

FORUM: *let's begin*

9 February 2022, 2PM EST

Speakers: Sebastian De Line, Michelle Jacques, Yaniya Lee, Jocelyn Piirainen, Nasrin Himada, Julia Paoli

Host: Mercer Union, a centre for contemporary art

Live captioning by Marina Fathalla

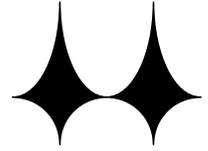
Transcript by Beatrice Douaihy

For more information visit: <https://www.mercerunion.org/events/forum-sebastian-de-line-michelle-jacques-yaniya-lee-and-jocelyn-piirainen/>

Introduction

JULIA PAOLI: Hello everyone and welcome, thank you for joining us this afternoon. My name is Julia Paoli and I am the Director & Curator at Mercer Union. I am welcoming you today from what is known as Toronto. The land I am speaking on has been a site for human activity for 15,000 years and is the traditional territory of many nations including the Huron-Wendat, Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabe, and the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. Today, the meeting place of Toronto is home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island. As a white settler, I acknowledge my responsibility to work actively in support of Indigenous sovereignty, to recognize colonial histories and to redress their present-day manifestations. My acknowledgment today is a small part of disrupting and dismantling colonial structures. It is both a recognition that settler colonialism is ongoing and a commitment to support the capacity of art and art institutions to unsettle these conditions. Given that this is a virtual event, I ask that you take the time to acknowledge the rightful stewards of the land in which you are situated today.

I'd like to welcome you to today's program titled *let's begin*, which we are live captioning. Today's event is the final in a series of talks that have been organized and curated by Nasrin Himada. Nasrin is a Palestinian writer and curator currently based in Kingston Ontario, on Anishnaabe and Haudenosaunee Territory. Their writing on contemporary art has appeared in many national contemporary art publications, including *Canadian Art*, *C Magazine*, *MICE*,



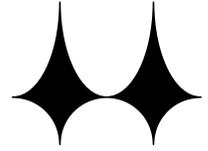
and Fuse. They have collaborated with film festivals and art institutions in Canada and the US, among them the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art in San Francisco; Trinity Square Video in Toronto; the Leonard and Bina Art Gallery and the Phi Foundation, both in Montréal. Nasrin's recent project *For Many Returns* typifies their current curatorial interests. The series is designed as a way to explore the possibilities of art writing as a relational act. Since its debut in Montréal, it has toured across Canada, the US and Europe. From 2019 to 2021, Nasrin held the position of curator at Plug In Institute of Contemporary Art in Winnipeg on Treaty One Territory. Currently, they hold the position of Associate Curator at Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston.

Mercer Union invited Nasrin to lead a response that extends on the themes found in our current exhibition by Onyeka Igwe entitled *THE REAL STORY IS WHAT'S IN THAT ROOM*. The exhibition is open to the public and on view until February 26.

I'd like to take a moment to thank our supporters who make our programming possible. Thank you to TD Bank Group for their generous support of Mercer Union's Online Engagement activities. Onyeka Igwe's exhibition is made possible with Leading Support from the Nuyten Dime Foundation, and with support from the Canada Council for the Arts through the Foreign Artist Tours Program. We are grateful to our exhibition partners, British Council and Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival, as well as to Panasonic through their partnership program for cultural institutes.

I am so thrilled to welcome Nasrin to Mercer Union, it has been a pleasure and a privilege to work with them on this series over the last year. Nasrin was instrumental in the commissioning of Onyeka's new work and bringing this project to Canada; we've been so fortunate to have Nasrin's insights guiding a response to the show. Please join me in welcoming Nasrin who will introduce today's speakers and share some details on the structure for this event. Thank you.

NASRIN HIMADA: Wow thank you so much Julia. Yeah this is the last event, all of a sudden I'm feeling a bit emotional. It's so nice to have a serial program to see where it goes. Good afternoon, everyone, and good evening, Yaniya, who's joining us from Berlin. Thank you all for attending the last event of *let it matter what we call a thing*, and thank you so much for the speakers who are here with us and for accepting this invitation. I also want to thank all the staff at Mercer, Aamna, Julia, Sonya and Beatrice. Such an extraordinary team of people that I have had the pleasure to work with over the last few months. *let's begin*, which as I

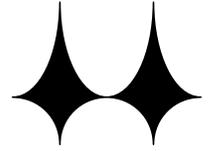


just mentioned, is the third iteration of this program, which extends on the themes of Onyeka Igwe's exhibition, *THE REAL STORY IS WHAT'S IN THAT ROOM*.

As guest curator of fORUM, I have invited artists, writers, curators, to consider Onyeka's propositions. In her film *a so-called archive*, which is a major feature of the exhibition at Mercer. The film explores the material and affective traces of archival architectures, and I think this is key to the aesthetic considerations being taken up in the film: these architectures tend to the unrecorded, the catalogued, and yet-to-be uncovered stories of these sites, conjuring their many hauntings to render a study of the pages, film reels, rooms in which these are held in, the structures that contain them, and that are still occupied by the shadows of empire.

I was really interested in thinking about the archive as image, or by taking up what compels us toward the archive, how do images emerge and in that sense, I think Onyeka's film, along with a lot of the speakers featured in this program, the way the archive is constituted through images troubles the ways in which memory is kept, both as record and as possession, and troubles the bearing that this has on how we tell our stories, and how we conjure our lost and disappeared histories. The way archives have been constituted also troubles the ways in which language has been applied to further the operation of colonial narratives. The archive, for some of us, is signified by loss, destruction, decay, or theft—its contents taken, disappeared, stolen, never to be seen again.

When I was writing this intro, I was thinking about my obsession with the disappeared archive of the Palestine Film Unit, which contained over thousands of reels of film made by Palestinian filmmakers based out of Lebanon and Jordan and elsewhere, who were documenting the formation of the 60s and 70s liberation movements coming out of the refugee camps. These films also contained stories of the people living through this experience and were culturally significant. Because of the wars during that time, especially in Lebanon, the archive was moved to different underground locations to keep it safe. But on one of these relocations, during the Israeli occupation of Lebanon, this archive completely disappeared. Remnants of it were found years later, one film was found in Italy and was restored, I think there were some found in Leipzig Germany, but most of it was just gone. And in thinking about this I wasn't so hung up on what those thousands of disappeared reels contained, but as someone who is from the diaspora and the generations who come after us, I think what is most important to think about is that we are left with this story, so what do we do with it. So, in thinking about archives, as they manifest in our

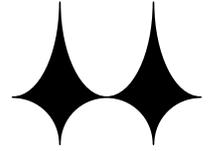


imagining, and in some way become about a search for other worlds, other formations, the speakers who have been invited today make it so that the archive never disappears, is never lost, and that is always in the making. Here, archival formations do not adhere to linear time, here, they are constellations bound to the love we have for our people, our stories, and our lands. Together we give language to this process, new languages emerge that inform us of these connections how they might have been felt or remembered. The visions and the impulses that drive some of us towards this search, and those that compel us with this obsession conditions a sort of collective engagement.

In this program, which is titled, *let's begin*, we delve into the conundrums of museum collections and sanctioned archives rooted in colonial histories, with guidance from Sebastian De Line, Michelle Jacques, Yaniya Lee, and Jocelyn Piirainen. *let's begin*: as in, how do we begin the work once we enter the collections and archives that house histories and legacies inherently connected to dispossession and violence? How do we then change the story, and as Michelle offers, give space to new interpretations, and “expand access?” *let's begin* is an invitation to begin again and again, until everything is changed, and then it changes again.

Before I introduce the speakers, I want to quickly talk about the title of this FORUM itself, which is *let it matter what we call a thing*. This is a direct line from the poem by Solmaz Sharif called “Look.” *Look* is also the title of the poetry book, in which most of the poems include rewritings of terms from the US Department of Defense dictionary. “Look” is a word they use in mine warfare to define: a period in which a mine circuit is receptive of influence. In *Look*, Solmaz undoes these definitions of violence. The way she thinks about language and the way she brings attention to its manipulation to serve a violent act, is undone, by catapulting the reader toward another vision of “look” that involves a kind of sacred intimacy: “Let it matter what we call a thing,” she writes, “Let it be the exquisite face for at least 16 seconds. Let me look at you. Let me look at you in a light that takes years to get here.” Solmaz’s poem reminds me of how poetry lets us be in the process of feeling how language, once changed, changes everything, which is so relevant to what we discussed last week and continue to discuss here today: the possibilities abound in the many forms of so-called archives.

Sebastian De Line is an artist, Associate Curator, Indigenous Care and Relations at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, and PhD candidate in Cultural Studies at Queen’s University. Their doctoral research focuses on the manufacturing of capitalist values and economies



that transform agential Indigenous and racialized Ancestors into labouring “objects” of extraction, accumulation and consumption determined by acquisition criteria within museum collections. Publications include the *Journal of Visual Culture and Junctures*. Sebastian I'm so proud to be your coworker and I'm so grateful you're here today.

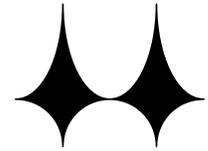
Michelle Jacques is a curator, writer and educator. She is the Head of Exhibitions and Collections/Chief Curator at Remai Modern, situated on Treaty 6 Territory and the Homeland of the Métis. She was the Chief Curator at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria in British Columbia for 8 years and has held curatorial positions in the contemporary and Canadian departments at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Michelle on a personal note you're my hero, I'm so grateful and honoured you're here with us today.

Yaniya Lee was a member of the editorial team at *Canadian Art* magazine from 2017–21 and joined the *Archives Books* publishing collective earlier this year. She has interviewed artists and written about art for museums, galleries and print publications locally and internationally. She was a founding collective member of *MICE Magazine* and is a member of the EMILIA-AMALIA working group. Lee has been a part of Mercer Union's Board of Directors since 2020. Yaniya thank you so much, you're my dearest friend and collaborator. I'm always in awe of everything you do. Thank you so much for being here.

Jocelyn Piirainen is Associate Curator of Inuit Art at the Winnipeg Art Gallery and Qaumajuq. A graduate from Carleton University, her educational background has primarily focused on the arts, particularly film and new media. When not working as a curator, her artistic practice primarily involves analog photography and film — mostly experimenting with Polaroids and Super 8 film — as well as honing her crochet and beading skills. She has contributed to publications such as *Canadian Art*, *Canadian Geographic* and the *Inuit Art Quarterly*. Jocelyn thank you for being here, i've been watching your work at the WAG for so long. Yaniya, I'll give it over to you.

Conversation

YANIYA LEE: I think we all step in now maybe, Michelle, Jocelyn, yes. Technology. It's really nice to be able to join. I've been getting to know some of your work better than before and it's exciting that we can talk together about the themes in Onyeka's exhibition, in particular the film, which I was able to dig into. For you all, I hope this is a loose conversation, Michelle,



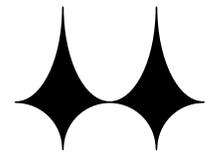
Jocelyn and Sebastian, you can speak back to each other and ask questions, and I'm just here to move it along if there are spaces or gaps. More or less, we are responding to the themes in Onyeka's exhibition, and the ideas that Nasrin laid out for us so beautifully. I do have some formal questions, and I'll try to make some less formal ones as we go along.

I wanted to start by talking about the film, *a so-called archive*, a 20-minute film which is in the exhibition. In it, Onyeka juxtaposes 2 different abandoned spaces: she uses footage from a colonial archive that she shot, and also museum. It was Lagos Colonial Film Unit, she went in person and took these slow moving images in what I think was film, and the other space is the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum, which was only open for a small window of years. She chose these two spaces and put them together, and I was really struck by the imagery of the film. It's dusty and creepy, especially the juxtaposition of the sound. I like the phrase "archive as ruin" to designate those spaces that was used by Canisia Lubrin in the exhibition text. It seemed to me that thinking of these spaces as ruin allows for a lot of possibilities. I wonder if you would share your first impressions of the film or the exhibition.

MICHELLE JACQUES: As you were talking about the archive as ruin, and talking about the archive and museum documented in the film, it was occurring to me that the three of us, Jocelyn, Sebastian and myself are all connected to museums that are – have recently or are in the process of expressing a drive to avoiding ruin, avoiding the natural decay of buildings. We're all in institutions that are participating in a kind of obsession with renewing and perfecting the spaces that hold the collections that the institutions are responsible for.

I actually recently came here from the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, which has not been able to jump onto that building renewal bandwagon. For 8 years I watched the building literally crumble around us. It wasn't until I connected that practical idea of what happens in the museum world in Canada and in other places with the film that I realized that there's a certain kind of natural beauty that is involved in the decay of a building that, for whatever reason, we're desperately trying to avoid facing in the museum sector. It's always rationalized by the collection. We need a better building to better care for the collection. So it's interesting how the building, the perfection of the building, saving an old building, relates directly to this desire to suspend the archive or the collection in time.

JOCELYN PIIRAINEN: I'm going to jump in here to go off on what Michelle is saying. Where I'm now working, which is the Winnipeg Art Gallery, and now Qaumajuq, the new Inuit art centre, that's exactly what we were trying to do as well in building this new home for

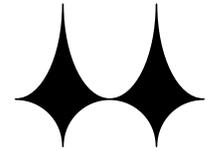


displaying our collection and also having better housing for our very large Inuit art collection. We're also trying to preserve this history and archive of artists' work of Inuit culture, even. So yeah, it's definitely an interesting position for me too, I'm sure I'll talk about that more throughout this. In response to your question about the film too, I found it really quite beautiful as well, but also haunting. It was really wonderful too to see all those analog decay in analog film reels and the wired microphones. Nowadays microphones are wireless, you see all these older technologies. I loved the overlay too of sound, echoing throughout the building too, it was really beautiful.

YANIYA: I don't know if you want to jump in Sebastian.

SEBASTIAN DE LINE: I'm not sure where to jump in. [Laughs] A few of your thoughts are sitting with me right now. I'll start with the film —when I first watched the film, while I did see the cycle of decay, I also focused on the life that was still living there and growing within that space, and I really appreciated the way in which the artist brought us into that stage of the cycle. I felt it was in a process of who is inhabiting that space at that time, that those ancestors that are connected to those reels and also those other nations that are living there. I think it was moss, and some other insect nations. Yeah, that place is still very much alive. I definitely hear what you are sharing, Michelle, about the institutions that all of us work in and propensity to want to— it ties in really well with the logic behind how Western ideas of objects and what that means from a Western perspective, oftentimes not being alive, being presumed, let's say, to not be alive. There's a whole kind of institutionalization around how to preserve and conserve the quote unquote object to keep their embodiment in a state of in perpetuity so they can be accessed for all time. It goes against natural laws in a lot of ways, it transforms in time and place and changes.

What I loved about the film too, how it started with this narrative that showed the way the institutions, the way that museums operate to hold certain stories throughout that construction of narrativizing museum tour, walking tour, the BBC-like, British narrator's voice, speaking on behalf of the empire, speaking our stories through the lens of empire, really drove it home for me. Those are the dynamics that tell a particular story that teaches us to see things as an object, which is really different than how I've come to learn, how I try to unlearn those things all the time. To extend that to the very institutions, and what it means to create a space, and continue that process in perpetuity. It's a weird paradox, working in that space is a weird paradox. I wonder how that is for all of y'all working in that space, in holding those paradoxes, or what your further thoughts are.



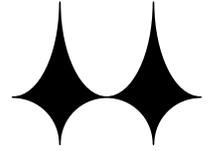
MICHELLE: Would you like us to respond to Sebastian's question, cause that's a great question.

YANIYA: Keep going. I have questions, but as long as you all are asking questions, it's good.

MICHELLE I think that question prompts me to think of something that came up when you and I were speaking in preparation, Yaniya, which is the kind of disconnect between the work you do as a curator through exhibitions and programming, and the collection building and maintenance work. I want to come back to a question specifically for Jocelyn, I think. I've always worked against the collections I'm caring for because I'm a Black curator who has always worked in colonial institutions, so I'm constantly caring for things I'm in a critical relationship with. It's occurred to me that I have to talk to Jocelyn, what it's like to care for a collection you care about.

To get back to Sebastian's question. I've always found a disconnect with the kind of work I can do in exhibitions and programming and you have to put aside some of your radicality to do this collections work, which is about maintaining objects that tell a narrative that is contrary to the stories that you're trying to tell through programming. It's a kind of multiple personality situation that I'm constantly dealing with. At a place like the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria where we had no money, the objects that we collected, they were still objects but maybe less connected to the market. It was easier to collect on the basis of the stories in the objects, which was a more comfortable place for me, it allowed me to imagine a way of building, connecting to a collection and drawing people into it, where everyone can bring their perspectives or worldviews to. There wasn't a singular narrative as when you are driven by what the art world tells you is worthy of being collected.

YANIYA: One question that came up for me while thinking of these ruins was the function of archives. What do they do for us? What would happen if they didn't exist? I also began to imagine what different forms archives and collections might take. In the film, how it's presented, it is this space that's haunted, and we can look at as the ongoing existence of many different histories that are held in those spaces, documents, objects, that were then squeezed into that place with the imperative of preservation that we were talking about. But I think archives can take shape in many different ways. They don't always have to be material, or housed in state-of-the-art, climate-controlled building. I wonder if you could talk



to this idea: is it possible that archives can be held outside of institutions? Maybe you think it's not possible.

JOCELYN: It's interesting for Inuit communities that there aren't very many museums or galleries in the north, really there are very few, maybe a handful or so. So I feel that it's sort of up to the community itself then to preserve the community's own history. For Inuit too, traditionally, a lot of stories –storytelling is obviously very oral, so oral history then is an incredibly important aspect to our history and culture, so a lot of the written and visual archives then, where do people house it?

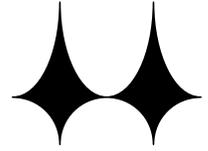
YANIYA: It doesn't have the same requirements, maybe. If these histories are being held in stories, they don't need a house, they need personal wellbeing, they need community.

JOCELYN: To then come and work in such places as WAG and Qaumajuq, it does take that kind of readjusting of thinking and ways of doing where archival history and the information about these objects are always written down, there's always documentation on all the pieces we have. It's a different environment that's for sure.

YANIYA: A few of you have talk about this, but I wonder if you can talk about the role of working in the space and I guess having allegiance to a different mandate. How are you careful to take care of yourself, or of being in the middle between these two different imperatives? Those institutions were built with a certain idea in mind of what those objects that they held should do, and you're coming in, each of you practice in a different way, trying to challenge or brush up against these traditional mandates. So how do you occupy that position?

JOCELYN: Coming in as a curator, an Inuk curator as well, to look after our collection, there was a lot of pressure to get a lot of the histories of these pieces right, to be telling the right stories and to also make sure that Inuit voices are heard correctly. It's a lot of pressure. I've only been working in Winnipeg going on 3 years now. I still feel new to this, and learning, and getting feedback from other Inuit. It's definitely–I'm always in consultation with the Inuit community on many different things, while I'm working on an exhibition, or doing research, it always goes back to the community.

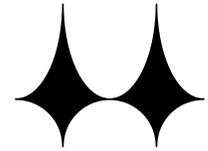
SEBASTIAN: I've also only been at the Agnes for three years. What I can contribute to that place has changed and is still evolving over time. When I first came I was asked to primarily



be a researcher. I remember when I was asked to work there as a researcher, I thought, well, I don't know how I feel about contributing to research for the benefit of a university museum. So part of it came from a conversation I had with my bosses, and I said, when I talked to my supervisor Dylan Robinson, people I trusted in my community, I said I don't know how I feel about this, what's being offered, coming in my life at this moment. I think right now the way I try to see my role, and always will be, is as a helper.

When I came into the institution, I placed it to them, it was important to my community here in Kingston, on Haudenosaunee and Anishinabeg territory that they are committed to repatriating and repatriating ancestries, medicines, some of the who lives in that collection that's come to the university since the late 19th century. I said if you're committed to starting that process, I'm committed to learning how to do that, and how to support you and asking the community and my elders that carry that knowledge and know how to do that well. I'll be a helper and a bridge for the communities, trying to bring all of us in the room together. Jocelyn, as you were sharing, I always go to my community to guide that process in a good way, cause I'm just a learner in it. I often struggle with the ways in which institutions kind of are constructed in a way that ask us to be experts on things, and there's a way that they want to make things into policy and become one universalized way. It's been an interesting ongoing conversation to remind the institution how there is no one way. The Agnes have many different communities whose ancestors live in the collections. I'm responsible as a helper to many different communities beyond my own. And I'm a mixed race person. I'm also Asian, and Mohawk, and I can only do so much as a person.

Those are reminders to me that it is really about being in relation, that's important. Museums sometimes forget, and I feel there's a fear with repatriation and repatriation, and I'm curious about what you all have thoughts about. Part of my thing that I think they are afraid of, sometimes people are afraid what happens when we send all the ancestors home, what's the function of the museum? I laugh sometimes, and I think hello, we're still alive, were still here, why not relate to our generation living now, and ask us what do we want to do in the museum, or what do we want to collaborate on together. It's part of the whole process, the returning of ancestors is part of the process that we build trust, and building relationships that are sincere with communities that are ongoing, long term, that go beyond all of us in this room, who will carry on that work and these commitments. That's how I feel about it in this moment.



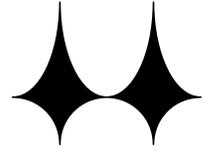
YANIYA: That question of trust, I wonder Michelle if you can speak to that. You have a big role in a big institution, surrounded by many different communities. How do you carry that and work towards creating trust?

MICHELLE: I've only been at Remai Modern for a year. When I arrived at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria in 2012, there were already lots of moves made towards forging meaningful relationships with local Indigenous communities, newcomer communities. We just spent time making friends. If you can find an institution based on that philosophy and practice, I think it's pretty easy. I think the institution needs to be small to commit to that kind of lack of bureaucracy. It was surprising when I came here and found out how much work had to be put into just making friends before we could really propose doing anything that would be useful or engaging or interesting to local Indigenous folks. So it is starting from scratch since coming here for me and really thinking through how to disrupt a larger bureaucracy in order to achieve that.

That said, the people inside this institution are so committed to moving in a good direction that a lot of steps forward have been made in just a year. But to get - to sort of tie this question into your previous question I was thinking about. I've been working in museums for more than 25 years and when I started at the AGO there was no assumption that I was going to do anything different than any of the white curators. I was a Black curator who was given a chance to work in the Western institution and I had to prove myself that I could understand the Group of Seven and abstract expressionism just as well as any of the other curators, and at the time I was grateful for that opportunity, so I put a lot of effort into proving myself. But that said, I always knew that I was always slightly outside the structure or narrative, that I was the outside and I kind of took that positionally as my motivation thinking through how to bring in other so-called outsiders.

Now 25 years later, I realize how valuable it is for me to have had that experience of working with a collection within a structure that I had that kind of critical relationship to, because now that there's a broader shared interest in decoloniality or questioning the systemic barriers of institutions. I feel like, oh that's what I was doing all these years, my career has come into focus two and a half decades later, when I started not knowing what I was doing or why I was doing it.

YANIYA: Thank you. I have another question for Jocelyn. Especially when you are starting and hearing from someone who has gone all the way, I wonder what you see for yourselves 5



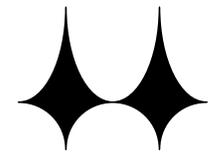
years from now, 10 years from now. Is this process of repatriation one that has an end. Do we get all our ancestors back to their home communities and then we're done, or do we invest in these institutions so that they continue in a different form?

JOCELYN: I think the future of institutions is changing, I think for the better. The change though is going to take time. As I also mentioned, I'm one of very few Inuit curators. I'm really hoping in the next 5 years, that changes, exponentially even. I'm hoping to get more Inuit curators into larger institutions to then look after the objects to basically do what I'm doing but then, along with that I'm hoping to see structural changes too to the institutions. It's not going to happen overnight but I am hoping we'll be in a different place in the next 5 to 10 years.

SEBASTIAN: I honestly don't know what it will look like in 5 years' time. As Michelle alluded to, probably the Agnes, maybe the building will look a lot different. That is actually going to really change how you orientate in that space, and that's a big part of the discussion. How to be intimate in those spaces, how to be intimate in different communities coming together. What I'm hoping in 5 years' time, we'll be able to have kitchen conversations, like what Jocelyn was talking about, where we have conversations. Maybe we can shake up a bit the names and words that hold them down because of the histories of how that has become: are they museums, or are they something else?

I forget word for word but I remember reading something from Derrida, he was writing about the etymology of the word archive, it was in the book *Archive Fever*. It comes from the word "archai", which has a long history in Roman registry bureaucracy, and from that position in the Roman Empire, that person who had authority to decide, categorize and collect. I would like to be hopeful and think that we can reshape the ways in which our beautiful teachings here, how we relate, we don't have to continually refer back to those histories as our starting point. It doesn't mean they go away, but I do believe that for me, being here, we have great teachings that our Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe talk about how we come together under the pine tree, teachings that my elders shared. If anyone wanted to follow those four routes across the earth, all four directions under the great tree of peace, the white pine tree, that everyone is sheltered under, that tree, everyone is sheltered under a great law, everyone's welcome. That's a big teaching we have here, and that's for everyone to share.

So even then the word archive, I'm kind of like, where does that fit in? There's a way we hold relations, to art, to what we learn, make and share, and from that what we pass on. It could

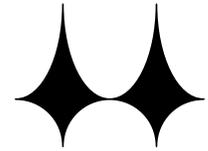


look very different, part of that is allowing the trust of relearning and learning those things and seeing what comes out of them rather than trying to always reform. It is not abolition that we sometimes talk about in institutions, it's reform. If we're trying to keep the institution and structure of what it is...that's what comes to mind.

YANIYA: I have a question that was asked by Aamna and I thought I would share. It's kind of departing from you are going somewhat. They are asking about embodied archives, what is the shape of embodied archives? One that makes place for and commits to preserving the energies and affective resonances of the objects. Meaning-making emerges from these layers that are at once part of and extra to the object itself.

MICHELLE: This might not answer, but might be a good place to talk about a project that my colleague Troy is working on with the artist, dancer taisha paggett, who is an African-American artist from California. She's been working on this series of projects where she goes to different historical black communities, and researches the histories and legacies of those communities, and creates a community-engaged project out of the research in partnership with people who are connected to those historical communities. She was recently in the fall in Saskatoon, and Troy, taisha and I went to a historic site called the Shiloh Baptist Church. The church is a community hub, a tiny one-room cabin, it was the community hub for Saskatchewan's first all-black community. These were folks that had in the early 20th century who came up from the south through Oklahoma, and settled in various parts of the Prairies. In Saskatchewan, the community was centred around the Shiloh church.

What was interesting to me, taisha's doing all kind of investigations, research, conversations to understand this history, but one of the things she was asking these people that she met through ancestry to the original folks who settled this community was, "do you see, do you recognize any movement or gesture that you think was passed down through generations from those original Shiloh people?" Something that I think about a lot is how when Africans were enslaved, they no longer had the means or time or tools to make objects, but they still had their bodies, so they made dance. I was going through some notes that Taisha has written about her project, and not only does she talk about investigating the legacies of these communities through thinking about what might seem to be throwaway gestures that people might not realize are inheritances, but she also talks about how Black dance practices are archived in the public arena because they are documented in popular film. That was an interesting revelation to me because I always think about movement as a way



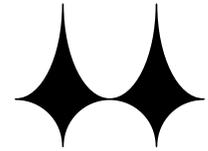
that enslaved people could maintain a connection to the ceremony of tribal life in Africa, but it had never occurred to me that with the evolution of that dance into popular dance that the place of that archive is actually popular film.

YANIYA: That's amazing and feels like such a great response to this idea of the embodied archive, how it might take shape out of necessity, and develop and grow over time. That's one example, and I'm sure there are different ways in which embodied archives have grown. Thanks for sharing that. We're nearing the end, but I'd like to hear from those of you who curate, to speak about the experience of curating, putting together an exhibition, and just some of the outcomes of that work. We've been talking about the collections and archives, and what's held there, but a lot of your practices are making informed decisions of what to put together and what to share. Maybe you can speak of exhibitions that you've made that brought you pleasure, allowed you to communicate, or challenged you, even.

JOCELYN: One of my current exhibitions right now at WAG is called *Inuk Style*. It focuses a lot on the more textiles and wearable pieces of art; it's mostly drawn from our collection but also the government of Nunavut's fine art collection that the WAG hosts, it's on long term loan to us. It looks at a lot of those parkas that have beautiful beadwork to it, as these objects of fine art and puts these wearable items, necklaces, jewelry, tools to make these pieces in the spotlight. I feel that much of what people think about when they think about Inuit art, is more stone carvings, or drawings, prints. The majority of Inuit art are those things, but what I really love about Inuit art is expanding that definition and including items such as textiles and beadwork more of these wearable pieces of art.

YANIYA: Sebastian or Michelle, do you want to talk about any specific experience of sharing artwork with a public?

MICHELLE: We just opened an exhibition here which is simply called *Canoe*. I had connected with some private collectors who collect Canadian historical and contemporary art that includes canoes in it. So a lot of the work is by big names of Canadian historical art history like Francis Anne Hopkins, Lucus O'Brien, Cornelius Krieghoff, all of the folks who were painting in the 19th century, images of voyagers and fur traders, taken through the Canadian wilderness in canoes by Indigenous guides. Somehow the exhibition unfolded so organically, I had it in my head that we would include actual canoes by Indigenous canoemakers or artists. Not only were we able to do that, but I found out that I have a colleague who works in Learning and Engagement department who is an Indigenous

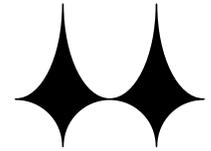


program guide, whose grandfather or great-grandfather was a guide. So not only was she able to tie in these beautiful family narratives, now the exhibition includes the moccasins that her ancestor wore when he was a guide.

What could have started out as an art historical overview of a moment and genre in Canadian art, became something much more inflected with lots of points of entry. Kelly, whose grandfather was the guide, and my other colleague Lyndon, who is the Indigenous Relations Advisor here, really contributed to creating a much richer exhibition by contributing stories and relationships to the way the exhibition is constructed. Ultimately, we decided that we were a curatorial team, and that they weren't educators supporting my curating of the Canadian art historical objects. It was a moment of real clarity for me to see how their stories are as much a part of the exhibition that we made as the objects on the walls.

YANIYA: It makes me so giddy and excited, it feels like it's coming together. We're tying things back, talking about how to work in these institutions, can we make changes, can we reform. The question of creating relationships, listening to different people, I feel like you shifted the methodology for presenting artworks. It involves listening, bringing in other stories, paralleling this consultation with community, always checking in with other people. Those practices, those new ways of relating to an institution, are maybe the key to shifting our institutions so that they become places that feel hospitable to us, to the objects, those artefacts and ancestors that hold our stories and art histories.

SEBASTIAN: I did think of something when I was listening to y'all. One of my favourite works that I appreciate, came out of the *Soundings* exhibition at the Agnes that was curated by Candice Hopkins and Dylan Robinson. There's this work by Tania Willard, she created for our sacred fire, this fire bowl, there's many processes, and she will say it better, but I'll share how I interpret it. She gifted cedar from her territory, for people to sit on with the fire bowl. She also had engraved around it some beadwork around it, from a piece that's in the collection at the Agnes. As well her own process of chopping wood in her territory, she created this beautiful print from a chord of wood, and that became a score which then was played by musicians to voice, to bring a sound to that piece—all these different layers. What I come back to in that work, one of the things at the end of the exhibition, she gifted that work to Four Directions, the Indigenous Student Centre at Queens. A lot of other artists from *Soundings* came, and we carried as a procession her work to the Student Centre. They had gifted it there for ceremony, so it's actually in the backyard, we have a tipi there in the Student Centre. I think it's quite fitting, how her gift is also a great example of an archive. I



want to refrain, moving away from that word. That's maybe an example of a beyond, where that ancestor has a life within that community outside, literally outside the institution. It's really nourishing us, and supporting our ceremony and inspiring young people to make art. It's pretty cool, one that sticks with me a lot.

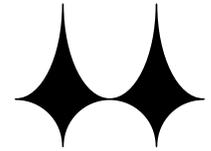
YANIYA: Thank you so much, all of you, Michelle, Sebastian and Jocelyn, for sharing your experience and wisdom.

NASRIN: Thank you all so much. I'm moved to tears almost, for real, because of how much I've learned today. Listening to you has been inspiring and validating. We do have a question from Wanda Nanibush, she's with us today, which I'm just so excited about. I don't know Sebastian if we'll get away from the word archive yet. But I'll read wanda's question: "Thinking through archive fever because our cultures and artistic practices are part of the west now -conceptually in so many ways. We also have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return. What do you all see as some of the pitfalls of archive in this sense? The seeking of our erased histories, our origins - and futures possible through this same archive fever."

JOCELYN: I'm still just trying to figure out an answer, it's a big question to think about. I think that's also what Michelle and Sebastian are also trying to figure out too. I'm not sure.

SEBASTIAN: I think we've been talking a lot about the challenges. We started in a conversation, what I remember hearing is about the unknowing and the challenges of unknowing...sometimes I feel like maybe connecting to something, and we don't want to let it go because they still have things to teach us. When we're holding something that our ancestors made, we might not always know what exactly that is, we might not know all those things that we can learn from it by spending time with it, we learn new things over time. It can be painful and hard to let go of when we can't always know everything, and when we long to know more. Sometimes the obsession of learning more, I wonder on a deeper, emotional level, is that about wanting to connect? It's sort of misguided, the way it's projected on the consumption of knowledge but really it's about connecting and feeling rootedness.

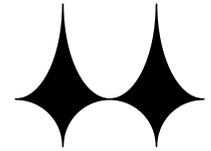
Maybe that's why it's so painful then, when we're faced with the decay of things, because it's hard to let go of something that you don't fully know what it was that you were connected to.



That's one of the things that comes up with that, the archive fever. I think part of it is a hunger that somehow needs to be done differently. There's a way in which Dylan talks about people. He said the stalwart, for settlers, the people who came hungry. I feel like with the archive fever, that hunger, it's an empty belly, how do we change that? Cause to continually feed that is not healthy. I feel like there's different ways that we're being asked to relate from a place that is healthier. I don't know those, I have to turn to my elders for that, how we're supposed to live better together. But that's what I think about with archives: a hoarding hunger to save and preserve those things, because it's hard to let go, and that's part of the grieving process.

MICHELLE: I had been telling Yaniya about visiting the National Archives in Grenada in the Caribbean, where my father is from. Grenada is pretty close to the equator, it's hot and humid, and the archives are held in this old building with no air conditioning, so the windows are always open, and they try to get fans going to move the air around. It's a place that feels like everything will be overtaken by something verdant at any minute. There were even plants in the gallery spaces, I don't know why. That's like a weird anecdote to preface saying that it's almost impossible for me to connect to a certain part of my origins in that mom and pop shop version of an archive. It's impossible for me to find a trace of my African ancestors, I don't know who they are. On the other hand, it's easy for me to find information about the colonizers who—trying to decide what language to use—procreated with my African ancestors. In terms of how archives can continue to do violence, that's what this question makes me think of. They block me from one of my origin stories and reinforce the one that is connected to empire. Maybe I'll stop there cause I'm depressing myself. [Laughs]

NASRIN: It's making me think a lot about the word provenance and its use in a museum, which I have such a hard time with. It's such a colonial concept and word that it's only fitting for objects that can be traced. This is a real issue in terms of other histories, in the ways we're not able to find a pathway to a kind of origin in the same way as say these other things. I think from just Wanda's comment. I know Wanda and I have talked about this before too, for anything that comes up. Just recently there was a huge archive of Palestinian music that was found, that the *Guardian* even wrote about. There are all these remnants some of us try to hold onto to figure out what our culture was like, where we come from, to just put it as simple as that. This is the archive fever that I think about more, the ways in which through the work we are all doing and how we care for artists and who we work with, are also creating another pathway of figuring out how it is that we are as beings in a



collective manner. There are no other questions and I don't know if you have any other questions for each other or comments or any other thoughts that you want to share.

JOCELYN: Just wanted to say thank you to Sebastian and Michelle for sharing with everybody your experiences. Thank you to Yaniya and Nasrin as well for inviting us for this discussion, it was great.

MICHELLE: It was great. I echo Jocelyn's thanks to my co-panelists, and also Nasrin, that was the most beautiful introduction, thank you for that. Yaniya is always amazing to talk to. It's been a fantastic conversation, thank you.

SEBASTIAN: I'll echo my thanks as well for this beautiful conversation. Nasrin, when you were sharing the intro, I thought, this is going to be good. I felt that yesterday when I met you briefly. I'm grateful for having met you all and having this moment together.

NASRIN: I hope it continues. My goal, and this is what I've said after each of the programs, that somehow there will be a reiteration in real life, in person, in the very soon future. Thank you so much, thank you for making time, thank you all of you for attending, thank you Wanda for your question, thank you Yaniya for your incredible moderation, and thank you Mercer Union for this incredible platform that you brought us all into. Have a really good afternoon or evening, see you all soon.