HERE I STAND, STILL GUARDED

By Melissa Johns

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"Our ancestors have never not imagined us."
Peter Morin

ABSTRACT

This research project explores Indigenous dispossession and cultural hybridity through an immersive and evocative mode, using digital facsimiles of material biography as vessels of meaning. Under the mixed frameworks of Indigenous theory, hauntology, diasporic theory, autoethnography, and material culture theory, family possessions are assessed as cultural artifacts, highlighting the lived experiences of French-Canadians and Kanien:ke'ha:ka diaspora in temporal and geographical overlap. Key objectives for this research project are the virtual translation of physical belongings as a means of storytelling and experimental archival, challenging official narratives of Canadian culture.

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A LEGEND OF SORTS

(Not the kind where the bear loses its tail or the chipmunk gets its stripes)

We are here, together, at the beginning of a story.

I am the one who will guide you through this telling, but I admittedly feel at odds with myself as I

write this. In academic settings I am used to formal composition: third-person, analytical,

detached. It's clinical, writing with the intention of obscuring and erasing the self; communicating

authority through manufactured neutrality. This carefully crafted tone runs completely counter to

the way I speak around family members, does not capture the

energy or *inflection*

or the way my accent

creeps into my voice when I really get going

(So he just shoves this thing back into his mouth, right,

n' I guess it like, *worked*, but

when he went to grab his other tooth he couldn't *find it*

'cuz someone had fukken–*pocketed it off the pavement*)

And then there's

yet another voice that's

dangling and

fragmented

lingering in the betweens

to make space for the soul.

But this is for them, isn't it? For my family, my relations—past and present and future. For Indigenous minds who have and will continue to claw their way into white institutions. For those who strive to find themselves through their hands and hearts.

And so I find myself slipping into these different tones, all of which are me: artist and academic and cousin.

Moving forward, you will find longer passages of academic text in this typeface, elucidating my methodology and relationships with larger theoretical frameworks;

But there are also chunks of this text that have been written informally (Hi Mom!), which are meant to make this research accessible to the folks who helped bring it to life in the first place.

And,

never far

the voice which

Processes through the pauses

And invites you

to do the same.

(LAND) ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

She:kon sewakwekon, Mel iónkia'ts.

Wakanien'kéhaka wakeniáhten.

Tsi Tkaronto nitiwaké:non.

Rake'níha, Tsi Fort Erie nithawé:nonh.

Ake'nihsténha, Tsi Chapleau nityakawé:nonh.

Land Acknowledgements, real ones, are meant to be spoken aloud and from the heart. While I have had the opportunity to practice the Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwen[1] with community, I have not been able to commit it to heart yet. Beyond the disconnect of oral and written word, there are further considerations for conducting ceremony in this new online world of asynchronous format. The Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwen is, in practice, a call-and-response citing gratitude for each natural force that has shaped our lives. Greetings and thanks are always punctuated by the statement:

Éhtho niiohtónha'k ne onkwa'nikón:ra

which translates to "and now our minds are one."

There is a marked time and distance between me writing these words and you reading them. It is therefore my intention to describe and acknowledge my relationship to the land I reside upon and its enduring power, and to entrust you with the responsibility of reflecting on yours.

My name is Melissa Johns – Mel for short, once we're friends. I am from a mixed *Kanien'kehá:ka* (Mohawk, Turtle Clan) and French Canadian background. Both sides of the family are large, with very

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[1] Literally "Words before all else," also known as the Thanksgiving Address.

different roots: devoutly Catholic French-Canadians and diasporic Mohawks living in the wake of the nation's Residential school system.

My mother's family immigrated from France in the 1600s, moving from the East Coast through to Quebec, and eventually settling into northern Ontario. Their ancestral migration was an escape from colonial deportation, part of the larger Acadian expulsion.[2] Mom was the sixteenth of seventeen children, with Grampa Donat Babin working for the railway and Gramma Veronica Babin wrangling kids and working half the odd jobs in town.

Chapleau

Treaty 9 territory

Wild blueberries everywhere and

kids wearing Halloween costumes over their snowsuits

My father's family has always been here, moving freely between Ohsweken, Buffalo, and Fort Erie over the last century. Great Grampa Gowandehsonh was born in Ohsweken, and while he survived his time in the Mush Hole,[3] the damage was lasting. While Gowandehson would go on to become an Indigenous activist and act as a Chief, he stayed reticent on his experiences in Brantford (and in a strange twist, converted to a Seventh Day Adventist later in life). His son—my Grampa Dave Johns—left the rez at sixteen to find work, and shared very little traditional knowledge with his children. My Dad, the second of eight kids, grew up with a very limited connection to ceremony and culture. He very narrowly avoided the Sixties Scoop, taken across the border to evade Canada's child

[2] *Le Grand Dérangement*, or The Great Upheaval was a systematic removal of Acadians from their maritime colony from 1756-1763 (Musée Acadien, 2019). The Babins moved to Gaspésie, then continued inland. It is not coincidental that there is a Bonaventure Babin in my family tree.

[3] The Mush Hole, formally known as the Mohawk Institute Residential School in Brantford, Ontario, which ran from 1829-1970 and acted as the seminal model for the Canada's Residential School System (Fricker, 2019). The Mush Hole was specifically known for its food, or lack thereof.

welfare services. Some of my relatives are ashamed to be Native. More have no idea what it really means beyond the laminated status card, and joke openly about being apples: red on the outside, white on the inside.

Ohsweken

Treaty 4 territory along the Haldimand Tract

home to the Haudenosaunee, the Six Nations of the Grand River,

the *Onkwehonwe*

Fort Erie

Treaty 381 territory

The fields and the beach and the border

daring your lover to jump off the Coal Docks

Both of my parents grew up in poverty, leaving home to pursue their careers. They met in Toronto where I was born, and always seem to return to.

Tkaronto

Treaty 13 territory

The place where the trees stand in the water

Darkness along the lakeshore, glimmers from the city's restless breathing

I spent a great deal of my life knowing that I was Native, but not understanding anything beyond the label's surface. Being white-passing didn't help[4]: I yearned to be a part of my culture, but felt like and feared being an outsider. I'd walk home from powwows in tears. I used art as a means to research and

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[4] Grampa and I took a polaroid with the flash on, and he asked me "Honey, why do you look so white?" I told him I asked myself that all the time. This is common in my family: siblings tend to be born lily white, followed by deep brown. We are eggs in mixed cartons.

safely explore my identity in solitude before feeling strong enough to reach outside of myself. It is in Tkaronto that I have met and merged with urban and pan-Indigenous communities who have supported me in my own cultural journey. I would like to acknowledge and extend my deepest gratitude to all who have helped me reach this point:

Niawen'kó:wa.

It is my hope to hold and share the knowledge, connections, and ceremonies I have been gifted,

to invite my family to walk this path with me.

Just as I am now inviting you.

Wa'kerihwa'ne:ke akwe:kon akotehia:ron naho:ten enkientho.

INTRODUCTION

"The strange and the familiar have manifested themselves in the landscape we have chosen to

visit together."[5]

As an evocative format, this body of work seeks to use digital facsimiles as vessels of meaning,

transforming them into mnemonic triggers of memory and being. It is heavily process-based, an

undertaking of translation, preservation, and archival through making. Using virtual reality as a medium,

the culminating installation is an immersive digital experience with dual functionality: digital preservation

of family history through living archival, and critical interrogation of both nostalgia and cultural identity.

It seeks to challenge hegemonic and official[6] narratives of culture, facilitating activation of

viewers' existent relationships to "Canadian" identity.

I am submitting this knowledge production as an exhibition accompanied by a digital catalogue,

written thesis, and documentation of a private audio archive. While it exists in a suitable format for

academia, this project exists for and because of those touched by displacement and loss. There

is a beauty in the spaces we have carved out for ourselves, our longing for what might have

been, and our imaginings of possible futures.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following questions represent core tenets for this endeavour, anchoring investigation across

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[5] Speaking on "unsettled histories and memories," Hurst notes the pull of the land as an access point for exploration of contemporary Indigenous identities (Hurst, 2015, 139). What changes when I am the one creating the landscape?

[6] I refer here to versions of national history and culture fabricated by state institutions, as explored by Eva Mackey. These are constructions of "Canadian Nationhood" produced through "pedagogical programs to create or reflect national identity," and which tend to be "deeply contradictory" to individual and collective remembrance (Mackey, 2012, p.310).

intersections of knowledge and sites of production. Where they are encoded by the exclusionary language favoured in academia, their proposed outcomes are intended to act largely in service of grassroots and culturally fragmented groups, activated on an individual basis.[7]

- In creating mimetic and composite VR environments, can virtual appropriations of material biographies disrupt colonial discourses of culture and identity?

- Through the digital translation of cultural artifacts and their embedded stories, can the virtual environment operate as an effective metaphor for diasporic experiences?

- As digital facsimiles, how do these translations function in terms of evoking familiarity or emotional memory recall?

These points of inquiry were developed over a period of two years, through many iterations of critical reflection, formal assessment, and a pandemic-related leave of absence. Their nascent versions, however, have existed in some form since 2016. I had been studying 3D workflows at the time, and virtual reality represented exciting new pathways of praxis.

After our Boxing Day gathering, I took pictures inside Grampa Johns' house: the black tiles and the out-of-tune piano and the chandelier and the snowshoe and the pass-through kitchen walls. Grampa followed me around the whole time, so happy to have company even after coming back from a big party, to pad around at an odd hour and watch me capture

material minutiae

the nooks and crannies of my childhood.

And then he died three weeks later.

I was not the only one who struggled to articulate the entangled *perte et deuil,*[8] the myriad ancillary losses that accompanied the passing of a patriarch. Layers of grief felt not only for a loved one, but the spiritual, physical, and material cornerstones of the family:

"We spent so many years here, all the memories and stuff, right, and this might be the last time I'm in here. And then the fact that somebody else is coming in here, there's going to be a new family in here...and I think that was the hardest part. Not so much saying goodbye, but having to turn it over to somebody else who's never gonna know. They're gonna move in, have their family, and hopefully live a very happy life...but they're never gonna know the times we had here."[9]

And so the work began to germinate. Despite the fact that I am now confident that some of these questions can be answered affirmatively, there remain ambiguities. Following the conclusion of this MFA, I plan to bring this work to both sides of the family, holding space for intimate experiences with the installation and accompanying research. Its lifespan will endure beyond the official bounds of this research period, and its form will undoubtedly shift over time and further exploration. I still do not have the means to explain this haunting; the work continues.

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[8] I turn to *français* here as it feels most appropriate—the word *grief* stems from the old french *grever*, to burden. What complicates this memory for me is the knowledge *qu'il a senti le sapin*; I find to this day the languages of grief I practice (Corless et al, 2014) remain under active negotiation via cultural and critical exploration.

[9] Cousin Dylan on boxing up Grampa's possessions following his death (Ratcliffe, D., 2021). After our session, we went to see Grampa's house on Champlain. We stood across the street, reminiscing, and the new owner came out to greet us. Her polite tone was underlined by notes of suspicion. I don't want to know what the inside looks like now that it has been overwritten—though I do wonder what traces of us might remain. I wish her and her family well (nonetheless).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research is intentionally situated within a mix of methodological frameworks. Drawing from the more Western structures of material culture theory and autoethnography, I sought to balance these modes with Indigenous theory, diasporic theory, and hauntology.

Where some Indigenous scholars argue that attempts to introduce Indigenous values within colonial frameworks are inherently flawed,[10] I find a modified approach perfectly suited to the task at hand. I have attempted to navigate the intersections of these paradigms in much the same way as my bicultural identity: respectfully engaging each element without submission to either prescriptive or monolithic stances. I am interested in the ways these schools of thought compliment one another, and means of activating them as vehicles for decolonization.

Although this chapter was conceptualized with separate sections expanding on each methodological component, a great deal of interconnected threads run between them. Rather than parsing through them as isolated concepts, I instead invite you to consider the following as cousins.

INDIGENOUS & DIASPORIC THEORY

There is a consistent pattern and consequence of tone found across Indigenous academics and philosophers, where theory and anecdote blend into conversational teachings. This is, to me, a

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[10] Criticisms of Indigenous paradigms situated within Western frameworks include the tendency towards exoticism, restrictive modes of knowledge production, and the diminishment of axiological authenticity (Wilson, 2008, 53).

natural extension of our storytelling: connecting our lived experiences to deeper knowledges and

ways of being. It is myopic to conceptualize Indigeneity as culturally singular, of course—in

representing one of three major Indigenous groups across Canada, there are more than fifty

distinct First Nations comprising some 630 communities.[11] With that awareness, I choose to

critically ground my own research in the Haudenosaunee values of my ancestors, and specific

teachings from Indigenous scholars of other Nations.

Nishnaabeg scholar Leeanne Betasamosake Simpson argues that without a critical reframing of

self, the unconscious repetition of our colonized lives only serves our oppressors. Drawing from

Audra Simpson's line of membership questioning for Mohawks, she uses the following as a basis

for critical intervention: "How do we continue to exist as *Kanien'kehá:ka* people in the face of

settler elimination?"[12] As my own experience ultimately stems from the success of institutional

violence, my own inquiries have been framed instead by themes of regeneration: **How do I** *begin*

to exist as *Kanien'kehá:ka*? **How does '***I***' become '***we***'?**

I found my questions echoed in Pauline Waterfall's process of uncovering her Heiltsuk heritage,

with whom I share many of the same methods of seeking: asking "ridiculous" questions,

undertaking genealogical projects, conducting memory-based interviews, and piecing together

traditional knowledge: "what began as a personal quest to understand where I fit in ended up

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[11] (Indigenous Services Canada, 2020). Each of these Nations hold distinct cultural histories, identities, languages, and practices. To date I have encountered more than a dozen variant spellings of *Anishinaabe* in terms of others' self identification; all are considered correct.

[12] It is also through this act of reframing that we are able to perceive "signposts in our nations, communities, and bodies of colonialism's ongoing existence and simultaneous failure" (Simpson, 2017, 90-91).

being an important healing outcome that continues today."[13] In relating decolonization to an active homecoming my own persistence, pain, and hope are reaffirmed.

One of the most important pieces of knowledge gifted to me was by Peter Morin, who told me that my experiences to date *are* Native experiences. That the healing journey is a lifelong one, and that I could be strong enough to take it on for not only myself, but for my family as well. At the time, it seemed like an impossibility; today it is a cornerstone of my *raison d'être*.

Relationality, starting with relations.

So I took my motorcycle to Niagara and my mother's car up North.

I wanted

to see my family members,

comfortable in the nests they had made for themselves

I needed

to trace the geographies of my ancestors with my own body.

I bathed in the glow of Fort Erie's autumnal foliage, breathed in the lake and the psychic iron of the Peace Bridge. I got lost through the farmlands to Ridgeway on purpose. I watched my father close his eyes and erase buildings from the fields he used to wander through. I spied glimmers of nickel in the Shield, inukshuks stacked on top of dynamite streaks. I saw dawn touch the snow in Chapleau with its

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[13] While the majority of diasporic literature centres on communities who have been displaced over vast distances, Pauline Waterfall's experiences cemented my understanding of *cultural* displacement as a valid diasporic form: "navigating the outside world eclipsed my Heiltsuk roots and often left me caught between the cracks of these two worlds, not truly fitting into either" (Waterfall, 2018, 11, 13). This is to say nothing of the real geographic losses experienced historically by Indigenous populations under the nation state of Canada.

sweeping gold, leaned into the curves of the rivers towards Iron Bridge. The house my mother grew

up in is now home to an Indigenous community organization. There is a new Friendship Centre in Fort

Erie. I passed, by chance, my first home, and though I have no memories inside I recognized it right

away.

Rascines

Being urban does not erase me, nor does being displaced: "people's way of telling and knowing,

when talking about their relationship to place and history in urban locations, challenges their

previous erosion as [Indigenous] people who continue to have place connections."[14] There is a

great deal of work to do in uncoupling *bicultural* from *displaced*–I ground myself in the interstitial

spaces[15] of my cultural identity. This is equally important as a psychic counterbalance against

both damage narratives[16] and common snares of the dispossessed: "the diasporan hunger for

knowledge about and intimacy with the [home] should not turn into a transhistorical and mystic

quest for origins."[17]

Early on in the thesis process, I took time to acknowledge my own diasporic trauma. The result of

this self-reflection and investigation of identity, memory, and experience was *The Docks*, a mobile

VR experience accompanied by a glitch-based soundscape. Sitting in place at the end of a long

wooden dock, the viewer watches dark water in front while distorted drums and the blaze of a

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[14] (Hurst, 2015, 133).

[15] Bhabha explores these as cultural in-betweens: "the interstitial spaces within and among individuals and cultures, which do not maintain a single position but form identities in an on-going process" (Ellis, 1995).

[16] *A Glossary of Haunting* defines damage narratives as "the only stories that get told about me, unless I'm the one that's telling them" (Tuck and Ree, 2013, 647).

[17] Hua asserts the importance of challenging "fixed notions" of home, as well as inclinations towards nostalgia which reduce spaces of belonging to "authentic" versus "inauthentic" (Hua, 2005, 193).

distant fire tease from behind. Though it draws inspiration from remembered geographies, the

work acts more as simulacra[18] than a real locale; a fabricated and intentionally mythologized

space. *The Docks* exists to address the longing which characterized previous identity-based

interventions, and to act as a resting place for old wounds. Creating a dedicated space for these

familiar and ambivalent feelings to live allowed me to more deeply explore my Indigeneity on the

basis of what I *am*, rather than what I *lack*.

Furthering this is the framing of identity as *action* rather than *attribute*: "In fighting for our future,

we have been misled into thinking that 'Indigenous', or 'First Nations'…is something inherently

attached to us and not a description of what we do with our lives."[19] Taiaiake Alfred later refers to

those who have accepted the status created for them by colonizers as *lost people*—and so my

response is to embody my Indigeneity, honouring multiple sites of knowing and engaging them in

praxis.

I do this research with and for my family. I support and am supported by pan-Indigenous

communities of artistic practitioners and researchers. Even in moments of isolation my relations

manifest, taking form through memories and sensations. The plume of a stranger's cigarette carries

me from a rainy patio to my grandfather's sun room. Studying a photograph of my mother on her

prom night brings the warmth of her voice to me. I am visited by my kin through this process,

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[18] No longer confined to "the real", Baudrillard writes on abstraction moving beyond maps, mirrors, and concepts: "the simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it" (Baudrillard, 1996, 6).

[19] (Alfred, 2005, 129). This is evidenced in my own life by a previous reliance on my status card for concretion of identity. Besides being an inherently colonial measure, I came to find in my late teens that it wasn't even accurate–my Great Grandmother had band-hopped her kids, registering them as Upper Cayuga to take advantage of the increased monthly allowances Cayugas were receiving from the government at the time.

critical approach underpins both my technical methods and conceptual foundation: anachronistic aesthetics, fragmented memories as a basis for narrative, and a rejection of dehistoricization.

Just as hauntology is well suited to critical investigations of and with new media,[23] it has found further avenues with contemporary Indigenous scholars who root their discourse in issues of land, identity, and narrative sovereignty. Drawing from Leroy Little Bear, artist Jackson 2bears theorizes that just as all things–living and inanimate–are imbued with spirit, so too must be technology. He goes on to identify ramifications which he styles as the *dark side of technicity*: "the spectral, phantomological, and hauntological traces of ghosts in our machines."[24] Where 2bears seeks to enact the destruction of these phantasms through performance, remix, and new media interventions–forcing them to "(re)appear so that they might face up to their haunting of the living,"[25] my intentions for this framework diverge. It is through this research process that I am interested in exploring further connections to possessions, as well as domestic landscapes constructed in the wake of geographic and cultural displacement.

And wouldn't it be so easy to

~~confuse~~

infuse

the glow of a screen

with the caress of a spectre?

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[23] Mirzoeff argues "there is no possibility of visual culture's hauntology of visual media being anything other than historical. The question is whose history, told in what way and at what time?" (Mirzoeff, 2002, 249).

[24] 2bears ties this theory to listening sessions of the nursery rhyme *Ten Little Indians*, citing the "strange, uncanny, and visceral sensations" accompanying his experience; 2bears credits these to the hauntological legacy of "spectres active in the colonial vocabularies of manifest manners" (2bears, 2014, 14, 19).

[25] (2bears, 2014, 26).

This project examines the notion of "ghosts of belonging,"[26] placing ourselves in relation to one another and to physical places, underlined by a desire to belong. With the understanding of a haunting as a kind of "place-based methodology," alongside the reality that "few processes of dispossession are ever complete,"[27] this work is located within layered eras, geographies, and cultural identities.

 Like Thrush, Boyd suggests that "ghostly matters" can be the key to identifying a collaborative middle path for Indigenous and settler anthropological research: "hauntings continue to provide dimension to unseen, unvoiced, and marginalized emotions, experiences, and imaginings that nonetheless contribute to the 'realness' of social life and the memories of people…they are alternatives for laying claim to place and the past."[28] Challenging mainstream academic approaches to historic interpretation, her writing addresses the same failures of empiricism as Adorno and Horkheimer in their critique of Enlightenment.[29]

Sitting with Janine Windolph over piping-hot tea, she listened patiently and gave me room to shake

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[26] (Hurst, 2015, 145).

[27] Beginning her examination with the question "Do places have spirits?", Thrush goes on note the estrangement between urban and Indigenous histories: "perhaps nowhere is this truer than in North America, where Indians and cities exist at opposite ends of the settler imagination: one represents the past, the other the future." This misconception is dismantled with the simple reminder that their connection is place-based: both have "occurred in the same locations" (Thrush, 2011, 71, 54, 56).

[28] Asking where exactly stories of stories and spirits belong "in our contemporary representations or reconstructions of culture," Boyd questions academic fears of "'going native'—or losing one's objectivity" (Boyd, 2011, 182183).

[29] Adorno and Horkheimer express the dominating and destructive qualities of Enlightenment, under which "there shall be neither mystery nor any desire to reveal mystery." They argue that in the pursuit of scientific excellence, "human beings have discarded meaning"; instead they offer magic as a means "concerned with ends, but [which] pursues them through mimesis, not through an increasing distance from the object" (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1947, 2-3, 7).

the chill from my shoulders. My cheeks were still red and windburnt from the hike. What we discussed belongs to the two of us and the mountains, but I was struck by how none of the Indigenous folks around me treated me with skepticism when I told them I needed to speak to a knowledge keeper. There was no disbelief to suspend.

<div align="right">

Learning to reject

the violence implicit within

a plausible narrative

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This approach is not to be confused as a means of engaging with what Tuck and Ree term "settler horror," aesthetics centred on the assuaging of colonial guilt and frequently featuring "Indian burial grounds." I do not fear the ghosts I am conjuring in this process. Instead I aim to commune with them as relations:

"Haunting doesn't hope to change people's perceptions, nor does it hope for reconciliation. Haunting lies precisely in its refusal to stop...for ghosts, the haunting is the resolving, it is not what needs to be resolved."[30]

<div align="right">

Though I wander far from home

I know you're with me when I roam.

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[30] (Tuck and Ree, 2013, 642).

MATERIAL CULTURE THEORY

Memories find concretion in objects.

When Gramma Babin's dementia had progressed to the point that she no longer recognized any of her children, or her own reflection, pressing a harmonica into her palm roused an unmistakable vitality. Melodies and anecdotes would flow from her as long as the mouth organ was held in her shaking grip, before fatigue closed heavy curtains behind her eyes and she returned to the fog of her illness. To look at her harmonica now would be to remember that moment and reflect on the vast and unknowable store of her own memories embedded in its casing.

Memory

as psychometry

When I moved in with my partner and we were sourcing housewares online, an image of speckled ceramic dishes yanked me from the present to my own childhood: nestled into Gramma Pat's cream-coloured kitchen booth, watching her carefully lift a defrosted bag of milk out of her dishwasher. The dishes weren't even identical, but they didn't need to be. They allowed me to feel as though I was building upon intimate foundations of domesticity, connecting across generations of care.

When I returned to my childhood home to help my mother do maintenance for her tenants, I was confronted with physical evidence of my own cognitive dissonance. I was struck by how *small* the space really was compared to my sprawling memories of each room in a sunlit montage. Though the furnishings were foreign, the configuration in my mind's eye shifted automatically to the

familiar. I was even able to find tangible echoes of myself and my family: hidden messages and wall drawings that had eluded coats of neutral paint. Devoid of its usual fixtures and standing separate from my own flawed recollection, the shell of the space was still recognizable as *home*.

The inverse is just as powerful: when a relative passed and their life boxed away, it was easy to find fragments of their biography imprinted on their divided possessions: physical evidence of their *being* worn and woven into everyday things. These material goods are transformed through possession, and their sentimentality outstrips monetary value: a cracked trivet, a scratched coffee table, a royal doulton figurine repaired at the wrist with super glue. Conversions which can take place over generations "change the appearance of the thing while preserving its identity; they appropriate the object at different stages of its relationships by stamping the identity of the owner on its appearance...[modifications] are almost rituals of passage in a relationship with the object."[31] Every mark is a marker, stains and dents and tarnish hinting at the larger stories of our lives. Moreover, generational accumulation and imprinting of objects comes to represent narratives beyond the individual: "The ideal of happiness has always taken material form in the house...the promise of the family is preserved through the inheritance of objects, which allow the family to be assembled. To inherit the family is to inherit the demand to reproduce its form."[32]

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[31] As an investigation into the significance of material belongings within contemporary urban and domestic contexts, *The Meaning of Things* explores "how the most complex patterns of emotion and thought can become embodied in and symbolized by concrete things, that is, how things themselves are part of the interpretive sign process that constitutes meaning" (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981, 62, 98).

[32] Writing on the contagious qualities of affect, Ahmed states that it is possible to "loosen the bond between the object and the affect by recognizing the form of their bond. The object is not simply what causes the feeling, even if we attribute the object as its cause. The object is understood retrospectively as the cause of the feeling" (Ahmed, 2010, 45, 28).

My uncle Scott is something of a local historian, routinely combing yard sales, estate auctions, and

antique shops for pieces of his hometown's past. Anything is game as long as it clearly demonstrates a

relationship to the localities of Fort Erie and Ridgeway: signs, maps, posters, trophies, milk bottles,

yardsticks, fishing lures, ceramic heads, signed ephemera. By chance he came across a pair of red

sculptures styled after geishas. Nothing about them suits his collection, home decor, or even personal

taste, but they were the *exact* set that lived in his grandmother's house:

"I just couldn't let them go like that."[33]

Where objects act as vessels for lived experiences, they also serve as expressions of culture.

These artifacts speak to their original environments as readily as their present post, a

simultaneous reflection on and reinforcement of value. Material intelligence comprises social

realities across disciplines, time, and geography, activated experientially: every time you use a

mug, you are "situating [yourself] within a broad human fabric."[34] The personal meaning we

impart on our belongings is only a facet of their accumulated knowledge, but one that is known

to us exclusively.

In examining the notion of commodified hauntings, Derrida uses a simple wooden table to

explore how, "like everything, the moment it comes onto the stage of a market, the table

resembles a prosthesis of itself...two genres, two generations of movement intersect with each

other in it, and that is why it figures the apparition of a specter...the inert thing appears suddenly

[33] (Johns, S., 2021). Uncle Scott's garage is a veritable monument, evoking the mystique of early "wonder rooms" which preceeded the contemporary museum (Richman-Abdou, 2018).

[34] Like Ahmed, Adamson takes note of the promises objects hold, as well as their operation independent from language (Adamson, 2018).

inspired."[35] Where the depiction of the table as an animated thing acts as commentary on the ways commodities embody social relations of class, I am specifically interested in an exploration of how possessions embody cultural narratives and material biographies.

How possessions may *possess*

and *be* possessed themselves.

Dwellings themselves are rife with their own hauntings, bound up within the intimate histories of families and their attachments: if the home is the theatre of our domestic experience,[36] the objects we surround ourselves with are props on that same stage.

"The home that I grew up in is somewhere that has seen the best of my memories, the worst of my memories, and has been a place that has always comforted me through ups, downs, whatever. I'm not speaking of my family in that home, but my literal *home*—it has been that for me."[37]

It is with the appropriation of these objects into a virtual space—the translation of this material foundation for history and identity that I intend to digitally preserve and archive these narratives:

[35] Throughout *Specters of Marx*, Derrida expounds on his hauntological arguments using the Marxist metaphor of a table and its commodified "use-value": in its initial introduction, the table is "worn down, exploited, overexploited...the thing is at once set aside and beside itself. Beside itself because...said table is a little mad, weird, unsettled, 'out of joint'" (Derrida, 1994, 192, 187).

[36] Ward charts the evolution of Canadian domestic spaces over the last three hundred years, from one-room dwellings based around a central hearth to more recognizable contemporary forms. At the outset, he situates his research not in architecture, but in the social dynamics of these spaces: "we tacitly accept the notion that a *house* is simply a building while a *home* is a domestic setting, filled with human meanings, whose spaces reflect the endless subtleties of everyday family life" (Ward, 1999, 3).

[37] Cousin Kendelle on the house she grew up in (Thomasula, K., 2021). To this day, the attic space which served as her bedroom has glitter caked into its chocolate brown paint. The sparkle has been rendered invisible, but its grit can still be felt all the way up the vaulted ceiling.

sowing "symbolic roots into a vanished world"[38]. In the same way as Marlene Creates has teased apart the embedded meanings of land in her "phenomenological examination of place," investigating subjects that are "[not] particularly exotic" by engaging intimate details which "[transpose] the story from her experience to ours,"[39] I am examining both lost and remembered environments as they are defined by material objects. The results act as virtual expressions akin to Huyssen's "memory sculptures,"[40] challenging the viewer to engage in a historical dialogue beyond the material presence of the work. Though the "materiality" relies on convincing digital manifestations, their tangible grounding and embodied narratives lend power to these representations upon recognition.

METHODOLOGY

This process-based thesis has unfolded in stages: collecting and recording memories through Story Sessions, connecting these memories to physical objects, reproducing selected objects digitally, and finally fabricating a virtual environment populated by the objects and their stories.

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[38] While Ward marks a clear distinction between a 'house' and 'home', Hecht identifies possessions as the metamorphic catalyst between the two: 'things' are "what [transform] our house into our *home*, a private cosmos that houses our memories of bygone times, as well as our hopes for what is yet to come" (Hecht, 2001, 123).

[39] Quoting Creates, Grattan explains the conceptual trajectory of "environment" towards an "image of green trees and blue water," one which excludes human existence. In truth, land "does not exist separately from us [and] we, as part of this planet, are not separate from the places that we live in either" (Grattan, 1993).

[40] Huyssen defines memory sculptures as "[inscribing] a dimension of localizable, even corporeal memory into the work…an artistic practice that remains clearly distinct from the monument or the memorial" (Huyssen, 2003, 111).

The following sections describe the practical methods I have used in this process, including an accounting of their conception, development, and efficacy.

Many of the methods I employ stem from existing approaches developed throughout my studio practice. Pink states that "Methods themselves have biographies"[41]; it is therefore my responsibility to honour their progression through articulation.

Informed by my established methodological frameworks, the execution of these methods were rooted in what Indigenous scholars refer to as the "three Rs": respect, reciprocity, and relationality.[42] I offer reflexivity as a fourth "R" in my approach, given my proximity to this work and its adaptive and recursive potential.

STORY SESSIONS

"[I thought] about how I could develop some elaborate hyper-intellectualized process for taking big ideas, discussing them with people smarter than me, and then distilling them into artwork or essay...It's become completely clear that the way to do that is to sit down with your family at the kitchen table and just listen."[43]

Stories hold power, *are* power. Thomas King goes so far as to argue "the truth about stories is

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[41] Sarah Pink charts the evolution of her visual ethnography practice over years of using her camera for home-based "video tours", collaborative "locative media", and "in-car video ethnographies" (Pink, 2020).

[42] (Wilson, 2008, 58).

[43] (Lewis, 2021). Kite goes on to mention the "maddening" nature of this realization as an academic.

that's all we are."[44] As Indigenous knowledge is bound up with protocol, entwined with well

established procedures for gifting, holding, and using, the same structures exist for storytelling.

For Haudenosaunee, the telling of stories was traditionally reserved for the wintertime.

I was told by Nikaronhyaa Dawn Martin that spirits love to gather and listen to stories, and summer

corn spirits might not return to their fields if they hear an especially enticing tidbit.

When winter sets in, there's the idea of *when the smoke rises*: storytelling around a central lodge fire

 to warm up the spirit. Reserving tales for specific seasons ran counter to the way I have always

practiced my own storytelling, where my pieces of my life flow freely from my mind and my heart.

(Have I been doing this wrong the whole time? Am I gonna get bannock slapped?)

On top of that, *both* sides of my family are storytellers; it was over crowded kitchen tables and in

smoky basement bars that I picked up the craft.

My solution was to lean into contemporary adaptations of tradition, holding an awareness of why

these protocols exist, and acting in their spirit: "get a blanket, a cup of tea. Hopefully you'll be

close to 'where the smoke rises' in your own lodge."[45] Incorporating this notion into a research

method, it was my intention to seek out some of the stories I had heard over the years from my

family, and uncover new pieces of our shared history in the process.

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[44] King subsequently warns his audience of the dangers of storytelling, as "once a story is told, it cannot be called back" (King, 2003, 2, 10).

[45] In *Dreamfast*, Elizabeth Doxtater shares histories and stories from Ohsweken. The work strives towards filling in cultural gaps for those who have been separated from their geographic and cultural roots, "so they know they were missed and know that when they return home, they will be loved and protected" (Doxtater, 2018, 17).

It was in the formalization of this method–my work with "human subjects"–that I encountered the same barriers Indigenous researchers routinely contend with in academia. I find a sentiment from Heather Harris' Coyote story especially apt: "I've got to ask a bunch of white guys for permission to talk to my own dad? That can't be right."[46]

The use of human subjects in the research process necessitated an ethics board review; doubly so if they were Indigenous. Anthropological ethnography has been historically rife with ethical transgressions, resulting in exploited and traumatized populations "as a rule of thumb."[47] Where these measures are intended to safeguard against further colonial violence, they do not account for instances where Indigenous research is being conducted by Indigenous researchers.[48]

The notion of using interviews to collect stories had seemed obvious from the start, and I had drafted my approach to this method after researching more ethical approaches to this ethnographic hallmark. I further admit to an underlying desire to *legitimize* these stories in some way, asserting their importance by forcing them through the gauntlet of qualitative humanities research. This was an error identified early on in the process: "the idea that knowledge must be approached through intellect leads to the belief that research must be objective rather than subjective, that personal emotions and motives must be removed if the research 'results' are to

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[46] The punchline of this story sees Coyote realizing that since Native Studies is just white professors teaching "in the way white people think," he needs to join the White Studies program instead (Harris, 2002, 196).

[47] Bourgois notes these stem from the colonial "predilection for the exotic" (Bourgois, 1990, 46).

[48] Early on in the thesis process, I was told "Nothing about us without us" by a white woman in a position of power while discussing my plan to speak with Indigenous family members. "But I *am* us" died on my tongue then; today, my response would be very different.

be valid."[49]

Moreover, it turned out that traditional methods of qualitative research did not necessarily gel with my community. I found, over and over, that the concept of an *interview* was problematic within my family. As word of my proposed research got around via family phone tree, there were consistent anxieties over what *The Interview* would consist of:

Would they need to prepare?

What should they study ahead of time?

Did they need to dress up?

How much paperwork was involved?

These concerns ran counter to what I had wanted and imagined, and so I turned to my 'research participants' to co-create solutions that were less intimidating and more collaborative. It was over tea with my cousin Kendelle, both of us wrapped in an electric blanket, that we worked out a better name for the process: Story Sessions.

Y'know, the same stuff we always talk about,

just with a microphone.

The questionnaire draft I had submitted to the Research Ethics Board had 106 questions, and I

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[49] Referencing Tafoya, Wilson relates the separation of self, motives, and emotions for the sake of objectivity to an act of amputation (Wilson, 2008, 56).

had planned for each interview to be 90 minutes in duration.[50] After dialogues with my Digital

Elders,[51] the resulting format was radically different: Story Sessions ranged anywhere from 30-120

minutes, and used prompts from the original questionnaire only to help guide the discussion. The

variation in session times was dependent on what my participants could afford me based on their

schedule and health, and the natural flow of conversation from person to person. Some sessions

feature multiple speakers in attendance: mother and son, cousins, siblings. I also found myself

speaking more than I had originally planned, throwing in anecdotes and ideas of my own as we

went. There is a great deal of laughter recorded throughout these sessions.

This method, while seemingly lacking the rigorous attributes of traditional qualitative research, is

strongly congruent with contemporary Indigenous scholarly approaches. In conversation on

Making Kin with the Machines, Kite notes that her "best work is done on the phone with [her]

aunt, with [her] cousin, on the porch with pineapple upside-down cake and coffee." She goes on

to stress that this form of knowledge production and development is not simply "thin" or "family"

bound, but "millennia of distillation of knowledge into a conversation at the dinner table."[52]

Though I don't care much for pineapple, the trappings and material comforts of my Story

Sessions were resoundingly similar.

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[50] While I did eventually receive an approval from the REB, I no longer feel bound to an institutional body regarding the legitimacy of these stories as sites of personal and Indigenous knowledge. My feelings on the application process have been captured by a poem at the end of this section.

[51] In moving away from Western modes of research, I found I needed guidance that was specifically Indigenous. I found this in Archer Pechawis and Monique Manatch, who are knowledge keepers in addition to their long careers in media arts and academia. They encouraged me to co-create the research model with my family, and to entwine ceremony with this process. After all, I am "answerable to *all* [my] relations when doing research" (Steinhauer, 2002, 177).

[52](Lewis, 2021). Kite is the first Indigenous artist to both use machine learning as an artistic mode, and to present ontological arguments in the field of artificial intelligence (Kite, 2017).

Research Ethics Board Application #102170
4.3) Will participants receive an incentive for participation?
No
unless you count homemade
pies, soup, wine
Loose leaf tea and scratch tickets
fresh flowers
(so hard to get up north, our job for every funeral)
white button mushrooms
before they've turned black
a new app
to fix aunt Bonnie's printer
Warmth from long hugs
Histoires de réveillon
et des rires se mêlant à la nuit
Ethics dictate distance
Sterile and stoic intentions
But I come from long lines of rulebreakers
Gramma Babin kicking police cruisers
And Gowandehson telling border agents to fuck themselves
And so I steal bites of Edna's cookies
And share this moment
with my loved ones, unbidden
Dommage!

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

In shifting between three distinct voices, I have approached the entirety of this written thesis as

an autoethnographic exercise. Positioning myself simultaneously as artist, academic, and cousin,

these tonal variations have allowed me to conduct this work with what *Onkwehonwe* refer to as a

"Good Mind."[53] There are clear connections between acting with a Good Mind and reflexively:

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[53] To carry a Good Mind means many things. More than positivity or gratitude to the Creator, it is a discipline which questions our intentions as much as our actions: "If that intent is good and clear and helpful and loving...we are working with a good mind" (Freeman, 2015, 26). *Kan'nikonhrí:io* "engages with the present and enables [us] to contribute to shaping a positive future" (Jamieson, 2021).

these actions can "transform the social structures or cultural systems within which they operate,

or they can be reproductive...[maintaining] structural and cultural forms."[54]

It is here that I will therefore acknowledge the additional roles I have taken on throughout this

process: curator, archivist, and student. These are bound up in their own sets of biases and

responsibilities; rather than mediation through the illusion of objective distance, I instead choose

to embrace the entwined and inextricable qualities of my subjective location within this research.

It's all the things

I take for granted

and all the things I start to miss

before they've even happened

Considerations for the future trajectory of this work necessitate an ongoing negotiation of my

own voice within it. It is "culturally appropriate for Indigenous people [to take on] the role of

storyteller rather than researcher/author...it is important for storytellers to impart their own life and

experience into the telling...[recognizing] that listeners will filter the story being told through their

own experience."[55] It has been challenging to demarcate the extent to which my own voice

reinforces this research, distinguishing where anecdotes might veer from relevance into triviality.

Beyond external consultation, I rely instead on the honesty of an inclusion to gauge its power:

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[54] Invoking Archer's theory of reflexivity, Ryan notes that reflection without action can render any "re-imagining" useless; reflective thought is instead positioned as "a catalyst for action, so beginning a continuous cycle of reflective deliberation, action and effect" (Ryan, 2014, 8).

[55] (Wilson, 2008, 32).

"In order to do Indigenous research and autoethnography well, one must be willing to

expose oneself...one hopes that through sharing some of the intimate details of one's

spirit, that it also opens possibilities for compassion, kindness, and greater levels of

understanding."[56]

This vulnerability is felt especially in the fractures of my bicultural identity. In researching

autoethnography as an artistic mode I noticed the inclination of even celebrated voices to waver

between authority and insecurity. Anxiety can be drawn as readily as assurance in response to

statements like "Why does it matter? You are a bridge...embrace your role."[57] Fortunately, I have

had a lot of practice in identifying and managing cognitive distortions as they manifest; perhaps

one of the sole benefits of having trauma to work through in formal contexts.

The opposite of a Good Mind is *Wake'nikonhrèn:ton*, which Nikaronhyaa explained to me as the mind

"hanging from a string." or having "fallen." This phrase is not simply a description of being depressed; it

is a call for those around you to help you pull it back up. *Wake'nikonhrèn:ton* is communal activation.

In her genealogical textile work, artist Laura Beard works according to an "intersubjective model

of descendant ethnographer", wherein she "simultaneously interrogates and is interrogated by

---

[56] Onowa McIvor employs these two frameworks in her approach to "(re)learning" her traditional language. At one juncture she shares a diary entry from 2004, questioning when she will recognize the completion of her cultural journey: "I won't know until I get there". She juxtaposes this with a response from 2007 asserting that she now knows "there is no 'there'". These entries are mediated by her own reflections on the vulnerability of including such personal entries for publication (McIvor, 2010, 142).

[57] In *Reconciling Two Selves in the Same Body*, Gresilda Tilley-Lubbs uses a poetic voice to explore and communicate the struggle she encounters between her "English Speaking Self" and "Spanish-speaking Self" (Tilley-Lubbs, 2018, 77). Much like McIvor's diaries, the work is packed with self-conscious questions relating to authenticity and the performance of identity.

her construction of the family tree".[58] I am similarly woven into my own family tapestry; it would be irresponsible and destructive to attempt the erasure of myself from what is presented to my audience. The questions I ask, the stories I choose, the objects I assign to them, and the way I digitally render them indelibly colour the result. Rather than seek the impossible sterility of scientific "purity", I strive to acknowledge and harness the power of the personal in the virtual realm: "In positioning technology and technique as a potential mediating tool and concept…we are not explicitly mediating a visual product, but prompting a visualizing and ways of seeing."[59]

Even among my early source material—in the accumulation and selection of family photos and video—it is easy to spot myself among curious and smiling faces. There is a dual activation in this visual research, where *review* becomes *relive*: a critical appraisal of what might be useful to the project alongside a conjuring of the moment it was captured:

Grampa and Gramma Johns had this little sleeper couch sized for kids, an indigo monstrosity printed with yellow cartoon bananas. We were obsessed with it: our parents had their big couch, with rye and cigarettes and grown-up conversations, and we had our little one with juice and pretzels and top-secret gossip. We'd watch animated movies that had been taped on the VCR, commercials and all, then pull out the cushions for the best sleepover ever. Gramma would pile us with afghans and pillows and make a big show out of tucking us in properly. I still have this flashbulb memory—I guess I must have been sleepwalking—where I'm stepping quietly across the cold kitchen tile. The whole

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[58] Ortiz-Vilarelle writes that Beard "does not presume that genealogy awaits her, static and ready to be found; rather, she positions herself as a living embodiment of insider ethnography, and endeavours to re-trace the broken, or misaligned paths of family memory in tribute to her ancestors" (Otiz-Vilarelle, 2021, 475-476).

[59] Oliver writes on this use of digital tools specifically as [refiguring] the digital visual as the digital-real, particularly in terms of an ethnographic relationship between the everyday digital sphere and everyday memory, sensory and visualised imagining of possibilities" (Oliver, 2017, 124).

house is dark, but I'm not scared. Gramma must have heard me though, because she's calling for me

with her rich, warm voice. I turn towards her; she is a comforting shape silhouetted by golden light.

We share another moment like this, years later. She tucks me in and tells me what I mean to her. I

am not aware that as we speak, she is cities away and dying of cancer.

I am a part of all of these stories: I am responsible *for* them and *to* them, as much as I am to the

relatives who gift them to me. It is, therefore, with the same care I have felt across generations

that I treat these relations.

3D TRANSLATION

In creating a virtual reality installation, a great deal of 3D assets had to be produced to populate

the space. This process typically involves visual research, modelling digital forms by manipulating

polygonal geometry, and texturing the result according to desired aesthetic. As the objects used

in this installation are based on real versions from family stories, each piece is unique and

custom: modelled and textured from personal reference with photorealistic intention. No

photogrammetry or scanning techniques have been used; every piece begins with a blank file

and is built up lovingly "by hand." I refer to this intensive process as "translation."

Key considerations for translation center on exploring and attempting to capture the affective

qualities of these objects, drawing inspiration from artist Roula Parthenious' "replicas": sculptural

lookalikes of everyday objects, totemic works relying on gestalt and careful rendering.[60] Where

Partheniou applies just enough detail to catch her viewer in a playful double-take, my approach is

more Sturtevantian, a dedication to the object itself rather than crafted illusion:

> "You need the impact of immediate identity and the repetition in order for the works to
>
> function as catalysis…Look at them again, look at them anew. Look at them as objects
>
> living and moving in time. Do you recognize them? Have you really acknowledged their
>
> power?"[61]

These recreations are by no means perfect replicas, by equal measures design and technical

limitation. As in the case of Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs*, the translation of elements to

a digital realm becomes increasingly limited:

> "The lexicographical chair is about one kilobyte of data. The photograph, in high
>
> resolution, would take up perhaps 10 megabytes. But the chair is, in a sense, infinite."[62]

Where text and photography compress neatly, the chair itself is stymied by its own physicality.

This raises the question: just how much of the 'real' chair's qualities are needed to create a

convincing surrogate? Can the essence of the original be communicated through a carefully

crafted form?

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[60] Partheniou's replicas come in many forms, all rendered with an "empty presence": "without the personal history, the scuff marks, the handling of our touch, her reproductions slip from the frame of the objects that they represent" (Castellanos, 2019).

[61] Phelan argues that it is critical to understand Sturtevant's method not as "counterfeit, but counter feat and each work is a feat of replication" (Phelan, 2015, 15, 18).

[62] (Adamson, 2018).

The opposite problem exists in industry: how can we represent a subject with as little effort as possible? How can we optimize, reduce, and flatten without sacrificing readability? **How can we work smarter, not harder?**[63] A previous mentor, Paul Neale, pursues this pragmatism in a no-nonsense and sometimes horrifying way. Everything he can possibly streamline in his work is scripted, down to a command prompt that backs his computer up onto a set of hard drives every night. He'd be appalled at the way I "hand drew" patterns of raised beadwork, or how I spent ("*wasted!*") time texturing the inside of a mitt if no one would see it "in-game."

There are ways to "fake it" in 3D: workarounds, stock assets, digital *trompe l'oeil*. Where some have been employed for the sake of my own sanity,[64] the process is the point. It allows me to honour these objects with a kind of reverence and care. To connect with makers and owners across temporalities, with materiality as my intermediary. I learn beading techniques from skilled Indigenous artisans, and reach through time to my mother writing her initials inside her new mitts with a felt-tip marker.

Recreating objects made or owned by my loved ones creates a profound sensation of closeness to those long gone—retracing each curve of my grandmother's handwriting or shaping the contours of a chair Grampa Johns made. I can see the sinew on a snowshoe with my eyes and

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[63] A mainstay of my Dad and his family, who are incredibly fond of adages. Many classics have been reiterated over the decades, accompanied by either smug satisfaction or a frustrated groan: "Never enough time to do it right the first time, always time to do it again."

[64] This speaks more to early workflow decisions than to a personal sense of "cheating." In replicating a piece of beadwork, I have two viable paths: model every single bead as its own sphere on top of a surface, or model the flat work the beads sit on and create the illusion of raised beads through texturing. The texturing itself is still an intensive activity given my own working methods, but the final result does not crash the software running my real-time installation.

my mind, but cannot experience its tactility; the best I can do is craft an illusion that evokes the same materiality for another, pulling on threads and inviting their own intimate remembrance.

The representations appearing in this catalogue constitute a living repository of translated objects, avatars for the originals and their embodied memories. Flexible in their presentation and staging, they are intended as a virtual investigation of material culture, and the potential for these experimental replicas to stimulate emotion. In their translated form these objects and their embedded stories are mine to keep, celebrate, and share; roots that persevere even as the genuine articles are lost to time.

RESULTS

Traditional structures of academia necessitate conclusions. I am wary and weary of the tendencies these statements have towards distortion, where a result becomes a summarization becomes a fact becomes a generalization becomes a stereotype. Indigeneity is not monolithic; diaspora is not straightforward. These stories are not to be wrapped neatly with a bow, nor are they to be placed with finality on a wall or shelf.

This research does not conclude with my graduation from OCAD University, nor culminate upon receipt of an accompanying shingle. It is with this in mind that I submit my graduate thesis as the summation of the following manifestations, my contribution towards contemporary decolonial dialogues. Over the period I have undertaken this research, streets and universities have been

stripped of their references to colonial figures. The bodies of children have been—and will

continue to be—excavated en masse around the country. The neutrality of history is actively being

challenged and renegotiated; to anyone lamenting that "this isn't the Canada I know,"

We knew.

It is my hope that beyond higher-level discussion and progressive social outcomes, this work

directly benefits those who have offered their stories, making space for them wherever they may

be in their own healing journey.

THE VR INSTALLATION

When I was a kid I went on a field trip to Crawford Lake. They have this recreation of a 15th century

longhouse there complete with furs, corn, half-ground medicines in mortars and pestles. I stayed long

after my classmates had rushed off for the next activity. Mixing with the smoke and sage there was

this silence, an immaculate stillness that hung in the air. The disconnect was surreal—it seemed as

though everyone who lived here had just gotten up and left moments before I arrived. I wondered,

not for the first time, what it would be like to exist alongside my ancestors. If they would recognize

me. I prayed to them in the only way I knew how, until my teacher noticed I was missing and came to

scold me.

It strikes me, decades later, how my VR interventions to date share eerie similarities with that

formative experience. The focus is on the pristine recreation of dwellings, on the illusion of

habitation down to the last detail. No bodies inhabit the space save for the viewer-as-visitor,
though this has more to do with the limitations of animation and its predisposition towards the
uncanny valley.[65]

A marked difference is in my staple use of candid audio, incorporating real voices and stories into
the work. Fragments of recordings are positioned throughout the virtual scene as location-based
"triggers," activating when the viewer moves into their invisible proximity. Although the objects
themselves cannot be picked up or moved by the viewer, walking around the installation space
and getting close to them represents an indirect interactivity. Through viewer activation this audio
layers and accumulates into an aural soundscape evoking the bustle and excitement of a family
gathering.

> "You'd walk in and every single family member was there.
>
> And there was always some random person that nobody knew,
>
> but they were also just welcomed as family, *no questions asked*."[66]

Throughout my Story Session process, I noticed the concrete qualities memories take on in their
conjuration. For all of their apparent intangibility, the way we speak of them communicates a
distinct palpability: we rummage through boxes and pluck photographs from albums to pass
around.

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[65] Coined by roboticist Masahiro Mori in 1970, uncanny valley refers to a jarring sense of "mental uneasiness" when viewing virtual representations of people: "human appearance or behavior can make an artificial figure seem more familiar for viewers—but only up to a point. The sense of viewer familiarity drops sharply into the uncanny valley once the artificial figure tries but fails to mimic a realistic human" (Hsu, 2012).

[66] (Thomasula, K., 2021). This sentiment was expressed by nearly all of my cousins when recalling a typical Johns family gathering.

"Sure, let's see what I have."

"Do you want a funny one or a sad one?"

"Yeah lemme see if I got one with all of us together."

"Y'know, I don't think I have any with her like that."

"You know what, I can beat that—one sec…"

The attachment of these memories to objects in the VR installation is intended to act as a further concretion, attaching these conjurations to more "solid" forms. In situ, these recreations and their fragmented audio are by no means static: they shift in and out of existence, their undulation producing an environment marked by temporal instability. Decades and generations are represented simultaneously as the decor within the virtual space fluctuates, emphasizing the relationality between the digital and material.[67]

The installation itself is based on a living room, a space identified by family members as a core gathering place, as well as its role as "the interface between the private and the public world."[68] In representing pieces of furniture which aesthetically and psychologically convey "living room"—couch, coffee table, armchair, television, fireplace—I have included between three and seven variations of each type of object, styled after pieces from family members, memory, and supporting visual research. This space stands in opposition to notions of the gallery as an

---

[67] (Oliver, 2017, 124).

[68] Drawing from Woodward, Annemarie Money posits that a living room is a "'transactional space' for the household, imbued with creating meaning and identity for those who reside therein; but also, it is the space for selective contacts with the outside world…the material culture can be seen as a performance both for oneself and family relations, and for others" (Money, 2007 321-322).

assimilating "white cube,"[69] operating instead as a ghostly twist on Sennett's ethos of craft.[70]

The smell of

Grampa routing

wood out back

while Gramma paints

dogwood flowers

with a careful hand

The viewer-as-visitor is invited into this space as warmly as one can be when their hosts are not

quite there. As they wander the space and take in visual and aural narratives, they are not meant

to be alienated, though "the relationship between what we see and what we know is never

settled."[71] In exploring the decolonizing potential of the virtual, "choreographies of possibility

 emerge from the experience of the multiple Indigenous scales within territories that 'go beyond'

into 'otherwise spaces.'"[72]

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[69] Brian O'Dorherty writes that the "white wall's apparent neutrality is an illusion. It stands for a community with common ideas and assumptions. Artist and audience are, as it were, invisibly spread-eagled in 2-D on a white ground" (O'Doherty, 1976, 79).

[70] In *There is no Neutral Exhibition Space*, Fisher applies this ethos of "meeting the living human, plant, animal, or mineral worlds around us from a place of radical care" to the design of exhibitions: "Such an ethos makes us aware of the spaces we come from and those we occupy in our practices, whatever they may be. Working in never-neutral exhibition spaces with this approach now requires more than simply holding space for others" (Fisher, Michelle, 2020).

[71] In ways of seeing, Berger states "We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves. Our vision is continually active, continually moving, continually holding thiugs in a circle around itself, constituting what is present. Soon after we can see, we are aware that we can also be seen" (Berger, 1972, 7, 9).

[72] Applying the concept of decolonial aesthetics to new media interventions, Recollet argues that "Within these spaces, Indigenous artists and creators are remixing media, aesthetics and modes of expression to refuse the constraints of colonial narratives on creation production…[gesturing] towards creative, desirous futures, practicing an active ongoing refusal of dispossession and erasure" (Recollet, 2016, 99, 93).

This installation further acts as an Indigenization of the archive. The objects represented are of the everyday, and their celebration constitutes an example of preservation which considers the vernacular and intangible contexts of its subjects."[73] Beyond the dusty and lifeless imagery evoked by the term "archive", my intention is to treat this space as Celeste Pedri-Spade treats her drum: "Responsible research also means ensuring that Anishinabe stories and songs are not confined to some obscure document, first distorted and then rendered unattainable and useless to Anishinabeg."[74] As a site for cultural regeneration, the creation of this work demands a commitment to its continued growth and maintenance: beyond my responsibilities as an Indigenous researcher, "Digital traces are only preserved when someone has an interest in persevering them."[75]

THE CATALOGUE

Accompanying the VR installation in both formal exhibition as well as in-situ for family showings is the Catalogue. This document originated as a process journal in the early stages of my translation work which allowed me to organize my ideas, reflect on possible creative avenues, and communicate my process to external parties.

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[73] Jack's research centres on the new conceptualizations of heritage preservation in architecture, delineating between "conventional heritage preservation" and "intangible cultural heritage"(Jack, 2017, 17).

[74] Pedri-Spade argues that relegation to a document represents how people and knowledge "continue to be colonized; thus, 'doing good work' requires a commitment to decolonizing our minds and our bodies" (Pedri-Spade, 2016, 390).

[75] (Thorsen, 2020).

"A very 70s style cake carrier, always guaranteed to have my mom's famous carrot cake inside. Unmistakablely dated by its aesthetic, and part of that post-Depression mentality of never throwing away/replacing anything that is still useful. The same colour as another set of tupperware baking containers, which will be placed together in scene.

Seeing this online image of my mom's exact set brought on this physiological rush/stirring - it's not as if they are even long-gone, as she still has her three underneath the cupboard and in use. What brings on this physical sensation?"[76]

As the journal filled up with ideas, reference, and progress images of my own 3D work, a word doc was no longer an appropriate setting for it. I migrated the work to Adobe inDesign and began to treat it as a catalogue of translations. The short form reflection I had been drafting became a longer essay, *On Translation*, which further acted as the foundation for several sections in this larger thesis document. As is the case with this written thesis, poetic inclusions were included as organic responses to each object featured. As an exhibition catalogue, the contents are largely image-based and include technical notes to illuminate aspects of my 3D workflow. An appendix details each item as well as a brief personal statement related to its selection for the project:

"Doilies (p. 12-15)

My mother would knit and crochet in front of the tv as a teenager, and all her creations would make their way into her "hope(less) chest." I grew up enveloped in layers of massive and colourful afghans."[77]

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[76] Excerpt from the original process journal, which is filled with reference images, technical notes, and questions posed to myself.

[77] Excerpt from *Here I Stand, Still Guarded: Exhibition Catalogue* (*Appendix*).

Devoting space to each object within the catalogue is another means of honouring their forms, as well as facilitating their narrative occupation of additional realms. With the temporal and ephemeral nature of the VR installation—by aesthetic design as much as the lifespan of contemporary technologies—viewers experience each object for a limited duration. The Catalogue allows viewers to re-access each object and their stories at will, without reliance on the use of proprietary equipment.

Moreover, the Catalogue wound up being critically important as an intermediary tool during the research process. At times, it has been difficult to explain to family members what exactly it is that I'm doing. Emailing them my research questions verbatim would be pointless—the language is dense and exclusionary. An elevator pitch over the phone could only go so far in terms of mutual understanding; the project was inevitably simplified between relatives as **"Mel's thing for school."**

Seeing the Catalogue was transformative. I watched elderly Aunts and technophobic Uncles scroll through the catalogue on a tablet, zooming in and asking questions and gasping when they saw objects they recognized from their memories. Cousins laughed at the jokes sprinkled throughout, and started to tell their own stories based on what they were looking at. The work moved from the distant and theoretical to the *real*, and they were excited to be a part of it.

I have since adapted some of the language from *On Translation* to better suit the vernacular modes of my family members. Its purpose, now, is to act as a bridge between this written research and the artistic knowledge production. Though there are more inroads for my

generation towards higher education, the majority of my family members did not complete or continue beyond a high-school level. There is exactly one person in my family with a PhD.

(Look out though Little Wayne, I'll see you in no time)

This is not indicative of a lack of intelligence, but rather economic and social forces acting as severely limiting factors. Grampa Johns, running into his kids' principal at the bar, was asked how they were all so bright–the subtext was that they shouldn't have been, as Natives.[78] Gramma Babin, considered by her relatives to be "beyond clever", was functionally illiterate well into her adulthood:

"My mother really wanted to be able to write, but she wasn't good at it. She did learn; she changed her name to Veronica, and she would practice writing 'Veronica' all the time. I would see her practicing:

'Veronica', 'Veronica', 'Veronica'."[79]

In sharing this work with my family, I want to make it as accessible and inclusive as possible. Rather than a site of shame or disengagement, I want it to be a symbol for and catalyst of radical connection: one that only grows over the years, an archive that sits closer to family album than mausoleum.

THE FAMILY STORIES ARCHIVE

The intention for my Story Sessions was three-fold: informing the aesthetic direction of the VR installation, capturing bits and pieces of audio to support the virtual experience and its

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[78] (Johns, T., 2021).

[79] (Johns, M., 2021).

embedded narratives, and to collect lived experiences for archival as a point of reciprocity. Where fragments were selected based on their thematic congruency to the installation,

> "You never forget where you came from. You never forget who you really are, as a person. And even though I've been away from my roots for forty years, I still miss it."[80]

There were a great deal more to be saved from the proverbial cutting room floor:

"The basement was low, like if you were tall and you went down the basement you'd have to duck your head. My mother used to have these big barrels of flour and sugar, and I was her legs. So when she baked I would run downstairs, pry the thing off, get sugar, carry it up for her. And when I'd run up the stairs at night I always thought someone was gonna grab my leg, and it scared the crap right out of me. And my dad also—when he'd bag a moose, he'd hang the moose from the rafter and let the blood drip off in the basement, in the dark. So if I was going down to get flour for my mother and there's a moose hanging there it would scare me sometimes, you know? But it was okay, my brother was a butcher and he'd come and cut it all up."[81]

As this is an ongoing project that will exist beyond the duration of my thesis, I've set each entry of the family archive according to a suitable naming convention: full name, year, season, and keywords relating to the story being told. At the time of writing, the archive comprises stories from 21 distinct interviews.

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[80] (Johns, M., 2021)

[81] (Johns, M., 2021)

JoanneThomasula_2021Winter_AlmostAdopted.mp3

JoanneThomasula_2021Winter_Christmas.mp3

JoanneThomasula_2021Winter_EarliestMemory.mp3

All were captured between the fall and winter of 2021, save for one set which was recorded in

2017 prior to this research process: Grampa Johns telling stories around his kitchen table. Some

of this audio has been integrated into the installation posthumously, though most have been

reserved for private family listening.

An emergent quality of this archive that merits future exploration is the interconnectivity of certain

narrative threads: with so many relatives sharing childhoods and other lived experiences, stories

surrounding the same themes, objects, and places materialized organically. Members from my

father's side of the family cite the beach, moving frequently, and Grampa Johns' "feast or

famine"[82] approach to providing for eight children. Members of my mother's family tell of the

bush, chores and church, and the everpresent smell of baked goods. These pieces weave

together into more complete images of a past beyond my experience:

Homemade bread and apples in packed lunches

At night, sending children to the low concrete basement for ingredients

massive cans and barrels full of pantry staples

lard and flour and sugar

Grampa Babin uses empty cans for his powdered cement,

not wanting to waste good tin

inevitably

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[82] (Johns, S., 2021).

Gramma Babin makes a cake out of cement

and doesn't realize until it is too late.

Minute details of these stories tend to vary, owing to the cognitive malleability of formative years and very likely occurrences of memory conformity. Over dinner in Chapleau during my research trips, the subject of Gramma Babin's bingo nights came up. I had heard of the rainy day practice during several story sessions already, and I asked my relatives in attendance what the winner of a bingo game would receive. All answered differently:

A piece of chocolate

A cherry cordial

A cookie

An exemption from a chore

A tea charm

Where it is routine to identify minor inconsistencies during joint recollection activities,[83] core details of both this and other stories were resoundingly congruent: Gramma Babin would make certain that everyone playing the game each won something, and would covertly manipulate the game to do so. No one would win more than once. It is in the accumulation of these narratives that mosaics of memories emerge, interconnected personal histories acting as sites of layered identity and culture.

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[83] Discussion of the same memory between multiple parties has the potential to influence the "memory reports" of those involved, often depending on the order of the telling and instances where disagreement occurs (Gabbert et al, 2006, 480).

In line with both Indigenous methodologies and *l'esprit famille*,[84] I intend to continue archival using this model as a foundation for future sessions. Conducted with sustainability and reciprocity as core values, this is durational work that resonates as spiritually vocational. This is a mirror I want to hold up for members of my family, past and future: a tool for critical reflection and a living vessel for our joys and sorrows. This is who we are as progressive generations of cultural embodiment, and it will be up to us to decide who we want to be.

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[84] (Babin, M., 2021). A term favoured by my Cousin Michel, *qui relie le plus le concept au fait de se rassembler autour de la table et de partager votre jour.*

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APPENDIX

Appendix of accompanying digital materials. May 5, 2022.

Here I Stand, Still Guarded: Exhibition Catalogue

HereIStandStillGuarded_Catalogue.pdf

April 25, 2022

An exhibition catalogue acting as an intermediary document between the written thesis and

virtual reality installation.

Here I Stand, Still Guarded - VR Documentation

HereIStandStillGuarded_VR.mp4

April 18, 2022

A brief video playtrhough of the VR installation.