Between Two Soils:

Reflections on Diaspora and Belonging

By
Emmette Lewis

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Abstract

Through a multidisciplinary approach that combines practice-based studio work, archival research, and critical analysis, I investigate how grief operates both internally and externally; internally, shaping self-perception, memory, and cultural embodiment; externally, influencing intergenerational relationships, state-imposed identity, and community. This research is conducted through oil painting and mixed archival media, using personal images drawn from family and moments brought together by community. These techniques function as a way to reframe my position within the collaged imagery. By inserting myself indirectly through obscure shadows, floral forms, and silhouettes I address and reveal the complexity of cultural loss without relying on overt cultural symbolism. This approach produces personal knowledge about how loss and grief persist even when they remain unseen. Moreover, this body of work examines my positionality in understanding the diasporic wound as a nonphysical condition.

My lived experience of the diasporic wound is not as an open sore, oozing and bleeding, that can be healed with surgery, prescription pills, or western medicine. This invisible wound festers on the soul; feeding off the erosion of memory and the surrender of culture. It is an emotional tear on the body of exiled flesh. The wound stings in the absence of ancestry, in dispossessed land and unpracticed rituals dissolved by assimilation. This expression of grief has no diagnosis, nor can it be camouflaged or masquerade as another version of self. It is this persistent, invisible wound that this thesis seeks to analyze: How does cultural loss manifest as diasporic grief, and generational hauntings?

With reference from the work of other artists navigating similar trajectories alongside my own practice, I will confront diasporic grief not as remnants of the past, but as an active force

that informs the present. By this, my goal is to reveal the unstable and unresolved shaping of identity under diasporic contexts. Using the critical lens of scholarly evidence by Judith Butler, Avery Gordon and Stuart Hall, I examine the dissonance of cultural memory; what is lost through immigration, what is unconsciously preserved, and what can be recaptured. Additionally, in my exploration of diasporic experience, this thesis will investigate the Western colonial and postcolonial perspective of Africa as a methodology to challenge the ways the West has impacted African diasporic experiences and perspectives. My engagement to situate diaspora within histories of colonial power and displacement is necessary to resist narratives that misconstrue African identity and refuse these assumptions through artistic innovation. This research deeply excavates the tension between personal and collective identity, examining how familial ties shift across generations and how feelings of guilt and responsibility persist in the aftermath of cultural displacement and political divide. I conclude by asking myself, how do you reclaim a culture that your parents had to leave behind? How do you reconnect with the roots that were grown in another soil?

Acknowledgments

I want to thank my incredible advisory team at OCAD University for giving me the confidence to pursue such emotional work. Thank you to my primary advisor, Amy Wong for guiding and mentoring me through in-depth research, and providing the encouraging structure to find acclaimed resources, holistic knowledge and strength in my personal voice. Thank you to my secondary advisor, Julius Manapul for directing my creative production and providing invaluable leadership throughout my artistic endeavors of this project.

I acknowledge the lands on which this thesis was developed, both in Tkaronto, where I currently live and create, and across Southern Africa, where my familial ancestry is rooted and the core of my thesis is grounded. In Tkaronto, I recognize the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishinaabe, the Haudenosaunee, the Chippewa, the Huron-Wendat, and the Métis Nation as the original stewards and owners of this land.

I also acknowledge the lands tied to my maternal lineage in Namibia, including the indigenous communities of the Nama, Ovaherero, Damara, San, and Topnaar. Finally, I recognize the indigenous tribes and land from my paternal lineage in South Africa who are the Khoi and San peoples, whose land was violently dispossessed through colonial expansion, and whose presence, spirit and knowledge systems persist, making possible my exploration of my Southern African roots.

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Synopsis of Thesis

While conducting art-based research methods to explore my personal experience of diasporic grief and hauntings, I began the process by decentering what I have long considered to be the foundation of my identity; the belief that my South African and Canadian identity existed separately. Through this development, I noticed a pattern; the parts of myself that have been uprooted are precisely the parts that remain haunted. Though this observation may seem superficially evident, it took until now to confront it. As Avery Gordon reminds us, “That life is complicated may be a banal expression of the obvious, but it is nonetheless a profound theoretical statement,”[1] a reflection that resonates with my encounter of layered, unresolved identity. In the context of my thesis, hauntings are best described by Gordon as a, “Reckoning with ghosts is not a return to the past but a reckoning with its repression in the past, a reckoning with that which we have lost, but never had.”[2]

These presences often linger as ancestral visions, dreams, nostalgia, and longings stemming from diasporic grief. I recognized that my current self-perceived identity has been corrupted in unseen ways by years of Western media, colonial influence, assimilation, and imposed belief systems. Yet, within this space, hauntings call me back to the parts of myself that have been repressed and abandoned. Moreover, through my work, I want to reposition these hauntings outside of their dominant connotations. Primarily, hauntings are conditioned with the affiliation of unresolved histories. [3] However, I am approaching hauntings with the celebration of grief, rather than its pathology. Instead, it emerges as familial memories, restored cultural practices and recovered identity. Within diasporic conditions, where identity has been erased or

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[1] Gordon, Avery F. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. 2nd ed., University of Minnesota Press, 2008, 3
[2] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 183
[3] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*

constrained, I reimagine haunting not as a backward pull toward loss but as a reimagined future. Guided by this, I turned towards archival documentation that involved combing through family photographs, family interviews, records, and historic materials. I started cataloging my sensory reactions to them such as colors, textures, and emotions that I associated with these findings. I then commenced painting these reactionary impressions as my own uncanny biography. This was directed with the goal of summoning my unconscious to fill in the blanks dulled by time and cultural absence. The interpretations of absence in my work are displayed as liminal archival interventions as floral patterned silhouettes. These spatial obscurities painted as botanical shadows interrupt and re-mediate family photographs, positioning absence as an active material condition rather than a loss to be recovered. This becomes reflective of Stuart Hall's philosophy who wrote, “Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.”[4] Absence, much like the diasporic wound, is not always material or physical emptiness. In my work, the wound becomes tangible and traceable, taking on a life of its own through my art, which confronts and reconciles this pain. My aim is not to replace the irreplaceable, but to embrace the legacy of what absence leaves behind.

The culmination of this work takes the form of various large to small scale, self-reflective oil and mixed-media paintings. By merging archival material with personal interpretation, I locate myself within the visual history of my family, rather than being astray from it. These paintings represent my core diasporic narratives of grief and displacement, expressed through my familial and personal memories of language, home, spirituality, and lineage. This display is not culture overtly represented through stereotypes or exaggerations, instead it is subtle acts of lived

[4] Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 225.

experiences such as my dad eating at a braai[5], or my oupa's hands holding me as a child in our home. My intent is to express the significance that culture is not the fabrication of stolen narratives or appropriated perspectives. It is not discovered through the lens of a tourist or a quick Google search. Representing diasporic culture through simplified, audience-recognizable gestures flattens the lived experiences of its people. Uma Narayan positions this ideology as, "the package picture of culture."[6] She states how, "Labels that pick out particular cultures are not simple descriptions that single out already distinct entities; rather, they are arbitrary and shifting designations connected to political projects that… insist on the distinctness of one culture from another."[7] Narayan argues that the consumption of culture as a homogeneous entity discounts individual perspectives and historical changes within that society. More so, cultural essentialism reduces complex realities to digestible symbols, reinforcing stereotypes and turning culture into a commodified bubble. It risks presenting the diasporic condition as something to be romanticized, imagined, or one that embodies universal understanding. My work pushes against this by engaging directly with real documentation, painting lived events, real people, and honest experiences. These are the moments that deserve attention and reflection, not abstract ideas of culture, but the culture itself as it exists and persists in daily life.

Positionality Statement

Prior to outlining my thesis, I want to position myself within the colonial and apartheid history of South Africa, and acknowledge how this history has shaped both my identity, South African culture, and my personal experience of diaspora. I identify as South African and Canadian. While significant portions of my ancestral records have been eradicated and

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[5] Red Carnation Hotels. "The History of Braai in South Africa." *Red Carnation Hotels*, n.d., https://redcarnationhotels.com/discover/delicious-dining/the-history-of-braai-in-south-africa
[6] Uma Narayan, "Undoing the 'Package Picture' of Cultures," *Jura Gentium*, no. 2 (2012): 3.
[7] Narayan, "Undoing the 'Package Picture'," 3.

rendered irrecoverable through processes of colonization and migration; narratives and history surrounding mixed heritage and ancestry circulate within my family as we continue to rediscover archival erasures. However, regardless of these complexities, I have been documented as white within Canada, and socially positioned as white in South Africa. With this, I state this positionality deliberately. I recognize how my inherited identity is inseparable from colonial and apartheid systems of racial classification, and this entanglement shapes both my perspective and the privileges I carry. Acknowledging this position is essential to the ethical framework of this research, as it outlines how I engage with documentation, state imposed identity and South African history while remaining attentive to the power structures embedded in the archive itself. Additionally, parts of the culture I grew up with and celebrate in my work is rooted within Zulu, Xhosa, and Sotho traditions. These cultural connections surface through music (mbaqanga and maskandi[8]), food (pap, melktert, and braai culture[9]), and layered artistic hybridity. I recognize these cultures not only through the friends and neighbours that shared them, but also from the broader social and geographic proximities that shape South African life. Navigating these intertwined cultural spaces creates a personal lens of cultural syncretism, where identity is found through exposure and participation rather than direct lineage. South Africa is a vibrant, layered amalgamation of diverse cultural practices, and while they are not all directly part of my inherited lineage, they were interwoven into the fabric of my cultural upbringing through community engagement, shared folklore, and daily rituals. Through my thesis, I aim to pay homage to this interconnection by giving deliberate recognition to the cultural knowledge, artistic practices, and traditions that have shaped my experience, while being careful to acknowledge their origins and histories. The history of South Africa is marked by colonization, segregation,

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[8] *Mbaqanga* is a rhythmic jazz style of music blending Sotho, Zulu and Xhosa harmonies, emerging from urban townships in the 1960s.
Maskandi, deriving from the Afrikaans word for music, is an acoustic genre of Zulu folk music originating in the 1920s.
[9] *Pap* is a maize porridge originating from African maize traditional meals. Afrikaner culture adopted the cuisine into what is called *stywe pap*.
Melktart is a milk based pie deeply rooted in Black South African farmer traditions and Cape Dutch origins.
Braai is a style of open fire cooking that predates colonial settlement, and incorporates traditional styles from Afrikaner, Sotho, Zulu and Xhosa traditions.

and apartheid. These forces have molded not only the social and political fabric of the country, but also the ways in which identities are categorized, recorded, and divided. My parents actively resisted and protested apartheid, yet systemic political repression compelled them to immigrate, situating their displacement within the structural forces of state violence and racialized oppression. Their migration, a direct response to political persecution, also frames my inherited experience of dispossession, including the loss of land, home, and culture. Born in 1997, I belong to what is often referred to as Desmond Tutu's and Nelson Mandela's "Rainbow Nation,"[10] a generational designation fixated on the African concept of *Ubuntu*[11], and the promise of unity and reconciliation post- apartheid. I was raised in this time when South Africa was striving to enact these principles, a South Africa that formally rejected institutionalized segregation and sought to construct a national identity grounded in racial equality. All while healing the complexities of deeply entrenched historical injustice. However, it is also important to note how the principals of the Rainbow Nation were critiqued in its initial development for masking the persistence of structural inequality, racialized economic disparity, and unresolved violence. Independent of this, my family and the community that surrounded me, instilled the ideological framework that emphasized reconciliation and national cohesion. This parallel exists within my experience of Canada as well, where accounts of multiculturalism and Indigenous reconciliation promote an image of harmonious coexistence, all while integral colonial injustices persist. This tension between aspirational national narratives and lived inequities informs my understanding of identity, historical inheritance, and my critical engagement with immigration and displacement. When I speak of diasporic grief and mourning, I am addressing my personal experiences of loss and what I observed around me in my family, among friends, and within my broader community; the violence of oppression, disenfranchisement and the exploitation of resources. I grieve that I was dislocated to Canada, while my community grieved in South

[10] Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999).
[11] A South African philosophy that emphasizes compassion, humanity and interconnection. Stemming from Bantu origins.

Africa. Additionally, I am also reflecting on the dislocation that arises from existing “in between” spaces; between countries, colonial states, communities, and cultural expectations. This “in-between” is emphasized by Edward Said in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, when he states, “Habits of life, expression, or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally.”[12] This ideology supports the nuances that arise from inhabiting two ways of life at once, where living in Canada is constantly measured against the social fabric carried over from South Africa. In *Cultural Identity and Diaspora,* Stuart Hall emphasizes identity without a fixed association, producing this decentered “between state” that is unanchored to a singular self.[13] This in-between position is compounded by how I am perceived externally, particularly through Western assumptions about race and more specifically, about African identity, which often reduces and misrepresents my background. Mixed ancestry in South Africa falls under the colonial and apartheid era classification known as Colored, a designation originating in the 17th century when the Dutch East India Company colonized the Cape, and forcibly trafficked enslaved people from India, Southeast Asia, and other parts of Africa. Under the Population Registration Act (1950) racial classification was codified into law, reducing the nuances of complex ancestry into bureaucratic labelling.[14] Today, the Colored community constitutes a distinct and dynamic cultural identity, shaped by interwoven histories of Cape Malay, Afrikaner, Khoisan communities. However, in South Africa, I am read as white. I am too pale to be recognized as indigenous or positioned as Colored, and I therefore position myself as white. This leads to the opposing perspective of my identity in the West. The same identity that situates me as white in South Africa, renders me as ambiguously mixed in Canada, but my position as a white South African in Canada complicates assumptions

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[12] Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Harvard University Press, 2000), Ch, 17.
[13] Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” 222–237.
[14] Nigel Worden, *The Making of Modern South Africa: Conquest, Apartheid, Democracy*, 5th ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012)

about my Africanness. To summarize, in South Africa, my whiteness marks me as other; in Canada, it distances me from my African roots while simultaneously positioning me as other once more, but this time through the lens of my appearance, which exposes the systemic codification and classification of racial identity in the West. Sara Ahmed frames this instability by saying, “Race is made present only through an act of negation: it is included as a vehicle for the re-presentation of a philosophy of difference rather than as a constitutive and positive term of analysis.”[15] In, *Strange Encounters*, she considers how bodies become surfaces upon which difference is read, noting that, “The skin provides a way of thinking about how the boundary between bodies is formed only through being transferred, or called into question, by the affecting of one by an other.”[16] Ahmed’s philosophy supports how my identity is therefore never stable; it is relational, contingent on place and state, perception and the weight of colonial and diasporic histories. While my diasporic experience is not equivalent to racialized dispossession, it illuminates how belonging is mediated by power and institutionalized perception. As Ahmed concludes, “For if the skin is a border, it is a border that feels.”[17] Rather than equating my experience with the structural marginalization imposed upon racialized communities and racialized diaspora, I recognize how these shifting readings of my body expose the instability and constructed nature of racial categories themselves. By positioning myself in this way, I acknowledge both my inherited privilege and its limitations, while using my work to explore the layered effects of colonial histories, diasporic displacement, and the evolving politics of identity across states, borders and cultural frameworks.

The Politics of Diasporic Grief

Diaspora is not a singular or uniformly defined experience; it is obfuscated by histories

[15] Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (Routledge, 2000), 43.
[16] Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, 45.
[17] Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, 45.

with colonialism, migration, and socio-political arrangements of identity and belonging. On account of this, diaspora varies significantly according to how bodies are classified and racialized within these structures.[18] In my thesis, I am focusing on my lived experiences of displacement as someone who resides within two colonial states; South African and Canada. I do not claim my experience represents African diasporic subjects, South African European migrants, or racialized communities in South Africa. The diasporic grief I address is not an articulation of racialized diasporic grief. Although my identity is racialized within Canada, it operates through more nuanced structures of social perception, and not from systemic exclusion in the way racialized diaspora does. Rather, it surfaces from a disrupted sense of belonging produced along colonial, national and familial lines. It is encoded through the loss of communal intimacy, ancestral land and distance from cultural practices, yet it cannot be equated to the racialized dispossession endured by Black diasporic individuals.

Individual Works

"Izobello & Seun" explores South African Zulu folklore around paternity and familial relations. As the story was told to me by my mother, if you bring your child into a field of cattle and allow the baby to greet the cow, the reaction will determine the lineage. If the baby cries, or reacts with fear, then the family is illegitimate. However, if the baby reacts calmly and untroubled, then it is a sign of legitimate familial relations. This piece represents a cow in the middle of an abstracted red background. There is no context to situate the cow in a pasture, or provide ties to a specific land or state. The cow floats within the frame, within the red abstraction. The edges of the canvas are embellished with decorative wood borders. These portray the emblems found on passports and licenses. On the cows ears are two different stamps signifying the Canadian border and the South African border. They operate as symbols

[18] Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 222–237.

of competing state claims and the opposing social biases that categorize my identity. Their ambiguity leaves the question of my belonging deliberately unresolved, asking viewers to sit with the discomfort of not knowing. The cattle, standing in as an ancestral witness, represents the questioning of my heritage and the instability of documentation meant to define who I am. Throughout my life, I have been asked the same question, “Where do you come from?” The expectation is that the answer is simple, singular and traceable. If I come from my South African parents, if my ancestors have been in Africa for generations, why does my documentation deny me that origin? Why does state paperwork narrow identity to a place of birth rather than a network of culture, and inheritance? These questions form the emotional and conceptual grounding of this piece.

Figure 1.

Izobello & Seun, 2025

Oil and wood frame on canvas

48” x 60”

The title comes from the names my brother and I would have been given if we were born in South Africa. The name Izobello originates from my great-great-great-great grandmother who was born by the Swartberg Mountains in the Karoo, and would have been passed down to me. Seun or Seuntjie is my mom’s favorite name for a boy, literally translating to “little son” in Afrikaans. Though such a naming shift may seem minor, it represents a subtle but potent form of assimilation. It is the decision that reverberates through identity formation. My cousins’ names and their children, stemming from traditional Afrikaans and West African origins, mark them

instantly as belonging. Names function as cultural indicators; they are often the first offering we give of ourselves, shaping perception before our life unfolds. A name carries belief systems, values, and lineage. It is the first element recorded on state documentation and, paradoxically, one of the few parts of identity we are taught to “own,” even as it becomes entwined with the bureaucratic structures that hold us.

“I carry the protea across oceans” is an oil and mixed textile painting on canvas. As previously mentioned, I have never centered myself in my artwork. Whether this stemmed from reluctance to confront my own identity or a desire to conceal it, the creation of this piece marks the conceptual and emotional foundation of my thesis. In this work, I incorporate materials from my ouma’s (grandmother’s) brooches, which hang deliberately from the embroidered pants around my pocket. They are the last remaining heirlooms that I have from her. The textiles were sourced in Toronto, as I did not have access to South African fabrics, the selection process was guided by memory and intuition. Instead of seeking exact replicas, I followed the recollection of clothing from my childhood in South Africa: vibrant beadwork, animal print, floral patterns. My ouma made all of our clothes, and through these fabrics, I pay tribute to the styles, practices, and creative inheritance that she and my mother passed down to me. The central focus of the work is the King Protea’s, South Africa’s national flower and a staple in my childhood memories. They signify courage, leadership and resilience. The phrase *I carry the protea across oceans* serves as a symbolic articulation of holding culture close to the heart despite displacement. In the painting, the act of cradling the King Proteas emphasizes the labor of preservation.

The cow-patterned jacket establishes a conceptual link to my piece *Izobello & Sein.* By wearing this jacket, I am choosing my identity, not through literal attire, but through the deliberate decision to carry my traditions and memories with me. By centering my own body

within the work, I confront the tension between personal history and state-imposed narratives of belonging, challenging geographical and bureaucratic borders. The materials in the painting such as textiles, brooches, and symbolic flora, work as traces of personified history, encoding familial knowledge and cultural markers that are not captured in documentation or official records. Through these layered visual elements, the work negotiates how cultural survival relies on active remembrance, material engagement, and the assertion of belonging beyond legislative frameworks.

Figure 2.

I carry the proteas across oceans, 2025

Oil, textiles, beads and glass on canvas

48” x 72”

“Can you give me a call?” explores the modes of communication across borders and continents. As per most diasporic families, methods of communication came through telephonic messages, long distance calls, mail and postcards. The two cans connected by string are a playful nod towards these forms of communication. They signify nostalgia, childhood memory and efforts of care. The label around the can is formatted after the Campbells soup label but replaced with the documentation from my parents passports. The passport documentation symbolizes the way immigrant identity is flattened and reduced through bureaucratic systems and authenticated procedures. The Campbell's soup label, a standardized and instantly recognizable emblem, represents the repetitive, restrictive administrative structures. The opposing texts underline the unseen acts of labor, loss and grief that happens through

migration. The passport label becomes a stand-in for the way experiences of migration get condensed to documentation, verification, and categories. Together, the can and the label expose the parallels between state imposed identity and histories of migration, emphasizing how personhood becomes consumed by the filtering of institutional borders.

Figure 3.

Can you give me a call?, 2026

Can, string and inkjet print

4” x 4”

“My Lief vir Meisie” is a piece taken from an image of my ouma cutting my hair as a child. This work is situated within my ongoing exploration of grief and hauntings. When I think of grief, I do not focus solely on the death of my grandparents. Death in my culture has never been a trickster or a thief. Death is a celebration of life and the love that surrounds them. I understand that death is an inevitable part of life, something beyond human control. I don’t mourn at their graves or think of them in their final moments. Instead, I think of them at peace, free from pain, and unburdened by suffering. One of my last memories of my ouma is of her speaking through tears, saying, “You will not see me again,” before I left South Africa to return to Canada. At the time, I could not fully grasp the gravity of her declining health or the true meaning of those words. Unbeknownst to myself, she had esophageal cancer and passed away the following year from her illness. Part of my diasporic grief comes from how information was withheld. Because reunions are brief encounters of celebration, no one wants to burden another with the realities of illness, divorce or even death, so these truths are often disguised or revealed in the aftermath. My mother traveled to be with her in her final moments, while my brother and I remained in Canada. I carry that final goodbye as a form of grief, not solely for her death, but for the

absence of shared time and memories; those unrecoverable moments linger as acts of ongoing mourning. Though I cannot personally recall the moment captured in the photograph, it undeniably conveys care, intimacy, and love. By translating this image into painting, I engage with the familial absences in my life, hoping to conserve this gesture of care while confronting the presence of grief. The work asks viewers to consider how grief is not always tied to a singular event but can exist as a persistent shadow of missed connections and the perpetual bargaining.

Figure 4.

My Lief vir Meisie, 2025 - 2026

Oil on wood canvas

48” x 60”

The mourning I carry is not bound to death itself but rather to the distance imposed by migration, which separated me from my ouma in her final days. In fact, it separated me from every single death that has occurred throughout our family. Grief, in this context, is homogenized with the logistics of migration, state borders, and the ways familial connections are disrupted. By translating this intimate moment into art, I investigate the ways grief manifests in diasporic experiences: as an awareness of loss and the subtler forms of mourning that structure life away from home.

Between Borders is a portrait based on a photograph taken during my father's immigration to Canada, capturing the exhaustion and psychological weight carried in the pursuit

of belonging elsewhere. The floral embellishments reference the significance of this choice, as it was the deciding factor in what brought me to Canada. This gestures towards the idea of fate, where certain moments become a catalyst for what follows.

Figure 5.

Between Borders, 2026

Oil on canvas with wood frame

12” x 12”

Portions is a reworked photograph of my father at a braai. The background setting is blurred as the focus lies in the act of eating. This is not just a dinner, it is the consumption of culture, the subtle acts of our everyday lives that engage in the exchange of memory and tradition. On his plate, vintage postage stamps layer the base and trace a material route between Canada and South Africa.

Figure 6.

Portions, 2026

Oil and archival stamps on canvas

48” x 72”

The work imagines the way our history becomes internalized and the experiences of migration, celebration, belonging, grief, become absorbed in the body. Whether we

acknowledge them or not, they exist within us. The bottle of wine next to him has the word, *Soutpiel* written on the label. The term is colloquially and humorously used for South Africans with English descent. The word combines *Sout* (salt) and *Piel* (penis), referring to the joke that such a person stands with one foot in England and one in South Africa, leaving his genitals dangling in the Atlantic Ocean. Within the context of the work, the Soutpiel label conveys a more comedic approach to how identity and lineage is defined.

familie liefde / At Rest are two works that interpret absence. Though they were not intentionally meant to be paired together, I found I could not separate them. Both artworks are captured from a cropped image of a family photograph. *At Rest* is taken from an image of a family member that I could not identify. It is an uncanny feeling to look at someone who shares your blood, yet is entirely a stranger. But by placing her in the painting I establish my own engagement with her. The frame of the painting reads, “I don’t know who you are, but I feel you here with me.” The image doesn’t show the identity of the person in question, instead I focus on her hands. This intentional cropping was made to signify hands as cultural holders. With our hands we eat, we hug, we touch, we talk. They not only carry culture, they actively engage in it. When I look at those hands, I feel their presence.

Figure 7.

At Rest, 2026

Oil on canvas

12’ x 24”

Figure 7.

familie liefde, 2026

Oil on canvas

12” x 24”

The Distance Decides is an artwork portraying five figures in the midst of a conversation, carrying one another and reuniting after distance. Within the imagery, my maternal grandparents hold three camouflaged silhouetted figures. Their abstracted outlines mark them as present, yet they exist beyond this timeline. In this piece, these figures represent the metaphorical weight of the floral embellishments. Inspired *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, Edward Said asks, "What is it like to be born in a place, to stay and live there, to know that you are of it, more or less forever?"[19] Belonging is, in this sense, a longing for something tangible. We often locate belonging in what surrounds us, in what we can hold, feel, or act upon. This piece considers belonging as an inheritance, a gift possessed only by those who choose to claim it.

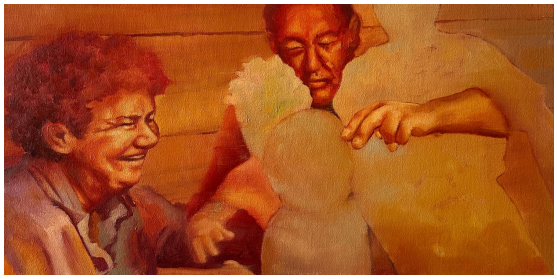

Figure 8.

The Distance Decides, 2026

Oil on canvas

12" x 24"

Salt the Earth Behind You displays a man sitting on the edge of an ambiguous body of water. At first glance, the red floral silhouettes dissolve into the yellow foreground, and the figure becomes absorbed in the abstract. With closer attention, the figure emerges, revealing the narrative. This artwork takes inspiration from a photograph of my father fishing off the east coast of Africa, near the Zambezi River.

Figure 9.

Salt the Earth Behind You, 2026

Oil on canvas

8" x 10"

[19]Said, *Reflections on Exile*, Ch. 17.

This image holds a moment of stillness shaped by light, water, and the calm simplicity of homeland. While the scene itself appears tranquil, the title introduces an alternate meaning. To “salt the earth behind you” suggests an intentional act of departure. The act of leaving inevitably alters one’s relationship to the land and to the past. Even when departure is necessary, it establishes that the land left behind cannot be reclaimed in the same way.

Unmapped Lineage, (Ed 1-4) is a series of four abstract works constructed from archival banknotes, stamps, postcards, lace textiles, twine, maps and canvas stained with rooibos[20]. Each piece uniquely uses the materiality to investigate state imposed bureaucratic systems that shape identity, and the efforts within them to keep communal connections. Rather than depicting family members or photographic references, this work evokes the condition of my diasporic experience through documentation and abstraction.

Unmapped Lineage, 2026 (from left to right, 1, 2, 3, 4) *Figure 10.*

Oil, banknotes, maps, textiles, string, postcards, and stamps on canvas

5” x 5”

I began this work by wanting to express my feelings of diaspora through an alternative perspective. In my other paintings, photo references are my way of building upon familial knowledge and cultural attachment, but with these works, I was interested in transcribing the nuances that are impossible to visually identify. The materials themselves become stand-ins for identity; banknotes and stamps speak to systems of authorization, maps acknowledge territories

[20] Traditional herbal tea native to South Africa and only grown in South Africa's Fynbos biome.

and motherland, and the textiles indicate domestic histories. Rooibos stains each canvas, operating as ancestral and cultural materiality. Through layering, distorting and manipulating, these works portray how identity and lineage is deconstructed and reassembled.

A Gallery of my Mother is an oil and ink jet print portrait painting. The scene of my mother sitting at a table is imagined, but the photo she studies on the wall comes from a photograph of her taken in Johannesburg. When I originally began the process of this piece, I wasn't confident of how I would represent my mother. She has always been such a dynamic force that there was no true way to capture her. At the same time, the distance from my Namibian and South West African heritage made it difficult to represent these parts of her life without relying on cliché or banal symbolism. Rather than forcing those identities into a single portrait, I built the painting as a gallery. These collaged details unify each work together to reference her interests, family and background, while also unifying the series together.

Figure 11.

My mother as a gallery, 2026

Oil and inkjet print on canvas

48" x 72"

A tennis racket, the sport she played in South Africa, carries the word *Nama*, a shortened reference to Namibian identity. Inside the framed images are recurring motifs from the series; a cow that recalls *Izobello and Seun*, a fig referencing the floral silhouettes, my ouma's

brooch which also appears at material inheritance in my self-portrait, a landscape of my home in Cape Town, and a portrait of my father from *Between Borders.* The letter in the upper corner references the writing on the frames of *At Rest* and *The Distance Decides*. Below, on the table sits a traditional bowl, one of many that we had at home made by my aunt. Scissors lay next to it, slightly open to portray their recent use, referring to the cutting of hair in *My Lief Vir Meisie.* Dead proteas besides them counterpoint the ones I hold in my self portrait. Their condition reflects the difference between my mother's relationship to home and my own. For her, immigrating to Canada meant relinquishing South African identity. Assimilation required distance from the cultural markers she once carried. My proteas remain alive because I am moving in the opposite direction, trying to recover and restore what was set aside. We share the same symbols, but we carry them individually.

Happy Birthday is the final piece I created for *Between Two Soils.* As the series came together, I found a lack of visual celebration. *Happy Birthday* is a scene that portrays our South African community celebrating at a party in Durban. Within the broader themes of the exhibition, it points to another dimension of diasporic grief; the distance from life's shared milestones. Part of the grief I discuss comes from the dislocation of these core experiences; birthdays, anniversaries, career celebrations, births, moments that bring family together. This work inserts me into the image, even if I celebrate at a distance.

Figure 12.

Happy Birthday, 2026

Oil on canvas

12" x 24"

Project Objectives

The objectives of this project are to create a series of paintings that investigate diasporic grief and the persistence of cultural identity despite displacement. Through experimenting with textiles, image transfers, and ancestral materials[21] each work allows me to excavate the indistinct teachings embedded in my own identity; realities that surface through gesture, layering, and the slow labour of making. This process becomes a way of painting selfhood while tracing how heritage and intergenerational relationships simultaneously cultivate and erode cultural experiences. Painting, in this context, is exercised as an act of healing. It becomes a way of working through trauma, loss, and the creative attempts at reconnection that bind me to my dislocated family. Together, these works build upon imagined futures of being reconnected to home, and reconciles with an identity that has felt, at times, borrowed or voided. The reconciliation I seek, exists within my own permission to accept loss and grief, not to settle it nor refashion it, but to shake hands with it and meet it fully as a testament to the weight of my experiences. I once saw my diasporic experience as Mark Nepo describes, “keeping my old wounds fresh and open, as evidence for a trial that would never come.” [22] I carried the pain of grief as validation, believing it was the only way to prove loss existed in my life. Now, I see it differently, grief visits like a friend, fleeting and gentle, and I can greet it on my own terms. Within my work, I invite viewers to consider both the hidden and the apparent. The immediate image and the deeper structures held beneath it. The hidden being obscured shadows representing abstract cultural ties and the apparent being imagery drawn from familial documentation. This visual duality is not only formal; it mirrors the pressures between lived cultural identity and the bureaucratic identity imposed through colonial histories and state

[21] Ancestral materials in my practice are seen through traditional herbs and tea such as Rooiboss which only grows in South Africa's Fynbos biome, my ouma's jewelry which was passed down from her mother, and letters passed down from previous generations of my family. To me, ancestral materials are items that carry generational knowledge and significance. Being removed from family, these are what I have accessible to hold onto.

[22] Elizabeth Gilbert, “Allow Yourself to Heal Dear Ones,” *ElizabethGilbert.com*, 21 Sept. 2014

documentation such as passports, citizenship papers, visas, and borders. Edward Said positions this in his work, *Reflections on Exile,* by stating, “Borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity.”[23] My intent is for the audience to see how these systems, beyond personal grievances, quietly impose boundaries around belonging, often creating censorship and erasure.

Secondly, I am considering how this groundwork is embedded directly into the materiality of my art. They appear in the artistic framework and in the small, indistinct decisions that structure each piece such as the silhouettes, the omissions, the marks that destabilize clarity. My intent is to foreground how these documents have not only shaped my own sense of self, but also reinforced the identity of the state itself. In doing so, I hope to open a space for viewers to reconsider the assumption that our lives and lineages are singularly anchored to state definitions of identity, and to recognise the histories, memories, and inheritances that endure beyond them.

Personal Background

My first party happened before I had even properly opened my eyes. I was born on December 29th, 1997, in the most unexpected of places; a ski hill in Kamloops, British Columbia. Delivered by my “uncle”, a close family friend also from South Africa, though like many diasporic families, all adults were culturally known as tannies (aunties) and ooms (uncles). Not even an hour after I was delivered, I was wrapped in a blanket and brought into the lodge’s bar where the 1997 World Figure Skating Championships played on the television, and the room ringed with festive cheer. In true South African fashion, we celebrated with drinks, food, laughter, and warmth. Exchanging stories, calling family across seas and announcing the news.

[23] Said, *Reflections on Exile*, Ch. 17

Though I was in Canada, the first welcome I received was from home. If memory had a beginning, I imagine it would start here. It is a moment I cannot recall, yet one that encapsulates the layered experience of being born into one culture while cradled within another.

A year later, we flew to the Western Cape to meet my mother's side of the family. Although I was too young to absorb what was happening around me, a root took hold here. That trip became the beginning of an annual ritual; the eighteen-hour journey from Canada to South Africa to reconnect with the people and places that shaped my parents. Every year we went, it felt like an escape from assimilation, a breath of oneself. I saw a different side of my mother getting off the plane, one that wasn't silent, one that wouldn't shift her accent. A woman that was more proud, less nervous. Those visits came with the promise of belonging. It was very evident, whether subconscious or not, that the distance from one's place of origin creates a longing for something intangible; a deep calling back to home.

By the age of seven, the dissonance between my Canadian upbringing and South African heritage began to surface, scoring the beginning of a diasporic consciousness. My older cousins in Cape Town would try to teach me what was "culturally cool" at the time such as slang, music, inside jokes, media, but I couldn't pronounce the words or follow along to the music. This moment signalled my first experience of cultural loss: the absence of language. My parents hadn't taught me Afrikaans, and over time, that silence became increasingly pronounced, revealing itself as a quiet but persistent form of cultural erasure. I could hear conversations full of life and emotion, yet I remained on the periphery, witnessing tradition without the ability to fully engage in it. I couldn't recite prayers, read recipes or books, or understand the history being passed on. Our house was filled with Afrikaans, and it sounded like static. I remember once attempting to speak Afrikaans to my mother in a S.A grocery store. She laughed as she explained to the cashier that I was Canadian, framing my mispronunciation as endearing rather

than acknowledging the quiet embarrassment that came with not knowing the language. In that moment, the divide was made visible; I could not speak to my own mother in the tongue that connected her family across generations. At the time, these moments felt small, almost harmless, but looking back, they signal the slow erosion of a lineage I was never equipped to carry.

This was followed by a second loss, one more abstract but equally substantial; the loss of belonging. *[To preface this discussion of the second loss, I must first acknowledge the use of the term otherness.*[24] *In Black Skin, White Masks, Frantz Fanon examines how colonial and social systems position bodies as "Other" through imposed difference, detailing that difference, "informs and deforms the image of identity, in the margin of Otherness that displays identification."*[25] *In exploring my personal experiences of cultural displacement and identity formation, it is essential to acknowledge the complex and layered nature of 'otherness.' While much of the discourse on othering emphasizes racial and ethnic disparities, my sense of exclusion emerged primarily from cultural and linguistic dislocation within my own family and community. This form of othering is not rooted in visible signs of difference, but rather in the intrinsic gaps of language, tradition, and community that accompany diasporic life. Understanding this nuanced positionality allows for a deeper reflection on how cultural boundaries are maintained, reproduced, and internalized, not only by external society but also within family networks. It is within this context that I explore the loss of belonging, a loss that is as much about identity as it is about the fractured dispersion of culture across generations and geographies.]* To continue, I began to understand that outside my immediate family, I was a visitor. No matter how often we returned, or how deeply I felt kinship, I was always introduced as a guest in a culture I believed was mine. My feelings of alienation stemmed subtly from a

[24] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann, (London: Pluto Press, 1986)
[25] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks,* (pg, 22)

cultural displacement within my immediate social circles. This dislocation created a form of invisibility, where my identity was diminished, not through overt dissimilarities, but through an absence of shared customs that anchored my family and community. At school alongside my cousins, I was distinctly an outsider, singularly identified as “the Canadian family member.” This label not only emphasized my positional otherness but also reinforced the cultural boundaries that delineated my exclusion from fully belonging. Although I engaged in cultural practices, lived and breathed them, the culture itself remained something outside of my own identity.

This dynamic was most evident among my cousins who spoke to my ouma and oupa with seamless fluency, sharing rhythms and understandings that eluded me while I looked to my parents for translation. I observed how my ouma would guide, question, and even reprimand them with familiar ease, yet when it came to me, her demeanor shifted, tempered by caution as if her full self could not emerge in the presence of a visitor. Culture, I have come to understand, is an inheritance passed down through generations, yet within my own family there exists a silent barrier, a rupture that has obscured stories and histories from my grasp. I recall discovering a diary and other worn journals belonging to my ouma, their pages filled with words I could not decipher. That history remains an unresolved mystery, one I carry within me, an absence I will inhabit and swallow for the rest of my life. These experiences did more than shape how I saw myself. They revealed the limits of belonging when culture is passed down across borders, not lived.

In contrast, British Columbia represented the other side of the coin. Our community in B.C consisted mainly of other South African families, people my parents had grown close to after immigrating. Yet, even within this familiar circle, I felt a distinct divide. One similar to the experiences I had in South Africa, but complicated by the diasporic condition, where cultural belonging was not inherited but regulated through language, memory, and shared histories.

Their children had been taught Afrikaans, and once again, I found myself excluded from conversations that flowed easily around me. Over time, it began to feel like a silent competition asking who was more *authentically* South African. Culture became something to measure and perform, like an identity negotiated through history, tradition, and experiences, rather than something I could simply claim.

Within the confines of our home, cultural continuity was preserved with deliberate intention. What had once been a sprawling extended family in South Africa was now condensed into intimate dinners for four. Yet my mother worked to sustain a sense of fullness by filling the house with the choral harmonies of the Drakensberg Boys Choir each morning and preparing traditional dishes like boerewors, vetkoek and potjiekos. Through sound, scent, and ritual, we curated a connection to the home we had left behind.

But outside our walls, we assimilated. These rituals, through recipes passed down, blessings and rites of passage, became echoes, remains of a life lived elsewhere, lovingly carried but slowly becoming mythic memories and hauntings.

However, the most prevalent loss of community came through the deaths of my grandparents in South Africa. My paternal grandparents passed away in Johannesburg, and my maternal grandparents, after long battles with cancer, died in the Western Cape. My mother returned home to care for my ouma in her final days, while I remained in Canada with my brother. I did not witness her pain, her presence amongst family, or the collective mourning that followed. Nor did I attend any of their funerals. I did not mourn collectively with my cousins, and I did not find comfort in the cultural rituals that commemorated and honoured their life. Instead, I remained alone, spatially removed but psychically entangled, feeling the absence as a kind of haunting, a disembodied grief that settled quietly alone in my room. I have never visited their

graves, laid flowers, or learned the customary practices that might have offered a sense of closure or togethership. In this way, their deaths marked not only a personal loss, but a cultural rupture. Grief is a vital moment of cultural continuity; it is where stories are shared, memories are grown, and peace is made amongst our loved ones. To be absent from those moments is to lose access to both time, culture and place. My experience of their deaths has left a void that spiritually unbinds me. I feel as though there is a part of me that cannot hold the magnitude of their passing. My grief is only anchored by my memories, and I have no memory of experiencing their death except for the loneliness that came with it. There are no objects, no passed down sweaters or goodbye letters, there is nothing to grasp, only her last words. Somewhere in me, I still imagine that they are there, waiting, separated only by geography. That illusion creates a spiritual vacancy within me. I believe after death that the soul, the self, transfers into the energy around us, shifting into time, dust and stars. Being removed from that grief, I struggle to feel them with me. It is as if they simply just stopped calling, and when I visit home, they will be there to open the door. Where most people will pray, make altars or speak to their passed loved ones, I cannot find comfort in those rituals. I see this as a reminder that history cannot be rewound; that the loss is not only of people, but of proximity, tradition, and a version of self found in the uniting of communal grief.

Another form of displacement manifested from my relationship to faith and religion. Although my family did not practice Mennonite traditions either in South Africa or British Columbia, I was placed in a Mennonite education institute, *M.E.I*. This process reflected a broader attempt from my family to assimilate into the dominant religious and cultural landscape of Abbotsford, often characterized as B.C's Bible Belt, where Mennonite and conservative Christian values heavily influence community life and status. A decision, made without consideration of our actual traditional practices, imposed a religious identity that was foreign to me. In this environment the cultural and spiritual dissonance deepened my sense of exile,

separating me from peers and underscoring how institutional assumptions contributed to my sense of cultural displacement. The children, though unaware at that age of the deeper social and internalized implications of bullying, were nevertheless unkind, and the adults offered little refuge. I recall them throwing my bags, shoes and textbooks into the garbage because my curly hair looked “unkept” and “unclean” in our uniforms. Our family did not attend the dominant church nor were we familiar with the pastors. But to this day, I still remember every hymn we sang on Monday mornings by heart, yet I struggle to recall the second verse of South Africa’s national anthem.

The accumulation of these events began to burrow within my psyche like a slow-moving contagion. Subtle at first, but gradually consuming pieces that intertwined with my cultural identity. Memories I once held as stable and true began to shift and fade into broken puzzle pieces. In their place emerged altered versions of half-remembered stories that were shaped by both absence and adaptation. This rupture brought me to the question of; *how does my grief live in my body? How can art shift the narrative from cultural loss to cultural reclamation?* Within these questions lies the core of my research; to repossess what has been obscured, to reunite culture that has been censored, and to discover why the loss of such creates a compulsion towards artistic intervention.

State Imposed Identity

From the moment we are born, we are documented by the state. Our birth certificates act as the first article of proof that we exist; that we take up space in a country, and must assimilate to its laws and principles. Our identities become tethered to borders and bureaucratic systems that determine who we are allowed to be. Regardless of any other cultural, ancestral, or religious identity, that document enforces ownership over our citizenship. This ownership is

considered justifiable through the establishment of borders as political boundaries and territorial control. In my thesis, I examine this tension between state-imposed identity and cultural memory, exploring how colonial systems of classification continue to define belonging. Drawing from Benedict Anderson's ideas of the census, map, and museum in his work, *Imagined Communities*, I consider how these structures shape my diasporic identity and contribute to a sense of dislocation and grief. Anderson argues that these legislative structures are not neutral systems of knowledge but national tools that impose a classificatory grid. The world is mapped out to produce a visual form of spatial reality. It ties every member within it to a location, subsequently attaching their identity to the stereotypes, stigmas, and biases that are socially and politically affiliated with that state. Thus, projecting generalized classifications onto a person from their documented identities. As supported by Edward Said, "Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions."[26] Knowing that there is a part of me that is unrecognized by the state, I live with that split awareness.

Brown eyes. Brown hair. 5 foot 8. B.C. Female. Canadian. This is how the state sees me. This is the simplistic identity that has been crafted on my behalf. Elementary facts neatly listed together as a way to classify my existence on a 2.13" x 3.63 driver's license. This limiting data declares I belong to the state that is documented on my papers, and that the institutions who run it possess my identity. It obscures my selfhood into a number; a statistic in a population made up of millions of others categorized by similar information. Meaning that our classificatory system and the qualifications on my documents subject me, and others, to a predetermined group in the state's population. In relation to this, it sparks questions of how closely intertwined our identity is with that of state classification along with the consequences and conditions it comes with. Hence, what are the limitations of state-imposed identity in capturing the

[26] Said, *Reflections on Exile*, Ch. 17

complexities of cultural belonging?

In my experience, what these state documents don't disclose is more revealing of my identity than what they do. Additionally, my parents' documents claim that they are solely Canadian. They immigrated to Canada from South Africa after 30 years of living there and close to 200 years of ancestral history there. The process of obtaining permanent residency required them to renounce their S.A citizenship, effectively causing them to assimilate to a new culture and adapt to a different environment. By doing this, they sanctioned documents that camouflage their history and washed over their nationality. When they had my brother and myself in Canada, they were still classified as South African immigrants and did not have their full citizenship till 2002. I was a legal citizen before they were citizens. Being born in Canada would undoubtedly dictate that I am Canadian. However, I spent half of my life growing up in South Africa; being a part of the community and living by the cultural practices of my environment. Although, no Canadian document will ever initiate the notion that I am affiliated with the other. From the perspective of the state, my identity is reduced to that of a Canadian citizen. This fact has always made me feel like my roots are rendered invisible. This abstraction produces a dissonance between who I am and how I experience myself within society.

The influences that constitute documented identities by the state are made up of three powers; the museum, the map and the census. As Benedict Anderson portrayed it, "the nature of the human beings it ruled, the geography of its domain, and the legitimacy of its ancestry." [27] Benedict's work expresses the responsibility of the colonial state for enforcing nationalistic and systemic ideologies. Moreover, how these aforementioned powers contribute to the state's authority. In Anderson's work, the colonial census, which he notes was, "perfected after the

[27] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 1991), 178.

achievement of national independence", [28] operate as ways to categorize identity, especially evident in racialized groups. The census made populations categorical, racially distinctive, and quantifiable under the state's dominion. Meanwhile, maps are used to separate different zones of sovereignty, much like a geometric language used to politically divide and demonstrate territorial dominance. Lastly, Anderson describes museums or, "museumizing imagination", [29] as the process of postcolonial states inheriting political colonial mindsets through their education, history and erased identity. Collectively these powers illuminate how the colonial state uses methods of government identification to subject individuals to racial, political, and social stratification and gain national control.

Although I'm now located in Toronto, I have contradicting documents that attach me to B.C. These documents interrupt my ability to apply to grants, medical care, insurance and career opportunities. I used these contradictions as my base because it is foundational for what disrupts my identity; where I consider home. Is it South Africa, B.C or Ontario? Is it how I am documented? In my art, the overlapping Erythrina and Fig tree leaves, taken from plants in my South African backyard home, produce forms that tether these places together. When observed closely, it is perceivable that they each stand as a symbol of where I feel my identity exists most and where I feel it has been most obscured. This is evident in *Between Borders*. In this piece, the floral forms wrap around my father's hands and face, reflecting both myself and the legacy of his migrant history. The photograph captures him during the reattempt of his exams in Canada while his citizenship was being ratified, conveying the exhaustion, labor, and emotional weight of migration. Through the significance of Anderson's work, it is recognized that there are prevalent colonial ideologies and dangerous categorizations from our institutional structures that continue to racialize, segregate and marginalize. From my personal experience, I don't agree

[28] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 185.
[29] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 178.

that my documents are a reflection of myself. I continue to define my identity by the community, culture and personal titles I feel most connected to. This act of defiance informs my knowledge making within my art.

On May 6, 2025, the Constitutional Court of South Africa overturned a provision of the Citizenship Act that had automatically revoked South African citizenship from anyone who acquired another nationality without prior approval.[30] This law had positioned the state as the ultimate arbiter of belonging, reducing complex lives and transnational histories to rigid bureaucratic criteria. The Court's decision recognized that citizenship cannot be treated as a procedural checkbox, but is inseparable from a person's lived experience and ongoing connection to community. For those in the diaspora, including myself, the ruling underscores the fragility and arbitrariness of documents as markers of identity, revealing how state structures can assert power over one's legal and social recognition while failing to reflect the realities of life across borders. The ruling speaks less to paperwork and more to principle. The Constitutional Court's ruling underscores that citizenship is not simply a legal checkbox; it is intertwined with. Even though formal procedures are still required to assert citizenship, the decision affirms that belonging cannot be fully captured by papers or bureaucratic categories. It is lived, inherited, and practiced. The law may record who we are, but it cannot contain the totality of who we have been or continue to be.

Hauntings and Hauntology

In my thesis, I draw on Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters* as a critical framework for understanding haunting as a lived, social condition rather than a metaphorical flourish. Gordon's

[30] Department of Home Affairs. *"Minister Leon Schreiber Welcomes Constitutional Court Ruling and Announces Home Affairs' Plans to Develop Online Verification Portal."* South African Government, 6 May 2025

writing positions my work to consider hauntings and ghosts as forms of reclamation, emerging not only from my own experience, but from the familial histories that have shaped both my sense of self and the trajectory of my artistic practice. My creative discipline is established in memories and in records drawn from documents and photographs. I approach these materials as ghosts captured on film that offer access to versions of myself that existed before they became legible as identity. Gordon distinguishes between hauntings and ghosts as related yet distinct phenomena, arguing that, "if haunting describes how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken for granted realities, the ghost is just the sign, or the empirical evidence… that tells you a haunting is taking place."[31] I take up this distinction to name what is absent yet operative, particularly through my diasporic experience of cultural grief, and feelings of misplacement. For Gordon, haunting is not a supernatural condition, but the persistence of social and historical forces that have been actively repressed. This ideology does not only exist in moments of rupture or pathology; it persists through the textures of everyday life, shaping how we act, react, and make meaning through the accumulation of past knowledge and present reflection. Haunting demands confrontation. Without such reckoning, the possibility of resolution or ethical relation remains suspended. As Gordon insists, "To study social life one must confront the ghostly aspects of it." [32] For me, this begins with the idea that acceptance activates hauntings toward consciousness. Before I could begin to interrogate my diasporic condition, I had to acknowledge the elements that haunted me. Gordon situates this form of knowing when she writes, "The way of the ghost is haunting, and haunting is a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening." [33] For much of my life, I understood my diasporic experience through a simplified logic of cause and effect; my parents immigrated, and our culture was left behind. Yet, the question of *why* still ghosted the narrative. To address this, I began tracing my parents' journey from South Africa

[31] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 8.
[32] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 7.
[33] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 7.

and the ghosts that travelled with them across 17,000 kilometres to Prince Rupert. What I once understood as a decision motivated by the promise of a better life was, in reality, one shaped by constraint and urgency. Before immigrating, my parents made a decision; they would either remain in South Africa and not have children, or they would leave in order to raise a family outside the conditions of war, poverty, and economic and systemic oppression. My grandparents actively participated in anti apartheid protests with the ANC and the Torch Commando to abolish segregation and apartheid regimes. Through my oupa's affiliation and advocacy, their phones were tapped and they were pursued by police. During this time in South Africa, participation in these protests was punishable by imprisonment and state surveillance. The fear and sustained pressure by law enforcement around their home ultimately shaped my parents decision to leave. This decision persists as an inherited haunting. I register it in my work through images of my family that are obscured such as the cropped references in *At Rest* and *familie liefde*. While this history of immigration includes the privilege of being able to leave, it also produces unresolved ethical tensions. There are multiple timelines of haunting that exist within my parents' process of immigration. My parents' intention was not to immigrate to Canada. My father submitted over a hundred fifty job applications across New Zealand and Australia, only after those applications were rejected did they submit to Canada. The only offer he received was in Newfoundland, where employment was tied to the promise of citizenship after five years of labour. The job required my dad to travel daily, on foot in terrain and weather unfamiliar to them, approximately thirty-five kilometres between two remote work stations, as they could not afford a car and had no access to public transit. This conditional promise of citizenship in exchange for prolonged physical labour under isolating conditions, reveals structures of exploitation that border on extortion. Rejecting the job, as it wasn't worth the cost of citizenship, my parents reapplied again and out of 75 applications, received 1 offer in Prince Rupert. In Gordon's terms, this accumulation of rejected applications and conditional offers for legitimacy, operates as a haunting, one that organizes immigration through systems of acceptance and rejection that

determine the future.

Gordon asks, “How do we reckon with what modern history has rendered ghostly?” [34] She suggests mediation as a necessary response, an act that links social structures and subjectivity, institutions and individuals, history and biography. [35] In the context of immigration, entire lives can become ghosted through the stigmatization of immigrant identity, reducing personhood to social prejudice while the lived realities of displacement remain unseen. My parents’ departure from South Africa and arrival in Canada emerged from these kinds of pressures. Although their migration was shaped by the necessity of survival, I continue to feel the weight of what was severed in the process. Critical language, political discourse, and cultural continuity were abruptly removed from daily life. While my parents spoke of what happened to them, their families, and their communities, immigration also required a form of self-extraction. Gordon summarizes this precisely as, “Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, not the structures of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition.” [36] This absence, *this recognition*, neither silent nor full articulation, remains a condition I inherit and attempt to make visible in my work. Gordon informs the foundational ideologies of my practice by questioning, “What are the alternative stories we ought to and can write about the relationships amongst power, knowledge and experience? [37] This question examines how displacement, assimilation, and colonization leave lasting marks on identity while fiction mends disciplinary boundaries. This framing is essential to portray my diasporic experience in my artistic practice. It allows me to understand haunting not as evidence of absence, but as proof of identity. I do not need to become the version of myself that appears missing; there is no

[34] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 17.
[35] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 19.
[36] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 7.
[37] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 23.

absence of self; there is nothing missing. What seems lost persists through ghosts that are not external to me, the haunted self and thyself is singular. Through this inseparability, what is dispossessed is also possessed as a living archive within me. By engaging with these hauntings, I aim to turn absence into a form of understanding. The absence of knowledge, history, or evidence produces discomfort, yet this discomfort exposes structural inequalities and the lasting effects of capitalist and colonial systems. Ignorance is the theft of critical thought, reinforcing binary distinctions between what knowledge exists and what knowledge does not. Without the ability to consider different ways of knowing and seeing, there would be no imaginative critique. Ghosts emerge and return, insisting on recognition rather than resolution. As Gordon writes, “It is an enchanted encounter in a disenchanted world between familiarity and strangeness” [38] I find this reflected in my work, *I carry the protea across oceans* and *Portions.* Here, I use physical elements to give form to ghosts, and settle between the uncanny and the familiar. In my self-portrait paintings, the inclusion of my ouma’s beads returns me to the anticipation I felt as a child when receiving such an heirloom. It inspired both the feeling of ceremony and comfort, as well as the strangeness of holding my last physical reminder of her. The materiality evokes histories I do not fully know, yet it takes on a new life as a symbol of inheritance, care, and sacrifice. In *Portions*, I incorporate discarded vintage stamps collected from antique stores across Ontario. These stamps do not originate from my family’s correspondence, yet they operate as stand-ins for connection and separation. After my parents first met, they were quarantined together for 12 weeks while working with patients infected by the Congo virus. When the quarantine ended, they were separated; my father in the Western Cape, my mother living and working in Gauteng, which formerly was Transvaal. At that time, there were no accessible technologies for immediate communication. Letters became the only means of maintaining intimacy across distance. The stamps in this work recall those exchanges, as well as the later return of those letters passed down to me by cousins and grandparents.

[38] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 55.

Eventually, becoming letters sent between B.C and S.A. It took emotional, spiritual and physical work to reckon with my ghosts. “If you let it, the ghost can lead you toward what was missing, which is sometimes everything,”[39] as Gordon states herself. The importance of this process allows me to locate meaning within loss itself. By attending to my hauntings, I cultivate an awareness of loss that becomes material and method, allowing my ghosts to live outside the darkness of fear and into the light of presence.

Exploring Diasporic Grief

In *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler asks, “Who am I without you?” This question is haunting, as there is no discernible self. No stable way of knowing because before one can recognize the change, it has already occurred and it will continue to occur. Being without is inevitable, but the true weight of it exists in the contours of what occupies that absence. The “you” in her statement is not only another person, but a condition of existing. What is mourned is not simply an external object, but a version of the self that was held in place by our attachments. Butler’s writing refuses the idea of the self as autonomous or self-contained. In contrast, identity is formed through relation; ways of being that make belonging feel natural. When loss occurs, the self becomes destabilized and grief interrupts the coherence of identity. She states this by saying, “What grief displays, in contrast, is the thrall in which our relations with others hold us, in ways that we cannot always recount or explain, in ways that often interrupt the self conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide, in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control.” [40] Butler suggests that identity is in our social bonds and inherited ties, and when these are inaccessible, the self is altered. As Butler writes, “When we undergo loss, something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to

[39] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 58.

[40] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (Verso, 2004) 23.

others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are, ties or bonds that compose us." [41] In this, loss exposes the relational structure of identity. We think we have lost something outside of ourselves, only to realize that it is the self that has shifted. This framework reflects Butler's larger question of whose lives are considered "grievable." Grief is not neutral; it is sculpted by political recognition. A life must first be acknowledged as valuable in order to be publicly mourned, or give credibility to the loss. This raises a difficult question within diasporic experience, how does one grieve a life that is not recognized as legitimate by others? What makes grief perceptible? Butler's discussion of the ungrievable life emerges from contexts of political violence and systemic erasure. While my experiences of displacement do not mirror the gravity of these conditions, her work grounds the ways loss and grief can be invisible. Within my own positioning, South Africa exists as a splintered associateship rather than a lived continuity. I am organized by the state in ways that do not allow for a fully South African identity to exist. That version of self is treated as aestheticized roleplay and because it is not recognized, by state or other, my grief is insubstantial. Yet, the absence remains. Diasporic grief operates here as a mourning for an uninhabitable identity. It exists as one that cannot be claimed without dismissal, and cannot be lost without being invalidated.

The conventional understanding of grief is seen as a linear process, something with a beginning, a middle, and eventual end. Mourning is treated as a step by step process, concluding with resolution or restoration. However, Butler unsettles this assumption by arguing that certain losses cannot be confined to such simplistic boundaries. As she writes, "When we lose certain people, or when we are dispossessed from a place, or a community, we may simply feel that we are undergoing something temporary, that mourning will be over and some restoration of prior order will be achieved." [42] Grief, in my personal experience, embodies this

[41] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 22
[42] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 22.

notion. The more I come to self reintervention, the more I shift rather than finding resolve. Through the development of my dissertation, I feel the gravity of belonging nowhere. There is a constant tension within myself to find “home,” not as a single place but as a feeling I have never been able to fully inhabit. I often mourn the version of myself that might have grown up in South Africa and remained close to family. When I was younger, I would fantasize about having large family gatherings. I’d watch my friends move through rooms filled with their relatives who all felt like extensions of themselves. It has been 10 years since I’ve been back home, and an eternity trying to define what home is. I carried that loss, even though it was something I never truly had, and witnessed as grief transformed to become jealousy and envy.

I miss the ocean. I miss the language. I miss the music. Grief, for me, is a hunger, and I never feel full. The production of my thesis is learning how to eat and digest what I can scavenge, to make something nourishing out of fragments. To find satisfaction in what I have on my plate. Grief is a meal I carry from the dinner party I cannot attend.

My grief happens in isolation. It is watching “how to speak Afrikaans" YouTube videos and South African Netflix shows just to hear the language, whispering mispronounced words alone in my room. Grief is feeling like I do not know how to mourn properly, as if I was never taught how to hold onto people because we moved away before I understood what leaving meant. I don’t know how to reconnect after so many years of silence. I don’t know how to bridge that distance without feeling like an intruder. I find grief in my own acts of erasure, in the heaviness of celebrating a heritage that is itself tangled in colonial histories. I grieve the impossibility of tracing my ancestors because migrations and structures of classification have left records incomplete. I grieve the feeling of being alone inside a lineage that I don’t know how to reconcile. I grieve for my cousins whose children I have not met, whose names I can’t pronounce, and I shame myself for that. I have never felt my identity anchored within Canadian structures, and I grieve that too. The absence of recognition, the sensation of being unrooted on

both sides. I grieve because it is how I hold on. I grieve because without grief I fear there would be a void. I grieve because I often feel like a fraud, someone who wears the skin of two places but finds that neither fits. The work of this thesis is not to resolve that contradiction, but to look at it directly, to sit with its discomfort, and to understand that mourning is also a form of remembering; an imperfect, aching tether to everything I fear losing.

Western Colonial and Postcolonial Perspectives on Africa

This section of my thesis will divulge how Africa is framed through a Western lens and how the Western gaze exoticizes, stereotypes, or misrepresents African culture and communities. Growing up in Canada, I encountered this gaze directly. I remember being asked, “Did you grow up in a hut?” or being told, “You do not look African.” These moments were not isolated curiosities; they revealed the deeper prejudices circulating in Western literature, media, popular culture, and epistemological discourse that normalize these views. They also revealed the limitations of Western viewpoints; demonstrating how the long history of Eurocentric narratives have flattened the continent to a singular image. Chibuike Oguh’s paper, “The Representation of Africa in Western Media: Still a 21st Century Problem” speaks on how Africa is characterized from a Eurocentric view as, “primeval irrationality, tribal anarchy, civil war, political instability, flagrant corruption, incompetent leadership and managerial ineptitude, hunger, famine and starvation as well as rampant diseases.”[43] Oguh’s dissertation argues how despite new academic coverage, colonial representation persists, sustaining a single story of Africa as uncivilized or impoverished. These narratives erase the complexity, beauty, and diversity of African cultures, reducing them to tropes of primitivism, geographical myths, and exotification. In the context of South Africa, this continually produces assumptions about my

[43] Chibuike Oguh, *The Representation of Africa in Western Media: Still a 21st Century Problem* (Edinburgh Napier University, 2015), 1.

identity that recognize the country only through colonial occupation. Oghu theorizes how this perpetuation stems from how “Western media sensationalizes Africa and other developing regions in order to command their audience’s attention to satisfy commercial interests.”[44] These narratives are most effectively challenged through lived accounts that resist abstraction and insist on authenticity. The Western gaze recycles the same binaries and reductive narratives that shape postcolonial understandings of Africa, structured by the history of slavery, colonization, and apartheid. Achille Mbembe’s paper, “African Modes of Self-Writing” argues that African subjectivity is often understood through a predetermined set of forces that continually reappear in different forms. Mbembe states that, “African experience of the world is supposed to be determined, a priori, by a set of forces—always the same ones, though appearing in differing guises—whose function is to prevent the blooming of African uniqueness, of that part of the African historical self that is irreducible to any other.”[45] The work of Achille Mbembe emphasizes the importance of reclaiming selfhood in the wake of Western misrepresentation. His writing foregrounds Black African subjectivity and the constraining impact of colonial systems of representation. While my own position differs, his work clarifies how Africaness and African assumptions are reduced to legible categories. With this, I recognize that despite Canadian documentation and racial assumptions, my identity cannot be confined within Canadian frameworks. Mbembe spotlights this by saying to disqualify, “the West’s fictional representations of Africa and refuting its claim to have a monopoly on the expression of the human in general … open up a space in which Africans can finally narrate their own fables.” Guided by this, my art performs as self narration and autoethnography. It is a way to rectify the vivid, beautiful culture I was raised in, while challenging these notions and the colonial history within it.

Encounters based in Western ideologies of Africa became formative in my diasporic

[44] Oguh, *The Representation of Africa in Western Media*, 13.
[45] Achille Mbembe, “African Modes of Self-Writing,” *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002): 239–273.

identity. As Frantz Fanon positions this, “It is always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image. The demand of identification—that is, to be for an Other—entails the representation of the subject in the differentiating order of Otherness.”[46] Those encounters informed how others read me, impacted how I learned to explain myself, and how I navigated the gap between the South Africa I knew and the South Africa regarded by others. The Western gaze did not just distort Africa; it distorted my relationship to my own origins, reinforcing the idea that my cultural background had to be defended or proven. This discourse directly harms diasporic subjects like myself. When the Western world imagines Africa only through violence, poverty, or spectacle, it becomes difficult to articulate the accurate depiction of home. The Western gaze collapses South Africa into a stereotype and, in doing so, creates an unwelcome alternative to my real experiences. These misrepresentations are not abstract media issues; they are lived frictions that erode belonging and self-perception within the diasporic context. I was Canadian but I was seen as foreign. This led to profiling, racialized stereotypes and exclusion from my peers. When I was in middle school, there were a group of students in my class that viewed my appearance as “dirty.” My hair, lips, eyes and African background were followed by remarks calling me, “ugly”, “different,” “untamed,” and "feral." Verbal insults turned into physical violence when one boy struck me so hard on my back with his textbook, that he bruised my spine. Visible markers of difference and assumptions attached to race, nationality and ethnicity do not only mark someone as outside. They turn difference into an object to be targeted.

In *African Artists: From the 1800s to Now*, Chika Okeke-Agulu and Joseph L. Underwood identify one of the most enduring paradoxes in Western conceptions of Africa through Pliny the Elder’s declaration, *“Always something new out of Africa.”*[47] While often

[46] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 16
[47] Chika Okeke-Agulu and Joseph L. Underwood (eds), *African Artists: From 1882 to Now*, Phaidon Press, 2021, p. 9

invoked as a statement of curiosity or fascination, this phrase has historically functioned to position Africa as perpetually outside of modernity, despite its progressive development. This has cast Africa as an evolutionary anomaly rather than a contemporaneous, intellectually complex continent. Even though significant developments across artistic, economic, social, and cultural spheres, Africa continues to be framed through a logic of exceptionality, where its present is obscured by a fixation on origin, difference, and primitivism. Okeke-Agulu and Underwood argue that this perception is sustained through the fragmentation of Africa within Western academic and cultural frameworks, particularly those grounded in colonial ethnography and cultural anthropology.[48] These disciplines, they note, largely confined their scope to what was categorized as “Black” or “sub-Saharan” Africa[49], thereby excluding vast populations, histories, and cultural realities from the definition of Africanness. Additionally, this framing collapses distinct nations, ethnic groups, and lineages into a stereotype, erasing tribal ancestry and reducing identities to a generalized and racialized caricature. As a result, Africa has been repeatedly reduced to partial, outdated, and ideologically driven representations. For Okeke-Agulu and Underwood, the question of who qualifies as “African” remains tethered to what they describe as “old and tired accounts of the continent’s peoples,”[50] accounts that continue to circulate because of the historical and political limitations on Africa. One of the authors’ central interventions is their assertion that twenty-first-century African art constitutes a critical site for the reconfiguration of African identity. Contemporary African artists, they argue, have engaged in a deliberate process of reinvention by reclaiming avant-garde strategies that imagine alternative futures and assert the possibility of independent cultural and political agency.[51] I portray this representation within my own work, *I carry the protea across oceans.* In this imagined narrative, hold my culture with me; it is not lost or shortened. I inhabit the

[48] Okeke-Agulu and Underwood, *African Artists*, 11.
[49] Okeke-Agulu and Underwood, *African Artists*, 10.
[50] Okeke-Agulu and Underwood, *African Artists*, 10.
[51] Okeke-Agulu and Underwood, *African Artists*, 13 -14.

“in-between” with integrity and agency, moving through it without anxiety. This work is beneficial to my journey of diasporic identity as it grants me the validity to confront and embrace the complexities of spaced geographical belonging. Not only is it my first self portrait, but it is the self portrait that positions me embracing my diasporic experience.

In continuation of Underwood and Okeke-Agulu’s discourse, these artists developed a postcolonial modernism that actively resists and dismantles entrenched narratives of primitivism and cultural inferiority. African modern and contemporary art, in this sense, operates not as a derivative response to Western modernism but as a parallel and self-determined visual language. My own artistic practice emerges in dialogue with this framework. The work I am producing reflects a personal engagement with what I describe as an invisible or unrecognized nationality, one shaped by displacement, documentation, and the inherited legacies of colonial classification. Through my work, I situate myself within a visual and cultural history from which I was structurally separated, rather than one from which I am absent. As evident in my works such as, *familie liefde.* This practice asserts that belonging is not determined solely by citizenship, ethnicity, or state-sanctioned identity, but can also be claimed through memory, material engagement, and visual intervention. As Okeke-Agulu and Underwood describe, contemporary African art encompasses diverse practices that interrogate the political, cultural, and ideological certainties produced by both colonial and postcolonial modernity. My work aligns with this lineage by distancing itself from pre-apartheid colonial frameworks while simultaneously acknowledging the South Africa that shaped my upbringing and worldview. It draws upon the legacies of artist-activists, collectives, and movements that have challenged reductive representations of Africa and insisted on complexity, self-definition, and multiplicity. A specific artist representative of this is Kudzanai-Violet Hwami. She is a South African and Zimbabwean artist who explores diaspora through images that layer and reproduce themselves anew. Hwami’s work deeply inspired my piece, *My Lief vir Meisie* to use abstraction as a

symbolic element for memory and recovery. From Okeke-Agulu and Underwood's philosophies, my practice is both an act of alignment and refusal: alignment with artists who have redefined Africa on their own terms, and refusal of the narratives that have historically constrained who is allowed to claim African identity. The work is produced in recognition of the freedoms secured through resistance and cultural labor, and in acknowledgment of the responsibility that accompanies the ability to create, speak, and belong.

Research Methodology

I am choosing to pursue these themes to procure the origin of how my cultural diaspora, grief and hauntings have influenced my identity. When I first began creating art, my work operated at the surface of identity, catering to visual aesthetics and market decor. It did not leave me exposed, and always implied abstract observations of my life and self. I was comfortable hiding in a glass house, thinking that the translucent walls offered protection. As that illusion shattered, I asked myself to deliver more. I demanded that I dig deeper and access my fear of exposure as a creative methodology. I circled the questions; *what can I not access? Why am I estranging myself from my own life?* Suddenly, the investigation became as vital as the production itself. An ouroboros of one informing the other, assembling a system of research led-practice.

The experimentation started with gathering what I could access from South Africa while living in Canada; telephonic calls with family, photographs, glass wear and beads from my ouma's jewelry, alongside documents such as birth certificates, passports, tax forms, home ownership, drivers licenses and other ID Cards. These materials became source and subject. Unfolding through process, where memory, intuition, and material decisions generated my understandings of selfhood, cultural loss, and reconstruction. Resultantly answering the

questions, *what does it mean to be connected to a place that I am not continually embedded in? How do I exist within an identity that is both self defined and assigned?*

The core method of my practice was established through painting photographs implanted with archival materials. Oil painting slows down my production and allows me to sit with my images to depict a genuine identity instead of rushing towards resolution. Using both realism and abstraction, I manipulate the palette to add warmth to the original photo, making it reminiscent of South Africa's landscape. This control also aids in concealing the subtle archival fragments through layering. Secondly, this becomes a way of processing my diasporic experience through slow action and intuitive design, allowing the complexities of my subject to reveal themselves through making. I understand that living in Canada limits my access to ancestral, traditional, and familial materials. These paintings, inlaid with the small amount of inherited objects I have, become new objects within themselves through my art. They are not only a way for me to resonate with my diasporic grief and its hauntings, but are an embodiment that materializes the home and culture I am distanced from. In this sense, the work does not act as the visualizer of absence, it fills in for it. Moreover, my art transforms into a personal archive, something I feel I can pass down and return to. They've evolved into my own cultural language that is accessible to me here, in Canada. Thus designating that distance is no longer a limitation but an open door to which I can construct home through my practice.

I engage with the theoretical frameworks of Edward Said, Avery Gordon, Stuart Hall, and Achille Mbembe, alongside other critical scholars, to situate my experience within broader discourses of diaspora, identity, and representation, while also recognizing where my own position diverges, allowing me to reflect on those nuances.

My research methodology and creative practice permits me to articulate my diasporic

experience as an autoethnography, where painting becomes a method for accessing and reconfiguring my diasporic grief, and where fragmentation emerges as a complete form of identity.

Closing Reflections

Through the accumulation of these pieces, I realized that being removed from home, does not mean my home has been removed from me. Working with familial materiality and oil paint, I found a connection between birthplace and ancestral land, offering a new way of comprehending how my diasporic experience situated me within my daily life. This fundamentally shifted my diasporic experience. As Frantz Fanon writes, “Where there is no human nature, hope can hardly spring eternal; but it emerges surely and surreptitiously in the strategic return of that difference that informs and deforms the image of identity, in the margin of Otherness that displays identification.”[52] Through my art I recovered my relationship to my South African identity, specifically in the ways I produce myself in spite of state imposed classification. Systems of classification are meant to disfigure identity by constraining it; I refuse their limits by aligning myself with a cultural inheritance that exceeds documentation. This ideology grounded the creation of my first piece, *Izobello & Seun,* where I settle upon my cultural home and not where home is bureaucratically defined.

Reflecting on this process was not without tension, but I have learned to release the fears related to my research. Through this work, I confronted expectations about my identity and asserted my diasporic experience as autoethnography. In my work, I asked, *how does my grief live in my body? How can art change the narrative of cultural loss to cultural reclamation?* I

[52] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 22

came to understand that I was absorbing my diasporic grief as a haunting, but not as burden nor as monstrous. My diasporic experience is a method of knowing rather than a condition I am defined by; it is intuitive and inherited knowledge. Giving it room to imbue as a creative ingredient allows my grief to go from something held privately to something shared openly.

The work does not resolve my identity but rather by how I choose to carry it. With that recognition, I understand that identity is not something fixed, but something I will continue to build, carry, and question through the work that follows.

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