

**Stories of Rivers and Gold:  
Counter-Archives of a Guyanese Transnational Identity**  
By Roxanne Fernandes

A thesis presented to OCAD University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of  
Fine Arts in Criticism and Curatorial Practice

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis positions Guyana as the subject of analysis and takes the inquiries, possibilities, and outcomes through the work of three contemporary artists of the Guyanese diaspora: Christie Neptune, Fariyah Aliyah Shah, and Sandra Brewster. What constitutes an archive for the post- and de-colonial persons? For those who seek to reconstitute personal identities, navigate fragmentation, and include the land, family, memory, and stories, how are they meant to preserve, organise, and archive them for the future? How do we synthesise the existence of colonial archives, their inevitable status as a means to primarily hold power and collect information but also, all that they may exclude or lack? How can archives be reconstituted, with powers of preservation put in the hands of the oppressed, to uncover forgotten histories and forge new futures? What can that archive look like?

Through selected critical analysis of artworks and conversations with artists, woven with storytelling and explored further through the theoretical lenses of Black and Caribbean and arts-based scholars, this thesis forms a publication that explores the practices of these artists as a new means of capturing what the archive could look like: a counter-archive. Counter-archiving is decolonial praxis: to look beyond the white and Eurocentric colonist powers-that-be and their formulation, stakes, and narratives that have been central in archival practices. Counter-archives are stories, photographs, family archives, and new media, amongst other practices; it is exercising presence of or resistance to the gaps in history by actively exploring or interpreting them; it is both a concrete space for holding material and a metaphysical space for holding memory and absence. It goes beyond mere collection and preservation and instead considers alternative modes of production, cultivation, and holding as means that we use to connect to the past and legitimise presence. The post- and de-colonial archive, through counter-archiving, is one in which the past, present, and future are intertwined to critically inform one another. This thesis and publication are a space for critical fabulation, speculation, poetics, storytelling, and relationality.

**Keywords:** archives, counter-archives, post-colonial, de-colonial, publication, guyana, caribbean, diaspora, identity, memory, fragmentation, storytelling, interview, conversation, critical review.

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## Statement of Contributions

While this thesis has been written and conceptualised by Roxanne Fernandes, significant contributions were made by Christie Neptune (Part III: Meandering a Thin Line: Cultivating Gilded Pasts and futures through *En Route Towards El Dorado*, An Interview with Christie Neptune) and Fariyah Aliyah Shah (Part I: Alternative Forms of Legitimate Knowledge: Storytelling Through *Looking for Lucille*, A Conversation with Fariyah Aliyah Shah) in the form of being respondents to interviews, which excerpts appear in the respective chapters. Sandra Brewster has contributed through consent and a foundational personal conversation.

The publication component of this thesis was designed collaboratively with Tetyana Herych, who provided professional expertise and opinion on the initial content, layout, and ideas. Michael Bitton provided insightful copy editing services for the Introduction (Gaps and Omissions: Unveiling Archives and Considering the Role of Contemporary Art), the Curatorial Essay (Stories of Rivers and Gold: Anticipated Futures Through a History of the Present), Part I, and Part II (Water is Another Country, A Critical Review of *DENSE* by Sandra Brewster). Primary Advisor Tairone Bastien and Secondary Advisor Camille Isaacs provided insight for the entire thesis, for multiple components throughout the process.



## Introduction

This thesis is presented as a hybrid effort, a publication featuring curated artworks as well as a critical text and conversations with artists. The format of the publication has developed a separate life outside of the standard exhibition catalogue, essay, or review. Its presentation as a loose categorization as a publication has allowed for me to delve into how it could be seen as ‘other’—allowing for experimentation, exploration, and reflection. *Stories of Rivers and Gold: Counter-archives of a Guyanese Transnational Identity* is the title of the thesis project, as well as the title of the publication in which the curatorial themes, individual and collective histories, artists, artworks, and criticism live together to address the question of “what does a post- and de-colonial archive look like?” In the context of larger histories and treatment of archives in the Caribbean (and/or the West Indies)<sup>1</sup> and the contemporary diasporic Guyanese artists working with them. The thesis question is explored through the work of artists Christie Neptune, Fariyah Aliyah Shah, and Sandra Brewster and how they are utilising personal and public archives or archiving methods in their respective practices. Each artist actively positions their identity and memory alongside ideas of fragmentation, storytelling, and migration. This thesis question is also explored through an analysis of the archives, the history, the people, and the land of Guyana (with some thought into the wider Guyana’s (Guyana, Surinam, and French Guyana and the colonial history of the Guiana’s: British Guiana, Dutch Guiana, and French Guiana) within South America and the Caribbean) and the inherently fragmented state of the country due to colonialist exploits and a turbulent political history.

Both post-colonial and de-colonial methodologies are central and are seen as ways to move forward with respect to the distinct circumstances they address. In this context, the post-colonial refers to the wake of the 1966 Independence of Guyana from Britain. Although official Guyanese data was already disorganised under Britain, the transition left archives incomplete, irrevocably disseminated, and unstable as the Guyanese people began a decades-long migration out of the country. The ‘post-colonial’ designation is political, and it is one of the periods we inhabit as a diaspora, left to reckon with what was (or was not) left behind. The other period in which we live—or act and hope towards—is that of the de-colonial, which serves as a method to move forward. In tandem with the proposition towards counter-archiving as

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<sup>1</sup> “What’s in a name?” BBC Caribbean, October 17, 2007, [https://www.bbc.co.uk/caribbean/news/story/2007/10/071011\\_afrosaxon.shtml](https://www.bbc.co.uk/caribbean/news/story/2007/10/071011_afrosaxon.shtml); T. Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Carib,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, August 6, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Carib>; Statistics Canada, (2007), *The Caribbean Community in Canada*, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-621-x/89-621-x2007007-eng.htm>; Julie Chun Kim, “The Caribs of St. Vincent and Indigenous Resistance during the Age of Revolutions,” *Early American Studies* 11, no. 1, *Special Issue: Forming Nations, Reforming Empires: Atlantic Polities in the Long Eighteenth Century* (2013): 118: The identifiers ‘Caribbean’ and ‘West Indian’ have historically been known to be interchangeable. The geographical area and people of the ‘West Indies’ is a mis-nomer that was popularised due to Christopher Columbus’ colonisation of the region and the need to differentiate it from the country of India. ‘Caribbean’ has become the more modern, socially correct term. The term ‘Antillean’ has also rose in popularity. However, despite its roots as colonist terminology, ‘West Indian’ has become a common means to identify oneself if there is Western Indian ancestry through the Caribbean. In a 2001 Statistics Canada Case Study of the Caribbean Community in Canada, for those who identified as Caribbean, at least 12% said they were West Indian and 10% said they were Guyanese, amongst other identifiers. And, although to be ‘Caribbean’ is a modernist term, the etymology of the word is rooted in ‘Carib,’ which is an exonym recorded by Columbus and used by Spanish colonisers as a means to designate hostile Indigenous peoples from non-hostiles (Arawak).

de-colonial praxis, the term 'de-colonial' within this thesis refers to actions that allow the archives to be reconsidered and reconstituted. It is the centering of land and people over imperialism and capitalism. It is noticing the past, acting in the present, and mapping the future. On the other side of these queries, the publication is presented as a curated exhibition in book form in which the post- and de-colonial counter-archive is presented. It is a living counter-archive and an accumulation and representation of the past and present to shape a future that is in the hands of racialized and formerly colonised individuals. As stated in my Curatorial Essay for this project, counter-archiving is decolonial praxis: to look beyond the white and Eurocentric colonialist powers-that-be and their formulation, stakes, and narratives that have been central in archival practices. Counter-archives are stories, photographs, family albums and memorabilia, and interdisciplinary art, amongst other practices; it is exercising resistance to the gaps in history by actively exploring or interpreting them; it is both a concrete space for holding material and a metaphysical space for holding memory and absence.

Primarily working within lens-based mediums, Christie Neptune, Fariyah Aliyah Shah, and Sandra Brewster are activating archival materials and creating their own through their respective research-creation-based practices. Lines of inquiry run through each chapter of the publication, referencing the "gaps and omissions"<sup>2</sup> that one encounters when confronting or utilising archives. And it is through the theoretical work of Mieke Bal, Saidiya Hartman, and Tina Campt that new methods of addressing archives and storytelling through them are applied. Bal's "migrational aesthetics" is a term with interlocking words, dependent on one another for full engagement. Aesthetics, as we have come to understand it in art, is "an encounter in which the subject, body included, is engaged"<sup>3</sup> and Bal further proposes that migration (or the migratory) is a "modifier" that "opens up possible relations" within aesthetics. All that migration encompasses, particularly a globalised sense of movement, is transformational in how we understand aesthetics in art and artmaking. In this thesis, "migratory" is further linked to the cultural exodus—and thus, transformation—that created modern diasporas of Guyanese people, and the act of movement that created what is known as contemporary Guyanese culture: a shared fragmented history engaged by each artist. What Bal asks through "sentient engagement" propositions the viewer to engage more deeply with the work through interaction and embodiment, to feel the act of movement through the work and to understand how it came to be.<sup>4</sup>

Saidiya Hartman's groundbreaking methodology of "critical fabulation" is another useful lens because it works to bridge theory and narrative in the archives<sup>5</sup> (something she employs in *Wayward Lives*,

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<sup>2</sup> James Robertson, "Making the West Indian Archive Accessible: Ken Ingram's Archival Cartography," in *Decolonizing the Caribbean Record: an archives reader*, ed. John A. Aarons, Stanley H. Griffin, Jeannette A. Bastian (Sacramento: Litwin Books, 2018): 328.

<sup>3</sup> Mieke Bal, "Lost in Space, Lost in the Library," in *Essays in Migratory Aesthetics: Cultural Practices Between Migration and Art-making*, eds. Sam Durrant Catherine M. Lord (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007): 23.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid: 23.

<sup>5</sup> Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *small axe* 26 (2008): 11.

*Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals*)<sup>6</sup> in a way that so actively brings them to life and into the diasporic imagination. Her article “Venus in Two Acts” speaks to the fickle presence of the archives for racialized, specifically Black, people. In these archives, all that’s available is “an analysis of the ledger,” or violence and excess, and what remains missing is “the everyday life, [a] pathway to [their] thoughts”.<sup>7</sup> Critical fabulation tells an impossible story while amplifying the impossibility of its telling—especially impossibility as it relates to lack and loss experienced as an impact of colonisation. Finally, Black feminist theorist Tina Campt, a contemporary to Hartman, writes of “listening to images” as a methodology for engaging the archives—particularly the photography of individuals created for public or governmental use and consumption.<sup>8</sup> She suggests “listening” as an act of engaging with the content, the subjects, and the histories (hidden and otherwise)—in line with what Mieke Bal asks of us to “sentiently engage,” to listen to history and, as writer Dionne Brand says, to be in the room with it.<sup>9</sup>

To go beyond the limitations and ephemerality of the gallery space is the challenge this publication addresses. Working with image-based artworks, the form of a publication allows for the work to be seen familiarly, but also allows for continued and deepened engagement towards the intersections of practice, memory, and storytelling. This is not to say that the walls of the gallery space are irrefutably confining, but this format is primarily utilised to become a counter-archive that the thesis question addresses. Historically, gallery and museum spaces have been exclusionary—often presenting gaps in which artists are shown, which curators or staff are informing and organising direction, and which issues are addressed. However, champions of the arts working within these institutes and the persevering legacies of artists have been transforming the space to address local and lived experiences in a more fulsome way. In the accompanying text to their exhibition “While Black: a forum for speculation on what the gallery can’t hold” curators Charles Campbell, Michelle Jacques, and Denise Ryner invited Black artists, curators, writers, and practitioners to respond to “what can’t the gallery hold?”<sup>10</sup> They speak of the essence, specificity of themes, reckoning with history, new visual cultures, and creativity exceeding what is typically accepted in the gallery space.<sup>11</sup> Thinking beyond what the gallery can’t hold—in relation to archives—prompts the question of ‘where can it be held?’ The publication, the art(ist) book, and the art object are all forms in which artists, curators, writers, and other critical thinkers have sought in order to convey authenticity, narrative control, process, and experimentation. Arts publications tend to exist in a ‘liminal space’ between a fine art object

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<sup>6</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts”: 2.

<sup>8</sup> Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017), 5.

<sup>9</sup> Dionne Brand. *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (Toronto: Penguin Random House, 2011): 25.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Campbell, Michelle Jacques and Denise Ryner, *While Black: a forum for speculation on what the gallery can’t hold*, published in conjunction with *While Black: a forum for speculation on what the gallery can’t hold* (June 11 - August 14, 2021) at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria and the Confederation Centre Art Gallery, Charlottetown (Vancouver: OR Gallery, 2021), <https://orgallery.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/WhileBlackBooklet.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid: 4-11.

and an everyday book, prompting touch and interaction.<sup>12</sup> While this publication does not strive towards being a work of art, it does reflect the shared historical, social, and political context for which many independently published artist books were created. Meanwhile, while the artist book and art writing have existed in various forms for millennia, there are questions as to “what do we expect or want from a book of art writing?” This is a question that is posed by writer Sarah Rose Sharpe in her *Hyperallergic* article “Art Writing as an Extension of Life” in which she proposes the invaluable accounts of lived experiences, which is taken forward in this publication and coupled with self-determination, resistance, and artistic expression.<sup>13</sup>

So, what of stories and their importance in this publication? Of storytelling, Hartman asks, “And what do stories afford anyway? A way of living in the world in the aftermath of catastrophe and devastation? A home in the world for the mutilated and violated self? For whom—for us or for them?”<sup>14</sup> With Christie Neptune and Fariyah Aliyah Shah, an email interview and video conversation, respectively, allowed for an active exchange and a visceral understanding of the motivations to share identity-based and multi-generational experiences as a person of the Guyanese diaspora. Neptune’s email interview was more straightforward in its method but allowed her to elaborate on the theoretical frameworks and abstract thoughts that fuel her work. The act of ‘gesturing’ in a physical and metaphysical sense is integral to her practice. The format of an email interview allowed for Neptune to recollect and connect the questions I had about her work *En Route Towards El Dorado: Deepened Relations and the Descent Back Home* to this larger act, which led to profound insights. Neptune writes in her current artist statement, “To touch ground(s). Pulling days of yore into today” knowing that through her ability to create art, world-building is a possibility. In works like *En Route Towards El Dorado*, she pulls at a thread connecting the past, present, and future. She continues, “With my convictions, I carry the past and reimagine the fullness of time. Vessel. A constellation of memories. Wrapped in space.”<sup>15</sup>

The video meeting with Fariyah Aliyah Shah became less about questions answered and instead became a conversation in which a personal relation to archives was an anchor for exchanging stories and understanding motivations. *Looking for Lucille* is an ongoing and modular work made of photographs, archival documents, textile additions, and a soundscape. Within Shah's larger body of research and practice, it is a piece that she is contributing to through new discoveries and analyses of the archives. Of *Looking for Lucille* she asks, “Who is in control of the archive, and can they provide an accurate representation of who we are?”<sup>16</sup> Shah is interested in continually decentring the colonial gaze of the archives, and her identity, and demonstrates it in the project through embodiment: documenting the spaces that her grandmother

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<sup>12</sup> Matt Stromberg, “The Power of Artists’ Books to Bind Together Radical Ideas,” *Hyperallergic*, August 28, 2018, <https://hyperallergic.com/457522/artists-and-their-books-books-and-their-artists-getty-research-institute/>.

<sup>13</sup> Sarah Rose Sharpe, “Art Writing as an Extension of Life,” *Hyperallergic*, October 9, 2022, <https://hyperallergic.com/731632/art-writing-as-an-extension-of-life/>.

<sup>14</sup> Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts”: 3.

<sup>15</sup> Christie Neptune, “Statement,” accessed March 7, 2024. <https://www.christieneptune.com/statement>.

<sup>16</sup> Fariyah Aliyah Shah, “AWARE x WOPHA x PAMM: On the Edge of Visibility – An International Symposium Day 1,” Pérez Art Museum Miami, October 19, 2023, video, 46:25, <https://www.youtube.com/live/Vqq5J8VSM5Q?si=opOefX3O5-Kvu1OF>.

Lucille existed in an almost spectral quality, and knowing that although there is a lack of physical archives associate to her, they can instead exist corporeally.<sup>17</sup>

The critical review of Sandra Brewster's *DENSE* emerged from a place of flexibility and understanding; Brewster was available to speak to me about my proposal but unavailable to commit the time for an interview or conversation. It pivoted to a critical review, which felt like an appropriate means to honour the work, the visceral visual impact, its ephemerality through site specificity, and the inevitable strings that tie it to other cultural information or material. The connection to Wilson Harris' *Palace of the Peacock* emerged as soon as I began to view images of *DENSE* and was further solidified when I learned of her artistic admiration of the author. A reflection of migration and balancing "here and there," Brewster's work encapsulates the notion of reclaiming memory and making archives of our own that correspond to what is vital and notable for the diaspora. She uses natural features, the Essequibo River, and forestry between Toronto and Guyana, to further mark a place and the impact of visually identifiable, but sometimes blurred, geographies. Here, Brewster documents her own encounters by focusing on the shared experiences we have of the land: as a metaphor and as a witness to history.

A final component of this project is my voice as the curator, writer, and a member of the Guyanese diaspora through immigrant parents. In addition to highlighting these artists and their works, in the publication's Introduction I present my familial and cultural motivations for focusing on lens-based artists, archives, records, and storytelling. I integrate my archival photographs, analogue video stills, records, and two collages that speak to the role that these physical elements had in the formation of this project. I share what has been provided to me by my family while speaking to the unfortunate lack of access to archives experienced by the Guyanese diaspora. I highlight the power they have had through their presence for my own family. Much like Shah has said, it is being able to see a face and to know where someone has been that is integral to mediating the complexities of a diasporic identity. Like Brewster, bookmarking land and environment through contemporary photography has also been a rich experience. Whether through photography or video, highlighting the notion of place and designating it as a character with a narrative has the potential to fill many gaps that exist within the archives. Recognizing a place is a means to repatriate and remediate the extractive history it may have endured. And, as with Neptune, working through my documents and records, as well as interacting with members of community, has allowed me to think conceptually about how the archive transforms through interaction and opens up possibilities for storytelling, myth-making, and diasporic imaginative thinking, by us and for us, with decolonial shared futurities in mind. This publication is a de-colonial archive, one that I hope continues to grow and is shaped by community, interaction, experimentation, and creation.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 54:40.

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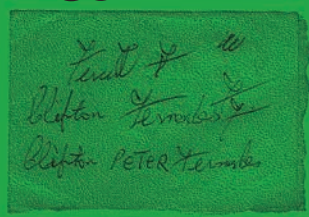
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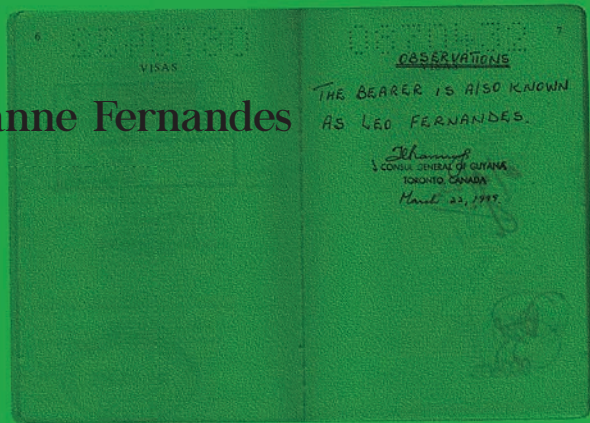
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# Stories of Rivers and Gold: Counter-archives of a Guyanese Transnational Identity



By Roxanne Fernandes



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## **Colophon**

Written by Roxanne Fernandes  
Designed by Tetyana Herych  
Copy Edited by Michael Bitton

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***Dedicated to my grandparents***

*Clifton Peter Fernandes, known as Leo (1925 - 2004)*

*Sheila Agata Fernandes (née DeNobrega) (1935 - 1976)*

*Nootandeo Moses, known as Vidan (1948 - 2017)*

*Durpattie Moses, known as Geeta (née Imrit) (1950 -)*

*Whose lives and stories reverberate in the lives  
of their children and grandchildren.*

# Acknowledgements

*Stories of Rivers and Gold: Counter-archives of a Guyanese Transnational Identity* is, to date, one of the biggest projects I've done as an independent writer and curator. It's the one where I've poured the most heart into. I'd be remiss for not thanking those who have influenced me, in varying degrees, as I've been thinking and making through this project.

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↑ 1. *My grandmother Geeta Moses, my mother Anita, my paternal grandfather Leo Fernandes, and my maternal grandfather Vidan Moses. with my brother Nicholas and I as children, Toronto, Canada, 1996. Courtesy of Paul Fernandes.*

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## INTRODUCTION

# Gaps and Omissions: Unveiling Archives and Considering the Role of Contemporary Art

Four years ago, right before the global lockdowns of 2020, I began my first experimental writing piece about my parents. A barrage of questions led me to know more about their lives in Guyana, their move to Canada in their early twenties in the late eighties, their motivations and hopes, and my relationship to it all. Upon arrival to Canada, my parents began an extensive photographic and video collection that lasted well into my childhood and gently waned upon the popularity of the digital point-and-shoot camera of the mid- to late-aughts. This act to document was instigated largely because they weren't afforded the same type of attention when they were growing up, mostly due to a lack of access to cameras and film or funds for studio photography. As a result, the memories of childhood for my brother, cousins, and I have been aided by enthusiastic record keeping. They captured every birthday, Christmas, family fete, and camping trip. It is not lost on me that, like many first-generation children, my parent's choice to uproot their lives caused my own to be privileged in a way that theirs wasn't. They worked, constantly, and encouraged us to work, to go to school, and to essentially be anything we wanted to be. I always joked that I grew up with 'young, laid-back parents.' In contrast to the more strict upbringing of my other friends with immigrant parents, I was given the freedom and trust in my late teens to early adulthood to be independent. I had many odd jobs, got my driver's license, went to concerts and backyard bonfires, university and post-secondary studies, and across-the-border trips.

It was through this independence and curiosity that I developed an early interest in photography, archives, maps, family history, and personal records. When I was ten, my grandfather Leo Fernandes, the widely loved and respected patriarch of my father's side of the family, passed away in 2004 in Canada, on the cusp of his



↑ 2. *My dad Paul with his childhood friend Partab, Niagara Falls, Canada, 1993.*  
Courtesy of Anita Fernandes.





↑ 3. Roxanne Fernandes, video stills from outtakes of *an inward ripple*, 2022. Film, 17:00. Courtesy of Roxanne Fernandes.

twentieth year living in the county. The death sent ripples of grief throughout our immediate and extended family. Despite him being eighty-two years old, the death was sudden and too soon for someone who had felt omnipresent. There was a pouch that my grandfather kept with him when he moved from Guyana to Canada in 1989 and, in his later years, as he moved between the houses of his adult children. It wasn't until my early adulthood that I was able to look inside. The pockets were lined with his one-way plane ticket to Canada, his Guyanese passport and Canadian social insurance card, his birth certificate (written in Latin), his wife's death certificate, his death certificate, a morning prayer, a baby photo of my brother, and other documents. Upon finding this, what quickly became apparent was that I lacked context. I lacked context regarding the generational differences as to why my grandfather, parents, and most of their siblings left Guyana, why so much of the population left after the country reached Independence in 1966, and why it continues to this day.<sup>1</sup> I wondered how this mass migration wove into the identity that colonialism brought about and subsequently left behind. Alongside this, I became increasingly interested in records—personal ones like letters, trinkets or mementos, and family photography and publicly issued birth/death certificates, immigration ledgers, and identification photographs—and their retention, longevity, and importance. Where were they for my own family outside of my grandfather's pouch? For my mother and her parents? For the generation before them?

By now I knew that the absence of records was not due to the lack of effort toward their overall creation or discovery. It is, however, a reality that because of various social and environmental reasons, the archives weren't just dispersed, they were unkempt, in disarray, and unresponsive to the needs of the people in the country and the diaspora outside of it. This was attached to a shame that I couldn't quite make sense of at the time but that was an adverse effect of becoming the family historian with a lack of resources. However, what came about as a means to combat this feeling was a thesis proposal based on the act of *unveiling*. My dad always said that I wasn't Guyanese, and I always knew what he meant. He was trying to situate me in his own identity—one that involved migrating, settling, changing, and ultimately continuing. It was his identity that *made me* 'Canadian.' That difference caused by experience was never lost on me. What motivated me was the idea of unveiling histories like his, that became mine, through archives, storytelling, and art.

1 Natalie Hopkinson, *A Mouth Is Always Muzzled: Six Dissidents, Five Continents, and the Art of Resistance* (New York: The New Press, 2018).

When I first entered art history studies as an undergraduate student, it took me a long time to understand that there was contemporary art out there and, specifically, art being made by Caribbean artists. I graduated and took up gig work, and it wasn't until a routine visit to the Art Gallery of Ontario in 2019 that I encountered Sandra Brewster's *Blur* series for the first time. I remember experiencing its grandeur in the centrality of the subjects, the application on the gallery walls, and the felt multiplicities. *Blur* was able to position my feelings around diasporic identity through a series that intentionally sought to express identity, movement, and cultural memory. In 2021, under Julie Crook's curatorial vision, the AGO hosted the exhibition "Fragments of Epic Memory" which featured the works of thirty-six contemporary Caribbean artists alongside photography from the newly acquired Montgomery Collection of Caribbean Photographs, which proved seminal. For one of the first times in an art space, I saw what felt missing.

After my undergraduate studies, I had a growing and continuing obsession with combing through my family's archives as a place to 'see myself.' I began scanning documents and photos and converting old VHS tapes to digital videos. Through post-graduate studies, I continued to think about artmaking, photographs, and archival studies. This led me to a case study of the Jamaican librarian and historian Kenneth Ingram's (1921–2017) momentous efforts to uncover, investigate, organise, and make public manuscripts relating to the history of Jamaica and the West Indies. Author James Robertson describes Ingram's efforts as ambitious and important.<sup>2</sup> Ingram wanted to expand on the material available in his homeland and to actively revise and re-frame the writing of history for the contemporary era. He elaborated that the "gaps and omissions require patience and care."<sup>3</sup> Ingram believed that the archives and books that he spent sixty years working towards were of the utmost importance in the early post-colonial years in Jamaica and that they were "part of the flesh, muscle, and nerves of our own history."<sup>4</sup> Learning of Ingram's dedication and seeing the result (*Manuscript Sources for the History of the West Indies*, just one of many books) was heartening. His work—especially in the current era of visibilising, recognising, reconstituting and redefining the role of the archive—was monumental, and his efforts were energising toward my questions: what if the power and authority of

2 James Robertson, "Making the West Indian Archive Accessible: Ken Ingram's Archival Cartography," in *Decolonizing the Caribbean Record: an archives reader*, ed. John A. Aarons, Stanley H. Griffin, Jeannette A. Bastian (Sacramento: Litwin Books, 2018): 327.

3 Ibid: 328.

4 Ibid: 321.

archives were put in the hands of the colonized? Ingram's contributions represent what can be done when we consider how archives exist in the world and the right of possession for homeland archives; how personal archives, knowledge production, and storytelling can be woven with institutional and administrative records to fill these "gaps and omissions"; to let the people deem what is important and what is, can be, and should be discernible. I'm reminded of the visual interpretation of what happens when the archive is forgotten and the omissions are created as it is captured in Onyeka Igwe's short film *No Archive Can Restore You*, in which Igwe captures the state of archives in the former Nigerian Film Unit in Lagos. At first, the images she captures appear disregarded and uncared for with abundant dust and water damage. However, the intentionality of Igwe's images becomes harrowing when considering how colonialist exploitation has impacted archival preservation in Nigeria. What is left behind is a "colonial residue that is echoed in walls of the building itself"—the physical decay accompanied by a haunting sonic soundscape indicative of this.<sup>5</sup> Ingram and Igwe's explorations further encapsulate how varied access to archives can be, and how they exist in multiplicities. There are the personal archives that I know (family records, photos, videos), the ones that are to be uncovered (like Ingram has done), and ones that must be interpreted in alternative ways (such as the one Igwe describes). However, they all bring to light the after-effects of colonialism, and potential afterlives through the weaving-in of process, history, and art. They are, ultimately, inter-generational and transnational examples of counter-archives, philosophical blueprints for the creation of this publication and examples of ways to challenge colonial narratives.

In this publication, I present the works of three contemporary artists and propose them as counter-archives of diasporic Guyanese experiences. This publication examines the counter-archival aspects of these artworks through conversations with the artists, critical analysis of their work, and sharing my story and archive. I explore notions of fragmented identity, memory, migration, and movement toward a greater understanding of the colonialist impact on pre- and post-colonial and contemporary artworks and archives. Narratives are brought forward, histories unveiled, migratory routes traced, and families are recognized. Christie Neptune, Fariyah Aliyah Shah, and Sandra Brewster are three artists who utilise lens-based practices (amongst other interdisciplinary methods) with varying inclusions of archival material to mediate their histories, identities, and individual and collective memories. They have used

5 Onyeka Igwe, "No Archive Can Restore You (2020)", accessed November 3, 2023, <https://onyekaigwe.com/No-Archive-Can-Restore-You>.



↑ 4. My mother Anita (center, age seven), my grandmother Geeta Moses (left, age twenty-five), and my great-grandmother Mai Mohabir Imrit (right, age forty-three), 1975. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of Anita Fernandes.



↑ 5. My mother's youngest brother Vijay (left, age five), my mother Anita (centre, age twelve), their father Vidan Moses (centre, age thirty-three), and her younger brother Radesh (right, age eleven). My mother said that this photo was taken by a visiting Catholic Nun, 1980. Courtesy of Anita Fernandes.



family photos and records, video, sound, and public records like phonebooks and advertisements, and have thoughtfully collected, rephotographed, or collaged them into different works. They have worked conceptually, and experimentally, and have used research as a part of their creation, effectively bringing the process into the final work. They have recontextualized myths and legends, rematerialized collective memories, and shared lesser-known stories that address larger issues of our time. Alongside their work, I offer relationality through my archives: family photographs, records, analogue video stills, and fulsome context and captions. While independent photographs are references, there are two collages (Image 9 and 10: *an inwards ripple: archival intervention I* and *II*) created which include archives explored during the creation of a student film, *an inwards ripple*, in 2022. The collages carry forth the methodology presented in the film of a ‘ripple’ of memory inwardly reaching me, and then continuing outwards. Expressed in three parts and several surrogates or vessels for memory—living, dead, and non-living—I aim to confront ideas of memory, legacy, and departure. Ultimately, all of the archives I present in this publication strive towards this due to the fragmentation that exists for me as a member of the diaspora. The format of a collage narrates a story, or pulls at threads of association. Together, within this publication, they address “*what can the de- and post-colonial archive look like?*” and share how they have waded through the daily cultural trans-nationalism often imposed on diasporic bodies.



# Stories of Rivers and Gold: Anticipated Futures Through a History of the Present

When I was young, I understood archives as portals to peoples and times, the hard facts procured by governmental bodies, yearly school photos or work IDs and the other papers and cards that identified us, as well as the ledgers in which we traced family histories, personal letters or diaries, family photo-albums, or studio portraits. Archives are an accumulation of both the public and the personal—what was made for you and what you have made for yourself. They can be used to piece together the story of where your ancestors came from and where they went that resulted in where you are today!<sup>1</sup> However, the distinction between personal and public archives often signals where someone comes from and how they came about; as Trinidadian-Canadian writer and curator Lise Ragbir states,

—those whose lineages are tied to enslavement, genocide, war crimes, or even extramarital dalliances—documentation of personal histories is limited: births and deaths not certified, family trees missing limbs, wedding photos replaced by oral accounts of unions that may or may not have been recognized by governing powers.<sup>2</sup>



1 Archive, as the noun, is understood as “a historical record or document so preserved.” by Oxford English Dictionary. Britannica Dictionary describes the noun as a place in its definition, stating that it is “a place in which public records or historical materials (such as documents) are kept.” Merriam-Webster adds to the noun by means of “the material preserved” and “a repository or collection.” The robust definition as presented through the International Council on Archives is “the documentary by-product of human activity retained for their long-term value.” and includes a series of characteristics (authenticity, reliability, integrity, usability) and defining the sources used to categorise archives.

2 Lise Ragbir, “Artists Breathe New Life into Archives,” *Hyperallergic* (2021): <https://hyperallergic.com/637431/artists-breathe-new-life-into-archives/>.

Missing personal archives may indicate coming from lesser means or a tumultuous family history. Missing public archives may signal social or political instability. An abundance of both kinds may indicate wealth or inheritance. In contrast, a significant absence of both can often point to circumstances pertaining to migration—forced or otherwise. Access to even the most basic archives (certificates, ledgers, or photographs) allows for more expansive storytelling. However, even then, familial and historical nuances within individual ownership allow for archives to hold varied meanings. As a result, what is defined as an “archive” has grown and morphed over time. As societies, we are implicated in this expansion of technologies, materials, definitions, and interests as we move forward within broader archival studies and their contemporary applications.<sup>3</sup>

Historically, especially within former colonies, to create and possess public archives was to control political, social, and colonialist power.<sup>4</sup> Public archives were largely for organ-isational or bureaucratic record-keeping—ways for European powers to “control their extensive and widespread empires” and to “ensure, among other things, uniformity of rules and regulations, maintenance of good order and discipline, the ability to keep a close watch on possible outbreaks of unrest, not to mention rebellion.”<sup>5</sup> But what happens to human memory and the means to document and capture it when public or organisational archives are all that is available as examples? How do we remember, read, digest, and interpret stories or images “assumed only to register forms of institutional accounting or state

3 Marlene Manoff, “Theories of the Archive from Across the Disciplines,” *Libraries and the Academy* 4, no. 1 (2004): 9. Manoff’s full quote about implication (and how she opens her paper) is: “In the past decade historians, literary critics, philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, geographers, political scientists, and others have wrestled with the meaning of the word “archive.” A compelling body of literature has accumulated around this term that demonstrates a convergence of interests among scholars, archivists, and librarians. This archival discourse provides a window onto current debates and common concerns in many academic fields. It also helps illuminate the ways in which all of us are implicated in transformations in scholarship, publication, and the changing fortunes of libraries and archives.”

4 Ibid, 16; John A. Aarons and Sharon Alexander-Gooding, “Historical Developments in Caribbean Archives and Record Keeping,” in *Decolonizing the Caribbean Record: an archives reader*, ed. John A. Aarons, Stanley H. Griffin, Jeannette A. Bastian (Sacramento: Litwin Books, 2018): 11. Manoff states, “Postcolonial scholarship has demonstrated how the colonial archive was shaped by the aims of its creators and how interpretation of the archive always depends on the perspective of its interpreters.” Furthermore Aarons and Alexander-Gooding elaborate: “...some territories [change] hands several times [due to] exploitation, and the institutions of slavery and indentureship. These factors have implications for record keeping as it affected the types of records created, who created them, why they were created and how they were treated when their original usefulness was over.”

5 John A. Aarons and Sharon Alexander-Gooding: 13.

management?” Black feminist theorist of visual culture and contemporary art Tina Campt asks, “How do we contend with images intended not to figure black subjects, but to delineate instead differential or degraded forms of personhood or subjection— images produced with the pur-pose of tracking, cataloging, and constraining the movement of blacks in and out of diaspora?”<sup>6</sup> And instead, how do we hold images that don’t only reflect the reality of trauma with honour, but celebrate a rich and culturally diverse human experience? Can oral tradition, ephemeral materials, artifacts, heirlooms, and art be understood as archives? Library and Archival Scholar Marlene Manoff describes this struggle to define the archives as “[researchers proclaiming] the centrality of the archive to both the scholarly enterprise and the existence of democratic society.” Essentially, archives exist as a means to collect information as much as they are a means to reflect people and culture.

The National Archives UK “Caribbean Through a Lens” project has hosted images from the Colonial Office Photographic Collection online since 2012.<sup>7</sup> Varied in their content but largely capturing a period from the late 1890s to the early 1920s, the ethnographic collection ranges from images of the emerging city of Georgetown to the interior hinterlands, to the different peoples and tribes located across the country (See Image 7: *An album page of portraits of “East Indian Immigrants”* and 8: *An album page of portraits of “Negroes and Portugese”*). The images are extraordinarily curious and offer insight into colonial British Guiana after slavery was abolished in 1833 but before Independence was established in 1966. While some images and album pages feature scrawls of descriptive writing and some captions provide visual context<sup>8</sup>, the information behind the image is lost, begging the question as to if the reflected people and their cultures are also lost, offering only “degraded forms of personhood or subjection”.<sup>9</sup> Manoff continues with the argument that it is also with the introduction of modern technology and the conflation of the library-museum-

6 Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017): 3.

7 “Caribbean Through a Lens,” *The National Archives UK*, accessed March 1, 2024, <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archives-sector/case-studies-and-research-reports/case-studies/audience-development/the-national-archives-caribbean-through-a-lens/>.

8 Specifically, the images references here only describe in so far as it is visual or presumptuous, for example, “East Indian Immigrants. A sirdar, or driver, foreman of a gang of Coolies on a sugar estate.” However, some of the spelling suggests that these descriptions are dates, perhaps of the time taken, and may have some accuracy in their limited descriptions. For example, “East Indian Immigrants. A Hindoo Girl of high caste.”

9 Campt: 3.



↑ 7. An album page of portraits of "East Indian Immigrants", 1870-1931. Part of the Colonial Office photographic collection held at The National Archives. Courtesy of The National Archives UK.



↑ 8. An album page of portraits of "Negroes and Portugese", 1870-1931. Part of the Colonial Office photographic collection held at The National Archives. Courtesy of The National Archives UK.



archive dichotomy, that the archive becomes a “loose signifier for a disparate set of concepts.”<sup>10</sup> Murkier is the archive’s definition in the present day as we move forward to discover new ways of activating what was once considered “lost” or unimportant, and reconsidering what was “useful” or prioritised by colonialist powers. As The National Archive UK album pages exemplify, there is tension between the quality, collection, and preservation of photographs and the lack of access and information regarding identifiers as simple as a name, age, and location. Even murkier is the diaspora’s relationship with archives—their importance, use, and future. Identities can easily lay fragmented due to gaps and omissions (and how they emerged or were caused) but, in the contemporary era, a power struggle is notable towards an understanding of how these aforementioned questions can be used, kept, and held towards an expandable definition of archives which actively challenges the colonialist models set in place. So, how do we define the archive to avoid ambiguity and retain a sense of what it should foster: this middle ground between information and culture? On one hand, to know the history of the coloniser’s presence is to understand how archives were implemented, used, and disregarded.<sup>11</sup> However, to know the history—and then to use it—is to know that there are possibilities in empowering the oppressed to recover forgotten histories and forge new futures. When we consider of the aspects that are pivotal to understanding the visceral nature of archives, the archives we hope to leave behind become living things, powerful communicators, and informational thoroughfares.

In the contemporary era, *what does a post- and de-colonial archive look like?* Counter-archives address this question by looking beyond the white and Eurocentric colonist powers and their formulation, stakes, and narratives that have been central in archival practices. Counter-archiving is a decolonial praxis. They are stories, photographs, family archives, and new media, amongst other practices; they exercise resistance to the gaps in history by actively exploring or interpreting them; they are both concrete spaces for holding materials and metaphysical spaces for holding memory and absence. They go beyond mere collection and preservation and instead consider “[disrupting] conventional national narratives”, alternative modes of production, cultivation, and holding as a means that we use to connect

<sup>10</sup> Marlene Manoff: 10.

<sup>11</sup> Aarons and Alexander-Gooding: 14. “As far as Britian was concerned, the colonies were plantations and not settled communities that needed to preserve records for their own use and identification.”

- 9. Roxanne Fernandes, *an inwards ripple: archival intervention I*, 2024. Archival photography and records.
- 10. Roxanne Fernandes, *an inwards ripple: archival intervention II*, 2024. Archival photography and records.

to the past.<sup>12</sup> Including both post-colonial and de-colonial methodologies is highly intentional, each emerging from and addressing distinct circumstances. In this context, the post-colonial refers to the wake of the 1966 Independence of Guyana from the British. While disorganized archives precede this, the transition left archives incomplete, irrevocably disseminated, and unstable as its people began a decades-long migration out of the country. The designation of post-colonial is political and is one of the periods in which we inhabit as a diaspora, left to reckon with what was (or was not) left behind. While de-colonialism serves as an action which allows for the archives to be reconsidered and reconstituted through the centring of land and people over imperialism and capitalism. It is noticing the past, acting in the present, and mapping the future. The other period in which we live—or act and hope towards—is that of the de-colonial, which serves as a method to move forward.

A post- and de-colonial archive, through counter-archiving, is one in which the past, present, and future are intertwined to critically inform one another. Of this, Saidiya Hartman says,

As I understand it, a history of the present strives to illuminate the intimacy of our experience with the lives of the dead, to write our now as it is interrupted by this past, and to imagine a *free state*, not as the time before captivity or slavery, but rather as the anticipated future of this writing.<sup>13</sup>

Hartman’s process of writing and narrating the counter-histories of slavery “has always been inseparable from writing a history of present.”<sup>14</sup> Speaking of “anticipated futures” is what allows for the state of archives of the past—in all of their incompleteness—to be rewritten, filled in, and reconstituted. Camp supports this, advising us to “listen to images”, both a description and a method, that opens up the “radical interpretive possibilities of images and state archives we are most often inclined to overlook” by engaging the images as “haptic objects”, attuning to them,

<sup>12</sup> “About,” *Archive/Counter-Archive*, accessed December 3, 2023, <https://counterarchive.ca/about>.

<sup>13</sup> Saidiya Hartman, “Venus In Two Acts,” *small axe* 26 (2008): 4.

<sup>14</sup> bid: 4.



COPY FROM THE REGISTER OF BIRTHS IN BRITISH GUIANA  
CENTRY OF South America

No.	299
Name and Place of Birth	Eleventh February 1976 St Joseph's Mary Hospital Crawford Street Georgetown Guyana
Name and Surname and any other surnames	Schela Fernandes
Sex	Female
Age	4 2 years
State of Religion Description	Roman Catholic Married
Cause of Death	1st Perinatal Losses Certified by Dr. J. G. Seawar
Signature, Grade of Midwife and of Registrar	As per information paper signed by Sister Mary Admachilis R.S.M. Administrator (Rg.) St Joseph's Mary Hospital G.P.M.
Date Registered	Eleventh February 1976
Signature of Registrar	S. Prasad Registrar

GUYANA  
IN THE YEAR 1976

REGISTERED IN THE  
CENTRY OF South America

CERTIFIED A TRUE COPY.

Sister Priscilla White  
2, St. Anthony, Gt. G.



MORNING PRAYER

New I wake and see The light  
God as kept me through The night  
make me good O LORD I pray Kee and  
guide me through The day That all  
I do and say will be Pleasire in  
my eyes Amen







**Eulogy for Leo Fernandes**

This man lying here today was a son, a husband, a brother, an uncle, a friend and most of all, he was our father.

Our dad was the best daddy in the whole wide world. Our mother died 28 years ago and left our father to raise 9 children. Our youngest sister Ave was only 6 years old. Our father never remarried because he was afraid that a stepmother would mistreat us. He asked our eldest sister Patricia to live with us so she moved her entire family back home and together with our dad helped to raise us.

Sixteen years ago, daddy moved to Canada. At first, he did not like living here, but soon grew accustomed to the lifestyle. He was always present no matter where we went.

Whether it was camping, church, the park or visiting family and friends. Daddy loved life and lived life to the fullest. He was always the centre of attention and death was the last thing on his agenda. As a matter of fact, he never discussed it. He always said that he would see about that when that day comes. That day has come and who would have believed that a simple fall would destroy such a strong and vibrant man.

In his younger life he was a great cricketer. The best according to himself, just ask his brother Compton. Daddy loved sports, especially wrestling. He looked forward to Sunday and Monday nights and would stay up late to watch with Chris and Lloyd. He would then later discuss the matches with Jerome and Julian. He also enjoyed movies but God help us all when we watched a movie with him that he had already seen. He would tell you every scene in the movie before it even happened. He always referred to himself as Emel Flynn.

Daddy lived a good healthy life. He was 53 days shy of his 79<sup>th</sup> birthday. He has 10 children, 20 grandchildren and 3 great grand children.

A notorious quote from our father was "I am God's own son, the only lion who ever lived".

Today we say goodbye to our daddy, "Leo the Lion". We love you Dad and will miss you. You will always be in our hearts, minds and souls. You are gone, but never forgotten. May God take you into his kingdom and may you rest in peace.





registering them through more than viewing, “and refusing the very terms of photographic subjection they were engineered to produce.”<sup>15</sup> I extend this to listen, so critically, not just to the images selected, re-worked, or accumulated by artists, but to the intentions and reasoning behind their selections: what they hope to convey about the archives and why they feel that it is relevant to facilitate a personal connection with the viewer. This becomes even more pertinent as new technologies and methodologies behind research-creation practices can support more visceral and expandable definitions and experiences of the archives. The de- and post-colonial counter-archive is glaringly non-temporal. It is interdisciplinary, especially where I approach it from this place and time of contemporary art, where research-creation fuels the respective practices of three diasporic Guyanese artists: Christie Neptune, Fariyah Aliyah Shah, and Sandra Brewster—each with an interdisciplinary image-based practice that explores the complexities of personal identity, memory, and the reconstitution of archives through art.

For Guyana, when considering colonial impact, a wide-spread diaspora, and diverse ethnic make-up, the task of reflecting or documenting can take on new and experimental forms—ones that contribute to the formation of a complex, yet shared, de- and post-colonial transnational identity for the diaspora. Guyana, located in the north-eastern part of South America: bordering Suriname to the east, Brazil and the Amazon to the south, Venezuela to the west, and the Atlantic Ocean to the north, is the grounding for this developing counter-archive, specifically within its diaspora. Existing as one of the “three Guyanas/Guianas”<sup>16</sup> of South America, the country is primarily English-speaking but boasts a diverse ethnic make-up that has led to it being described as “the land of six peoples.”<sup>17</sup> Largely built as a result of colonialist exploitations—British European colonisers, tribes of Indigenous (formerly referred to as “Amerindian”) inhabitants, enslaved African peoples, Indian and Chinese indentured workers, and Portuguese farmer transplants—Guyana, along with Suriname (formerly Dutch Guiana) and French Guiana, exists at a distinct crossroads of being culturally and historically Caribbean, though in South America,

<sup>15</sup> Campt: 5, 8, 23.

<sup>16</sup> While the spelling ‘Guiana’ came about during Christopher Columbus and Sir Walter Raleigh’s exploration of the land, it is cited that the post-Independence spelling of ‘Guyana’ is an Arawak word meaning ‘the land of many waters.’

<sup>17</sup> “The land of six peoples” is a line taken directly from the Guyana National Anthem *Dear Land of Guyana, of Rivers and Plains*. The “six” refers to the historically diverse ethnographic make-up of the country: Chinese, African, East Indian, Amerindian, Portuguese, and European. In the current era, these titles can be reconsidered or further specified.

with the pepperings of its irrefutably forced and intentional diaspora. It’s how I grew up: a fusion of old Bollywood movies and Jhandi’s; dancehall and soca music; curries and chow mein; and so forth. But what I lacked, at the time, was the knowledge of how cultural elements overlapped in order to become what I understood as a singular identity.

This history and its lasting impact are brought forward through a critical curatorial lens by looking at contemporary Guyanese diasporic artists and what they are creating as a result of a shared fractured personal history, memories, or cultural relationalities. While working in their respective practices (largely lens-based) Neptune, Shah, and Brewster are capturing new ways of being in their identities and relating to each other, history, and the land. Through their work, they ask: how do we revel in memories, confront, sink, and recreate them? How do we bring to life stories or splintered histories that were previously lost? Through an exploration of their practices and works brought together with cultural and historiographic analysis, a de- and post-colonial archive is imagined. The selection and exploration of three artists who identify as women speaks to the often ‘coded’ work that women do (even beyond their role as artists) to be the ones who hold histories, pass down information, capture memory, and take care of the community. Despite the majority of these disciplines (archivists, photographers, so-called community leaders) being dominated by men in the professional realm, it is often up to women to care for nuance, search for meaning, and go beyond the stale methods of record-keeping set forth by colonialist agendas. It is seen and practiced actively in the inclusions of *an inwards ripple: archival intervention I and II* (Image 9 and 10), two collages in which I carry forth and aim to speak to

<sup>18</sup> *an inwards ripple: archival intervention I* narrates what is left in the wake of a sudden death for those who did and did not know the deceased and pulls at threads related to grief, mourning, longing, and generational memory. The image on the right is of my grandmother, Sheila Fernandes, who passed away suddenly when my father was only nine years old. The document on the opposing page is of her death certificate and the small piece of paper is a ‘morning prayer’—both of which were kept in my grandfather’s grey pouch. The sepia-toned image of a little girl is of my father’s sister, Bernadette, who also passed away suddenly from a health complication when he was a boy. The background image is of Canje Creek, located behind my father’s childhood home, where his other older sister, Camille, drowned when she was a teenager. The image of the child below is of me, being held by my mother. She is holding me after putting on a beaded black-and-white bracelet meant to protect infants from ‘evil eyes’. *an inwards ripple: archival intervention II* speaks more to the aforementioned period of the wake, being ‘there’ instead of ‘here’, and the inevitability of continued life. On the left side, my grandpa helps me swim at a lake in western Ontario. Overlaid is a Eulogy from her funeral written by one of my aunts. On the opposing side, we see a glimpse of my grandfather’s life during his time living in Canada. The house he grew up in, now inhabited by one of his daughters and her family, is seen

the ‘ripple’ of memory, grief, stories, and people that are left in the wake of trauma.<sup>18</sup>

In the work of Neptune, Shah, and Brewster, there is a thread of “migrational aesthetics” throughout their work, a term coined by Dutch cultural theorist and artist Mieke Bal, which carefully considers how migration and the wide and often disparate history of it (physical movement, traces at/in places, and/or as pertaining to migrants) can be translated into aesthetic forms. Bal notes that the word “migration” actively modifies “aesthetics” because migration (movement, transference, resettling) is indisputably a part of cultural transformation in the same way that aesthetics is often noted to be.<sup>19</sup> She invites the viewer to consider the relationality of the two. These artists, through deep aesthetic consideration, work with large ideas of migration and memory that are ancestral and diasporic and often shaped around ideas of identity and fragmentation.

Saidiya Hartman’s methodology of critical fabulation is described as, “—listening for the unsaid, translating misconstrued words, and refashioning disfigured lives” in order to “[redress] the violence that produced numbers, ciphers, and fragments of discourse.”<sup>20</sup> Hartman considers the unfilled narratives that exist in the history of Black and African peoples, victims of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, and contemporary Afro-Caribbeans. Neptune, Shah, and Brewster are all Afro-Guyanese diasporic artists who address identity in their work and wider practices, and look towards the use of personal archives (past and present) as storytelling and the strife that comes with that, using the Guyanese landscape as metaphor, and the musing of narratives which challenge history and subsequent assumptions about the country and its people. In “Venus in Two Acts”, Hartman muses on the reasons, rationale, and consequences for narrativizing these gaps; what it means to lend voice to the voiceless, to add personality and place to a single non-specific line found in a record, or to take an offhand story and give it metaphor and second life. She asks,

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post-reconstruction in the early 2000s. The photo was taken during his first and only visit back. Beneath it are materials from his grey pouch: his one-way ticket to Canada, an image of a white-Jesus, and a baby photo of my brother. The background is of the dense foliage of bush and palm trees near where he lived in Canje, Berbice.

19 Sam Durrant and Cathrine M. Lord, “Introduction,” in *Essays in Migratory Aesthetics: Cultural Practices Between Migration and Art-making*, eds. Sam Durrant and Catherine M. Lord (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007): 11-13.

20 Hartman: 3.

21 Hartman: 11.

“Is it possible to exceed or negotiate the constitutive limits of the archive?”<sup>21</sup> With these artists working deeply alongside the themes of speculation, memory, fragmentation, and storytelling, and this reconstitution of their content, curatorially and critically, towards counter-archiving, this question is pertinent. What limitations were presented in their lives that these artists chose to work around and, in consequence, led to the creation of these artworks or their complex practices?

How do we, as viewers, take the time and consideration to see the post- and de-colonial counter-archival intentions in the work of artists, writers, or critical practitioners in a way that actively challenges the sociopolitical norm or expectations towards aesthetics, and honours where they approach migratory impact and the critical speculation of historical narratives? The answer lies in what Bal calls “sen-tient engagement,”<sup>22</sup> which goes beyond participatory art and asks us to not just consider these “traces” that are left behind by migration and thus present as an aesthetic form,<sup>23</sup> but to interact with them, know them, and responsively embody them. This is what I ask of the reader as they carry through and lay witness to the diasporic artists sharing their works as counter-archives, and this publication and its culminations as a testament to post- and de-colonial archives. The stories these artists share deserves elaboration. I encourage a conscious reading through the text and viewing of the work and ask further of this new counter-archive, beyond this text: what does it include, who does it speak of, and to? Additionally, how do artworks and archives place the country’s colonial past in dialogue to understand its impact? What counter-archives are and what they can be will be defined and explored, both independently and in the proposed contexts.

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22 Mieke Bal, “Lost in Space, Lost in the Library,” in *Essays in Migratory Aesthetics: Cultural Practices Between Migration and Art-making*, eds. Sam Durrant Catherine M. Lord (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007): 23.

23 Mieke Bal, “Documenting What? Auto-Theory and Migratory Aesthetics,” in *A Companion to Contemporary Documentary Film* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2018): 124–44. Bal says, “different aesthetic experiences are offered through the encounter with such traces.”





PART I

# Alternative Forms of Legitimate Knowledge: Storytelling Through *Looking for Lucille*

A Conversation with  
Fariyah Aliyah Shah

↑ 11. Video still of family members whining at my father Paul's thirty-second birthday party at our home in Malton, Mississauga, Ontario, 1999. Analogue video. Courtesy of Anita Fernandes.

↑ 12. Video still from Chowtal performance during Phagwah at my grandmother's house in Berbice, Guyana, 2000. Analogue video. Courtesy of Anita Fernandes.



***they ask me to remember  
but they want me to remember  
their memories  
and i keep on remembering  
mine.***

— Lucille Clifton, “*why some people be mad at me sometimes*”

When looking through Fariyah Aliyah Shah’s conceptual photo series *Looking for Lucille*, I was transported back to the extensive collection of family photographs that I grew up viewing. “Have I seen that house before?” was a question I had when I saw her photograph of a grove with a wooden shack and palm trees abundant in the background. It resembled the house that my parents photographed at some point in my childhood, or perhaps even before that. It was all innocuous, fragmented recollections. I have not been to Guyana in over twenty years, and the memories I do have belong to a child. Although foreign to me, there was a shared cultural memory. One where certain signifiers pulsed at me through Shah’s photograph.

*Looking for Lucille* is an ongoing conceptual series started by artist Fariyah Aliyah Shah in 2017 featuring eleven images (a combination of her family archive and own photography), seven fabric installations, and a soundscape. It began as an inquiry during a trip to Victoria Village, Guyana—as a result of the documentation, or lack thereof, for her maternal grandmother Lucille. For Shah, the series began by asking questions about the archives and exploring “the strength and validity of memory and oral history as alternative forms of research.” As in many countries with colonial history, Shah’s family records and archives were dispersed, missing, or non-existent. The series is Shah’s “act of reclaiming agency [of her] personal narrative”<sup>1</sup> by recreating Lucille’s archive—recognizing that her life, the

stories of who she was and where she came from, were worthy of exploration, documentation, and memorialising.

In January 2024, I spoke with Shah about *Looking for Lucille*, her larger practice, and her current research. What has resulted is a conversation enveloped by narrative interventions which provides brevity through elaborating what is being discussed, while also providing insight into applicable methodologies.

**RF:** How would you describe your photo-based practice, the intersections you may approach, what and how you explore, and how you pursue conceptuality?

**FAS:** In terms of my practice, I think of it quite broadly. I usually approach it from a lens-based perspective, in the sense that I could be using photography, the history of photography, or the moving image. Those mediums are really exciting to me. I like to have a conversation with the history of photography. My parents didn’t have much when they came from Guyana, but they had lots of stories and photographs. And, so, my understanding of history and my personal history was through photos. When I became an artist, the medium of photography was one that I gravitated towards—I like to unpack it from colonial and feminist perspectives.

I’ve never thought of my practice as something that was going to be purely in one stream. That was never how I created. Experimentation allowed me to break the forms and have more confidence in terms of my skill set. Now that I have more technical know-how, it’s a decisive choice as to what I’m using. If I want to include textiles, it’s because there’s a purpose behind that: a rich textile history within my family. And if there’s a skill set that I feel will better explain or articulate an idea, I’m willing to learn it. I’m willing to say, “How can I push this further or collaborate with somebody who does that thing in a way that would enhance the project or the idea?”

I think there are many layers to that question as well because

<sup>1</sup> Fariyah Aliyah Shah, “Looking for Lucille, 2017 - Present,” accessed February 8, 2024, <https://www.fariyahshah.com/looking-for-lucille>.



↑ 13. *Looking for Lucille, Sustenance from Coconut*, 2017. Archival Digital Print, 6" × 4".



↑ 14. *Looking for Lucille, View from St. Hubert*, 2019. Archival Digital Print, 8" × 12".

there's the execution of the concept and then there's the formation of the concept. It's a lot of thinking, contemplating, questioning—questioning the way history is written, questioning my experience, and seeing how much of my experience is represented in that history. That's typically the approach that I take, and then from there, I ask: what stories exist? Do they match or resonate with the stories that I have? And how can I add to those stories?

**RF:** I imagine that, when you were speaking about it being difficult to frame the conceptual process at first, especially with your series *Looking for Lucille*, there could have been a lot of experimentation to see what modes fit within the story that you're trying to tell.

**FAS:** Although I come from a research-based practice, I am not the type of artist who will actively quote theory in my work. But as I move through, I will undertake intense research

around some of those concepts. At the end of the day, I want my work to be meant for a broader audience.

**RF:** I understand that! [For this publication] It's been a process of applying theory and making it approachable. I want people to read about Guyanese artists through an accessible thoroughfare.

**FAS:** Yeah. And I think from that standpoint, it becomes really interesting. Providing alternative forms of legitimate knowledge is a way to push back against the canon. A big part of my work is to change that from a decolonial lens—it's this kind of push and pull. We have a lot of knowledge from a cultural perspective that is completely legitimised in our eyes, so how do we get global or academic recognition for these processes and these stories and all of the beautiful things that we do?

Tina Campt's methodology of "listening to images" is an imaginative and exciting way to revel in the possibilities of the deeply intimate and challenging act she is proposing to the formerly colonised persons. Campt describes it as an intervention for interacting with photos and archives, as both a description and a method of "recalibrating vernacular photographs as quiet, quotidian practices that give us access to the affective registers through which these images enunciate alternative accounts of their subjects."<sup>2</sup> To listen to images is to participate beyond the act of mere looking and instead attune to the other frequencies that photographs may register. She continues,

Engaging these images as decidedly haptic objects is a method that requires us to interrogate both the archival encounter, as well as the content of archival collections, in multiple tenses and multiple temporalities and in ways that attend to both their stakes and possibilities. It is a method that reckons with the fissures, gaps, and interstices that emerge when we refuse to accept the "truth" of images and archives the state seeks to proffer through its production of subjects posed to produce particular "types" of regulated and regulatable subjects.<sup>3</sup>

2 Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017), 5.

3 *Ibid.*, 8.

Shah's attempts to do this have been particularly challenging, with a passport photo of Lucille being the only photo that she has of her grandmother. Because of this, Shah has approached the archives corporeally: putting her body in the same spaces Lucille inhabited and seeing her likeness in her own face and her mothers.<sup>4</sup> Like Saidiya Hartman's proposition to "listen to the unsaid" through critical fabulation,<sup>5</sup> Shah's autoethnographic methodology behind this project—her motivations for addressing the gaps and omissions—directly implicates her own identity with the material, how it has been found, the "shape" of the space left by missing archives, and associated notions of place. She begins very directly with the personhood of her grandmother and the limits of the archive made present in getting to know her.

**RF:** Can you share a bit about the inception of the series *Looking for Lucille*? How have you chosen the breadth of images and material?

**FAS:** While doing this project, I was working on the large initial archive and photographed it in 2017. On my first trip to Guyana, I was trying to organise and create narratives with this [film] roll I had and all of this precious material. Typically, when I shoot, especially when it's out in the field, I don't have a shot list. I like to absorb and experience and then photograph from there. Then when I have the images back, I'm further reflecting to see what kind of themes are merging. What did I learn by being in that space? What additional research have I done about that space to then conjure more ideas? How do these ideas show up in the images?

When it came to *Looking for Lucille*, there was an opportunity to speak about the idea of hybridity and being in Guyana. Specifically in Victoria, I was staying in my grandmother's house. My grandfather passed away when my mom was about ten or eleven years old and afterwards they relocated back to Victoria where my grandmother was from. We stayed in her

4 Fariyah Aliyah Shah, "AWARE x WOPHA x PAMM: On the Edge of Visibility – An International Symposium Day 1," Pérez Art Museum Miami, October 19, 2023, video, 54:40, <https://www.youtube.com/live/Vqq5J8VSM5Q?si=opOEFx3O5-Kvu1OF>.

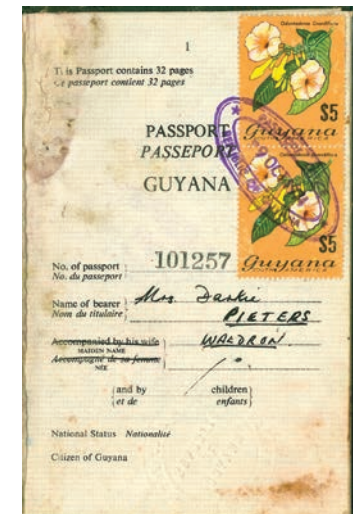
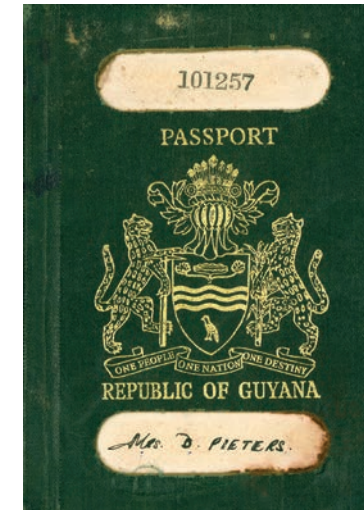
5 Saidiya Hartman, "Venus In Two Acts," *small axe* 26 (2008): 3.





↑ 15. *Looking for Lucille, Victoria*, 2017. Archival Digital Print, 6" × 4".

↑ 16. *Looking for Lucille, Guyanese Thyme Wrapped in Lace*, 2019. Guyanese Thyme, Lace, wooden embroidery hoop, 10" Diameter hoop.



↑ 17–19. *Looking for Lucille, Portrait of Lucille 1–3*, 2019. Archival Digital Print, 6" × 4".

home and my mom hadn't been in that house since her mom had passed. I was there for her sister's funeral, and she didn't want to come back to Guyana for a funeral. There were all of these talks about my grandmother and the last time my mom was here. And because I didn't grow up with my grandmother (she passed the year before I was born) this relationship with my aunt—my eldest aunt—was something as close to that I could have with an elder in my family. There were all these intersections from a timing and spatial perspective.

By virtue of being in space, I started to ask questions about my grandmother and reflect on stories. And because I was in Guyana, for the first time, I was thinking back to the stories of my childhood. It was a very live experience. Multi-layered because, again, I'm working with my memory, my mother's memory, the memory of my aunts and cousins, and the space itself felt like it had its own memory. I kept telling people that I had never experienced a land welcoming me like Guyana had—as if it had known me before I knew it. With all of that, I knew I was going to make a piece, I just didn't know what it was going to be. But *Looking for Lucille* became something that I was thinking about. And even before I came to Guyana, I was already asking my mom questions, so all of this was happening over many years.

There was a research centre of sorts very close to the village and I was curious to know a little bit more about my grandmother, but there was limited information. I tried other archives and ancestry spaces and it was just very, very limited. My mom had given me my grandmother's passport and while looking at this document, I saw all these inaccuracies. There was this back-and-forth dialogue with my mom about all of these inconsistencies with this government document that's supposed to be an accurate representation of an individual. I couldn't find deeper information or recorded history of who this woman was or who her family was. Past my great grandparents, there's very little information about that line

of my family. So when there were all of these holes in my research, I was just frustrated.

I went back to the archive that I had shot in Guyana and as I sat with my mom I was having a conversation with her about what she remembered. *Looking for Lucille* manifested into a portrait of my grandmother through my eyes. When it came to selecting the work, I wanted a piece that represented an image or a space that we had all occupied together. These were images of my grandmother's bedroom where my mom and I stayed. My mom grew up in that house as well. And then later in my grandmother's life, she moved to Montreal. So, I have these two windows. They're on opposite ends. A viewpoint of her life in Guyana, and then a viewpoint of her life in Canada. The other image that I selected was the coconut, and this image kind of is something that reoccurs from a historical perspective. I was thinking about the idea of a hard exterior holding something so precious. It's being held by my mother and presented to me. I wanted some of that archive to exist and live in this body of work as well. I scanned her passport because I wanted an image of her. I'm having this conversation between my documentation versus the documentation that is legitimised.

**RF:** During this research on the subject of your grandmother, what did you face in the initial process of collecting archives and stories, especially in terms of what was in abundance or what was excluded?

**FAS:** I found that the biggest part was where to look. The location of archival materials, specifically of Guyana, is everywhere. That's something that I didn't realise when I started this project in 2017. It's something that clicked for me this past year, especially during my fellowship in Miami. The Caribbean Cultural Institute Fellowship<sup>6</sup> has a rich archive-

6 Pérez Art Museum Miami, "Pérez Art Museum Miami Announces Recipients of Fourth Annual Caribbean Cultural Institute Fellowship," Pérez Art Museum Miami, September 21, 2023,





↑ 20. *Looking for Lucille, View from Victoria*, 2017. Archival Digital Print, 8" × 12".

and research-based focus on Caribbean histories. I was very excited to go there because Guyana is part of the Caribbean. So, I go. Then they said that they didn't think I'd find much information about Guyana. And it was so true! There was little to nothing about Guyanese stories, history, and people—but there was a lot about resources and what was exported and imported. For any photographs I found of people, they didn't have their names attached. It was just archetypes.

Another element to this particular story, when looking at the research, is that Victoria Village holds a lot of significance. It was one of the first villages in Guyana where the formerly enslaved were able to purchase back the land from the British in 1893. There's an image that I photographed of a meeting point where folks gathered their money in a wheelbarrow to buy back the land. There's this plaque on a fruit stall next to

<https://www.pamm.org/en/press/perez-art-museum-miami-announces-recipients-of-fourth-annual-caribbean-cultural-institute-fellowship/>.



↑ 21. *Looking for Lucille, Untitled (Wiri Wiri)*, 2017. Archival Digital Print, 6" × 4".

a gas station that has this historical information, and that's it. There's no, you know, UNESCO plaque next to it. I started to understand that I needed to know more about broader Caribbean history in order to really understand the history of Guyana and why certain histories were not recorded. That led me to do a lot of initial research. And I'm continuing this very deep research on the Haitian Revolution because it had such a major impact on not just the rest of the Caribbean, but specifically in Guyana. Those were the difficulties that I found in the research. Then I had to turn to other forms of research by having conversations with folks. And then it wasn't until later on that I recorded histories, or oral histories, and things of that nature.

The haunting of a migratory past is a significant component of what Mieke Bal calls "migratory aesthetic." The "materiality of the artwork becomes one of the resources through which the cognitive and aesthetic experience of encountering

a theme, such as migration, is enriched.”<sup>7</sup> Shah’s method and motivations speak to a need for sentient engagement<sup>8</sup>—to allow for viewers to have an active encounter between the theme and the artwork. To seek out why stories are omitted becomes as important as telling the story itself and is an important component of counter-archiving in a post- and de-colonial sensibility.

**RF:** While doing research for this publication, I came across an archives reader called *Decolonizing the Caribbean Record*, which outlined the treatment of archives—or the lack thereof—imposed by colonialist empires of Europe. Specifically, that “colonies were plantations and not settled communities that needed to preserve records for their own use and identification”<sup>9</sup> and that “as a general rule, Britain demonstrated no great interest in the historical series of records which were kept in its colonies.”<sup>10</sup> In the mid-twentieth century, upon the independence of several Caribbean countries, a decree and telegram was issued for the “disposal of classified records and accountable documents.” In contrast to this, your ideas around challenging what constitutes “legitimate” archives is interesting to me, especially in considering the stakes for the future and your research toward Victoria Village. What do you think can be done in regards to archives or the past and present to shape a more fulsome story of formerly colonised peoples? What stories do you feel could be told about Guyana for the future archives of its people and diaspora?

**FAS:** What can be done about the current archives is to make it accessible to the diaspora. I don’t know if you’ve seen it on

7 Sudeep Dasgupta, “The Aesthetics of Displacement and the Performance of Migration” in *Art and Visibility in Migratory Culture: Conflict, Resistance, and Agency*, ed. Mieke Bal and Miguel Á. Hernández-Navarro (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011): 92.

8 Mieke Bal, “Lost in Space, Lost in the Library,” in *Essays in Migratory Aesthetics: Cultural Practices Between Migration and Art-making*, eds. Sam Durrant Catherine M. Lord (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007): 23.

9 John A. Aarons and Sharon Alexander-Gooding, “Historical Developments in Caribbean Archives and Record Keeping,” in *Decolonizing the Caribbean Record: an archives reader*, ed. John A. Aarons, Stanley H. Griffin, Jeannette A. Bastian (Sacramento: Litwin Books, 2018): 14.

10 Ibid, 21.

YouTube, but there’s this channel called British Pathé. It’s a series of archival videos and includes videos from when the Brits had come to Guyana and documented their time there. British Pathé holds a lot of footage from historical Guyana, and this particular archive is owned by another space. That space is in the UK and to access and use it, you have to pay for it. It frustrates me because this is our history. This is our people. It’s great that it’s been preserved by that space, but now it needs to be paid for? It’s a very common colonial trope to experience—to be sold back your history. And for it to be sold to you in a piecemeal fashion from a very curated lens and perspective. So, I think liberating the archive is one thing to be done.

I do realise that the archives exist in various forms in Guyana. I was speaking to Grace [Anezia Ali] about this. She says it’s very difficult to get access to things that are in Guyana. It’s not kept to archival standards, records are falling apart, and things of this nature. So not a lot of care has been given to the Guyanese people to be able to preserve their archives. I think there’s this watering down of history to say, “Well, before the colonial presence, your people were just a scattered people—you came from here, there and everywhere, and your histories were not important.” It’s now another layer to have people of the diaspora wanting to actively reclaim their archive and say, “This is something that is very important to us, and we would like to have control of it.”

In addition to liberating the archive, it’s expanding that archive to make sure it includes voices and stories that have been marginalised. I’m still going through that process and it’s such a big task, even just working from the lens of my family and my lived experience. But I think it’s possible, I am such an optimist. I believe anything’s possible. The way that Guyana was colonised, the archive is split into three major spaces. In the future, that’s where I’d like to take my body of practice. It’s like these wholesome stories about somebody’s



grandmother. I find it really interesting to have a holistic picture of who people are. How does religion play a part? How do cultural practices play a part in terms of who people are? Language and what is lost in language. What is lost is being recreated through food, and Guyanese cuisine is really amazing. There are so many different aspects that I think the archive can be improved upon.

With programs like British Pathé, one can begin to speculate as to whether or not we live in post- and de-colonial times for British Guiana/Guyana specifically. The spectre of colonialism looms in the challenges that those of the homeland and scattered diasporas face when attempting to access public history, collective memory, and storytelling. It's a map with holes burned over the important checkpoints. The frustrations that Shah speaks to are emblematic of what writer and theorist Christina Sharpe calls being in "the wake"—a multifaceted term in which Shape defines as the aftermath of chattel slavery, but one that she also seeks to illustrate, with richness and complexity, the myriad of Black diasporic identities in that aftermath. The wake is a place of mourning, but it is also "insistence on existing"<sup>11</sup> and a place to live in complexity and care. That care, which she describes as "wake work" is "a mode of inhabiting *and* rupturing [what we have known to be true through certain knowledge] with our known lived and un/imaginable lives."<sup>12</sup> Wake work is Shah and her mother going to Victoria Village, directly, and seeking out the stories of Lucille based on what they know to be true and painting a portrait of her life. It is also recognizing that locations, especially one as historically charged as Victoria Village, can be classified as sites of the "wake" where the past "reappears, always, to rupture the present" because it is not truly and exclusively the past. Shah's weaving of intergenerational memory, and trauma, to understand her own identity is reliant on the qualities of rupture, fabulation, and habitation. She actively challenges the relationship between public archives, personal archives, and contemporary artistic expression of the Caribbean identity.

**RF:** I find that I can't discuss Guyana with someone who doesn't really know it without first bringing up the political history. And I know it's an important part and foregrounds a lot of

other discussions, but variety would be appreciated. Natalie Hopkinson's *A Mouth is Always Muzzled*<sup>13</sup> is a book that navigates that space well. Hopkinson interviews the artist Bernadette Persaud about the Burnham Presidential era, being in proximity to activist Walter Rodney, and the liberation movement happening within. But she's also able to talk to her about her artistic practice as a painter, how it moved forward and evolved, and her identity as a mother and a teacher within that period. I think it's difficult to tread the line because the context is needed. Like you said, there's so much possibility to bring these other stories together. A lot of the research I've been looking into speaks to the Guianas very specific multi-ethnic Caribbean identity that is a direct result of a specific history of colonialism. So it's hard to talk about one without talking about the others.

**FAS:** Of course. And I feel like, for those of us who have been colonised by the British—whether you're in the Caribbean or not—there are so many similarities and so it opens up the dialogue to other spaces outside of the Caribbean who are experiencing this—

**RF:** ...start with the smallest similarity and build up from there.

**FAS:** Yes, yes. It's exciting to explore. And I have this love-hate relationship with politics. It is a very fascinating space. You know, politics drive. It is important to never discredit it. You'll keep hearing me say "nothing is produced in a vacuum"—these things are always in tangent with one another.

**RF:** In what way did you reach through your Guyanese upbringing, family, and memories to dictate the cultural nuance of place in your work and practice?

11 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (London: Duke University Press, 2016), 11.

12 Ibid, 18.

13 Natalie Hopkinson, *A Mouth Is Always Muzzled: Six Dissidents, Five Continents, and the Art of Resistance* (New York: The New Press, 2018).

**FAS:** I think it's a cornerstone of my practice. Even if it's an idea that's happening outside of the framework of Guyana. I mean, because that is the lived experience of my parents. And then, by virtue, that's passed down to me and my identity.

My family is mostly biracial. On my dad's side, it's mostly Black and East Indian. And on my mother's side, it's mostly Black, however, by virtue of being Guyanese and of colonisation, there are lots of different kinds of mixtures. But most of my family on my mom's side is from the African diaspora. So with these two, I feel like I have those three diasporas happening at the same time. So when I talk about the Guyanese experience, as somebody who identifies as being Black and biracial, I like to make sure that I'm speaking with that lens and framework in mind. So, for me, it was really important to try to say that I'm not going to speak for Guyana, but I'm going to speak about a Guyanese experience. When I approach it from that perspective, I then lean on my family history and conversations and things of that nature and it allows me to be as authentic as possible.

I learned a lot about family histories, of course, in the body of work [*Looking for Lucille*] itself. I'm using images that I've shot and my family archive. I'm leaning on my family quite a bit in terms of having these conversations and doing this research. And thinking about memory—my mom and I having a conversation, my grandmother's spirit, and then being physically in Guyana, specifically in Victoria. I reflect on what it all means to us collectively, and then to me as an individual. I then put on this lens as an artist to see how I can share this as a story. These are all the threads that weave together.

*This interview was held in-voice, and the transcription has been edited for clarity.*

**Fariyah Aliyah Shah** is a contemporary lens-based artist originally from Edmonton, Alberta, Canada (Treaty 6) now based in Bradford, Ontario, Canada (Treaty 18). She holds a BHRM from York University and a BFA in Photography with a minor in Integrated Media from OCAD University in Toronto, Ontario.

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PART II

# Water is Another Country:

A Critical Review  
of *DENSE* by  
Sandra Brewster

↑ 22. Video stills of a family trip to Number 63 Beach, facing out into the Atlantic Ocean on the northeastern coast of Guyana, 2000. Analogue video. Courtesy of Anita Fernandes.



***The river's silk is unforgiving,  
says our guide. Its subterranean  
stories are carried to their storytellers' graves***

– Shireen Madon, *Boat on the Essequibo*

### I. Recalling Sediment

In the intentionally murky waters and the dark woodlands that Sandra Brewster captures in *DENSE*, I glimpse crossings, mystery, and memory. I also recall sediment—the physical presence of mud and dirt, and broken down stories being carried in a seemingly endless rush of water. Small, coarse bits that are made smaller, obliterated, and then turned into something new. The river is both a threshold for crossings between the past and the present and an apparatus for the flow of our own memories. “Water is another country,” says Dionne Brand of its vastness, its irrevocably painful history.<sup>1</sup> *DENSE* asks, how do we mediate our memories of the past with the lived realities of the present? If memory is a river, then how do we capture a thing that is always moving? How can the ecologies of a place support us in developing greater relationalities between the known and the unknown? *DENSE* offers not only personal reflections from artist Sandra Brewster, but space to contemplate the many ways in which we create archives. First, how do we view art as an archive through its aesthetic content? Brewster mediates her memories (or lack thereof) through intentionally layered image-making. She contemplates a subject—the Essequibo River—that is geopolitically and historically charged, a natural feature that was once used for travel and expedition, where the banks grew sugarcane and tobacco and is currently a site for border disputes between Guyana and Venezuela. Then, she takes a second image to contrast the memory of “there” (Guyana) by building upon “here” (Toronto, Canada) through added waterways and dense foliage of the latter. On two walls, across from each other in a narrow hallway, gel-transferred photographs form a larger collage. A multiplicity of

1 Dionne Brand. *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*. Toronto: Penguin Random House, 2011: 56.

images captures the dichotomy of migration(s): of the body, between places, and of memory. Second, how does focusing on the river (and other non-human subjects) serve as an entryway into understanding the immutable power of one’s own narrative as a counter-archive? Brewster is creating an open invitation for storytelling and visioning with the more-than-human entity of the Essequibo River. Many of these communities and colonies along the Essequibo and the surrounding region “were plantations and not settled communities that needed to preserve records for their own use and identification.”<sup>2</sup> Brewster is in stride with Wilson Harris’s seminal supernatural, post-colonial fiction novel *Palace of the Peacock*, in which a group of ethnically diverse men partake in a dangerous river-boat expedition in sixteenth-century Guyana in search of a run-away woman. Together, these two works, which explore a sense of place so deeply, look further into the artist/writer as contemporary archivists of their own identities and experiences. This critical review will consider the potentiality of *DENSE* and *Palace of the Peacock* as two post-colonial counter-archives that are built upon and influenced by pre-existing archival materials, and how, due to the river, they are inevitably intertwined in their meaning but offer their own footing in the scope of de-colonial works. Threads are drawn between *DENSE* and *Palace of the Peacock* through the river as a subject or character and experience or location. Attention is paid to the land as a witness, all that the archives can and cannot hold, and the act of migration which is often a catalyst for storytelling.

*DENSE* was a site-specific work installed at the Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery in Toronto from February 5 to May 1, 2022, in the clerestory, a corridor-like gallery with high walls and a generous skylight. *DENSE* joins Brewster’s long-standing image-based practice, often focusing on identity and representation as well as landscape as a metaphor.<sup>3</sup> Born in Toronto in 1973, Brewster’s Guyanese parents moved to Canada during the late 1960s, part of the wave of post-independence migration that struck the population.<sup>4</sup> Migration is both an act and a condition, a memory and an experience, that many

2 John A. Aarons and Sharon Alexander-Gooding, “Historical Developments in Caribbean Archives and Record Keeping,” in *Decolonizing the Caribbean Record: an archives reader*, ed. John A. Aarons, Stanley H. Griffin, Jeannette A. Bastian (Sacramento: Litwin Books, 2018): 14.

3 Sandra Brewster, “About”, accessed November 21, 2023, <https://sandrabrewster.com/about/>.

4 Pamela Edmonds, “Shifting the Gaze,” *Art Canada Institute – The Essay*, accessed on November 21, 2023, <https://web.archive.org/web/20231104183248/https://www.aci-iac.ca/the-essay/shifting-the-gaze/>.



↑ → 23–27. Sandra Brewster, *DENSE*, 2021-2022. Acrylic, drawing and photo-based gel transfer.  
Courtesy the artist. Installation view: By Way of Communion, The Power Plant, 2022.  
Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.

Guyanese people hold in their personal histories, whether it's linked to post-independence immigration or even further back to times of enslavement or indentureship. To this day, "approximately only half of Guyanese now live within the borders of Guyana, with the remainder scattered in diaspora communities across the globe," largely because of steady emigration from the 1970s onwards.<sup>5</sup> Growing up, Brewster heard stories of the Essequibo from her parents—a massive and frightening body of water which is mysterious in its depth, colour, and lack of reflectivity. These stories played into her interpretation of the river, particularly

particularly as a metaphor for what she calls the "unknowing experience" of moving from one place to another.<sup>6</sup> Here, the occurrence of migration is central to Brewster's narrative interpretation of the Essequibo.

Through larger-than-life, black-and-white photo-based gel transfers, Brewster applies a prosaic interpretation of the Canadian and Guyanese environments she photographs. In *DENSE*, the Essequibo River of Guyana is a predominant component. The river stretches across the wall of the clerestory, a transmission of energy seen through the rushing waters and lapping waves. A colour wash of a brownish hue is applied over the waters, with the excess dripping down the wall—out of the frame of the image—and towards the floor. A dense forest lines the

5 Michael Matera, Linnea Sandin, and Maripaz Alvarez, *The Guyanese Diaspora*, Washington: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2020.

6 "Sandra Brewster on her By Way Of Communion exhibition | The Power Plant," The Power Plant, April 27, 2022, video, 01:30, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9PP\\_yQ1aMqw&t=90s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9PP_yQ1aMqw&t=90s).





and offers less depth than it does mystery. On the opposing wall, other smaller forests from natural areas in Toronto mingle with Guyanese flora and speak to an attempt to reconcile a “here” and a “there”. Through gel-transfers of graphite, charcoal, and ink drawings spliced with photography, Brewster captures density by depicting, with clarity, thick barks and robust leaves in the foreground, and lush volumes of bushes or shrubbery in the background. The high contrast of the black-and-white forestry makes old and new growth apparent, as well as the spots where light hits while other areas are shrouded in darkness. There is also water here, but more docile streams, coloured with the same brown hues as the Essequibo. Brewster, having read *Palace of the Peacock* and created work in

tribute to Wilson Harris<sup>7</sup>, has been intimately influenced by his writing. Born in 1921, Wilson Harris was a Guyanese poet, novelist, and essayist of mixed-race descent, the complexity of which is often addressed in his books. While *Palace of the Peacock* was Harris’ first novel, he went on to write twenty-five more. He received a classical education and became fond of Greek epics and drama. In the 1940s, he worked as a river and land surveyor for the country, an opportunity which allowed him to see, with intimacy, the mystery of the interior. Upon returning, he found that what he learned from the land altered the way he viewed the traditional novel or narrative, stating,

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<sup>7</sup> Sandra Brewster, *Wilson Harris: “even in my dream, the ground I knew I must not relinquish”*, 2022. This additional information comes from an informal conversation held with Brewster on September 4, 2023.

I have expressed this unease in diverse and various ways through the fictions I have written. The life of the landscape/riverscape/skyscape is pertinent to the reality of place. That life differs from human life but is of invaluable importance.<sup>8</sup>

Through it, he was able to identify and address the vulnerabilities of the time in which he was writing (British Guiana on the cusp of Independence, 1966 and onwards). There is a certain symbiosis that exceeds the confines of time and space, with descriptive passages from *Palace of the Peacock* describing what Brewster has produced in *DENSE* with vividity. Harris writes, “The solid wall of trees was filled with ancient blocks of shadow and with gleaming hinges of light. Wind rustled the leafy curtains through which masks of living beard dangled as low as the water and the sun.”<sup>9</sup> The prosaic and specific description of the river injects fluid ideas of motion and colour into an otherwise stationary black-and-white scene.

Through her application, Brewster unsettles an image—physically and in ideation—that someone may have of an attraction, an unknown place, or a monument. The Essequibo takes on all these categories—with its size and distance, mysteries in both the hinterlands and waters, and a national symbol attached to prosperity and strife. Its insurmountable distance houses a place for questions with unascertainable truths. Answers hiding in murky waters. Journeys lining the jungle shores. Brewster does not apply the gel transfer seamlessly. She agitates it, allowing for creases and small tears to become visible—a document of the process becomes as much a final piece as the actual completed and documented artwork. She refers to it as a “visual strategy,” making the action more apparent by its obvious obfuscation on the wall.<sup>10</sup> In her book *Immaterial Archives: An African Diaspora Poetics of Loss* Jenny Sharpe, Professor of postcolonial literature and Caribbean histories, addresses the idea of memory as a tide that unsettles the stability of archival memory. Particularly, because a tide is stationed but always shifting, it disappears as it is chased and replaced by another, also presenting a method of repetition or emphasis.<sup>11</sup> Brewster’s actions

8 A.J.M Bundy, introduction to *Selected Essays of Wilson Harris: The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1999), 2.

9 Wilson Harris, *Palace of the Peacock* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1960), 28.

10 Neil Price, “The Legacy of Presence,” *Canadian Art*, August 21, 2019, <https://canadianart.ca/interviews/the-legacy-of-presence/>.

11 Jenny Sharpe, *Immaterial Archives: An African Diaspora Poetics of Loss* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2022), 39.

of scrubbing can be read as an act of giving or taking away, of memory, especially as it pertains to the river being a representation of movement or migration, coming and going. With each gel panel applied, she is adding a new memory or story to the scene. As Gaetane Verna, former Director of Power Plant at the time of Brewster’s installation, puts it, “Her images, much like her technique, centre on the notion of transference within facets of the contemporary Caribbean diaspora.”<sup>12</sup> Through it, Brewster is like a steward, allowing for these memories of migration (often of the lesser known) to be placed at the forefront. It interrupts the presumed stability of archival memory which is often seen or suggested through its fixity or solidity, and an imperial past evoked often through its artifacts and historical recreations. It re-articulates individual memory as a source of both culture and information, the collective memory of the oppressed as expressions of time, place, and movement. Especially through its juxtaposition of multiple places, Brewster creates a “circular happening” of “porous movements”<sup>13</sup>—the artwork becomes a place for stories and memories of migration to move through and feel so deeply relational and familiar. The very essence of *DENSE* being site specific and thus not existing in the present as collectible or perfectly replicable also suggests its defiance of stability. As curator and writer Joséphine Denis writes, “Material conservation is of no concern to the ephemeral.” Just as memory and migration can be, *DENSE* is an unstable archive but an archive nonetheless. Her aesthetical considerations allow for it to live as a uniquely fixed and materially potent image.

## II. Floating on Tributaries

While there has been historical interest in the Essequibo River and what lies along the length of the river, a modern interest in the Essequibo can be shifted from what it *is* to what it *holds*. The 995 kilometre river has an estuary opening to the Atlantic Ocean, runs north-south through Guyana, and down into the Amazon

12 Gaëtane Verna, foreword to Sandra Brewster: by way of communion as part of the PowerPlant Pages (No. 19), published in conjunction with the presentation of *DENSE* (February 5 - May 1, 2022) and *A Place to Put Your Things* (February 5, 2022 - January 2023) by Sandra Brewster at the Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery (Toronto: the Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, 2023), 5.

13 Joséphine Denis, “Sandra Brewster: by way of communion” in *Sandra Brewster: by way of communion as part of the PowerPlant Pages (No. 19)*, published in conjunction with the presentation of *DENSE* (February 5 - May 1, 2022) and *A Place to Put Your Things* (February 5, 2022 - January 2023) by Sandra Brewster at the Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery (Toronto: the Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, 2023), 73.



Rainforest.<sup>14</sup> As is the case with many other natural boundaries, the ownership of the land surrounding the river has been contested between Guyana and Venezuela, with Venezuela considering the river as a natural boundary between the two countries.<sup>15</sup> However, the dispute has origins from former colonialist ruling bodies, with Guyana having former Dutch and then British rule. In 1897, Venezuela and British Guiana passed along their case to an international arbitrator to resolve their competing claims to the lands west of the Essequibo. In previous years, a topographical line which had been denoted the “Schomburgk Line” was an unofficial map of how the land was divided.<sup>16</sup> Historians Anthony S. Reyner and Walter B. Hope elaborate further,

At the risk of oversimplifying this complex issue, one could say that, by virtue of succession in title to Spain after 1810, Venezuela inherited poorly defined claims based on alleged discovery, settlement and missionary activities between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. On the other hand, Britain’s claim to territory in its possession was founded on conquests from the Dutch, whose rights in turn rested on the occupation of undelimited territory and absence of both Spaniards and Venezuelans from the disputed zone.<sup>17</sup>

The ruling was in favour of the British, resulting in 90% of the disputed area being designated British Guiana territory, a decision which was unpopular in Venezuela and has since been contested numerous times.<sup>18</sup> Indigenous peoples of the region

14 “STS51I-31-0093 Georgetown, Essequibo River Mouth, Guyana August 1985,” Earth From Space, NASA, accessed January 22, 2024, <https://eol.jsc.nasa.gov/Collections/EarthFromSpace/photoinfo.pl?PHOTO=STS51I-31-93>.

15 Ariel Cohen, “Venezuela Vs Guyana: The Battle For El Essequibo’s Oil,” Forbes, November 16, 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/arielcohen/2023/11/16/venezuela-vs-guyana-the-battle-for-el-essequibos-oil/>.

16 “Venezuela Boundary Dispute, 1895–1899,” Office of the Historian, Foreign Service Institute of the United States Department of State, accessed January 22, 2024, <https://history.state.gov/about>. The denotation of a border was, of course, contentious. When the British acquired British Guyana in 1814, British surveyor and naturalist Robert Schomburgk was sent to denote a missing territorial line. His survey ended in 1835 and concluded an additional 30,000 square miles for British Guiana.

17 Anthony S. Reyner and Walter B. Hope, “Guyana’s Disputed Borders: A Factual Background,” *World Affairs* 130, no. 2 (Summer 1967): 111.

18 *Ibid.*, 111; “Agreement to resolve the controversy over the frontier between Venezuela and British Guiana. Signed at Geneva, on 17 February 1966” in *Treaty Series: Treaties and international agreements registered or filed and recorded with the Secretariat of the United Nations*, Vol. 561 (United Nations Treaty Reg. No. 8192, Geneva, Switzerland, 1966), 323-327; “Arbitral Award of 3 October 1899 (Guyana v. Venezuela),” (International Court of Justice Summary, The Hague, Netherlands, 2020), 1-13. The following footnote is a brief but comprehensive history of the 2023 Guyana–Venezuela border dispute, recently elevated to a crisis: In subsequent years after 1897, work was made to further denounce boundaries between the two countries. Surveys were







have been scarcely notified.<sup>19</sup>

There is a diverse ecology in Guyana—flora, fauna, and other waterways—have all become thoroughfares for further contemplation about lost histories. As Marlene Manoff writes, “postcolonial literature places the former subjects at the centre and

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held from 1900 to 1905 and between 1915 and 1917 Venezuela sought to re clear and remark the boundary. However, when an internal memorandum was published by a recently deceased New York lawyer involved with the dispute that stated of five appointed to the arbitration, the supposedly impartial Russian representative had been unduly influenced by the British, Venezuela considered the arbitration null and voided. They brought it to the United Nations in 1962 where it was subjected to an agreement “to resolve the controversy over the frontier between Venezuela and British Guiana.” by peaceful means in four years time. It was signed in 1966. In 1970, the “Port of Spain” Protocol was signed by the Presidents of each country, which allowed for a twelve-year halt on boundary making or land claim in order for each government to continue to seek cooperative measures. After the protocol expired in 1982, it was not renewed. After more years and attempts to reach a peaceful decision, the case was referred to the International Court of Justice, who accepted it in 2020. The conflict continued and reached elevated status in October 2023 when the Venezuelan National Electoral Council approved a referendum to essentially dismiss all peacekeeping collaborative efforts with Guyana over the border dispute and claim all land west of the Essequibo River as a Venezuelan state. Indigenous peoples of the area were not consulted.

19 Juan Arráez and Regina Garcia Cano, “Venezuela’s planned vote over territory dispute leaves Guyana residents on edge,” *AP News* (November 2023): <https://apnews.com/article/venezuela-guyana-essequibo-territory-dispute-maduro-referendum-d3e65757ca8da2355994ec8a44c148ba>.



makes possible the exposure of the distortions and manipulations of the historical record.”<sup>20</sup> When we place a feature like the Essequibo River at the centre of the narrative, the potential for what it may uncover or the narratives it may facilitate expands. With *DENSE*, Brewster invites potentials for histories and narratives meta-phorically connected to the idea of migration, family, and peoples, and to the idea of place in relation to the Essequibo, other tributaries, and its eventual Atlantic estuary. Guyanese author Wilson Harris’ novel *Palace of the Peacock* also exemplifies this, with the sixteenth-century story presenting philosophical and supernatural twists in a journey across the Guyanese interior and the mysteries of the jungle.<sup>21</sup> Second-generation European coloniser Donne leads five ethnically diverse men into the jungle on a riverboat expedition in search of an Indigenous woman, Mariella, who has run away from him. When they reach a checkpoint, a Christian Mission at the top of a waterfall, an elderly Arawak woman is taken by Donne to aid them. The journey begins with a narrator, Dreamer, who is thought to be Donne’s brother

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20 Marlene Manoff, “Theories of the Archive from Across the Disciplines,” *Libraries and the Academy* 4, no. 1 (2004): 16.

21 Wilson Harris, *Palace of the Peacock* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1960).

but his role as the journey progresses slowly fades into obscurity. Dreamer is no longer a character who speaks or is spoken to. There is no reference to an “I”, and the traditional third-person becomes the perspective the reader is granted. Dreamer faces an existential crisis on the journey, stating,

I shook my head a little, trying hard to free myself from this new obsession. Was it possible that one’s memory and apprehension of a tragic event would strike one’s spirit before the actual happening had been digested? Could a memory spring from nowhere into one’s belly and experience? I knew that if I was dreaming I could pinch myself and wake. But an undigested morsel of recollection erased all present waking sensation and evoked a future time, petrifying and painful, confused and unjust.<sup>22</sup>

On the journey, which grows increasingly dangerous, more is learnt about each man and the past they left behind as they seemingly die, one by one. Harris describes the journey as having both human and non-human characters—the Guyanese landscape being a place of mutation and sitting between this world and the next. The characters solidify the truth of their being when they reach an unnamed river. They are able to recall their “past-death,” and realize that they have died at least once—perhaps many times—before. It is a sign that the characters are chasing the unreachable and heading towards the unknown, the dense interior landscape. It is a place of duality, liminal notions between life and death, heaven and hell, colonisers and Indigenous peoples.

Sandra Brewster and Wilson Harris create what Erin M. Fehskens calls “epic [expressions of] resistance to colonial and neocolonial ideology at a formal level.” Taking this “outside” environmental entity, the Essequibo River, “inside” the confines of the gallery space, making it larger than a standard reproduction (so much so that it fills a hallway), gives the river a new meaning. The piece prompts further reflection on what the river can do for us rather philosophically and spiritually outside of its utilitarian functions (travel, trade, navigation). As aforementioned, when an entity like the Essequibo River is placed at the centre of the narrative, the narratives it may uncover or facilitate expand greatly. It allows for memories to travel, be activated, and expressed. As Brewster herself has stated of collective memory,

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 48.

For many in my family who are of my generation or younger, we have been raised learning about Guyana through the older family members. For me specifically, I have visualised memories that are not my own; somehow I have some access to them. I think this is very interesting. This all defines a blur to me: layered, beautiful and affirming—to know that people are made up of so much more than what you see on the outside...than what is presumed.<sup>23</sup>

This notion of personal narratives and collective memory, especially when applied to an artwork like Brewster’s, encapsulates the potential of post-colonial counter-archiving; recentering the inconspicuous subject in order to highlight the lived histories of the oppressed. Stories like Brewster’s parents may be common in this day and age, but they deserve the nuanced read that the story of colonisation is given.

Similarly, Harris not just explores the river, but the interior of Guyana as an epic setting for “[refiguring] and subversively [disrupting] the master narrative of conquest and civilization imposed by colonisers.”<sup>24</sup> Donne, in his journey into the interior as a second-generation coloniser is unassuming of the environment and the original Indigenous habitants of the land. He says of his post,

One has to be a devil to survive. I’m the last landlord. I tell you I fight everything in nature, flood, drought, chicken hawk, rat, beast and woman. I’m everything. Midwife, yes, doctor, yes, gaoler, judge, hangman, every blasted thing to the labouring people. Look man, look outside again. Primitive. Every boundary line is a myth.<sup>25</sup>

Even the crew, though multi-ethnic, is distrustful and indignant toward the elderly Arawak woman and the missing tribe from the Mission above the waterfalls. Dreamer—whether he is Donne’s brother, his future consciousness, or a representation of the collective and subconscious fear or awareness felt by the crew—feels differently about the land and respects its vast unknowingness, having an intimate relationship with the rivers and flatland. It is, however, the land that reclaims Donne, swallowing him up and breaking the threshold between life and death.

<sup>23</sup> Neil Price, “The Legacy of Presence.”

<sup>24</sup> Erin M. Fehskens, “The Epic Hero in Wilson Harris’s *Palace of the Peacock*,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 41, no.4 (Summer 2018): 90-106.

<sup>25</sup> Harris, 22.

There's a symbiotic relationship in works that address the same subject through two disparate experiences or motivations. *DENSE* and *Palace of the Peacock* are both epics. Both Brewster and Harris present thoughtful questions to ponder about the future of how we augment individual and collective memory, future storytelling, and expressions of migration, not just for Guyana but for the Caribbean as a whole. There is inevitable trauma represented in each work. A thread pulled at and through the fabric of time. When the thread is scrunched up, it reveals that the lasting violence of colonialism is multi-generational and transnationally affective. Édouard Glissant explains that the notion of Caribbeaness exists in a reality that is fragile due to its urgent and negative twisting together (colonisation and imperialism). It is "there in essence: dense (inscribed in fact) but threatened (not inscribed in consciousness). This dream is vital, but not obvious."<sup>26</sup> While Harris is a post-colonial writer, Brewster is more subtle in this approach to "inscribing into consciousness" the Guyanese/Caribbean identity into *DENSE*. It is subtle even as a piece that has an afterlife and continues to inscribe into the discourse a methodology about counter-archive making, migration, and memory keeping. The river continues to flow, the tributaries don't dry up, and the sediment continually dissolves and becomes new.

**Sandra Brewster** is a Canadian visual artist based in Toronto, whose work has been exhibited nationally and abroad. Through her community-based practice, she engages with themes including identity, representation, and memory, centering a Black presence located in Canada.

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<sup>26</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1989), 221.





PART III

# Meandering a Thin Line: Cultivating Gilded Pasts and Futures Through *En Route Towards El Dorado*

An interview with  
Christie Neptune

↑ 28. Video still of picture frames at a relative's house in Georgetown, Guyana, 2000. Analogue video. Courtesy of Anita Fernandes.

↑ 29. Video still of my mother Anita dancing at her younger brother Vijay's wedding, 1998. Analogue video. Courtesy of Anita Fernandes.



***I saw my children dancing in the beams of moonlight,  
Weaving patterns they spun with the threads of their yesterdays  
Of black shadows hanging over the river,  
Coppers winging the air from cane-sugar's palaces,  
And, on the loom of tomorrow,  
I saw them weave benab cities in the forest,  
Molten factories drinking deep from the waterfalls feeding  
visions sailing downriver,  
My children, in universities, born and grown in the jungle  
Like a symbolic womb, cradling and nurturing the generations  
of yesterdays's visions.***

— Mahadi Das, “Looking Over the Broad Breast of the Land”

When first encountering Christie Neptune’s work, what is immediately noticeable is its quality of being that which Tina Campt calls “quiet and quotidian”—meaningful and active in possibility and practice. Campt explains that ‘quiet’ is not an “absence of articulation or utterance” but a “modality that surrounds and infuses sound with impact and affect, which creates the possibility for it to register as meaningful.” ‘Quotidian’ is understood as a practice (rather than an action) to “create possibility within the constraints of everyday life.” It is not equivalent to passive everyday acts.<sup>1</sup>

1 Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017), 4.

Neptune’s practice is an amalgamation of several methodologies resulting in varied multidisciplinary and often lens-based works, the results of which are immensely expressive. Particularly in her series *En Route Towards El Dorado*, there is a deeply intentional exploration into identity which presents as curious and layered in meaning.

*En Route Towards El Dorado: Deepened Relations and the Descent Back Home* is a conceptual photo series by Neptune that explores the implication centering the myth of the hidden ‘city of gold’, as well as the relationship that gold has with the people and economics of Guyana. Guyana was often thought to be El Dorado due to the successful history of gold mining, but the stipulations go even further back to the myth of the legendary (or now, ancient) Lake Parime as the site for the city, and was fueled by the expeditions of English explorer Sir Walter Raleigh.<sup>2</sup> The story has gripped the collective imaginations of the Caribbean and South America (as well as the Global North) for centuries, spilling out into further expeditions and explorations, works of fiction, and colonialist exploits. Neptune plays upon those imaginations in her work, speculating a future where the myth of the city of gold is a reality and the economic success that Guyana is due is reflected on the global stage. She asks two questions through this body of work. First, “How did the global flow of gold shape the sociocultural practices, symbols, and grammar of the Guyanese diaspora?” And secondly, “More importantly, how does my body, as a material, articulate the cultural *métissage* of a transnational identity?”<sup>3</sup> The conceptual nature of the series speculates an almost afro-futurist imagining, with thoughtful consideration given to the voices of the past.

I reached out to Neptune in October 2023 and conducted an email interview in January 2024 where we touched upon her practice, *En Route Towards El Dorado*, the nature of conceptualism in her work, and the themes of migration and futurity through the lens of personal diasporic and national Guyanese and Caribbean identity. This has resulted in an interview with narrative scaffolding, providing further insight into the histories discussed and the artistic and methodological aims that Neptune incorporates as a part of her practice.

2 As time passed and riches weren’t materialized, El Dorado soon became “a source of untold riches somewhere in the Americas.” In the 15th century, Spanish explorers thought it was in the Columbian Andes. Then they thought it was Lake Guatavita. Then Raleigh in 1617. Willie Drye, “El Dorado,” *National Geographic*, accessed February 18, 2024. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/el-dorado>.

3 Christie Neptune, “En Route Towards El Dorado,” accessed February 18, 2024. <https://www.christieneptune.com/towards-el-dorado>.



↑ 30. *Towards El Dorado*, 2022. Archival inkjet print mounted on Aluminum, 30" × 40".  
5 editions + 2APS.

**RF:** Your conceptual photographic series *En Route Towards El Dorado* embodies the different modes of artistic production you bring into your work—photography, performance, and visual assemblage or sculptural elements through your scene-building. How would you describe your practice?

**CN:** My practice mediates themes of belonging, migration, and the everyday. Through the body, signification, and varying processes of assemblage, I explore the disintegration of identity, time, and memory within systems of assimilation, subjugation, and globality. My narrative impulse, my lived experience in the American urban, is the driving force behind my material choices, artistic approach, and methodology.

I am a first-generation Black Caribbean American of Guyanese and Trinidadian descent, the sum of mixed ethnicities, cultural



↑ 31. *The Elders*, 2022. Silkscreen on Mirror, 24 x 36.

practices, values, and beliefs. The work I produce attempts to reconcile the implicit relationship between these differences. Utilizing industrial and domestic everyday objects, the material properties of film, and spatial semiotics, I foreground the intricate and wide-ranging dimensions of Black life within the American urban.

The works are highly conceptual. They meander a thin line between real and imagined space, combining historical truths with speculative fiction. The idea, the language I wish to communicate, takes precedence within my practice. This approach proffers room to counter and reimagine the formalist praxes of Western art, a mode of resistance that renders new frameworks of understanding Black representational space. Within this schema, the body functions simultaneously as a conduit of historical cultural memory and a designer of new futures.

**RF:** Guyanese culture is one that I've had trouble describing to others, having often used history as a means of storytelling. A combination of West Indian, Black and African, East Asian, and Indigenous cultures pepper my childhood and that of my parents and grandparents. In *En Route Towards El Dorado* I see it subtly—in the ways I would see it in my own memories and family photos. The black bindi (a West Indian kaala tikka), the regal-esque gold-threaded couch covers, the gold grape earrings, house plants with plastic dishes, and the gold bangles. It is achingly familiar, despite the probable distinct upbringings we each had. How did you reach through your Guyanese upbringing, family, and memories to dictate the cultural nuance of place in this series?

**CN:** Utilizing archival imagery, constructed sets, props, and the body, I collide historical memory with speculative fiction to establish a sense of place. This series took many years to develop. Initially, I wanted to investigate my maternal family's social history in Guyana. However, I encountered many obstacles in the pursuit of this approach. Progress was stalled. To revive the work, I decided to pivot my embodied experience as a Black Caribbean in the American urban, amplifying the stories, rituals, values and beliefs that connected me to ancestral land (Guyana). I began looking through my personal archives, a collection of photographs from my upbringing in East Flatbush (a predominantly West Indian enclave situated in central Brooklyn, New York) to identify and categorize images that spotlight tradition, traces of empire, identity, and place.

In addition, I organized an open call, requesting oral narratives on the matter of cultural practice from first-generation Guyanese-American women throughout the US. Gold, particularly Guyanese gold, was among common motifs found in oral narratives and my familial archives that connected us 'back home.' Back home, in this sense, is not a geographical

location, but the psychic pulse of Guyanese diasporic identity made visible through the spatial-temporal articulations of the body.

Gold is one of the most narrativized natural resources in the world and is deeply tied to a sense of place. Of gold in the Caribbean and the Guyanas, Surinamese-Canadian writer and researcher Sonja Koon describes it as “a site of both horror and longing, disgust and desire. Gold unites [disparate histories].”<sup>4</sup> Official records of gold production in Guyana began in 1884 where, until 1914, production numbers for gold exports were so high that it was unrivalled in the century to come.<sup>5</sup> A majority of Indigenous people live(d) in the interior gold-bearing regions and hinterlands of the country. Particularly, tribes like the Karinya (also known as the Kalina or more commonly (though dated) the Caribs) are central to areas of extraction and have picked up an affinity for gold prospecting by paying attention to their dreams.<sup>6</sup> Most recently, gold and mining have contributed to 65 percent of Guyana's gross domestic product in 2022.<sup>7</sup>

Gold is idealized as the highest standard. It is all that glitters and the weight of riches. It exists in myth: in a pot at the end of the rainbow, fabled about as spun threads on bobbins and spindles, or as entire peoples and cities. However, gold is also performance. It is tied to historical colonial identity—becoming an identifier of a ruling upper class, laden in spaces of status, and a feature of monuments. It dictates economies, for their gain or that of others. But, as mentioned, gold is natural—it's embedded into the earth, has known heat and pressure, interacts with the non- and more-than-human and is tied to cycles of life and death. Neptune's practice of expressing elements like gold through “spatial-temporal articulations of the body” allows for the relationship, and the implicit history and associations that come with it, to pursue new avenues of interpretation and relationality.

4 Sonja Koon, “Telling Stories with Gold” in *Reimagining the Guyanas*, ed. Lawrence Aje, Thomas Lacroix & Judith Misrahi-Barak (Montpellier: Presses Universitaires De La Méditerranée, 2019): 85.

5 Janette Forte, “Karikuri: The Evolving Relationship of the Karinya People of Guyana to Gold Mining,” *New West Indian Guide* 73, no. 1/2 (1999): 68.

6 Forte's 1999 article details an autoethnographic account of the Karinya's relationship to mining in Guyana. *Ibid.*, 62.

7 “Guyana - Country Commercial Guide: Mining and Minerals Sector,” International Trade Administration, United States of America Department of Commerce, January 10, 2024, <https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/guyana-mining-and-minerals-sector>.



**RF:** In *En Route Towards El Dorado*, gold is expressed in several ways. Through brush, thread and fabric, jewellery, and objects. Gold and the body form a relationship. It's on the body and the body becomes, as you've written, a material for articulating the cultural métissage of a transnational identity. Speaking to your process, what choices did you implement in applying the material and aesthetic of gold? How did gold, to you, become a physical and communicative material?

**CN:** In *En Route Towards El Dorado*, gold is a signifier utilized to express myth, empire, and (global) identity. The *mise-en-scène* of still life, portrait and tableau photography within this series gives credence to this. As a physical and communicative material, gold does two things. On the one hand, it evokes a longing for 'back home'—a psychic bond to the land and ancestral roots intensified through nostalgia and signification. And on the other, it draws attention to the material productions of globalization and empire nested within the hybrid practices, grammar, and symbols of the Guyanese diasporic identity.

The decision to use gold as the focal point for this series came naturally. It was already a part of my registry of cultural symbols and environment. For example, *Drapery and Plants in Grandma's Living Room* (2019), is a photographic index of my environment. The image draws one's field of attention to gold-tethered colonial furniture and drapery in my grandmother's living room. Aside from lighting, there was minimal staging. The image is indexical and correlates directly with my themes of signification. In *Rosie's Great-Grandchild at 33*, (2020) and *A Guild of Light Shining Bright*, (2020), I am adorned in gold given to me by my grandmother. In all images, gold and the body are interchangeable communicative material for spatial practice, identity, and place. They are, without doubt, performative instruments to think with.

**RF:** Have you felt the pull to resist *or* entwine the spectre of colonialism and its effect on not just gold, but the Guyanese



↑ 32. *Rosie's Great-Grandchild at 33*, 2020. Digital Chromogenic Print, 30" × 30". 5 Editions + 2APs.

historical cultural memory as a whole? Or the pull to resist or entwine colonialism's latency in post- or de-colonial notions of place and groups of people?

**CN:** So much of Caribbean history and identity is entangled with colonialism. This, of course, makes it rather difficult to ignore within representational practice. Whether referenced directly or not, the implications of a colonial past are visible within the organization of the frame. It's an abstraction reflected across all aspects of our society. For this reason, my approach to my subject matter is twofold. I compel the viewer to think critically about the vestige of empire and provide new spatialities of knowing and seeing peripheral experiences. The gesture shifts the dynamics of power, drawing one's attention to a plurality of perspectives beyond the context of Western logic. One's inner life becomes the locus of resistance. It is what American author and educator Kevin Quashie describes as "the quiet,"<sup>8</sup> the renderings of the mundane, human presence that defies the violence of erasure.

Through *On Route Towards El Dorado*, there is a reaching backwards and forwards through time. The shaping of speculative pasts and futures by actively engaging them, and the narrativizing of both myth and family. It's using archives (as seen in *The Elders*, *Disparate Points in Space Time*, and *Rosie*) and contributing to them (particularly in *A Guild of Light Shining Bright* and *Rosie's Great-Grandchild at 33*.) through the myth-making quality of gold. Sonja Koon goes on to say that gold is an affective and 'sticky' substance and that it is "a product of transnational, colonial hauntings...something that finds its meaning in the asymmetrical encounters

8 Kevin Quashie says, "Resistance, yes, but other capacities too. Like quiet." Quashie astutely elaborates the "intimacy and human vagarity" of Blackness against the common and public modes of resistance that have been tied to one's identity as a Black person. "This is the politics of representation, where black subjectivity exists for its social and political meaningfulness rather than as a marker of the human individuality of the person who is black." He posits quiet as a simple and conceptual word, "full range of one's inner life— one's desires, ambitions, hungers, vulnerabilities, fears. The inner life is not apolitical or without social value, but neither is it determined entirely by publicness. In fact, the interior— dynamic and ravishing— is a stay against the dominance of the social world; it has its own sovereignty. It is hard to see, even harder to describe, but no less potent in its ineffability. Quiet." See Kevin Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (New Jersey, Rutgers University Press, 2012): 5-6.

between peoples, landscapes, and histories."<sup>9</sup> Its ability to aspire relationality is unfounded with other mined resources.

Of her method "critical fabulation" Saidiya Hartman says "How can narrative embody life in words and at the same time respect what we cannot know?"<sup>10</sup> On the archive, she continues,

Is it possible to exceed or negotiate the constitutive limits of the archive? By advancing a series of speculative arguments and exploiting the capacities of the subjunctive (a grammatical mood that expresses doubts, wishes, and possibilities), in fashioning a narrative, which is based upon archival research, and by that I mean a critical reading of the archive that mimes the figurative dimensions of history, I intended both to tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling.<sup>11</sup>

"Exceeding or negotiating the constitutive limits of the archive" has been integral in understanding the power of de- and post-colonial counter-archives within the growing field of archival studies, especially when positioning Blackness in the way that Neptune (and Fariyah Aliyah Shah and Sandra Brewster) do. How artists like Neptune are utilizing the past to inform the present and dream of a future is an active contribution to the growing definition of counter-archives as decolonial praxis. Neptune centers the impact of many forms of colonization, as far back as the Transatlantic trade of enslaved peoples in the Caribbean, to her own direct history and identity. Caribbean philosopher Édouard Glissant says that history "is capable of quarrying deep within us, as a Consciousness or the emergence of consciousness, as a neu-rosis (symptom of loss) and a contraction of the self."<sup>12</sup> Campt speculates that the way in which we presently read and render archives of the past, especially in how they interpret the Black body, has an impact toward the practice of interpreting the archives in the future. She says, "—the question of futurity is inextricably bound up in the conundrum of being captured by and accountable to the historical impact of the Atlantic slave trade on the meaning of black womanhood in the Americas."<sup>13</sup>

9 Sonja Koon, 75.

10 Saidiya Hartman, "Venus In Two Acts," *small axe* 26 (2008): 3.

11 Ibid, 11.

12 Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 70.

13 Tina Campt, 15.



↑ 33. *A Guild of Light Shining Bright*, 2020. Archival inkjet print, 30" × 30", 5 editions + 2APs.



↑ 34. *Drapery and Plants in Grandma's Living Room*, 2019. Digital Chromogenic Print, 30" × 30".



When thinking through these modes of inquiry from Glissant and Camp—into the past and the future—it feels as if it is one cohesive thought when viewing Neptune’s work: the past (history) troubling the deepest parts within us, and the future reflecting that conundrum, all whilst knowing that is what is being reflected.

**RF:** What is your relationship with archives, using them and/or the notion of creating them?

**CN:** My relationship with the archives varies according to context. I believe that archival appropriation within artistic practice has world-making capabilities that provides one the ability to reimagine and counter the historical record. For voices on the margins of history, like myself, it is a powerful intervention that examines, de-centers, and counters the supremacist legacy of empire. But, does archival appropriation wholly disavow the authority of Western logic, the spectre of empire, within the framed schema? Is it an effective decolonial praxis within the ongoing struggle of resistance? These are questions that come to mind when working with the archival. The answer comes down to power dynamics. Whose gaze is the image aligned with? When sourcing archival material, navigating this space, for me, requires critical reading. I prefer archival imagery of ‘the everyday,’ inner life captured by the very bodies that lived them. The subjects are foregrounded within an image that speaks to their humanness. This space breaks down the axes of hegemony and shifts representational control from nation-state to local. The potential of such imagery within decolonial practice is limitless.

In *En Route Towards El Dorado*, I repurpose archival imagery of family members captured at a local studio in Georgetown, Guyana. The dynamics of power implicit within each image speaks to my family’s humanity. My intervention, silkscreen on mirror, fosters dialogic space between the past and present. The work is fixed within a continuous loop of transformation. The viewer’s reflection entwines itself with the image imprinted upon the surface. Looking becomes an

assertive act of engagement that shifts meaning and collides histories. The language is fluid. Bidirectional. Perpetual. The archival as decolonial praxis, in this context, disavows the authority and singular narrative of Western logic. In the absence of violence, I believe there is room to amplify, uplift, and reimagine.

The shared aesthetics that are intertwined throughout the series suggest a world ahead of, outside of, or beyond our own. As Neptune states, in the absence of violence, one is free to not just speculate but to *be*: to amplify, uplift, and reimagine. In the future that she imagines, Neptune places herself as a primary subject that interacts with elements of past, family, home, culture, and place.

Artists are increasingly creating stories, photographs, family archives, and new media, amongst other mediums to shift the narrative and create counter-archives. This is done to exercise resistance to the gaps in history by actively exploring or interpreting them. Counter-archiving allows for us to push forward with our archival impulses.

**RF:** Do you feel that the act of speculation or building speculative futures is rendered in *En Route Towards El Dorado*? That this, and your practice, “offers a way of memorialising [your] passage through the world or the passage of [your] ancestors” in the present?<sup>14</sup>

**CN:** Absolutely. It is the notion of ‘myth-making’ which grounds this project. I am actively colliding historical truth with speculative fiction to investigate and reimagine, to some degree, the practices, symbols, and grammar of my identity. The excavation and repurposing of my familial archives within this particular narrative canonizes my passage and the passage of my ancestors within this world. This challenges institutional frameworks of power, particularly the role of the museum and nation-state in the production and preservation of the canonical. I am not a passive recipient or observer of historical

14 Sam Durrant and Cathrine M. Lord, “Introduction,” in *Essays in Migratory Aesthetics: Cultural Practices Between Migration and Art-making*, eds. Sam Durrant and Catherine M. Lord (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007): 13.

knowledge within this system, but an active producer. I decide what gets preserved. I ascertain value. I frame history. The gaze is aligned with my point of view. The reversal of such roles within the preservation and maintenance of historical knowledge is seeded.

**RF:** Has your relationship or perception of gold developed with the creation of this photo series? Do you feel as if your photographic practice, as a whole, has evolved?

**CN:** My understanding and relationship to gold, particularly Guyanese gold, before the development of this project was limited. Guyanese jewellery, during my adolescence, was akin to tribal markings. It had a distinct color and style that signified cultural belonging. Without verbal introduction, my grape earrings and bangles illuminated the spatial-temporal links of my ethnicity. From a young age, I understood the cultural significance of gold, but it was not until I initiated this project did I understand its global implications. My perception and understanding of gold have certainly expanded on account of this project. My work is grounded in research, significant reading, and writing. Hence, a deepened understanding of my subject post-production is expected.

Regarding my photographic evolution, I believe only time, experience, and continued practice can demystify that. I am still trying to figure out what I'm doing. That only becomes visible when one stops. I guess we shall have to wait for that answer.

**Christie Neptune** received her M.S. in Art, Culture, and Technology from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology School of Architecture and Planning, and B.A. in Visual Arts from Fordham University.

READ MORE IN *BIOGRAPHIES*



# Biographies

## Christie Neptune

(b. 1986, Brooklyn, NY; lives and works in Brooklyn, NY)

Christie Neptune received her M.S. in Art, Culture, and Technology from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology School of Architecture and Planning, and B.A. in Visual Arts from Fordham University. Neptune's work has been exhibited at venues including: Gagosian, New York; We Buy Gold, New York; Martos Gallery, New York; Tilton Gallery, New York; Vox Populi, Philadelphia; the Bronx Museum of the Arts; and the Queens Museum, amongst others. Her work is in the collection of the Worcester Art Museum, Massachusetts. In 2021, she was awarded the Prix Medeos in connection with Grant Wahlquist gallery's presentation of her work at Art-o-rama, Marseille. Her work has been widely discussed in publications such as 4 Columns, Artforum, Hyperallergic, the New York Times, Vogue, the Wall Street Journal, and the Washington Post. Her numerous awards and residencies include Cornell University's Art Award, Light Work Artist-in-Residence, NYFA Fellowship in Interdisciplinary Arts, Smack Mellon Studio Residency, and the Bronx Museum of the Arts AIM Fellowship, among others.

[www.christieneptune.com](http://www.christieneptune.com)

## Fariyah Aliyah Shah

(b. 1988, Edmonton, AB; lives and works in Toronto, ON)

Fariyah Aliyah Shah is a contemporary lens-based artist originally from Edmonton, Alberta, Canada (Treaty 6) now based in Bradford, Ontario, Canada (Treaty 18). She holds a BHRM from York University and a BFA in Photography with a minor in Integrated Media from OCAD University in Toronto, Ontario.

Using photography, video, sound, and installation, Shah's research and lens-based practice explores identity formation through the colonial gaze, forced migration in relation to labour of goods and services, race, connectivity to land, and collective memory. She analyzes and critiques the photographic canon while building new narratives and archives that narrow gaps within her personal history addressing intersectionalities of her identity: multi-diasporic, female-identified, Black, Caribbean, etc.

Shah was the 2019 recipient of the John Hartman Award and long-listed in 2022 for the New Generation Photography Award. She is a member of Gallery 44 - Centre for Contemporary Photography, Women Photograph, and is the co-founding member of Mast Year Collective; an artist duo exploring kinship through collective practice. Shah has exhibited internationally in Asia, Europe, and North America.

[www.fariyahshah.com](http://www.fariyahshah.com)

## Sandra Brewster

(b. 1973, Toronto, ON; lives and works in Toronto, ON)

Sandra Brewster is a Canadian visual artist based in Toronto, whose work has been exhibited nationally and abroad. Through her community-based practice, she engages with themes including identity, representation, and memory, centering a Black presence located in Canada. The daughter of Guyanese-born parents, she is especially attuned to the experiences of people of Caribbean heritage and their ongoing relationships with back home. Brewster's meditations on being and place are expressed within her drawings, video, and photo-based mixed media works that range from 2-dimensional pieces to installations that incorporate the architecture of spaces.

Recent solo exhibitions include *Blur* at the Art Gallery of Ontario (2019/20), *Token I* Contemporary Ongoing at A Space Gallery in Toronto, *Or* Gallery in Vancouver and the Art Gallery of Guelph. Brewster's work has been exhibited in group exhibitions including *Identity in Flux*, organized by VISART, Rajko Mamuzić Gallery, Novi Sad, Serbia; travelling to National Gallery of Macedonia Skoplje in Northern Macedonia; Tivat Cultural Center Gallery in Montenegro; and *Here We Are Here: Black Canadian Contemporary Art*, organized by the Royal Ontario Museum, travelled to Musée des beaux arts in Montreal, and the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, NFL, Canada (publication forthcoming). Her works have been featured at LagosPhoto Festival 2018 in Nigeria, Aljira Contemporary Art Center in New Jersey, and Allegheny Art Galleries in Meadville, Pennsylvania. Brewster's exhibition *It's all a blur...* received the Gattuso Prize for outstanding featured exhibition of CONTACT Photography Festival 2017. She was the 2018 recipient of the Artist Prize from Toronto Friends of the Visual Arts. Brewster's work is in numerous public and private collections including the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX, USA and the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, ON, Canada.

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## Roxanne Fernandes

(b. 1994, Toronto, ON; lives and works in Toronto, ON)

Roxanne Fernandes is an arts administrator, producer, and emerging curator and programmer based in Tkaranto. She writes, researches, and creates through a lens that is experimental, archival, and pedagogical. Roxanne has a BA from the University of Toronto in Art History, Cinema Studies, and English, a Postgraduate Certificate from Humber College in Arts Administration & Cultural Management, and an MFA in Criticism & Curatorial Practice Program at OCADU.

Roxanne has worked at Toronto Biennial of Art, Images Festival, TIFF, and has freelanced for various institutions and artists across the city. She has curated and programmed for Images Festival (Toronto, 2019), the Confederation Centre Art Gallery (Charlottetown, 2023), Art in the Open (Charlottetown, 2023), and the OCADU Graduate Gallery (Toronto, 2023). She served on the board of SAVAC from 2021-2024.

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