

*Diasporic Spidering, Counter-Archiving, and Collective Memory*

*A Curatorial Exhibition*

*By*

*Dedra McDermott*

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

The Centre for the Study of Black Canadian Diaspora, March 15 – April 8, 2024

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, May 1, 2024

[© Dedra McDermott 2024]

## CREATIVE COMMONS COPYRIGHT NOTICE

### Copyright Notice

This document is licensed under the Creative Commons [Diasporic Spidering, Counter-Archiving, and Collective Memory © 2024 by Dedra McDermott is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/> 2.5 Canada License.

### Under the following conditions:

This license requires that reusers give credit to the creator. It allows reusers to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the material in any medium or format, for non-commercial purposes only. If others modify or adapt the material, they must license the modified material under identical terms.

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I authorize OCAD University to lend this thesis to other institutions or individuals for the purpose of scholarly research.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public. I further authorize OCAD University to reproduce this thesis by photocopying or by other means, in total or in part, at the request of other institutions or individuals for the purpose of scholarly research.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ *Dedra McDermott* \_\_\_\_\_

## ABSTRACT

*Diasporic Spidering, Counter-Archiving, and Collective Memory* is an experimental exhibition that aims to foster community through interdisciplinary and intercultural collaboration and uncover a process of critical curatorial practice. This exhibition displays select videos from Rhodnie Désir's *BOW'T TRAIL* and features a commissioned sculptural installation by Alberto Castillo titled *Silk Strands, Silk Traces*. Travelling across the Americas to experience the ports and portals of ancestral memory that exist within the aftermath of Transatlantic Slave Trade, Désir's *BOW'T TRAIL* offers a poignant yet poetic entry into the histories of migrants who left voluntarily and involuntarily. Considering the global map as a web further situates Désir's choreographic methodology as a 'diasporic spidering,' itself. Nadine George-Graves explains that "Diasporic heritage survives despite the odds, and Anansi's processes of journeying, gathering (wisdom and memory), gaining insight, sharing, and connecting are *diasporic spiderings*." Experimental in nature, *Diasporic Spidering, Counter-Archiving, and Collective Memory* explores my emergent curatorial practice as a 'diasporic spidering,' utilizing Désir's choreo-documentary methodology and the creation process of *Silk Strands, Silk Traces* as research materials. This exhibition uses the gallery space as a site for valuing choreographic methodology as an artistic product as a way of celebrating the multiplicity of Black thought, history, and communities, now.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A heartfelt thank you to Dr. Andrea Fatona, Dr. Andrew Gayed, Alberto Castillo, and external examiner, Collette “Miss Coco” Murray.

This exhibition would not be possible without the incredibly giving and gifted folks at the Centre for the Study of Black Canadian Diaspora – Donica Willis, Ghislan Timm, Abby Adjekum, and Abi Cudjoe.

For your support, thank you to Hannah Dickson, Tai Lee, Haven Hughes, Ésery Mondésir, Roxanne Fernandes, Orus Mateo Castaño-Suárez, Jose Miguel ‘Miggy’ Esteban, Criticism and Curatorial Practice Faculty and 2024 Cohort, Liam Crockard, and the INTM and AV Departments at OCAD U.

Endless gratitude to my mentors Dr. Seika Boye, Dr. VK Preston, Dr. Angélique Willkie, Heidi Strauss and Emelie Chhangur for their unwavering support.

To Murat of Saman Design, thank you for everything.

To my loving friends + family, this is my last degree. Promise.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CREATIVE COMMONS COPYRIGHT NOTICE .....	ii
ABSTRACT.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	v
LIST OF FIGURES AND ILLUSTRATIONS .....	6
PROLOGUE.....	7
INTRODUCTION.....	10
POSITIONALITY .....	14
ON COLLABORATION .....	15
CURATORIAL VISION AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS .....	18
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	19
LITERATURE REVIEW.....	21
INSTITUTIONAL KNOWLEDGE, REPRESENTATION, AND BLACK FEMALE PERFORMANCE ..25	
EXHIBITION REVIEW .....	28
STORYTELLING: GESTURES OF SURVIVAL .....	35
DIASPORIC SPIDERING: RHODNIE DÉSIR’S BOW’T TRAIL AS TRANSNATIONAL CREATIVE PRACTICE .....	35
CONNECTING COMMUNITIES AND PRACTICE .....	44
(RE)INTERPRETATION: DIASPORIC SPIDERING, COUNTER-ARCHIVING, AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY .....	48
SITE AND AUDIENCE .....	52
EXHIBITION DESIGN .....	53
A Note on Language and Accessibility.....	54
EXHIBITION DESIGN AS CHOREOGRAPHIC PRACTICE .....	55
PUBLIC PROGRAMS .....	58
<i>WHAT REMAINS</i> OR ‘DIASPORIC SPIDERING,’ A CURATORIAL PRACTICE .....	60
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	62

## LIST OF FIGURES AND ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1 (left) Gerrard St E. Play Structure, (right) Draft, <i>Silk Strands, Silk Traces</i> .....	49
Figure 2 Final Design, <i>Silk Strands, Silk Traces</i> .....	50

## PROLOGUE

“Where is the dance? What is the live aspect?”

I have been working within the realms of performance and choreographic research for over a decade. I approached this learning opportunity with an appreciation for the work that is being done to counter inaccurate histories about racialized people through storytelling. The curatorial impetus for this project came from my desire to celebrate Black women doing choreographic work that focuses on identity and migration. I sought an opportunity to commemorate the diversity of Black performance practice beyond lamentation, degradation, exotification, and the Western aesthetics of ballet. Recognizing the reality that many artists are celebrated in death rather than in life, I was prompted to think about how stories are shared across generations, how embodied and ancestral knowledge is valued, and the ways that I can actively participate in the revalorization of choreographic voices working to shape, reframe, and re-educate the public on the realities of Black history.

The main questions I would hear from others as the project was developing were, “If this work is about choreographic practice, then where is the live performance? Why is there no Dance?” *Hmmm*. Placing a moving Black body in a performative situation was not of interest because this exhibition is not a *spectacle*. This work is not concerned with the traditional choreographic imperative, be that live performance, body in space to be witnessed, or intrigue of the audience/performer dichotomy. This work explores

artistic reinterpretation that works toward valuing methodology at the same level of performance; positioning choreographic methodology as artistic product rather than a process towards creating an artistic product. Here, methodology points to recognizing the approach to creation, generally, rather than specifying which approach is being employed. In this moment, comprehensive choreographic practice, for me, is about valuing method (where form meets research), practice, and performance, equally. In this writing, research is meant to denote a way of approaching a certain form. Thinking through the specific approach/technique/style within the chosen form. Although Désir's *BOW'T TRAIL* engages an autoethnographic, interdisciplinary performance methodology through choreographic-documentary, the crux of this inquiry is about questioning what is of value to art audiences and society at large. By challenging expectations of performance presentation within this exhibition, I am curious about what is seen, felt, and what is deemed 'missing.'

The enticing task of reinterpretation (which, in this situation, can go by many names, *recontextualization*, or depending on the intent, *remediation*, or *revalorization*) is its subjectivity. My witnessing is not your witnessing and my expectations are not your expectations, and this allows for discussions about performance, spectating, presence and what 'liveness' entails. In the exhibition space, there is a living entity made up of natural materials that will slowly degenerate. The branches will weaken, the sinew will loosen, and the exhibition will change slightly, every day. The space is alive, filled with plants and elements needing a level of attention and care that is indicative of its vitality.



Liveness is continued presence, and the presence of people, natural materials, and ancestral permanence is the pulse of this exhibition.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper outlines the frameworks that ground the experimental exhibition *Diasporic Spidering, Counter-Archiving, and Collective Memory* and reflects upon the process of bringing the exhibition into being. This exhibition focused on fostering community through interdisciplinary and intercultural collaboration to uncover a process of critical curatorial practice. This exhibition displayed select videos from Rhodnie Désir's *BOW'T TRAIL* and featured a commissioned sculptural installation by Alberto Castillo titled *Silk Strands, Silk Traces*. Travelling across the Americas to experience the ports and portals of ancestral memory that exist within the aftermath of Transatlantic Slave Trade, Désir's *BOW'T TRAIL* offers a poignant yet poetic entry into the histories of migrants who left voluntarily and involuntarily. Considering the global map as a web further situates Désir's choreographic methodology as a 'diasporic spidering,' itself. Nadine George-Graves explains that "Diasporic heritage survives despite the odds, and Anansi's processes of journeying, gathering (wisdom and memory), gaining insight, sharing, and connecting are *diasporic spiderings*."<sup>1</sup> Experimental in nature, *Diasporic Spidering, Counter-Archiving, and Collective Memory* explores my emergent curatorial practice as a 'diasporic spidering,' utilizing Desir's choreo-documentary methodology and the co-creation process of *Silk Strands, Silk Traces* as research materials.

This research essay is comprised of the following sections: The introduction is separated into subsections titled Positionality, On Collaboration, Curatorial Vision and Research Questions, and Theoretical Framework. Part one, the *Literature Review*,

---

<sup>1</sup> George-Graves. "DIASPORIC SPIDERINGS: Constructing Black Identities," 35.

engages with discussions taking place in the fields of performance studies, curatorial studies, dance studies, Black feminist epistemologies, and concepts of minor transnationalism and of global indigeneity that informed and contextualized this research. Part two, *Institutional Knowledge, Representation, and Black Female Performance*, will discuss the theme and social context of this work through the foundation of place and time—grounding the research in the historical function of arts institutions as sites of surveillance and socio-cultural assimilation, as well as the connections between Western institutional knowledge and the socio-political implications of Black female performance. This section aims to draw the connections between the Transatlantic Slave Trade and representations of Black diasporic knowledges, and the journey of self-determination after being displaced from one's cultural origins. Part three, the *Exhibition Review*, provides a survey of exhibitions that explore movement in public space, Black dance history, intercultural and interdisciplinary collaboration, and embodied ways of re-interpreting archival artifacts. Part four, *Storytelling: Gestures of Survival*, charts the nuanced connections between ceremony, ritual, and embodied storytelling practice present in Rhodnie Désir's *BOW'T TRAIL* and the creation process of *Silk Strands, Silk Traces*. This section includes subsections titled Diasporic Spidering: Rhodnie Désir's BOW'T TRAIL as Transnational Creative Practice and Connecting Communities and Practice that will further establish folkloric character 'Anansi the Spider' and the metaphoric connectivities of a spider's web. I contend that this presence of collective memory further solidified her practice of choreo-documentary, and the work of Castillo and McDermott as a "diasporic spidering"

that provides a contemporary reference point for choreographic research and knowledge sharing. Lastly, part five, *(Re)Interpretation Diasporic Spidering, Counter-Archiving, and Collective Memory*, provides a clear exposition of the installation design and the collaborative methods employed to craft the exhibition. This section includes subsections Site and Audience, Exhibition Design, A Note on Language and Accessibility, Exhibition Design as Choreographic Practice, and Public Programs. Moreover, this section thinks through André Lepecki's theory of 'choreopolitics'<sup>2</sup> to further consider curatorial elements of access and critical engagement in relation to exhibition design.

Choreography is the method through which I interpret space, creating a container for knowing, doing, and practicing ways of being. *Diasporic Spidering, Counter-Archiving, and Collective Memory* is the first step within the long-term project that is my curatorial practice. Following the trailblazing success of *It's About Time: Dancing Black in Canada 1900-1970* by Dr. Seika Boye (2017), there is a clear need for the excavation and exhibition of Black dance and choreographic history. "To date, the history of dance within Canada's Black population is significantly under-documented in Canadian dance history and in African Canadian history...Without it, we are incomplete in our self-knowledge and so our potential."<sup>3</sup> This exhibition focuses on the framework

---

<sup>2</sup> The term choreopolitics works towards an ability to "reveal a particular political-aesthetic dimension that reflects, refracts, and attempts to answer one of the crucial questions of our times: how to claim agency for our movements and actions within our highly (even if subtly) choreographed societies of control, societies where, "nothing is left alone for long"? (Deleuze 1995: 175)."

Lepecki. "The Choreopolitical: Agency in the Age of Control," p 44.

<sup>3</sup> Boye. "Ola Skanks: Delayed Recognition of a Dance Artist Ahead of Her Time." p. 222.

of research practices being employed in Désir's work rather than a deeper excavation of the content being explored. Through this curatorial research I am gesturing to a choreography of freedom for Black people, specifically children; centering methodology, or intergenerational knowledge transfer through embodied engagement, as artistic product as a way of celebrating the distinct multiplicity of Black thought, history, and communities.

## POSITIONALITY

As a first-generation Jamaican born in Canada, I find myself placed in the role of “settler”—a troubling, bewildering, and complex truth. I continue to question my role in the ongoing colonialist project now known as Canada, while orienting my presence as a Black, female-identifying person existing in the dissonance of displacement, assimilation, settler privilege, and cultural vagrancy. Born and raised in the diaspora, as the first and only daughter of my mother, I was taught to be compliant. I was warned that my success and safety were dependent on silence and an intentional betrayal of self in the name of survival. To be a Black woman meant that I must be well-mannered and discreet - but if seen or heard, I must be graceful, well-spoken, and eloquent. In my lived experience, Canada, as a geopolitical site, has shaped my performance of female Blackness to be trite and filled with repressed anger to the point of not knowing who I am outside of the labour of assimilation. This simmering fury is well identified by what Dr. Naila Keleta-Mae calls *perpetual performance*. In her words,

Inhabitants of bodies read as female and Black in Canada have long had to simultaneously value the specificities of our diverse cultural signifiers while fighting oppressive forces that seek to colonize our bodies and the spaces we occupy as human beings[...] Anti-Black racism, sexism, classism, and heteronormativity in Canada are the primary factors that necessitate this way of being, and as I theorize in this book, create the condition of perpetual performance.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup>Keleta-Mae.” Performing Female Blackness,” 4-5.

At the age of 29, I find myself noting personal institutional oppression and resistance(s) as I learn about stories from Black female artists in Canada (like Esie Mensah and Syreeta Hector) in search of 'home', a kind of permanence or self-determination. However, coming across Rhodnie Désir's story struck me differently. An internationally acclaimed artist, speaker, advocate, mother, and educator, and still, her story is so familiar to many Black, female artists making work about identity and migration in Canada. Toronto, my place of residence for over 10 years, is known to be a leader in cultural production, one of the most diverse cities in the world in terms of population, and a space that hosts the most prolific, and at times controversial, artists and visionaries from around the globe. In 2024, Toronto has yet to present Désir's work with the level of respect and resources she has garnered internationally. It is this lack of presence and reverence that prompted an exploration into how Black, female-identifying movement artists can be celebrated in their life, rather than, if at all, posthumously.

## **ON COLLABORATION**

Castillo is a Toronto-based, 33-year-old Xicano artist and activist invested in grassroots advocacy for immigrant and labour rights. A central theme that drives Castillo's work is serving his community as a form of resistance, activism, and care through visual mediums like illustration, murals, painting, graffiti, and tattooing. Recently, he has begun diversifying his practice to include sculpture and installations. The materials he uses are also indicative of his socio-political values, utilizing traditional Indigenous tools and prioritizing tactile, durable, and sustainable materials like found leather and natural substances. Castillo and I met in the Fall of 2022 after hearing him

speak about crafting bespoke altars for the Latin American tradition of the Day of The Dead (El Día de los Muertos). Soon after, I conducted a studio visit where I learned about his devotion to community care; using his artistic practice to amplify the voices and labour being done by social and environmental justice workers. His dedication was inspiring and prompted an early discussion about building a curatorial relationship between us as emerging makers.

Due to the nature of my curatorial interests, it was imperative that the values of the commissioned artist include a sensitivity to and respect for the lived experiences of marginalized and historically erased people. Our individual and shared understanding of cultural coding made Castillo the ideal collaborator for this experimental exhibition. Additionally, our proximity to each other as graduate students provided the time and space for us to naturally build our relationship.

Over the past two years, our sporadic gatherings have allowed us to explore our relationship outside of resisting dominant culture and in deference to Western Eurocentric society. We discussed the similarities between Caribbean and Latin America culture including how we were raised, our cultural and environmental memories, food, language, and navigating identity politics as visible minorities. Meeting each other amid ever-evolving change; new leadership roles, new family dynamics, and the mounting pressure of advancing or contributing to our respective forms, we did our best to be present in the here and now. Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih's *Minor Transnationalism* (Lionnet and Shih, 2005) provided language to further understand our desire to make relevant the idiosyncratic, embodied, and ancestral practices that have



shaped us, inspired us, and sustained culture throughout the diaspora for centuries. Here, minor transnationalism centers minority cultures that are born of intercultural community and communication—decentering and challenging what Lionnet and Shih have articulated as the presupposition that “minorities necessarily and continuously engage with and against majority cultures in a vertical relationship of assimilation and opposition.”<sup>5</sup> Minor transnationalism is defined as a term that “recognizes the difficulty that minority subjects without a statist parameter of citizenship face when the nation-state remains the chief mechanism for dispersing and regulating power, status, and material resources.”<sup>6</sup> Approaching our collaborative process through the lens of minor transnationalism allowed us to recognize the privilege of prioritizing and questioning how we identify ourselves in relation to each other. It is important to note that our shared minority history differs by way of mobility and the repercussions of presence. In his chapter ‘Alternate Geographies and the Melancholy of Mestizaje,’ Rafael Pérez Torres explains that “the Chicanos/as occupy an ambiguous space: their transnationalism is not one born of the movement from a national context to another but rather one produced by the historical realities of shifting borders in the southwestern United States.”<sup>7</sup> We actively sought language that most appropriately spoke to our individual subject positioning and our evolving understanding how cultural connectivities can occur for marginalized people, furthering our discussions on mobility and movement. This text illuminated the shared reality of our politicized and surveilled existences. Visibility.

---

<sup>5</sup> Cover Copy. Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih. “Minor Transnationalism.”

<sup>6</sup>Lionnet and Shih. “Minor Transnationalism,” 8.

<sup>7</sup> Lionnet and Shih. “Minor Transnationalism,” 20.

Identity. Tactility. We craved the expansive and embodied rituals, practices, and knowledges held and transferred across generations through movement of bodies, borders, stories, and practices. We found the vital movements of survival; telling stories through a poignant gaze, a slippery tongue, and tricky limbs.

## **CURATORIAL VISION AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

As an emerging curator with a history and practice of choreography and performance, I am envisioning this work in a way that is concerned with how a space can house a person, comprehensively. I am using the word ‘comprehensively’ to speak to how bodies exist as active participants in the gallery space, entering with lived experiences, biases, and understandings of belonging that may be aligned or misaligned with the function and design of the exhibition space. How do we honour known, embodied ancestral knowledge in institutional arts spaces? How can artistic reinterpretation, through intercultural and interdisciplinary collaboration, that values methodology as artistic product further conversations around Black performance practice and creation? How does one cite references and place methodology with the same level of regard and intrigue as the spectacle of the dancing, moving Black body? Guided by these questions, *Diasporic Spidering, Counter-Archiving, and Collective Memory* explores the utility of intercultural and interdisciplinary collaboration through the lens of autoethnography when mapping and embodying origin stories.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research employs collaborative ways of working that are guided by autoethnographic research practices through the lens of performance studies (specifically Black performance theory), cultural studies, dance studies, and curatorial studies with attention to Black feminist practice. For approximately two years, artist-curator Dedra McDermott and Xicano artist, Alberto Castillo, have been exploring language that most appropriately spoke to their individual subject positioning and evolving collective practice. Initial discussions focused on exchanging diasporic knowledge and ritualistic ancestral practices, placing concepts of minor transnationalism and counter-archiving at the forefront of the theoretical research. Then, Nadine George-Graves' Black performance theory of 'diasporic spidering' provided us a vehicle for understanding how cultural connectivities occur for marginalized peoples.

Nadine George-Graves' 'diasporic spidering' is based on the folkloric character *Anansi the Spider*, a historic character, often recalled as a trickster at the centre of cautionary tales, with ties throughout the African diaspora including West Africa, Europe, the Caribbean, and the Americas.<sup>8</sup> In the Akan dialect Twi, *Ananse* translates to the word spider. George-Graves explains that "The web of stories that Anansi spins serves as a metaphor for the ways in which we remain connected to people over time, geography, cultural differences, and so forth. I posit the term "spidering" to describe the Anansi metaphor for contemporary diaspora."<sup>9</sup> She credits postcolonial scholars Kwame

---

<sup>8</sup> George-Graves." DIASPORIC SPIDERING: Constructing Contemporary Black Identities," 34.

<sup>9</sup> George-Graves." DIASPORIC SPIDERING: Constructing Contemporary Black Identities," 36.

Anthony Appiah, Paul Gilroy, and Daphne Brooks with informing her ability to reimagine the African diaspora through performance. She explains,

Anansi stories cast a web through performance that has global and historical reach. Memory has been the web of the African diaspora connecting the points along the map, and the fear of the loss of heritage has haunted African American history. Anansi's desire to be remembered through storytelling points to the importance of how we create links. In the twenty-first century, these methods have taken new shape and will result, no doubt, in new concepts of identity.<sup>10</sup>

As a key component of minoritized culture, folkloric storytelling symbolizes an essential form of sustenance that exists in the immaterial. Ultimately, separately held, but collectively valued, Castillo and I found our intercultural connectivity; seeking the truth we feel in our veins but have few visible, tangible, tactile reference points to make 'real.'

---

<sup>10</sup> George-Graves. "DIASPORIC SPIDERING: Constructing Black Identities," 38.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The array of literature explored for this research included the areas of Black performance theory, counter-archiving, collaboration and collective memory, and minor transnationalism. Within the field of performance studies, the Black female body can often be positioned as spectacle, saviour, or other. In this research the object of analysis is the presence of Black Female bodies in contemporary Western performance and the positioning their value when situated in a visual arts context, specifically a gallery space, in present day Canada.

Based on Naila Keleta-Mae's *Performing Female Blackness* (2023), Nadine George-Graves' *DIASPORIC SPIDERING: Constructing Contemporary Black Identities in Black Performance Theory* (2014), and Rhodnie Désir's "Body of Rhythms and Resistances" in *Configurations in Motion: Performance Curation and Communities of Colour* (3rd ed.) (2019), the notion of the performing Black female is considered from an intersectional perspective in terms of race, gender, class, age, and geographic location. Keleta-Mae's text elucidates a nuanced and vital reference point for the embodied experience of people existing at the intersection of Black and Female, while existing in Canada. In a similar fashion to Desir's work, *Performing Female Blackness* (2023) weaves autoethnographic storytelling, creative poetry, and theories of Black feminist performance to speak to what Keleta-Mae has termed 'perpetual performance.' This term is specific to the assimilative practices that have been imposed on generations of Black people who have been displaced to what is now known as Canada due to imperialism and the consistent mining of resources from colonized lands. Furthermore,

George-Graves' concepts of 'diasporic spidering' further substantiates how performance, performativity, and diasporic understandings of Blackness are multiplicitous, connected, and timeless—grounding my canonical understanding of intercultural connectivity and the possibilities of mobility and movement. Thematically, the investigation of 'global movements,' be that bodies in space, evolving epistemologies, or sharing of story and self as a way of leaving traces, paved a way to critically engage Rhodie Désir's *Body of Rhythms and Resistances* (2019). Reading this artist statement and manifesto through the lens of minor transnationalism and 'diasporic spidering' made clear how the theoretical can be put into practice. Mapping personal experience on to key issues of racism and immigration in Quebec, white supremacy in contemporary dance and performance, and the erasure of Canadian Black history within Quebec's cultural milieu, Désir provided a pointed reflection on the timely, vital, and necessary existence of *BOW'T TRAIL* as a historical reference point for generations to come.

Identity and cultural sustenance are clear themes within the surveyed literary materials. Thinking through how an individual experience can significantly impact the collective, the term *minor transnationalism* explores collaboration and community practice as a way of bridging the gap between cultures and minority movements. Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih's *Minor Transnationalism* (2005) frame the points of convergence between counter-archiving and the possibilities of collaborative practice within the field of cultural studies. Locating identity through the lens of Lionnet and Shih's prompted realizations of counter-archiving—questioning globalization with

specific reference to the expression of Canada as a 'cultural mosaic' and the insidiousness of assimilative practices throughout Canada's history.

On control and order, André Lepecki's "The Choreopolitical: Agency in the Age of Control" in *The Routledge Companion to Art and Politics* (2015) illustration of 'expected' conduct for bodies in the gallery space is a particular point of critical thought in socio-cultural performance. The unique consideration of how bodies in space, place, time operate within and against surveillance and desires for autonomy were in direct conversation with Tony Bennett's *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (1995). The theory of choreopolitics is in direct conversation with Bennet's comprehensive and critical overview of knowledge holding institutions and their role in shaping and dictating societal function and order. While these texts were published twenty years apart, they are analyzing a similar discussion of how public spaces, such as the arts institution, library, or gallery space, act as a critical interlocutor between culture and authority.

While reading these texts it became clear that most of them looked to fill a gap in minority cultural knowledge through approaches such as autoethnography, collaboration, and collective memory for the purpose of counter-archiving. I read about their relationships to self, for co-authors I read about their relationship to each other, and for the most part, the clearest thread was a choreography of place-making; seeking an opportunity to understand their lived experience, reckoning with a projection of what their lived experience is based on how the world sees them, or being attuned to the experience of minority communities and questioning the relationship between identity,

place, control and being. Each text provided a vital reference point that spoke to my research questions and helped me think through how I am choreographing the experience of the exhibition and shaping a practice of care for the people who will encounter this space. Moreover, although I did not reference their individual materials as core texts, when reading authors such as Thomas F. DeFrantz, Anita Gonzalez and Brenda Dixon Gottschild, I noticed that the conversations happening in the fields of performance theory, curatorial studies, and dance studies, much of this literature does not take up what I am thinking through, honouring methodology as artistic product as a way of valuing research that highlight subjugated knowledges to understand the complex nuances of minoritized histories through the vehicle of performance practice. Thinking of ways that 'form' informs thought patterns, I am fascinated by the way that embodied practice can pathway an idea. Overall, these texts have informed and are shifting my intercultural and interdisciplinary approach to curatorial practice. Moving towards one's ability to witness the cultural excavation and labour that is occurring through the work of *Silk Strands*, *Silk Traces* and *BOW'T TRAIL*, the conversation around environment is crucial.



## INSTITUTIONAL KNOWLEDGE, REPRESENTATION, AND BLACK FEMALE PERFORMANCE

Historically, the role of galleries, museums, and other institutions such as libraries and archives, has been to establish order through crafted social practices that align with the desires of the ruling class. The priority of order and decorum is also reflected in the forms of knowledge and expression displayed within these institutions. Similarly, with libraries and archives, there is a privileging of histories dictated by white, European descendants that are celebrated within the walls of established Westernized knowledge-holding spaces, resulting in a decades-long struggle in Canadian institutions over the dearth of accurate and accountable histories of Black and Indigenous people.

Charmaine A. Nelson, author of *Towards an African Canadian Art History* (Nelson, (2019), explains “As both the by-product of British and French settler colonies, the foundation of Canadian national identity was based upon the strategic displacement and exploitation of Indigenous and African populations.”<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, “while the First Peoples had to be contained, assimilated, removed, or destroyed in order to make way for the white settlers’ possession and reimagining of the land, from the 17th century onwards, the French declared the African (in their supposed biological inferiority) as uniquely suited to the role of “New World” labourer.”<sup>12</sup> Labourer, Spectacle, or Other.

The level of erasure and dehumanization that has occurred in visual arts spaces requires those of racialized identities to search for all that was left behind. These words inspire reflections of the often-referenced Saartjie Baartman and the legacy of Hottentot

---

<sup>11</sup> Nelson.” Introduction: *Towards an African Canadian Art History*,” 3.

<sup>12</sup> Nelson.” Introduction: *Towards an African Canadian Art History*,” 3.

Venus. “In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Baartman was brought to England to be exhibited as an “exotic” specimen of Black African women’s bodies. She performed strategically unclothed for the masses, to the outcry of abolitionists and others concerned with the dehumanized portrayal of African-descended peoples in the West.”<sup>13</sup> Born in rural South Africa and taken from her place of origin, the story of the renowned Hottentot Venus is a notable precedent for the inhumane, hypersexualization that many enslaved women faced during chattel slavery in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The act of concealing more nuanced and noble racialized histories while amplifying the experiences that inspire shame is undoubtedly a tactical effort to isolate and silence Black women.

There is significant labour and grief that accompanies locating one's own history when it is deemed forgettable or counterproductive or, conversely, witnessing renderings of ancestors that are eroticized, demonized, brutalized, and falsified. For many displaced artists, the labour and responsibility of building your own understanding of history when it is not documented or documented inaccurately is a familiar and inescapable obstacle. This labour requires a level of *mattering*, which female curators of Royal Ontario Museum’s *Here We Are Here: Black Canadian Contemporary Art* (2018) Silvia Forni, Julie Crooks, and Dominique Fontaine define as “bringing to the fore the ‘absented presence’ of four-hundred years of Black history in Canada through a contemporary lens and myriad artistic practices.”<sup>14</sup> This absence demands an expansive

---

<sup>13</sup> Pinto.” *Infamous Bodies: Early Black Women’s Celebrity and the Afterlives of Rights,*” 106.

<sup>14</sup> Forni, Crooks, and Fontaine.” *Activism, Objects and Dialogues: Re-engaging African Collections at the Royal Ontario Museum* “, 193.

epistemological exploration of Blackness, Black movement, and the revalorization of what Black female bodies have done and continue to do in the face of widespread erasure. This labour, which I believe to be an act of performative resistance, is a core aspect of Black feminist performance practice.

## EXHIBITION REVIEW

To survey the exhibitions and projects relevant to the experimental work of *Diasporic Spidering, Counter-Archiving, and Collective Memory*, I looked for examples of intercultural and interdisciplinary collaboration in Canadian gallery spaces that feature an aspect of choreographic practice in the last 15 years. I look at these exhibitions with an attention to the following: the diversity of voices in curatorial leadership, the placement of dancing bodies in space as spectacle, as knowledge holding vessels, and as active representations of change within the landscape of visual art. The following exhibitions point to an embrace of embodied knowledge, histories of movement as performance and sociopolitical practice, and the capacity of choreographed bodies as disruption, intervention, as well as a signal of presence and liveness within traditionally insular and highly surveilled spaces. Here, I will discuss *Dancing Black in Canada: IT'S ABOUT TIME 1900-1970* curated by Dr. Seika Boye at The Art Gallery of Ontario (2018), Jenn Goodwin's *Thunderstruck: Physical Landscapes* (2018-2019) at the Canada Council for The Arts, taisha paggett and WXPT in collaboration with Ashley Hunt and Kim Zumpfe's *School of Movement for Technicol(u)r People* at Gallery TPW in Toronto (2019), and *MAGDANCE*, a collaboration between MacKenzie Art Gallery and New Dance Horizons in Saskatchewan (2011-present).

*Dancing Black in Canada: IT'S ABOUT TIME 1900-1970* curated by Dr. Seika Boye at The Art Gallery of Ontario (2017), "illuminates the largely undocumented dance history of Canada's Black population before 1970, with responses from contemporary

performing and visual artists reflecting on how the archival resonates in this moment.”<sup>15</sup> Revealing, timely, and vital, this exhibition makes known the impact and cultural presence of Black dance in Canada, providing opportunities to learn and respond to expansive narratives and the resilient nature of Ola Skanks, Len Gibson, and Ethel Bruneau, to name a few. The crucial aspect of this work is its focus of social dance, centering the recreational, leisurely, and civic notion of Black movements as expressions of joy, resistance, and livelihood. Exposing the “representation of Blackness on Canadian stages, as well as audience and media reception of Black performance in Canada during this era,” *Dancing Black in Canada: IT’S ABOUT TIME 1900-1970*, reveals a side of Canadian history that deserves to be witnessed, celebrated, and carried forward.<sup>16</sup> In an artist response written by Christina Sharpe, she poetically explains that “Righting the wrongs of an archive gives legitimacy to cultures who have otherwise been denied.”<sup>17</sup> Once again, it is the act of remembering, rewriting, reinvestigating, and reinvesting in the people who make up these stories that enact the process of *mattering* that is key to the cultural survival of minority communities.

*Thunderstruck: Physical Landscapes* (2018-2019) featured an array of artist from Canada to investigate “the landscape in which contemporary dance is created,

---

<sup>15</sup>“Exhibition.” *IT’S ABOUT TIME: Dancing Black in Canada 1900–1970*. Accessed March 10, 2024. <https://www.dancingblackcanada.ca/the-exhibition>.

<sup>16</sup> “Exhibition.” *IT’S ABOUT TIME: Dancing Black in Canada 1900–1970*. Accessed March 10, 2024. <https://www.dancingblackcanada.ca/the-exhibition>.

<sup>17</sup>Battle, Christina. “It’s About Time (Where Was It Fun to Dance?): A Response.” Christina Battle, November 2020. <https://cbattle.com/where-was-it-fun-to-dance/>.

presented, and received.”<sup>18</sup> Thinking about the residual remains of any physical or performance practice, this work prioritizes liveness and the act of doing in the space that is, in a sense, the antithesis of my exploration. Exhibited in the Âjagemô art space at the Canada Council for the Arts in Ottawa, *Thunderstruck* presents a look at “bodies, movements and dances *within* landscapes, as well as the body and dance as landscape.”<sup>19</sup> Questioning the ephemerality of dance and its impact past the point of live encounters, this work creates an environment of witnessing that allows audiences to be present in the everyday performance of their existence juxtaposed with a curated performative landscape of contemporary dance in Canada. Goodwin presented art, installations film-based works, and materials related to choreographic performance from Shary Boyle, Francesca Chudnoff, Ella Cooper, Mario Côté, Aganetha Dyck, Brendan Fernandes, Angela Miracle Gladue, Deepti Gupta, La calq, Michelle Latimer, Brandy Leary, Tanya Lukin Linklater, Zab Maboungou, Lola MacLaughlin, Freya Björg Olafson , Omar Rivero (aka Driftnote), Tedd Robinson, Brian Solomon, Laura Taler, Rosanna Terracciano and Anne Troake.<sup>20</sup> This exhibition was a significant offering in the interdisciplinary arts ecology as it places movement at the crux of a mixed media, performance-based exhibition on view in an institutional space located at a heightened

---

<sup>18</sup> Goodwin, Jenn. “Curatorial Statement.” Canada Council for the Arts. Accessed March 10, 2024. <https://canadacouncil.ca/about/ajagemo/thunderstruck/curatorial-statement>.

<sup>19</sup> Goodwin, Jenn. “Curatorial Statement.” Canada Council for the Arts. Accessed March 10, 2024. <https://canadacouncil.ca/about/ajagemo/thunderstruck/curatorial-statement>.

<sup>20</sup> Goodwin, Jenn. “Thunderstruck: Physical Landscapes at Âjagemô.” Canada Council for the Arts. Accessed March 10, 2024. <https://canadacouncil.ca/about/ajagemo/thunderstruck>.

level of sectoral prestige. Its placement inspires questions of who this work is meant to reach and what are the ways of engaging how a body is meant to be witnessed, valued, and understood as a site of human experience within this environment.

In 2019, intercultural and national collaborative project, *School for the Movement of the Technicolo(u)r People* (SMTP) offered a large-scale artist exchange, exhibition, public-school platform as a site/home and experimental curriculum that responds to the limited positioning of Black and queer movers in the worlds of dance, visual art, and beyond.<sup>21</sup> This unique approach to pedagogy and community learning acted as a gathering place for artists and arts enthusiasts to question their perspective of Black dance in the contemporary North American experience. On this project, Los Angeles-based dance artist taisha paggett works in collaboration with visual artists Ashley Hunt (LA), Kim Zumpfe (LA) and the temporary dance company WXPT Toronto which features: Ella Cooper, Rodney Diverlus, Bishara Elmi, Aisha Sasha John, Ashley “Colours” Perez, and Danielle Smith, with curatorial and dramaturgical support from artist/scholar Seika Boye (TO), to transform Gallery TPW into a temporary dance studio and school for the local community.<sup>22</sup> The Toronto iteration of the *School for Movement of Technicolo(u)r People* follows versions that have occurred in other cities in North America, such as Los Angeles, Austin, and Houston. Functioning as a cross-border

---

<sup>21</sup> “School for the Movement of the Technicolo(u)r People | Gallery TPW.” Gallery TPW. Accessed March 10, 2024. <https://archive.gallerytpw.ca/exhibitions/sntp/>

<sup>22</sup> “School for the Movement of the Technicolo(u)r People | Gallery TPW.” Gallery TPW. Accessed March 10, 2024. <https://archive.gallerytpw.ca/exhibitions/sntp/>

exchange, SMTP existed at the intersection of “US/Canadian forced and voluntary migrations, the mining of both land and bodies, and memories of erased Black histories, to bring forth new possibilities of collective movement and embodiment within the everyday practices and grammars of social struggle.”<sup>23</sup> The School offers a unique reference point for knowledge transfer, focusing on critical dialogue around “What is a Black. Dance. Curriculum. Today?”<sup>24</sup> Spotlighting terminology, the company took the time to consider their definition of Black, Dance, and Curriculum at the end of the 2010s decade. For the company, ‘Black dance’ is “intended not just to point to the canon of African diasporic dance but to the perpetually unstable condition and resiliency of Black life in Canada and the United States. The curriculum will investigate ideas of kinship, intimacy, and care; succumbing and resistance to gravity; body printing and the metaphor of dye/dying; collective recitations and trance; strategies of capturing movement for the camera; and the multiple possibilities of support inside collective improvisational dancing.”<sup>25</sup> With a diverse and robust public program, each Saturday this temporary platform for community building and learning offered workshops and talks that are in critical dialogue with the core inquiries present in the project.

---

<sup>23</sup> “School for the Movement of the Technicolo(u)r People | Gallery TPW.” Gallery TPW. Accessed March 10, 2024. <https://archive.gallerytpw.ca/exhibitions/sntp/>

<sup>24</sup> “School for the Movement of the Technicolo(u)r People | Gallery TPW.” Gallery TPW. Accessed March 10, 2024. <https://archive.gallerytpw.ca/exhibitions/sntp/>

<sup>25</sup> “School for the Movement of the Technicolo(u)r People | Gallery TPW.” Gallery TPW. Accessed March 10, 2024. <https://archive.gallerytpw.ca/exhibitions/sntp/>



MacKenzie Art Gallery (MAG), located in Wascana Park, Oskana Kâ'asastêki/Regina in Treaty Four territory of what is now known as Saskatchewan, is the oldest public art gallery in the province.<sup>26</sup> Through a collaboration with New Dance Horizons, a local choreographic development and presentation platform, MAGDANCE is “a groundbreaking series of dance residencies/exhibitions that has been prompting new perspectives and dialogues on dance in the gallery for over a decade.”<sup>27</sup> This partnership has yielded five iterations of collaborative residency and performance, providing opportunities for “choreographic development, archival animation, and community engagement that broadens and deepens perspectives of dance and what a body a can do.”<sup>28</sup>

*MAGDANCE performance series offers an opportunity to reflect on the deeper connections between dance and visual art. By inserting the ‘black box’ of the dance studio into the ‘white cube’ of the gallery, the place of the art viewer/dance spectator is brought into question.*<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Vida, Mackenzy. “Mackenzie Art Gallery and New Dance Horizons Present the Much-Anticipated Fifth Installment of Their Innovative Dance Residency.” MacKenzie Art Gallery, August 24, 2023. <https://mackenzie.art/mackenzie-art-gallery-and-new-dance-horizons-present-the-much-anticipated-fifth-installment-of-their-innovative-dance-residency/>.

<sup>27</sup> “Exhibitions.” MacKenzie Art Gallery. Accessed March 10, 2024. <http://www.mackenzieartgallery.ca/engage/exhibitions/magdance-art-dance>.

<sup>28</sup> “Exhibitions.” MacKenzie Art Gallery. Accessed March 10, 2024. <http://www.mackenzieartgallery.ca/engage/exhibitions/magdance-art-dance>.

<sup>29</sup> “Exhibitions.” MacKenzie Art Gallery. Accessed March 10, 2024. <http://www.mackenzieartgallery.ca/engage/exhibitions/magdance-art-dance>.

The most recent iteration of MAGDANCE 5: *art + dance + archive* (2023) offered an exhibition that was based on the reinterpretation of a set piece for Paul-André Fortier's choreographic work, *Bras de plomb* (1993). Questioning the "role of the art gallery in archiving contemporary dance, MAGDANCE asks what it means to archive a medium which exists post-performance only as series of traces: sets, costumes, videos, photography, choreography notes, reviews, etc."<sup>30</sup> On the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this work, a group of choreographers were awarded a residency to explore, reconsider, and reinterpret the possible uses of the set design, proposing alternative engagements in conversation with Fortier and dance archivist, Ginelle Chagnon. Collaboratively designed by Montreal artist, Betty Goodwin, and Fortier, this exhibition provides a fascinating reference point for the possibilities of expansive genealogies of performance; giving new life to a storied work, object, and memory that stood the test of time. Featuring artist from across the nation, the selections include Brian Webb (Edmonton), Naishi Wang (Toronto), James Viveiros (Montreal), Rouge-gorge (Regina), Gordon Gerrard (Regina), Marion Newman (Toronto), Marcus Merasty [Saskatchewan], Anastasia Evsigeeva (Winnipeg), Anna Protsiou (Winnipeg), Lee Henderson (Montreal), Johanna Bundon (Regina), and Jayden Pfeifer (Regina).<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup>"Magdance 5: Art + Dance + Archive." MacKenzie Art Gallery, September 29, 2023. <https://mackenzie.art/exhibition/magdance-5/>.

<sup>31</sup>"Magdance 5: Art + Dance + Archive." MacKenzie Art Gallery, September 29, 2023. <https://mackenzie.art/exhibition/magdance-5/>.

## **STORYTELLING: GESTURES OF SURVIVAL**

Rhodnie Désir (RD CRÉATIONS) has been an architect of Black cultural production in Canada for over a decade. Through her unique multimodal approach, Désir has created stage, film, and visual artworks around the world—focusing on ancestral movement languages from Haiti, Central and West Africa, and other Caribbean countries. Désir’s practice is an active participant in this research and requires a level of presence and reference to give voice to the years of research that has gone into her methodology. The following section explores her impact on my emerging curatorial and collaborative practice, focusing on her methodology of choreo-documentary as a gesture of survival; an act that advocates for the survival of history and practices of Afro-Caribbean peoples across the diaspora.

## **DIASPORIC SPIDERING: RHODNIE DÉSIR’S BOW’T TRAIL AS TRANSNATIONAL CREATIVE PRACTICE**

*BOW’T (boat) is derived from the word “bow” as the forefront of a ship, to bend the head or body, and also signifying in Haitian creole “to give.”<sup>32</sup>*

---

<sup>32</sup> Rhodnie Désir, “BOW’T,” Bow’T • 2013 - RD Créations, accessed February 6, 2024, <http://rhodniedesir.com/en/bowt-original-version>.

Désir solo, *Bow'T* (2013), began as “a dance and drum solo that addressed the subjects of migration and deportation...exploring the parallels and distinctions between the migrant body who leaves voluntarily, and those bodies forced away involuntarily.”<sup>33</sup> In the years to come, she would concretize her methodology of utilizing afro-contemporary movement practices to create what she has termed choreographic-documentary. In her words, “choreographic-documentary [is] a process that starts with an encounter and ends with a choreographic creation. These encounters take the form of interviews with those whom she calls *bearers of memory*.”<sup>34</sup> Through this method, she would go on to create *BOW'T TRAIL* (2015–2019) and *BOW'T TRAIL Retrospek* (2020 to now), seminal works that would change the trajectory of her life as an artist, leader, and global advocate.

This voyage resulted in an interactive web documentary titled *BOW'T TRAIL* including 6 countries, 75 videos, and more than 5 hours of content, a publicly accessible documentary series available on ICI.TOU.TV with 5 episodes on the *BOW'T TRAIL*, as well as the film *Sur les pas de Rhodnie*, which offers a unique perspective as the artist retraces her unique journey.<sup>35</sup> Most recently, her artistic leadership and innovation have garnered accolades such as GRAND PRIX de la danse de Montréal in 2020 and the Danseuse de l'année award at the Gala Dynastie.<sup>36</sup> A renowned international public

---

<sup>33</sup> Désir. “Body of Rhythms and Resistances”, 28.

<sup>34</sup> Rhodnie Désir, “Choreographic-Documentary - RD Créations,” rhodniedesir.com, accessed January 18, 2024, <http://rhodniedesir.com/en/the-choreography-documentary>.

<sup>35</sup> Rhodnie Désir, “The Whole BOW'T TRAIL - RD Créations,” rhodniedesir.com, accessed January 18, 2024, <http://rhodniedesir.com/en/bow-t-trail>.

<sup>36</sup> Rhodnie Désir, “RD Créations - RD Créations,” rhodniedesir.com, accessed January 18, 2024 <http://rhodniedesir.com/en/rd-creations>.

speaker and artistic delegate, her profound contribution to the worlds of artistic research and performance creation are undeniable. However, in public interviews and published works, Désir has experienced barriers in the Canadian arts sector, specifically Montreal, recollecting the experience of discussing her works with Quebec media. She explains,

Again and again, I am asked if Bow'T can really be considered contemporary work because of its reliance on ancestry. I'm asked, "...but you use the drum, Haitian Vodou rhythms... maybe it's not contemporary because you use the drum?" I was also told that migration might not really be of concern to Quebec.<sup>37</sup>

As perplexing and daunting as this memory is, it illuminates the experiences that many racialized and Black artists face when creating work that explores concepts of identity and/or traditional forms that call on their ancestral knowledge. Regardless of the extensive research supporting their work, Black artists are often burdened with the onerous task of defending the value of their work and being required to contextualize and make relevant its historical accuracy and impact on Western audiences, today. The imbalance of power in these experiences and the resistance from institutions to come to terms with supremacist systems is a reminder of the ineffability of identity politics. Angela Ards, on the ethics of self-fashioning, explains that "The black feminist mode of reading power relations provides a theoretical basis for understanding contemporary

---

<sup>37</sup> Désir. "Body of Rhythms and Resistances", 29.

autobiography as political thought.”<sup>38</sup> For Désir, she took this experience as an opportunity to seek truth and reconcile the absence of her ancestral history, a way of deepening cultural understanding on the path of self-determination. She states,

What if *Bow’T* became my own history book? What if *Bow’T* allowed me to go back to the source, to translate one of the greatest crimes against humanity, but also to trace the similarities with current events and the omnipresent movement of Black people in the world?

...The *BOW’T TRAIL* project was born.<sup>39</sup>

Rhodnie Désir’s work stands out amongst the many voices in Canadian choreographic performance due to her choreographic-documentary practice; a practice that I believe employs a performance theory proposed by Dr. Nadine George-Graves called ‘diasporic spidering.’ Désir, by nature of creating interdisciplinary performance that is an active practice of counter-archiving grounded in embodied practice and informed by autoethnographic anthropological research, forms unique connectivities between all who contributed to *BOW’T TRAIL*. This act of autoethnographic choreographic practice as self-determination aligns with George-Graves’ belief that “the

---

<sup>38</sup> Ards. “Introduction: The ethics of self-fashioning”, 17.

<sup>39</sup> Désir. “Body of Rhythms and Resistances”, 30.

search for connections and the implications for black identity and subjectivity have always been part and parcel of the African diaspora.”<sup>40</sup>

The publicly accessible web documentary, *BOW'T TRAIL* shares interviews, rehearsal footage and site-specific performances to offer a comprehensive look into the choreo-documentary process. With each site-specific performance creation, Désir utilizes simple yet effective props such as three thick wooden frames in the shape of three-sided boxes and a dress made up of paper boats. Through these items she imbues a nuanced and highly ephemeral approach to storytelling, engaging in a collaboration with local artists and knowledge holders who have a specific relationship to ritual and ceremony to create a new work that will be performed in that locale, and never again thereafter. In its entirety, this series is an offering of cultural artifacts that speak to the stories that are in danger of being lost. Now, due to her labour, these gestures of survival have been made available and accessible for future generations.

In Haiti, Désir collaborated with local musicians who shared the rhythms of the ancestral vodou tradition to illuminate the human and spiritual dynamic within her ancestral, embodied movement knowledge. Here, we are welcomed to the *BOW'T TRAIL* through the power of dance, or more succinctly, embodied testimony. With original music by Désir and Haitian artists Jean-Mary “Kebyesou” Louissant, this collaboration provided a connection to land and knowing that would be impossible without shared language, intention, and a desire to learn from and alongside one

---

<sup>40</sup> George-Graves. "DIASPORIC SPIDERING: Constructing Black Identities," 38.

another. Through interviews with Eddy Lubin, Emile Anya, and Marie Camelle Mentor, this series educates the audience on the richness of Haitian history, the traditions, rituals, and the powerful voices and rhythms that have sustained them as they “fight for their life while trying to reactivate life.”<sup>41</sup>

The Black Brazilian (denoting African ancestry as well as darker skin tone) population lives life as second-class citizens. In the favelas<sup>42</sup> of Rio de Janeiro, Désir comes to terms with the realities of Black life in all its beauty and struggle. “The slave trade has left an indelible mark on the history of Brazil. Inequalities of colonization oppress the Black population. In this economic and socio-cultural context, dance becomes a political tool.”<sup>43</sup> On this journey, the audience learns the history and lived experience of locals on the land. At Valongo Wharf, Désir creates and performs with young local artists, weaving together her contemporary afro-diasporic movement language and their raw and vigorous movement quality of Samba, known as the movement of resistance, that is informed by their lived experience.<sup>44</sup> Valongo Wharf is a port where the enslaved people arrived to what is now known as Brazil. Here, they sit

---

<sup>41</sup> Rhodnie Désir. Artist Talk. October 19, 2023, Winchester Street Theatre, Toronto, Canada.

<sup>42</sup> Favela, in Brazil, is a slum or shantytown located within or on the outskirts of the country’s large cities, especially Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. Some have identified the origins of the favela in the Brazilian communities formed by impoverished former slaves in the late 19th century, but it was the great wave of migration from the countryside to the cities from the 1940s to the 1970s that was primarily responsible for the proliferation of favelas in Brazil.

Wallenfeldt, J. "favela." Encyclopedia Britannica, January 11, 2024.  
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/favela>.

<sup>43</sup> Rhodnie Désir and Marie-Claude Fournier, “Bow’t Trail: Séries: Ici Tou.Tv,” Séries | ICI TOU.TV, December 16, 2019, <https://ici.tou.tv/bow-t-trail>.

<sup>44</sup> Rhodnie Désir. Artist Talk. October 19, 2023, Winchester Street Theatre, Toronto, Canada.



together and make a dress out of paper boats that she will dance in, honouring the memory of suffering that occurred in this place. Throughout the performance, the rhythm of funk and soul vibrate through the bodies present in this place, illustrating the resilience and passion for life that emits from the soil. Featuring interviews with Jose Jorge Siquieres, Hebe Mattos, Itamar Silva, Carolina Câmara Pires dos Santos, Lelette Couto, and Filó Filho, with collaborative performances from the young company of Movimiento 2.0.5 and musicians, Carlos Negreiros, Jovi Joviniano, and Glaucus Linx, this documentary provides insight into histories and knowledges that otherwise may be left unknown.

In the episode, *The hidden side of New Orleans*, Désir immerses herself in the dynamic and vivacious city of New Orleans, Louisiana for the final episode of the documentary series. The audience is offered a rich history of New Orleans' ritual of the second line (parade or procession), rhythms and movements of people brought to this land through the Transatlantic Slave Trade, and the contemporary state of Blackness in America pre- and post- Hurricane Katrina, thinking through the longstanding policy-based struggles Black communities have faced for decades. "More than 60 years after the civil rights movement, the socio-economic reality of the Black population still bears the scars of latent and systemic racism. Yet, despite this, the community remains determined not to be set up to fail."<sup>45</sup> Sharing narratives from interviewees Monique Moss, Alvin Jackson, Dr. Jeffrey U. Darrensborg, Malik Rahim, and Chief Victor Harris,

---

<sup>45</sup> Rhodnie Désir and Marie-Claude Fournier, "Bow't Trail: Séries: Ici Tou.Tv," *Séries | ICI TOU.TV*, December 16, 2019, <https://ici.tou.tv/bow-t-trail>.

we are guided through the complexity of Black and Indigenous experiences on that land and the ways they would celebrate life in the face of struggle, as a way of moving forward.

This documentary illustrates the soul of Blackness, revealing a spiritual and unrelenting vitality that makes Black people and culture interminable. We are shown sites of joy like Congo Square, one of the few spaces Indigenous and Black communities were permitted to liberate themselves and express their joy through music and dance, juxtaposed with sites of immense grief, such as the grounds where the most lynchings in North America had occurred.<sup>46</sup> In collaboration with musician Spirit McIntyre, audiences witness a performance of a funeral procession. Capturing the heartbreaking nature of the kind of death that occurred in this space, Désir brings to life a level of reverent, gracious, and solemn joy—leaving an orange behind on a tree as an offering to those whose spirit continue to live on between the roots and the sky.

Situating the global map as a web offers pointed insight into ways in which Désir's method is a spidering. George-Graves explains that “the architecture of the web changes in time, and different nodes reference how other sites refer to each other... identity therefore shifts in response to how other identities are shifting in a look by an individual, less to the past than the present and future.”<sup>47</sup> ‘Diasporic spidering,’ like the work of *BOW'T TRAIL*, functions with the participation of community through conversation and with a commitment to building a trusting relationship that allows for a

---

<sup>46</sup> Rhodnie Désir. Artist Talk. October 19, 2023, Winchester Street Theatre, Toronto, Canada.

<sup>47</sup> George-Graves.” DIASPORIC SPIDERINGS: Constructing Black Identities “, 37.

human connection to take place. Travelling, as an aspect of meeting, presents itself as a component of 'diasporic spidering.' For Désir, this meant moving across the Americas to experience the ports and portals of ancestral memory that exist within the legacy of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, offering a poignant and poetic entry into the past and present histories of Black people living in the wake of slavery. For Castillo and McDermott, this was a movement towards each other, and then together, towards Six Nations.

## CONNECTING COMMUNITIES AND PRACTICE

As I considered both the physical and spatial choreographic elements of exhibition, the opportunity for pedagogy within curatorial practice was signalled by the storytelling component of 'Anansi the Spider.' To help orient the world of minority culture and understand the complex nuances of our intercultural and interdisciplinary collaboration, I shared the stories of Anansi with Castillo, offering a grounding point for 'Trickster' mythology. This brought conversations of Sky Woman or Mother Sky, recognizing the intersections of Afro-Caribbean and Indigenous storytelling from Xicano and Haudenosaunee peoples, noting the connectivities between the larger global Indigenous mythology.

The Six Nations of the Grand River is a Haudenosaunee First Nation and a reserve in Ontario, known to be the largest reservation by population in Canada. The Six Nations are the Cayuga Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Seneca, and Tuscarora nations. In search of materials and land connection, Castillo took me to the reservation to share his experiences, teach through storytelling, and build upon his connections to Indigenous communities in BC and the people of Six Nations. Castillo's relationship to Six Nations is preceded by his labour and artistic advocacy during the height of BC pipeline protests and the connection to Indigenous culture being imparted unto him by his Indigenous wife, Anne Spice. His knowledge of the land and people of Six Nations provided an invitation for me, through Castillo, to engage with both human and non-human knowledge as both of us are most simply 'welcome guests.' Thinking through global Indigeneity and placing our evolving understanding of ancestral ties, transnationally,

Castillo and McDermott have actively situated this work as an acknowledgement (and timely reminder) of the vitality and necessity of minority relations as a means of survival.

While driving to Six Nations, Castillo shared this story,

This community has all types of people, of every background. There are probably assumptions about the rez, but I cannot address all of them. It is not just native people living there, but by far they are the largest group. With nearby towns like Caledon, there are many white people that come to the rez. Not every reservation is this open and welcoming. There are some reservations with checkpoints or have a more standoffish nature. There is no check point here and one of the reasons I believe they are so open is due to their robust economy. They are close to the US-Canada border and nearby cities, like Toronto. Several nations started generating wealth through several industries such as marijuana, gas, labour, construction, and agriculture—such as corn, tobacco, wheat, and soy. There is some slipperiness in terms of legality and taxing of marijuana, tobacco, and growing wheat, as well as a slipperiness of naming and placing of the different people who live on this land. The naming of this place is also contested. A newer name for Six Nations is the Iroquois Confederacy, but depending on who you ask, they may not like that name. For example, the Mohawk were pushed off their lands to reservations, and also made deals with the King of England for specific pieces of land. Six Nations was actually just the hunting grounds for people like the Seneca, but a lot of them were actually living in communities towards the US side.

The community connection around displacement and resource sharing is at the crux of the transfer of knowledge that occurred in Six Nations. Be it nuanced and precise, or quick and imprecise, it inspires a desire to learn and understand more about

the places that we exist in and contribute to. Hearing this story from Castillo instigated discussions of the American Revolution and the War of 1812 which led to the origin story of the *Great Law of Peace*<sup>48</sup> and how the Six Nations, through the Peacemaker and Hiawatha, came to live more harmoniously.<sup>49</sup> Then, naturally, came the story of Turtle Island and the Sky Woman.

Castillo was introduced to a larger community in Six Nations through Shiloh, an Indigenous land defender who grew up in Six Nations as well as Kensington Market, Toronto. Following this introduction, Castillo began creating murals and public art for Indigenous business owners and on private properties. Due to his working and personal relationships, he frequents Six Nations often, becoming familiar with the local vendors, chief among them, Iroqrafts. Here, we purchased the raw-hide and sinew for the sculpture, and Castillo shared information about the various Indigenous hunting tools and practices that yield these materials including furs and other materials that are then made into clothing or accessories. In this time, I learned about the relationships that held Castillo as an artist and activist, nourishing his desire to belong and be of service to a

---

<sup>48</sup> The Six Nations of Cayuga Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Seneca, and Tuscarora nations are united by the Great Law of Peace (Kaianere'ko:wa), which is considered both a political constitution and a basis for Haudenosaunee society in general. The Great Law was given to Hiawatha by the prophet Peacemaker, and together they helped to form the confederacy. The Haudenosaunee use the metaphor of the longhouse to describe their political alliance, and its spirit of togetherness also applies to social and cultural life, mirroring the use of the Great Law of Peace as both a political and cultural document.

Ramsden, Peter G. "Haudenosaunee (Iroquois)." Edited by Zach Parrott. The Canadian Encyclopedia, December 14, 2006. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/iroquois>.

<sup>49</sup> EVANS, TONY TEKARONIAKE. "How the Iroquois Confederacy Was Formed." History.com. Accessed March 11, 2024. <https://www.history.com/news/iroquois-confederacy-hiawatha-peacemaker-great-law-of-peace>.

people that have continued to prosper and flourish in this ecology of settler-colonialism. The slipperiness of how he shared this story reminds me of how I first heard about Anansi. These folkloric stories were shared by the person who raised my mother—not my maternal grandmother, but a bonus caretaker, Agatha McKenzie. The woman who taught me how to brush my teeth and shared the story of *Brother Anansi and Brother Snail*, a story about deceit that eventually proves that slow, steady collaboration will take a person further than bullish, quick work, alone.

## **(RE)INTERPRETATION: DIASPORIC SPIDERING, COUNTER-ARCHIVING, AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY**

This exhibition displays select videos from *BOW'T TRAIL* in Haiti, Brazil, and New Orleans, and features a sculptural installation by commissioned artist Alberto Castillo titled *Silk Strands, Silk Traces*. This dynamic sculpture metaphorically reimagines the connectivities made possible through 'diasporic spidering.' Utilizing local red-osier dogwood as well as Indigenous materials from Six Nations, the latching of wood with sinew mimics the shape of a spider spinning a web as a nod to the ties that exist within the intercultural and interdisciplinary relationships that informed this creation and the land it is being created on. *Silk Strands, Silk Traces* aims to reinterpret the collaborative methods used to create Désir's *BOW'T TRAIL* into a less ephemeral artifact; representing our active, albeit symbolic, 'diasporic spidering' in practice.

*Silk Strands, Silk Traces* is aptly named to describe the substance spiders make. Spiders spin their *silk* to create the complex and delicate yet resilient webbing we see in daily life. Referring to George-Graves, it is this silk that holds and carries our diasporic stories. Castillo formed this sculpture out of wood and sinew, creating a durable structure like a spider, with an echo of a web built into its frame to metaphorically trace the remnants of collaborations and traces of ancestral memory. At the beginning of our collaboration, we explored a version of structures that would be reminiscent of spider webs but built durably enough to be a site of tactile engagement for audiences, including children. The initial design was inspired by a play structure on Gerrard St. E in Toronto, ONT.





*Figure 1(left) Gerrard St E. Play Structure (right) Draft, Silk Strands, Silk Traces*

The initial design prompted questions about Indigenous history and cross-cultural points of reference in sculptural design. During this preliminary design process, Alberto and I were made aware that this design was reminiscent of Indigenous sweat lodges, prompting a need for specific acknowledgment and historical context for the Indigenous knowledge that birthed this design. This was an excellent learning opportunity. Although this preliminary design was not used, it opened the door for a discussion about global Indigeneity and questions around Indigenous representation across Turtle Island.

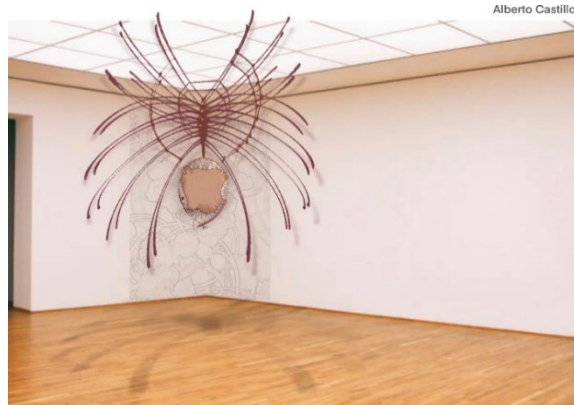


Figure 2 Final Design, Silk Strands, Silk Traces

The final design featured a sculpture made from red-osier dogwood. Each intersection of a branch is latched with sinew from a Caribou, citing the life cycles all living beings participate in throughout the structure. On what would be the largest part of the body of a spider, Castillo has constructed a drum made of raw-hide that acts as both a tactile surface and screen for the projection of media from *BOW'T TRAIL* New Orleans. This also provides a reference point to a gut, a womb, a part of the body that has the capacity to bring life, create, and reproduce. Our collaboration mirrors an interdisciplinary and intercultural collaborative method, and the sculpture manifests a site of reference to the choreographic methodology and performance theory within *BOW'T TRAIL*.

*Silk Strands, Silk Traces* aims to contribute to the present possibilities of Black performance methodology as artifact.<sup>50</sup> Situating each other as *bearers of memory*<sup>51</sup> of our respective cultures, we looked to each other to think through the intersections of our histories; embracing a working relationship that allows us to inform each other's practice through our own diasporic and ancestral histories. This relational understanding pathways a reinterpretation of knowledge that deepens an act of movement by way of knowledge transfer, be it experiential observation or oral storytelling about our diasporic ideologies. This is 'diasporic spidering' in practice.

---

<sup>50</sup> Defined as something characteristic of or resulting from a particular human institution, period, trend, or individual.

Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. "artifact," accessed March 10, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/artifact>.

<sup>51</sup> A reference to Rhodnie Désir's choreographic-documentary process.

Rhodnie Désir, "Choreographic-Documentary - RD Créations," [rhodniedesir.com](http://rhodniedesir.com), accessed January 18, 2024, <http://rhodniedesir.com/en/the-choreography-documentary>.

## **SITE AND AUDIENCE**

Selecting 'the gallery' as a site for exploration is an act of critical engagement that points to a desire to place my Black body, this experimental work, and the publics who encounter this exhibition in a different, more autonomous relationship to a gallery space. The exhibited works exist independently, however, there is a dimension of liveness that is awakened by witnessing (and by extension, being seen while witnessing) that adds another layer of presence through the subjectivity of interpretation. The audience as an active participant, or an act of 'being,' adds to this layer of witnessing, perception, and interpretation.

Galleries, in comparison to traditional theatre or performance venues, have the capacity to offer a site for exploration and valuation that is more malleable. Considering Western movement and dance performance as a historically non-speaking form, placing this research exploration in a gallery offers a multifocal opportunity for engagement with Black art, Black thought, Black feminist performance methodology, Black identities and the myriad understandings of diasporic lineage that resist Western expectations. Here, I am using the gallery as a site for presenting Black thought as a precursor to embodied performance; providing more dynamism to what is already being done on the stage through multisensory and participatory engagement.

## EXHIBITION DESIGN

*Silk Strands, Silk Traces* is made of sustainable and living materials, inviting soft touch to create a sensorial relationship between the intercultural histories that informed this creation and whoever engages with the sculpture—welcoming audiences, including young children, to trace the metaphorical connections with their fingertips. In alignment with the core tenets of curatorial practice, each item in the exhibition is placed specifically to be in conversation with another component. The text, the media, and the sculpture speak to each other and the audience in such a way that anchors and further solidifies the connection between the works in space. The northernmost wall in the gallery features *Silk Strands, Silk Traces*, and the narrative didactic for the exhibition. The projection of the New Orleans media, which takes place in the city of Louisiana on the Mississippi River, near the Gulf of Mexico, is integrated into the sculptural installation to coalesce the North American presence separate from the Caribbean Sea. The audio from the New Orleans footage is live throughout the gallery. As the only English-speaking content within the *BOW'T TRAIL* on display in the space, this audio acts as the soundscape for the entire exhibition. To the west, we have a monitor displaying the voyage in Haiti with French subtitles and headphones for a more intimate experience of the video display. On the southern wall is the library featuring texts that have informed the exhibition as well as a couch and plant to make the space warm and inviting for people to take their time and be in the space. Above the couch is a quote from Rhodnie Désir: “J'ai dû retourner à mes racines pour comprendre qui je suis.” which translates to “I had to go back to my roots to figure out who I am.” Along the slightly southeastern wall of the gallery is a monitor displaying the documentary footage from Brazil. This

video also features French subtitles, although there are multiple languages being spoken, with headphones for intimate listening. Through this exploration, I question how this exhibition can illustrate and celebrate the complex concepts of "reach" as it relates to metaphoric, geopolitical, and/or sociological concepts. Conceptually, the exploration of *reach* is inspired by Nadine George-Graves' concept of 'diasporic spidering' and its relationship to Désir's commitment to locating lineage, which is further challenged by the multilingual presence within the exhibition.

#### *A Note on Language and Accessibility*

Recognizing that the distributor of this documentary series is based in Quebec, a challenge I faced when engaging the material is the fact that 3 out of 5 of the videos were not in English and none of the videos featured English subtitles. The featured languages include Haitian Creole, French (Quebec) and Portuguese (Brazilian). The aspect of language barriers is a specific element that Désir touched upon during her artist talk in Toronto on October 19, 2023, at the Winchester Theatre. She spoke about the immigrant experience and being required to adapt to a space where one does not understand the language being spoken. This sharing was in recognition of the demand to translate, comprehend, adapt, and learn, quickly. This act of transformation is core to the newcomer experience; from arriving in a new place to being confronted with the demands of assimilation. Désir met this task, adapting and speaking the language in every country she visited. This experience of language inaccessibility clarified language as an active 'diasporic spidering'— situating language as a tracing of history and carrier of knowledge. Désir explained to the audience that “the ancestors had to adapt and

recreate a language. Maybe you will pick up the essence and create your own story.”<sup>52</sup>

I experienced a challenge of accessibility, but one that I am fortunate to meet through available means of translation. I am questioning what it means to be able to have access to this knowledge, as much work has been done to cultivate this resource and make it available to the public. Recognizing the language and cultural translation happening through this work, I am motivated to question whom she is making space for, who this media is for, and who can engage with it.

## **EXHIBITION DESIGN AS CHOREOGRAPHIC PRACTICE**

As an emerging curator who initially focused on cultivating a space for the celebration of Black artists that centers Black communities and their ability to engage with art made for and by Black people, I intently considered how Black bodies in public spaces are historically surveilled, especially in institutionalized spaces. Considering the implication of race, gender, and class politics within the gallery space, I look to André Lepecki’s theory of choreopolitics to explore questions of accessibility for marginalized bodies in gallery spaces with specific attention to visibility and critically engaged exhibition design. André Lepecki’s states:

A movement requiring a choreographic imagination taking the dancer, the choreographer, and their audiences away from certain predetermined images of what such a movement is supposed to look like, to sound like, and to move like – regardless of whether this movement takes place inside

---

<sup>52</sup> Rhodnie Désir. Artist Talk. October 19, 2023, Winchester Street Theatre, Toronto, Canada.

or outside the boundaries of art. This expanded vision of the relations between movement and politics I like to call “the choreopolitical” (Lepecki 2013)[...]Inspired by Stefano Harney’s and Fred Moten’s *The Undercommons*, particularly through their distinction between “policy” and “planning,” choreopolitical planning rescues choreography from being understood only as synonymous with normativity, as prescribed or forced mobility, or as a system of command and obedience (all of which certainly are part of choreography, historically as well as esthetically).<sup>53</sup>

Positioning exhibition design as a choreographic practice inspires questions about access, borders, spatial orientation, movement, and land relations—further informing how choreopolitics can be mapped onto the traditional ways of engaging the gallery space. Placing this research in an experimental gallery space is the best way to trouble notions of decorum and self-surveillance as a way of reorienting the Black experience in the gallery for audiences, specifically for Black children. As Black children are known to be more surveilled than children of other visible minorities or their white counterparts, I asked myself how I can organize a space where they feel free enough to be curious, to learn and to have respite from institutional surveillance and discipline at the same time? The aim is to make the space open and the structure durable and well-anchored, to not warrant any need for policing or rules that curtail innate curiosity—making the space an optimal destination for exploration and play. The experimental nature of the space at the Centre for Study of Black Canadian Diaspora is offering a

---

<sup>53</sup>Lepecki. “The Choreopolitical: Agency in the Age of Control.,” 47-48.



distinct perspective on how people and their bodies may function in this space. Thinking about exhibition design through the lens of choreopolitics while animating an experimental gallery space that is, by nature of its existence, challenging the antiquated rules of decorum and surveillance at the core of institutional spaces, is a rare opportunity to both explore curatorial practice and make space for more diverse and intergenerational community engagement. Each person who enters this exhibition space will be coming in with different reference points, knowledges, and expectations. To meet this need, I have engaged my curatorial practice from a more dramaturgical, choreographic, and pedagogical frame of reference.

Within the exhibition space, I encourage rest, opting for an environment that embraces slow study. This exhibition takes approximately one hour to fully experience all media on display and engage with the written materials. The space is meant to be warm and inviting, operating from a place of 'no assumed level of knowledge: the exhibition notes are written for the viewers guidance and consideration, there is a library featuring texts that have informed the exhibition are available for reading within the exhibition, and the definitions are in place to combat any assumed level of knowledge that would be a barrier to people being present with the work. The aim is to provide the opportunity for someone to be at ease in the space to explore, engage, and imagine without a sense of surveillance or overbearing control that overtly dictates one's experience of the exhibition. Situating exhibition design as choreographic practice allowed me to further understand the connection between sequencing bodies and space in time as it relates to confronting truth and memory as a way of navigating the

past to move forward.

## **PUBLIC PROGRAMS**

Storytelling links people across time and space, offering a powerful point of cultural connection that remains for generations. Anansi folklore is primarily shared orally from adults to children as a way of carrying history; introducing a central character that is recognizable by many as an intergenerational cultural connection that dictates, informs, and actively sustains Afro-Caribbean ways of existing in the world. The first public program created for this exhibition is a story time for kids, which requires the space itself to be safe for children. When it comes to Black children, who are much more surveilled than children of other visible minorities, I asked myself how can I organize a space where they feel free enough to be curious, to learn and to have respite from institutional surveillance and discipline at the same time? Children's Story Time was held within the exhibition space on March 16, 2024, 11-12 pm. "Afro-Caribbean Folktales: Anansi the Spider" is an oral storytelling event for children to hear about the folkloric character Anansi, who has ties throughout the African diaspora including West Africa, Europe, the Caribbean, and the Americas. This event featured "Anansi and The Golden Pot" by Taiye Selasi (2022), one of the few published folkloric authors of African and Caribbean descent that focus on children's literature. This event will share the tales of Anansi with a younger generation, giving an opportunity for racialized artist-parents and their children to be immersed in the history being displayed around them and participate in an active 'diasporic spidering.' Second, a curatorial tour will occur on April

5, 2024, at 2pm. The public is invited to join artist-curator, Dedra McDermott, and artist Alberto Castillo for a tour and discussion about the experimental exhibition *Diasporic Spidering, Counter-Archiving, and Collective Memory*. Lastly, as a way of expanding the exhibition and inviting audience participation, a unique phone number has been created so that audiences can text or leave voicemails to share their reflections. As audiences experience this exhibition, I invite them to offer a reflection or viewpoint that ‘diasporic spidering’ has inspired them to recall. This offering allows for time away from the exhibition to process and consider their experience, potentially engaging in conversations about the work and sharing reflections that become artifacts of their own.

## **WHAT REMAINS OR 'DIASPORIC SPIDERING,' A CURATORIAL PRACTICE**

*Diasporic Spidering, Counter-Archiving, and Collective Memory* is, in a sense, both a new creation and a companion piece to a work that already exists as it reinterprets the knowledge within Désir's work and is the foundation for the artifact of cultural memory, *Silk Strands, Silk Traces*. This exhibition preserves culture and perseveres, learning the past to inform the present and returning to communication practices that often surpass language and translation—centering movement and ancestral embodied knowledges that have carried Black stories across time and geographies despite cultural censorship. Through this process of collaboration and writing, I have realized that my understanding of mobility and movement has evolved to mean acts that transfer bodies across time and space; considering mobility as both loss and survival, while movement acts as reference to remember and remain. With this distinction, I have been able to link existing theoretical knowledge from an interdisciplinary 'choreographic' perspective, both physical and spatial, with a curatorial practice that engages counter-archiving to highlight subjugated knowledges to understand the complex nuances of minoritized histories and ways of collaborating and being together, differently. This is how 'diasporic spidering' as curatorial practice emerged. I am finding a way to expand possibilities for cross-pollination and increasing audiences for the performance sector by offering a more tactile and less ephemeral way of engaging and valuing embodied knowledge. At this point in my emerging research, 'diasporic spidering' as a curatorial practice acts as a pedagogical tool, community building opportunity, and a space for slow study, reflection, and connection. Bringing together intergenerational audiences to engage with our sculpture, sharing Afro-

Caribbean folkloric stories and crafting a space for engagement with minority histories, this exhibition engages the *I*, *we*, and the *us*, which is the choreographic role of this exhibitionary practice. *Diasporic Spidering, Counter-Archiving, and Collective Memory* cultivates a space that encourages audiences to place themselves within the exhibition and engage in an act of internal critical questioning of how they actively participate in the sustenance and survival of minority culture, now.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ards, Angela A. Introduction: The ethics of self-fashioning. In *Words of Witness: Black women's autobiography in the post-Brown era* (pp 3-25). Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. (2015).

Battle, Christina. "It's About Time (Where Was It Fun to Dance?): A Response." Christina Battle, November 2020. <https://cbattle.com/where-was-it-fun-to-dance/>.

Bennett, Tony. *The Birth of the Museum : History, Theory, Politics*. London ;: Routledge, 1995.

Boye, Seika. "Ola Skanks: Delayed Recognition of a Dance Artist Ahead of Her Time." *Canadian journal of history* 56, no. 3 (2021): 216–228.

Désir, Rhodnie. "RD Creations - RD Créations." [rhodniedesir.com](http://rhodniedesir.com), 2024. <http://rhodniedesir.com/en/rd-creations>.

Désir, Rhodnie. "Choreographic-Documentary - RD Créations." [rhodniedesir.com](http://rhodniedesir.com). Accessed January 19, 2024. <http://rhodniedesir.com/en/the-choreography-documentary>.

Désir, Rhodnie. "The Whole BOW'T TRAIL - RD Créations." [rhodniedesir.com](http://rhodniedesir.com). Accessed January 18, 2024. <http://rhodniedesir.com/en/bow-t-trail>.

Désir, Rhodnie. "Body of Rhythms and Resistances" in *Configurations in Motion: Performance Curation and Communities of Colour*, 3rd ed. Co-Edited by Boye. S, Gabriels. J, and Thompson. MJ Martin. Montreal: Concordia University, 2019. 25-34.

Désir, Rhodnie. "BOW'T." *Bow'T • 2013 - RD Créations*. Accessed February 6, 2024. <http://rhodniedesir.com/en/bowt-original-version>.

Désir, Rhodnie. "Program Notes: Rhodnie Désir: RD Créations." *Program notes: Rhodnie Désir | RD Créations | National Arts Centre*. Accessed February 6, 2024. <https://nac-cna.ca/en/event/notes/31883>.

Désir, Rhodnie, and Marie-Claude Fournier. "Bow't Trail: Séries: Ici Tou.Tv." *Séries | ICI TOU.TV*, December 16, 2019. <https://ici.tou.tv/bow-t-trail>.

EVANS, TONY TEKARONIAKE. "How the Iroquois Confederacy Was Formed." History.com. Accessed March 11, 2024. <https://www.history.com/news/iroquois-confederacy-hiawatha-peacemaker-great-law-of-peace>.

"Exhibition." IT'S ABOUT TIME: Dancing Black in Canada 1900–1970. Accessed March 10, 2024.

<https://www.dancingblackcanada.ca/the-exhibition>.

"Exhibitions." MacKenzie Art Gallery. Accessed March 10, 2024.

<http://www.mackenzieartgallery.ca/engage/exhibitions/magdance-art-dance>.

George-Graves, Nadine. "DIASPORIC SPIDERING: Constructing Contemporary Black Identities." In *Black Performance Theory*, p.33–44. Duke University Press, 2014.

Goodwin, Jenn. "Curatorial Statement." Canada Council for the Arts. Accessed March 10, 2024. <https://canadacouncil.ca/about/ajagemo/thunderstruck/curatorial-statement>.

Goodwin, Jenn. "Thunderstruck: Physical Landscapes at Âjagemô." Canada Council for the Arts. Accessed March 10, 2024.

<https://canadacouncil.ca/about/ajagemo/thunderstruck>.

Janes, Robert R., and Richard Sandell. *Museum Activism*. Edited by Robert R. Janes and Richard Sandell. Abingdon, Oxon ;: Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, 2019.

Keleta-Mae, Naila. *Performing Female Blackness*. 1st ed. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2023.

Lepecki, André. "The Choreopolitical: Agency in the Age of Control." in *The Routledge Companion to Art and Politics*. Edited by Randy Martin. London: Routledge, 2015. Pages 44-52.

Lionnet, Françoise., and Shu-mei Shih. *Minor Transnationalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005.

“Magdance 5: Art + Dance + Archive.” MacKenzie Art Gallery, September 29, 2023.  
<https://mackenzie.art/exhibition/magdance-5/>.

Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “folklore,” accessed March 12, 2024,  
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/folklore>.

Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “artifact,” accessed March 10, 2024,  
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/artifact>.

Nelson, Charmaine, ed. *Towards an African Canadian Art History: Art, Memory, and Resistance*. Concord, Ontario: Captus Press, 2019.

Pinto, Samantha. *Infamous Bodies: Early Black Women’s Celebrity and the Afterlives of Rights*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020.

Ramsden, Peter G. “Haudenosaunee (Iroquois).” Edited by Zach Parrott. *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, December 14, 2006.

<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/iroquois>.

Rhodnie Désir and Marie-Claude Fournier, “Bow’t Trail: Séries: Ici Tou.Tv,” *Séries | ICI TOU.TV*, December 16, 2019, <https://ici.tou.tv/bow-t-trail>.

Rhodnie Désir. Artist Talk. October 19, 2023, Winchester Street Theatre, Toronto, Canada.

Saldívar, Ramón. *The Borderlands of Culture : Americo Paredes and the Transnational Imaginary*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006. Accessed March 8, 2024. ProQuest Ebook Central.

“School for the Movement of the Technicol(u)r People | Gallery TPW.” Gallery TPW. Accessed March 10, 2024. <https://archive.gallerytpw.ca/exhibitions/smtp/>

Vida, Mackenzy. “Mackenzie Art Gallery and New Dance Horizons Present the Much-Anticipated Fifth Installment of Their Innovative Dance Residency.” MacKenzie Art Gallery, August 24, 2023. <https://mackenzie.art/mackenzie-art-gallery-and-new-dance->



horizons-present-the-much-anticipated-fifth-installment-of-their-innovative-dance-residency/.

Wallenfeldt, J. "favela." Encyclopedia Britannica, January 11, 2024.

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/favela>.

Zobel Marshall, Emily. "Liminal Anansi: Symbol of Order and Chaos An Exploration of Anansi's Roots Amongst the Asante of Ghana." *Caribbean quarterly* 53, no. 3 (2007):30-40.