of herself is a form of self-archiving. *DIFFICULT PEOPLE*, 2016-2018, is a method of composition similar to that of third party authorized archives. As an iterative work, *DIFFICULT PEOPLE*, 2016-2018, also performs the conditions of endless archiving described by Enwezor in *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*<sup>58</sup> wherein the focus is on the archive as an active regulatory, discursive system. In Mehra’s work, this system is open and always shifting. *DIFFICULT PEOPLE*, 2016-2018, is a self-aware archive. Mehra never stops—self-archiving, self-

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Okwui Enwezor. *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*. New York: International Center of Photography; Göttingen [Germany]: Steidl, 2008.

annotating, self-summarizing and self-anticipating. The work performs an amplification of the continual drafting of an archive—the unlimited iterative contexts each depending on resources, contexts, publics, and institutions. The continual self-encapsulation and self-condensation of *DIFFICULT PEOPLE*, 2016-2018, provides a temperature for the various contexts of Mehra's precarious archival address whilst denying subjugation, colonization, and management of its iterative form.

*DIFFICULT PEOPLE*, 2016-2018, responds directly to the form and structure of systemic racism, violence, and sexism that are built within and beyond archival systems of control. Mehra's audience often sits attentively listening to her monologue as she introduces them to encounters, situations, and topics which would likely otherwise go unregistered. From those that are listening, the performance demands recognition. In calling out and speaking aloud, Mehra introduces a catalyst for mobilization, activation, radicality, and eventual revolution. The political rhetoric of *DIFFICULT PEOPLE*, 2016-2018, demands attention to the frustration associated with rectifying whiteness. *DIFFICULT PEOPLE*, 2016-2018, reflects on a Canadian blind spot and points to a central incommensurability of the Nation's contemporary and historic politics. Mehra challenges the effects of centuries of exclusion and discrimination against large groups of people. She opens a space of ideological transgression as a necessary condition for participation.

#### **5.4 Instant Archive: Performing History in the Public Realm**

In *DIFFICULT PEOPLE*, 2016-2018, Mehra performs memory. Her memory is manifested as a temporal experience which goes undocumented. The performance is only accessible in person, and by way of active listening and remembering. Moving away from the

strategies of traditional archival documentation, Mehra, uses performance—30-minute encounters— to address the lack of autonomy in regard to representation of her family within Canadian national archives. She confronts these failures by insisting on drawing from her own personal archive in the production of an autonomous familial history. For the performance of *DIFFICULT PEOPLE*, 2016-2018, Mehra understands and imagines place based on encounters and experiences. She provides a first-person narrative delivery of information. The unexpected combination of tone, context, language, and wordplay imbue a vernacular that turns the private archive public.

A certain level of reciprocity is expected in exchange for access to Mehra's personal archive. The audience is expected to engage, reflect, and respond to her archival authority and in turn question the authenticity of both official and unofficial national archives, records, and histories. Those that experience *DIFFICULT PEOPLE*, 2016-2018, are required to consider who belongs within national archives and who does not. Mehra's body is a central component of the visual material presented within *DIFFICULT PEOPLE*, 2016-2018. Her diaristic selfies and video recordings lead into a form of browsing that is both pleasurable and uncomfortable for the viewer. The sound of these recordings has been omitted and filled with the narrative voice of Mehra reflecting on the context that makes greatest sense to the resources, contexts, publics, and institutions to which she finds herself performing.

## **5.5 Extraction and Activation: A Greater Whole**

*DIFFICULT PEOPLE*, 2016-2018, is a story. It relies on the freedom of words. In *DIFFICULT PEOPLE*, 2016-2018, Mehra's words occupy a site of power and play. Their iterative movement and arrangement are painstakingly planned and articulated to reflect the

moments, days, hours, and minutes leading up to each performance. Through Mehra, the bias and injustice presented in her stories allows the words of their perpetrators to rebel against the original speaker. Pain and discomfort are radically turned over through a shift of hierarchical power, generating space beyond fixed definitions. In proximity to *DIFFICULT PEOPLE*, 2016-2018, Mehra produced a portfolio commission for the 2018 Spring Issue of Canadian Art Magazine.<sup>59</sup> The feature was titled “TONE” and included textual excerpts from the performative script of *DIFFICULT PEOPLE*, 2016-2018. Of the many examples whereby Mehra radically shifts the power of an oppressive speaker to her advantage, I will focus on the following,

During my Foundations in Drawing class I started adding SPIDERMAN costumes to all my nude model figure studies in hopes that my kinda-super-orthodox-Hindu family would never see the drawings when my 18” x 24” sketch pad would eventually make its way home. Making his daily rounds during another nude model class, my instructor grimaced at the costumes. “THIS ISNT THAT INTERESTING” he said “YOU SHOULD THINK MORE ALONG THE LINES OF YOUR CULTURAL BACKGROUND, AND IF YOU REALLY WANT TO BE IMAGINATIVE AND EXPLORATORY... MAYBE YOU SHOULD ADD LOTS OF ARMS AND LEGS TO THE NUDES.”<sup>60</sup>

The text appears at the bottom right of a centerfold. At the end of the page a typed frown face, :(, has been placed over the page number.

Reading the excerpts within the Canadian Art magazine feature, I flash back to the first time Mehra told me the story over the telephone<sup>61</sup>, and then forward to hearing her speak the worlds at a *DIFFICULT PEOPLE*, 2016-2018, performance.<sup>62</sup> I recall that the experience was

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<sup>59</sup> Divya Mehra. “Tone.” *Canadian Art*. Vol. 35, No. 1. (Spring) 2018. p 140-172.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Divya Mehra (artist), in discussion with the author. January 4, 2018.

<sup>62</sup> *DIFFICULT PEOPLE*, 2016-2018. Mehra, Divya. 221A Pollyanna 圖書館 Library. 24 March 2018. Performance.

from the first year of her undergraduate degree. Mehra had, many years later, posted the narrative on her Instagram story, and many friends and followers—also people of colour—reached out in response as they were all too familiar with the experience. In the face of alienation, Mehra's stories, posts, performances, and archival forms of address revoke hierarchical powers and form concrete opportunities for community, future audiences, and radical change. Mehra speaks to the displacement and removal of documents from archives and the implication of such gestures on resulting historical narratives. *DIFFICULT PEOPLE*, 2016-2018, is an homage to the limits of archival memorialization and preservation—to information and identity, which speaks to the growing alienation of people from place, land, community, archives, and history.

## **5.6 Archival Authorship**

Rather than draw from institutional archives of the nation state and or institutions, Mehra supplements the production of her own identity and history by way of the construction of a personal archive. She is well aware of third party authorized documents and records but chooses to learn, produce, and confirm her own autonomous history from a place outside of the traditional archival structure. *DIFFICULT PEOPLE*, 2016-2018, is a living archive. While producing her own archive and performing its contents as *DIFFICULT PEOPLE*, 2016-2018, Mehra is well aware of the capacity for her autonomous control to be undermined, usurped, overwritten, recontextualized, and hijacked. For this reason, her performances are never recorded. The work always requires her voice and her body. *DIFFICULT PEOPLE*, 2016-2018, shifts the boundaries, systems, and structures associated with records, archives, and the production of history. It continues to reverberate beyond the encounter of performance.

## Chapter 6: Krista Belle Stewart

### 6.1 Potato Gardens Band

“The truth about stories is that’s all we are.”<sup>63</sup>

Author and scholar Thomas King begins his 2003 book *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative*, with the chapter heading “*You’ll Never Believe What Happened*” *Is Always a Great Way to Start*. The first chapter and the four that follow each begin with the same story,

There is a story I know. It’s about the earth and how it floats in space on the back of a turtle. I’ve heard this story many times, and each time someone tells the story, it changes. Sometimes the change is simply in the voice of the storyteller. Sometimes the change is in the details. Sometimes in the order of events. Other times it’s the dialogue or the response of the audience. But in all the tellings of all the tellers, the world never leaves the turtle’s back. And the truth never swims away.<sup>64</sup>

Each of King’s chapters reinscribes this same narrative, and after the repeated narrative, repeats another,

One time, it was in Prince Rupert I think, a young girl in the audience asked about the turtle and the earth. If the earth was on the back of a turtle, what was below the turtle? Another turtle, the story teller told her. And below that turtle? Another turtle. And below that? Another turtle.

The girl began to laugh, enjoying the game, I imagine. So how many turtles are there? She wanted to know. The storyteller shrugged. No one knows for sure, he told her, but it’s turtles all the way down.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Thomas King. *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative*. House of Anansi Press Inc. 2003. (p1)

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. (p1)

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. (p1)

This back and forth goes on at the beginning of each chapter. Just like that. Each back and forth features the same questions. All that changes are the location, age, and gender of the story teller and questioning audience member. The original story and questions remain the same.

Thomas King's narrative strategy offers a precise entry point to Krista Belle Stewart's *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018. Like the story of the turtle, the work bears rich knowledge, relationships, intuition, and complexity that is rearticulated by an ongoing process of storytelling. *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, is a work that continues to be expressed over and over. The work never closes. Like the story of the turtle, it remains open to continued negotiation of resources, contexts, publics, and institutions. And yet, this continued retelling is anchored by a central narrative. In Thomas King's story, the narrative always comes back to the earth floating in space on the back of a turtle. In Stewart's *Potato Garden's Band*, 1918-2018, the narrative always returns to the voice of her maternal great-grandmother Terese Kaimetko. More specifically, the narrative always returns to the sound of Stewart's great-grandmother Kaimetko singing.

The artwork *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, responds to circa 1918 wax-cylinder recordings of Stewart's grandmother singing on the Spaxomin (Douglas Lake), Syilx (Okanagan) territory (British Columbia, Canada), the land of her and Stewart's home territory, the Upper Nicola Band of the Okanagan Nation. The recordings were taken by anthropologist James Alexander Teit.<sup>66</sup> The recordings are titled *Potato Gardens Band* as this was the self-proclaimed band name of Stewart's great grandmother.

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<sup>66</sup> 150, Canada. 2017. "Canada 150: Anthropologist Chronicled 19Th-Century First Nations Societies". *Vancouver Sun*. Accessed July 7 2018. <https://vancouversun.com/news/local-news/canada-150/canada-150-anthropologist-chronicled-19th-century-first-nations-societies>. North American anthropologists James Alexander Teit learned and was fluent in regional First Nations languages. His first wife was Lucy Susannah Antko of Nlaka'pamux. They were

Stewart came to know the recordings through a cassette tape that had been shared with her by a cousin. The recordings include sounds of songs, the flute, and jaw harp. Since her first encounter with the recordings, Stewart has produced three performative iterations of *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018. The first iteration took place in 2014 as a performance and responsive collaboration with a string quartet at the Vancouver, British Columbia, theatre venue The Cultch.<sup>67</sup> The second iteration took place in 2017 as a sound performance and collaboration with artist Jeneen Frei Njootli and musician Laura Ortman in the basement of an abandoned Hudson's Bay department store.<sup>68</sup> The third performance of *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, is the focus of this chapter. It took place on June 30, 2018, where, for the first time, the recordings of Stewart's great-grandmother were played back to the land where the original recordings were composed—Spaxomin (Douglas Lake), Syilx (Okanagan) territory (British Columbia, Canada). In honor of her great-grandmother, Stewart performed the recordings to an intimate group of family members—many of whom had never heard the recordings before.

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married until her death in 1899. In 1904 he married Leonie Josephine Morens of Nicola Valley. Teit recorded indigenous cultural, beliefs, practices, laws, oral traditions, and social and personal value systems. His reporting of these systems resulted in four extensive reports which were shared with famous American anthropologist Franz Boas. He produced comprehensive studies of Salish basketry, collected songs and stories, traditional tools and clothing, and assisted a comprehensive linguistic study of Ahtaskan language. He is purported to have been an important political activist of his time. He supported the formation of the Interior Tribes of British Columbia and the Indian Rights Association which convened a meeting of 450 chiefs at Spence's Bridge over land rights. Teit was elected by First Nations to serve on an executive committee of the Allied Indian Tribes of British Columbia, Canada. University of Victoria scholar Wendy Wickwire, who wrote three books with esteemed Okanagan elder Harry Robinson, describes Teit as "one of the most outstanding, one of the most progressive, one of the most ahead of his time."

<sup>67</sup> "Music From The New Wilderness - Western Front". 2014. *Front.Bc.Ca*. Accessed July 8 2018. <https://front.bc.ca/events/music-from-the-new-wilderness-3/>. "Music From The New Wilderness - Rehearsals Under Way - Western Front". 2018. *Front.Bc.Ca*. Accessed July 8 2018. <http://front.bc.ca/events/music-from-the-new-wilderness-rehearsals-under-way/>.

<sup>68</sup> "Krista Belle Stewart". 2018. *Stages*. Accessed July 8 2018. <https://www.stages.plugin.org/krista-belle-stewart/>.



## 6.2 The Performance

The performance of *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, was live broadcast from Spaxomin (Douglas Lake), Syilx (Okanagan) territory (British Columbia, Canada) to an audience at 221A Pollyanna 圖書館 Library located in Chinatown, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. The performance extended to include the loan of a familial document to the Pollyanna 圖書館 Library *sum of the parts* research collection. A three-gallon utility bucket comprised Stewart's contribution to the archive—25 pounds of soil from Spaxomin (Douglas Lake), drawn from Stewarts maternally inherited land. At this time its contents remain entrusted to Pollyanna 圖書館 Library in wait of future activation.

At 2:00pm, on the day of the performance, people began gathering at the library. From the front entrance they made their way through the collection stacks to an open research area. As with most events at the library, the research carrels had been cleared away to make room for seating. Guests were greeted by a semicircle of chairs placed behind a lone table. Prior to the guest's arrival, Stewart's contribution to the library archive, the half full three-gallon utility bucket, had been placed at the centre of the research area atop of the table. The bucket and its contents, along with the guests, faced an 85" monitor, screening a live feed of the site where *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, was originally recorded. The monitor depicted a sweeping landscape. From the distance of a hilltop, the expanse of Stewart's lake side property appears. It is blurred with the familiar glitch of digital video transmission. Pixels clump and disperse in response to the telecommunications network which carries the surveilling view from Spaxomin (Douglas Lake) to Vancouver. In the foreground of the camera's frame, dry yellow grass and pale green sagebrush methodically dance in the wind. Down the hill along the curve of the lake's

edge, a blurred homestead stands at a still next to the movement of small and medium black dots—the bodies and vehicles of Stewart and her family. The slow movement of a partly cloudy grey sky gives way to amorphous shapes of blue and responding bits of light along the distant hilltops. One who is familiar with the geography of the landscape makes note of the reservation at the edge of the lakes horizon.

After thirty or so minutes of communal chatter, the performance began.

The monitor speakers turn up and with their amplification arrives the voice of Stewart's great-grandmother Terese Kaimetko. Carried by the sound of the wind, her voice and instruments ebb in and out of reach from the library audience. The flapping, beating friction of the wind on the camera's microphone obscures and often overtakes the performed recording. Audience members strain to listen, to hear both the land and sacred recording. Along with the streaming signal, the sound cuts in and out. And then, with unexpected force, Kaimetko's voice jumps from the monitors speaker. Loud and clear, the sound of her voice reaches out. With the methodical movement of her voice, the landscape sways back and forth. As her vocals move up and down they continue to merge with the sound of the wind. It becomes difficult to decipher what the sound of the wind is and what the sound of the recording is. Is there a drum, the sound of a walkie-talkie radio, a flute, the jaw harp?

As the recording continues on, it becomes more difficult to discern the edge of where the recording's sound begins, and where the landscape's sound ends. The voice of the anthropologist identifying each section of the recording intermittently interrupts the experience. Teit's voice is distorted in comparison to the clarity of Kaimetko's song. Half way through the performance, the

voice of Stewart questions, “Can you hear me?” The camera is lifted up and begins being walked down the hill. The sightline of the landscape shortens while the network transmission of the camera view continues to blur into further abstracted distortion. The wind rumbles heavily. Stewart’s voice cuts in and out. From Stewart, the words *Vancouver* and *gallery* punctuate the library audience’s attention. The camera angle wobbles with the footsteps of its handler. And then, as if by way of an invisible forcefield, the camera stops halfway down the hill. The recording of Kaimetko repeats for a second time.

From the closer angle, a familiar vocal sequence again fills the library. The shortened vantage point yields further technical interference to the visual of the landscape. The landscape freezes in a longer delayed glitch as the wind picks up. Kaimetko’s voice continues to overpower the sound of the wind. From the closer vantage point the valley echoes a mirror of the recording. The powerful sounds of Kaimetko and her instruments reverberate against the landscape. As the second performance of the recording comes to a close, the camera again begins to be walked down the hill. The sound of a walkie-talkie cuts in and out at the same pace of the heavy wind.

The camera frame bounces as the handler walks towards the site of the performance. It passes a lone black microphone, and stand, pointed in the direction of the lake. As the camera edges closer to the site of the performance, the image continues to blur and glitch. The familiar fade of a wireless mobile telecommunication technology failure takes hold of the view. The wind continues to be heard clearly as the view of the camera freezes between movements, gaining closer access to the performance site. In the last two minutes, the viewer bounces closer and closer. Within the blur of the camera, the black shapes of vehicles and bodies become more distinct. One can make out two cars, a truck, and an SUV. Figures of Stewart’s family appear as black specters in a sea of green grass. A light-coloured rooftop is cut off to the left of the frame.

As the camera gains proximity to the performance, the visual reception becomes less and less available. In final abstraction, the landscape blurs into a kaleidoscope of colors. Clumps of green, grey, yellow, blue, black, and off-white pixel blocks merge in distortion, until finally the camera view permanently freezes and the sound transmission completely cuts off.

Through the multiple iterations of *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, the story continues to be anchored by the rich knowledge available in Kaimetko's performance. The reperforming of Kaimetko by her great-granddaughter Stewart is, like the story of the turtle as told by Thomas King, one that persists to be expressed over and over. The performance of *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, by Stewart is a meaningful interrogation of the historic and colonial erasure of Indigenous narratives in the Americas and, in particular, in Canada. The precision of Stewart's interrogation reaches deep within the archive and comes to consider not only its collections, such as that of her great-grandmother, but also the structures and systems which persist in withholding such knowledges from the people of whom they were taken. Stewart's *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, foregrounds the relationship of Indigenous identity within and beyond the traditional confines which currently control mechanisms of archival address.

The sound of Stewart's great-grandmother reverberates from the many mouths and tongues of the Okanagan people and land around them. Thomas King aptly quotes Okanagan storyteller Jeannette Armstrong who proclaims, "I am a listener to the language's stories, and when my words form I am merely retelling the same stories in different patterns."<sup>69</sup> The iterative quality of Stewart's practice makes way for the retelling of *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, among such multiple patterns. King suggests that our stories control our lives, that parts of us

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<sup>69</sup> Thomas King. *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative*. House of Anansi Press Inc. 2003. (p2)

never move past these stories, and that for him a part of himself will be chained to these stores as long as he lives. That once a story is told it cannot be called back. “Once told, it is loose in the world.”<sup>70</sup> *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, is one such story for Stewart.

### 6.3 Transmission and Technology

The Spaxomin (Douglas Lake) iteration of *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, traverses great spatiotemporal and technological distances. As mentioned earlier, the original *Potato Gardens Band* recordings were captured on wax cylinders. Wax cylinders were the first sound recordings produced on a widespread commercial scale, and in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were a common method employed in recording Indigenous languages. Although readily available and easy to produce at the turn of the century, the volatile and fragile nature of wax cylinders eventually rendered them obsolete.<sup>71</sup> The wax cylinder recordings that have survived the test of time, such as *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, require extensive preservation and conservation methods. Institutional archives implement strict environmental control systems in the keeping of wax cylinder recordings.<sup>72</sup> Left to their original material state, most century-old wax cylinder recordings found within institutional archives are indiscernible. It is possible to make out sound but often difficult to decipher what the sound is. Advances in digital technologies has provided conservationists the capacity to digitally recover these records. Optical scan technology is used to transfer the three-dimensional record into a digital file which is then translated by way of

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid. (p9)

<sup>71</sup> "Seeing Voices: Using Light To Restore And Preserve Early Recorded Sound: Guest Lecture With Dr. Carl Haber | UBC Linguistics". 2018. *Linguistics.Ubc.Ca*. Accessed July 7 2018. <https://linguistics.ubc.ca/events/event/seeing-voices-using-light-to-restore-and-preserve-early-recorded-sound-guest-lecture-with-dr-carl-haber/>.

<sup>72</sup> "Brown Wax Cylinders | UCSB Cylinder Audio Archive ". 2018. *Cylinders.Library.Ucsb.Edu*. Accessed July 8 2018. <http://cylinders.library.ucsb.edu/history-brownwax.php>.

specially designed software. These advancements allow for renderings from even the most damaged and broken cylinders.<sup>73</sup> Under ideal circumstances, these digitized recordings would come to be made available to the communities in which the knowledge contained on the wax cylinder records were originally gathered. However, barriers to these materials continues to be a major concern with the maintenance of scholarly access continuing to be of primary concern. To this day, Stewart has never been able to access the original wax cylinder recordings of her great grandmother.

#### **6.4 Amplifying the Archive**

For the performance in Spaxomin (Douglas Lake), Stewart set up an amplifier on the back of her brother's black pick-up truck. From there she broadcast the recordings of her great-grandmother through the valley and across the expanse of the lake. The sound of her great-grandmother singing boomed and echoed upon the surface of the water and adjacent hills. As previously mentioned, at some point the original wax cylinder recording had been transferred to cassette tape. By the time Stewart accessed the cassette, it had also become fragile and required digital restoration. That digitized copy was what Stewart played to her family and the land. The top of the hill from which the camera transmitted the performance to the library was the only site in the area capable of connecting with a telecommunications network. From this distance, the sound of the performance required further assistance, making it to the camera and, in turn, the library audience. In order to overcome the lack of sound transmission, Stewart used a walkie-

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<sup>73</sup> "Rare Audio of Indigenous Languages Saved By Invention 100 Years Later - Science Nation". 2018. *Youtube*. Accessed July 7 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H6AqEppqUDA>.

talkie radio to move the performance from the bottom of the hill to the top. The radio at the bottom of the hill was pushed to talk, and the radio at the top of the hill was left to listen. The sound transmitted through the transceiver was picked up by the iPhone camera at the top of the hill and transferred to an apple computer which was hardwired via HDMI cable to a Samsung smart monitor which broadcast the performance to the Vancouver library audience.

Clues to the extended transmission of communication involved in the performance of *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, came in the form of walkie-talkie radio beeps, intermittent telecommunications glitches, and a final visual glimpse of the performance site at the bottom of the hill. The materiality of spatiotemporal and technical distance was deeply considered by Stewart and thoughtfully employed as a mechanism of withholding. The family members welcome to attend the Spaxomin (Douglas Lake) performance were permitted access to a clear communication of the original recordings. Those awaiting transmission of the performance at the library received a fractured and discontinuous version of the experience. The technical consideration and precision of this performance implicitly negotiates the terms and conditions of archival resources, contexts, publics, and institutions—where the library audience was left on the edge in considering pressing archival questions of access, denial, control, and circulation.

## **6.5 The Act of Listening**

The performance of *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, is as much about the act of listening as it is about the act of looking. It is about the politics of these gestures and what they signal. As the land is made host to, and reverberates, the performance of Kaimetko, the audience comes to consider that she too listened and responded directly to the land. The sound of *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, being performed is one of testimony and storytelling. For the distant

viewer it triggers the neural responses for understanding and communication. Although only some of the parts reach the listener, they combine to produce a greater whole. Furthermore, the library audience is led to accept that rather than obtaining an overarching understanding of the sounds they can only come to know an overarching meaning of those sounds. In the absence of translation, tone, and context come to activate material reference.

Through *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, the original wax cylinder recording departs from the archive in order to be amplified in the present and future. This action reinforces the physicality of Kaimetko, and for Stewart ramifies the possibility of return. *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, survives beyond its original archival containment. It surfaces in an act of archival defiance and refuses to remain hermetically boxed within the deep storage of institutional control. The act of listening sets a precedent for interrogating the architecture of archival systems and resulting modes of thought.

The communications glitches experienced in *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, act as a synecdoche for the arena of technology. Although 21<sup>st</sup> century technology has proven a great capacity for modes of assimilation, appropriation, theft, and the homogenization of experience, it also operates as a medium to decisively consider the founding principles and methods of exclusion within the archive. *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, performs this decisive consideration in an act of radical agency and expression. The technologies associated with the performance of *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, allow for the voice of Stewart's great-grandmother to return to her land and to be heard. Upon being heard, or in the case of the library audience, struggling to be heard, Kaimetko's voice returns to be experienced, described, considered, and meditated upon.



## 6.6 Public and Private (Hi)Stories

The conclusion of Thomas King's chapters follows the same repetitive logic found in each of his chapter introductions. At the close of each chapter, which features an individual story, Kings states some variation of the following. Take this story,

It's yours. Do what you will. Make it the topic of a discussion group at a scholarly conference. Put it on the Web. Forget it. But don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story.

You've heard it now.<sup>74</sup>

The variations of each conclusion are represented by what King states to presume might be the result of the audience members' will. Whether they will tell the story to friends, put its subject on a t-shirt, cry, or get angry.

In the afterward of his book, where King tells a story about his friends John and Amy Cardinal, he strays slightly from the logic of his first five conclusions. He reminds the reader that they have no reason to trust him because, after all, he is a storyteller. The variation on the theme goes like this,

You can have it if you want. John's story, that is. Do with it what you will. I'd just as soon as you forget it, or, at least, not mention my name if you tell it to friends. Just don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story.

You've heard it now.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Thomas King. *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative*. House of Anansi Press Inc. 2003. (p29, 60, 89, 119, 167)

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. (p167)

The difference between the stories in the pages of the preceding chapters is that King considers and defines them as oral stories. Ones that he would speak out loud. Stories that he considers public. The afterward of his book is titled “Private Stories.” It begins with a quote by Nigerian storyteller Ben Okri,

In a fractured age, when cynicism is god, here is a possible heresy: we live by stories, we also live in them. One way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted—knowingly or unknowingly—in ourselves. We live stories that either give our lives meaning or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by quite possibly we change our lives.<sup>76</sup>

King departs from this quote to talk about the difference between private and public stories. He defines that spoken stories are public and written stories are private. These terms and conditions lend to understanding Stewart’s negotiation of the familiar records held within and beyond the systems and structures of institutional archival spaces and how the defining protocols of each site implicates contained documents by way of custodial effect. King claims that “For Native Storytellers there is generally a proper place in time to tell a story”<sup>77</sup> --that some stories can only be told by certain individuals or families, and that when Indigenous stories began to appear in print, concern arose that the stories were in danger of being destroyed or compromised. He concludes that the printed word, “once set on a page, has no master, no voice, no sense of time or place.”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid. (p153)

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. (p153)

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. (p154)

The compromise and danger that King speaks to is one familiar to the document and the archive. In parallel with the conclusions of Nesbit, the document is always derived from a specific context but is not exclusively derived from its context. The document is always capable of applicability beyond its archival structure. And as stated earlier, this is a precondition of the archive yielding political principles. King's apprehension about the written story is demonstrated by him including a private story at the end of his book where he states that it is a story that will likely never exist as an oral work. His statement sets the written page as mute and silent. Through the sharing of a private story, King performs a deep advocacy for the act of withholding. This defense is one which the audience of *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, may or may not have completely understood when grappling with the consciously produced gaps and omissions of the performance transmission received within the library. In this gesture, Stewart draws attention to the complexities of the archive and its material. And within the calculated action of her *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, performance accounts for intimacy, coincidence, and the meeting of history across time.

## 6.7 A Familial Document

As briefly noted earlier, the performance of *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, extended to include the loan of a familial document to the Pollyanna 圖書館 Library *sum of the parts* research collection. A three-gallon utility bucket comprised Stewart's contribution to the archive—25 pounds of soil from Spaxomin (Douglas Lake), drawn from Stewarts maternally inherited land. At this time, its contents remain entrusted to Pollyanna 圖書館 Library in wait of future activation. This deposit furthers Stewart's interrogation of archival complexities and materials. As with the visual and sound aspects of *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, this loan

also accounts for intimacy, coincidence, and the meeting of history across time. The soil within the bucket has geological properties which, in the hands of those versed in applying forensic methods and techniques, would be capable of being read scientifically. Such an investigation would yield details, facts, figures and evidence of the soils origin and history. In *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, the bucket comes to stand for much more. It is inscribed with the bodies, blood, sweat, tears, songs, and lives of Stewarts ancestors.

The bucket of soil deposited as part of *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, is made of an opaque white plastic. From the outside one can see a shadow of the line of the soils presence. The lid is tightly sealed with the extra security of a clear tape barrier. Without prior knowledge of the soils visible properties, the viewer is required to imagine its colour, texture, taste, and smell. There is no indication of the rich reds, browns, and grey colours associated with the land's clay. The mineral deposits are left to speculation. The history of soil as an archival medium has primarily been reserved for persons performing geological exploration and advancement. Soil as a medium, and in turn as a document, capable of representing lives, is a 21<sup>st</sup> century phenomenon.<sup>79</sup> Like the wax cylinder recordings of *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, the soil collected by Stewart extends deep into the recess of history representing a period of time far beyond the lives of her ancestors. What remains within the soil deposit is left to what can be named through the details shared by Stewart herself.

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<sup>79</sup> "The Blood of Lynching Victims Is in This Soil." 2018. *Nationalgeographic.Com*. Accessed July 8 2018. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2018/04/race-lynching-museum-katie-couric-alabama/>. Most recently, on April 26, 2018, an exhibition at the Equal Justice Initiative's Legacy Museum and National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, opened with a section dedicated to the collection of soil samples from sites where Blacks died from lynching throughout the south. The new memorial preserves nearly 300 jars of soil. The museum claims a mandate to help America acknowledge the racist brutality in its past.

## **6.8 Land Claims and Legal Documents**

The temporary deposit of soil into the library research collection responds to the institutional context of archival control and restriction associated with the original *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, recordings. Stewart inserts her home territory within the research collection as a demonstration of her sole proprietorship over the land, its extraction, and resulting circulation. Bringing attention to the explicit material of the land from which the recordings of Kaimetko were taken raises additional questions around the topic of Indigenous land claims in the Americas and, specifically, within Canada. Stewart considers the land as the oldest archive, one in which culture can be implicitly traced within its materiality. Furthermore, the deposit of soil within the institutional collection of the library points to the tension between personal and institutional narratives which have been imposed upon Indigenous bodies of the Americas for centuries. The temporary loan of soil gifted to the library acts as a citation to the complicated narrative of Indigenous dispossession of land through colonial contact. In the short 151-year history of Canada, Indigenous lands have come to serve repressive colonial systems. The contrast of the small fraction of soil deposited at the library to the vast expanding landscape of Spaxomin (Douglas Lake), Syilx (Okanagan) territory (British Columbia, Canada)—the land of Stewarts home territory the Upper Nicola Band of the Okanagan Nation—brings to bear the discrepancy of broken treaty promises.

## **6.9 Speaking to Canadians**

Through the gesture of depositing soil within the library, Stewart brings her home territory to occupy the institution. In her absence, the land continues to exist, both in the library

and the site from which the soil was excavated. In absence of Stewart's great-grandmother and family, the land continues to exist. In absence of their bodies, the land continues to be inscribed with the stories that extend centuries prior to colonial contact. For Stewart, the land is an archival site. It is a document in and of itself. It is a representation of how systems of power impact lifetimes, not decades. The performance of *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, marks not only a 100-year anniversary but an accumulative centennial effect of time passed since the recording was taken. Stewart's inclusion of the soil deposit within the *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, performance contributes a radical and meaningful archival deviation, with the capacity to change the course of history. It implicates a power shift of self-determination whereby specific land, languages, and stories take precedence over general colonial historic inscriptions.

Stewart's long-term lasting interrogation of archival inequality is reflective of the subjugation, suppression, and hegemony associated with the sanitization of Canadian's historic narratives as depicted in the countries founding principles. Acclaimed Sto:lo scholar and writer Lee Maracle offers a precise and meaningful perspective on these issues in her 2017 publication, *My Conversations with Canadians*. Her prose essays are structured into thirteen conversational and direct chapters. The first essay, "Meeting the Public," begins by confronting the myths of Canada's collective historic narrative,

Canadians have a myth about themselves, and it seems this myth is inviolable. They are innocent. They gave us things; they were kind to us. The reality is that Canada has seized vast land tracts, leaving only small patches of land specifically for us, as though they indeed owned everything and we had nothing, not even a tablespoon of dirt. Canada says it gave us these lands, and Canadians actually believe that Canada "gave us" these

reserves. In fact, Canada took all the land but the reserves it set aside for us. You cannot give someone something that already belongs to them.<sup>80</sup>

Maracle's reference to a tablespoon of dirt provides an apt image in considering the relationship of the bucket of soil as a document within the library. As a document, the bucket of soil comes to represent a small fraction of the extensive availability of documents (land), which remain absent from the library collection. The small fraction of soil inversely draws attention to all that is missing from the archival collection. Furthermore, the temporary status of the document (bucket of soil) within the archive perpetuates the interrogation of repatriation and reclamation of documents which have been taken with or without permission and withheld from the communities in which they were drawn. The repatriation of original recordings is not something that can be given back but rather something that already belongs to those from whom they are being withheld.

## **6.10 Indigenous Women and the Land**

*Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, recognizes a connection to the land through Stewart's material lineage. It performs the continuance of matriarchal organization and power. In advocacy of the connection of Indigenous women and the land, Stewart defies Canadian concepts, restrictions, and legislative authority over Indigenous land and people with particular attention to the colonial authority over Indigenous women. The continuous attempt by the Canadian state apparatus to marginalize Indigenous people from their land, and in turn their stories, is a central component of Stewart's performance of *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018.

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<sup>80</sup> Lee Maracle. *My Conversations with Canadians*. BookThug, 2017. (p10)

Lee Maracle considers the position of land and stories as a great lineage of feminist politics within Indigenous communities that fight the continual marginalization conjured by racist, colonial, patriarchal systems, and structures.

Stewarts *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, performance aligns with Maracle's advocacy of Indigenous land claims. Maracle proclaims that Indigenous people are responsible for the land. That they have been on it for thousands of years and will not relinquish responsibility to its cause. That Indigenous people are the caretakers of the land.<sup>81</sup> Maracle's assertion of Indigenous people as caretakers of the land, and in turn stories and cultures of Indigenous people, is constitutive to the custodial effect reverberated upon documents within the archive. Without adequate care, both land and knowledge come to be appropriated—that is expropriated without permission from its owners.<sup>82</sup> This claim is most aptly articulated by Maracle in the definition of appropriation and familial protocols of knowledge transference by and through the land:

Our children have a birthright; it is access to and use of sustenance materials (both tangible and intangible) within and on the territories (Turtle Island). They are entitled to whatever sustenance the land can provide (and the knowledge attached to the land and its sustenance); whether or not the oppressive state that claims to govern it agrees to this birthright it does not eradicate its existence. As parents and grandparents, we are responsible for securing children's access and dominion to the land and its material and non-material (knowledge) sustenance and insuring they inherit this birthright. We are then also responsible for the state of the land. The responsibility carries with it the transmission and protection of the knowledge that travels with and arises from the land. No one but our children are entitled to our knowledge, stories, law, teachings, science, or medicine. We are responsible no matter what the newcomers' narrow parameters of permission grant us.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid (p85)

<sup>82</sup> Ibid (p101)

<sup>83</sup> Ibid (p113)



*Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, is an ongoing and lifelong endeavor for Stewart. Through *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, Stewart performs the connection between the land and the stories and cultures of not only her familial lineage and the home territory the Upper Nicola Band of the Okanagan Nation but of Indigenous people across Canada. *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, performs the knowledge attached to the land and its sustenance.

Stewart's great-grandmother took responsibility for securing her children, and her children's children, access and dominion to the land and its material and non-material (knowledge) sustenance as an inheritance and birthright. Together, the gestures of *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, further the Stewarts' precise and meaningful interrogation of archival materials and their association with the land. *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, simultaneously transmits and protects the knowledge that travels and arises from the land in which it has been learned. In accordance with familial protocols, Stewart's performance actively shares and withholds the knowledge, law, teachings, science, and medicine of her ancestral land. Through a deep connection with the land and her maternal lineage, Stewart continues the genealogy of these protocols as an imperative personal responsibility—protecting the land from theft and misuse, abuse and exploitation. Stewart has been entrusted as the caretaker of monitoring and determining the use and transmission of her familial knowledge and cultural property. She is a protector of land and knowledge, authority and authenticity.

## **6.11 Personal Narrative and Institutional Histories**

*Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, is an action in the preservation of ancestral history and the perpetuation of memories belonging to Spaxomin (Douglas Lake), Syilx (Okanagan) territory (British Columbia, Canada)—the land of Stewart's family home territory, the Upper Nicola Band

of the Okanagan Nation. The performance pushes against the terms and conditions of archival subjugation, suppression, and hegemony in an act of self-determination and independence from state sanctioned inequalities. As with the condition of the archive, the narrative of *Potato Gardens Band*, 1918-2018, never closes. It continues to shift and change. It does not wrap up neatly into a box, bucket, or book. It takes time and labour. It cannot be rushed. It is a long-term commitment pointing to what is missing from our archives, history books, and museums, the ownership of archival sites, land, knowledge, keepers, custodial effect, and discursive structures which confront the long-lasting historical atrocities in an exploration of reimagining the future of what constitutes an archive and, in turn its nations.

I will close in return to, and repetition of, Thomas King's apt end to each of his chapters,

Take this story,

It's yours. Do what you will. Make it the topic of a discussion group at a scholarly conference. Put it on the Web. Forget it. But don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story.

You've heard it now.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Thomas King. *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative*. House of Anansi Press Inc. 2003. (p29, 60, 89, 119, 167)

## Chapter 7: Conclusion

### 7.1 Reenact, Resurrect, Reassert

The ability of Bowen, Kalmenson, Mehra, Stewart and Wei to straddle the topography of art, document, memory, and archive gives precedence to their artworks which rise to retrieve alternate histories, forms of existence, incommensurable modes of constructing subjectivity, and social relations.<sup>85</sup> These artists aesthetically enact memory without contributing to an acceleration of the fetishization of race, ethnicity, religion, and/or culture. They tightly skirt the spectacle of such fetishization commonly associated with 20<sup>th</sup> century artworks engaging with the archive. The works of Bowen, Kalmenson, Mehra, Stewart, and Wei impart visibility to the classes and people, spaces and sites, where history has remained nameless and without image, not only for themselves as individuals, but for their family and fellow comrades. The artwork as representation in these artists' works leads to an initiating constitution of historical identity. In antagonism to past values and privileges, *sum of the parts* artists reenact, resurrect, and reassert the vanishing basis of cultural legitimation defining global societies.<sup>86</sup>

### 7.2 Art and the Archive

Through an extended process of interpretation, the works of Deanna Bowen, Felix Kalmenson, Divya Mehra, Krista Belle Stewart and Casey Wei reassert the status of the document by interrogating the potential of archival accumulation, subjective aggregation, and the

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<sup>85</sup> I owe this tremendously important language on the social, political, and economic correlations to formalism and historicity to Benjamin H. D. Buchloh from *Formalism and Historicity: Models and Methods in Twentieth-Century Art*. The MIT Press, 2015. (p xl-xli)

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

conditions of extended narrative circulation. Both autonomously and collectively, the works call a rereading to the status of the document as artwork and artwork as document, and its relationship to the archive. The formal and historic methods within each work challenge the facticity of the document while contending with the problematized status of fiction and memory. Within these terms, the dialectic of the fact, with reference to the historic economy and evidentiary promises of the archive, is further confronted. The works are not only archival in their citation of the document and archive but also in their production of the artwork as document, and furthermore, the artwork as historic record. Bowen, Kalmenson, Mehra, Stewart, and Wei offer a poetic analysis of the status of the document which expands a depth of field to include not only visual archives and material reference but also immaterial familial records. The hierarchy between such records is not reversed but straddled in a see-saw or reciprocal back and forth. As I have discussed throughout this paper, the problem of historical contradiction with memory, the document and the archive are deeply considered in these artists' works. They mark a tremendously important ongoing transition in artistic practices that stand to represent a historically unique shift, whereby artwork skirts the position of historicized document.

### **7.3 sum of the parts**

Through their autonomous works, Bowen, Kalmenson, Mehra, Stewart, and Wei independently perform a rereading of the status of the document by tracing its trajectory from the discourse of empirical facticity to a more complex dimension of mnemonic production. This rereading considers the document and memory as resources available for extraction and activation. It brings to bear the double negation of the archive whereby its internal contradictions serve as a reminder that action is required in order to reinscribe history. In response to this

contradiction, Bowen, Kalmenson, Mehra, Stewart, and Wei consider the immaterial and often invisible subjective quantum of memory and mnemonic production involved in their activation of the archive. Rather than visually reaffirm historical reflections, Bowen, Kalmenson, Mehra, Stewart, and Wei radically forefront a concern with the mediation of histories and contemporary narratives by political, institutional, and corporate bodies, and how these communications serve to redefine publicness, sovereignty, and power. The artworks of Bowen, Kalmenson, Mehra, Stewart, and Wei address the archive as open to ongoing negotiations of resources, contexts, publics, and institutions. Their precise and meaningful interrogation of archival materials, structures and systems operate in citation of historic colonial erasure and foreground the relationship of identity within and beyond the traditional confines of archival address. These artists advantageously deploy the document as subject and witness, with tremendous attention to the deficits of such deployments and to the slippage of empirical facticity. By way of action, they reinscribe the body within the archive, imparting visibility to alternate versions of the document and, in turn, history. This visibility challenges prevailing notions of art and the archive and the status of the document, opening new possibilities by rendering historical what has hitherto been hidden from history. The histories presented by these artists of the 21<sup>st</sup> century not only multiply stories but also subjects and insist that such histories are written from fundamentally different—indeed irreconcilable—perspectives, standpoints, or documents, a sum of the parts.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> I owe this tremendously concise language on the crisis of history and historiography to Joan W. Scott from “The Evidence of Experience.” *Critical Inquiry*. Vol. 17 No. 4 (Summer) The University of Chicago Press, 1991. p 773-797. (p776)

## Figures

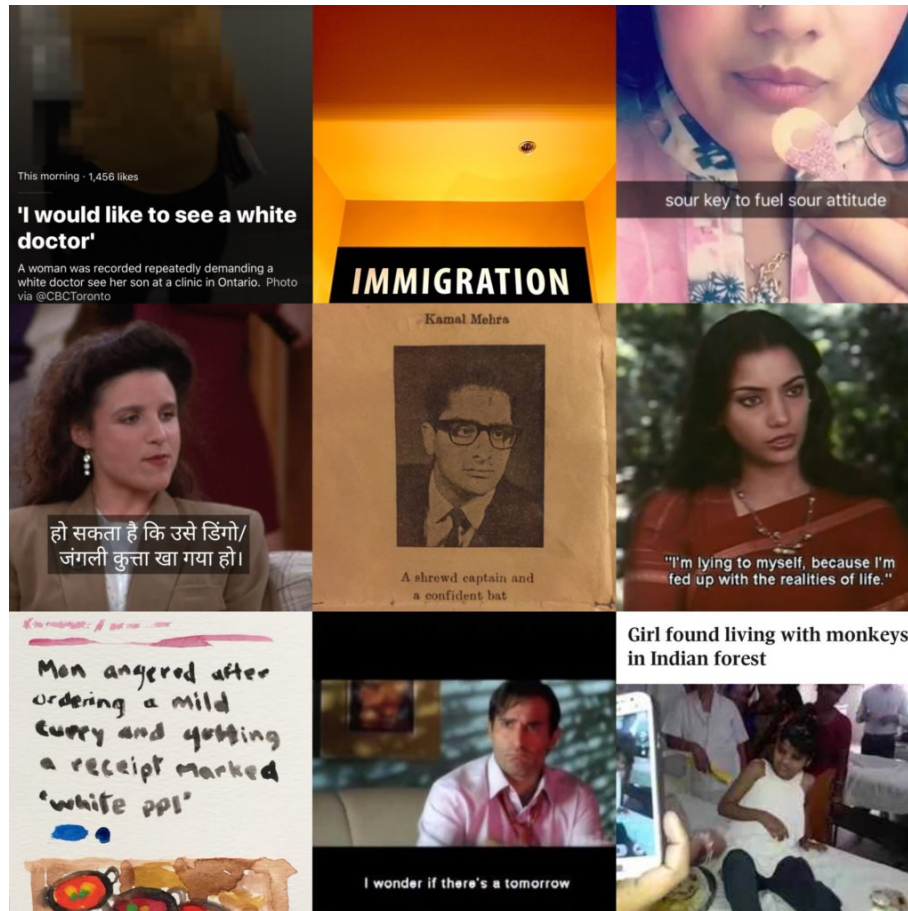


Figure 1 DIFFICULT PEOPLE, 2018, promotional image courtesy of the artist, Divya Mehra





Figure 3 Video still from Deanna Bowen's 'sum of the parts: what can be named', 2010, 18 mins. Colour with sound, HD. Courtesy of the artist.





**Figure 4** Video still from Deanna Bowen's 'sum of the parts: what can be named', 2010, 18 mins. Colour with sound, HD. Courtesy of the artist.



**Figure 5 Photograph from Deanna Bowen's website. Deanna Bowen. (2018). Deanna Bowen – deanna [at] deannabowen.ca. [online] DeannaBowen.ca. Available at: <http://www.deannabowen.ca/> [Accessed 6 Jul. 2018].**



**Figure 6** Still from Casey Wei's 'Vater und Sohn/Father and Son/父与子', 2014, 75 mins. Colour with sound, HD. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 7 Still from Casey Wei's 'Vater und Sohn/Father and Son/父与子', 2014, 75 mins. Colour with sound, HD. Courtesy of the artist.





**Figure 8** Still from Casey Wei's 'Murky Colors', 2013, 47 mins. Colour with sound, HD. Courtesy of the artist.



**Figure 9** Still from Casey Wei's 'Murky Colors', 2013, 47 mins. Colour with sound, HD. Courtesy of the artist.





**Figure 10 'Potato Gardens Band', 1918-2018, promotional image courtesy of the artist, Krista Belle Stewart.**

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