

Sister Ancestor

by

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Grieving My Littlest Sister Taught Me How To Practice Love

My little sister came before me; she's my Ancestor now
I've been honouring her memory, but I know she's still around
I can feel her in her clothing, and the things she left behind
And when I burn that good rosemary, she reminds me she's just fine
That she's with our other family, all across space and time
And that she will also hold me, and teach me when I cry
She brings me closer to our culture and opens up my eyes
I am grateful, little sister, that you are now my guide



Inéz Petrazzini, *The Zonas*, 2024. Oil on paper.

This piece is dedicated to my mom and Kai, who share the same middle name, “Zona”.

Abstract

Sister Ancestor is an art exhibition and written research that honours my little sister Ancestor Kai, who transitioned to the spirit world in 2018.

Following in the footsteps of Black womxn thinkers like Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Lillian Allen, I weave together personal stories that speak to my rage, my grief, and my love. I tell the story of being Kai's big sister, and of my experiences with misogynoir. Telling these stories allows me to heal and teaches me how to connect with my Ancestors in the spirit world.

This body of work includes journal entries, poems, mixed-media paintings, drawings, engravings, sculptures, installations and performances. The cowrie shell, the colour Black, rosemary, and thyme are recurring symbols that act as mediators between me and the spirit world. They form part of my ritual and prayer practice. Kai collaborates in this body of work by lending her clothes to be transformed and incorporated into these works. She has been my guide along this creative research journey.

In this creative research production, **autoethnographic storytelling** connects undercurrents such as **Caregiving, Ceremonies for Grieving, Rituals of Release, and Healing**. This work becomes a **personal archive** that engages with the concept of **Erlebnis** by making a space for Kai's voice, my voice, and those of our ancestors in artistic knowledge production.

Sister Ancestor is a deep exploration of what it means to be a Big Sister (in life and after the death of my sister) and the leadership involved in embodying and believing in that work. It asks the questions – **How can I ritually embody and artistically interpret ancestral practices for honouring deceased kin? What does it mean to be a disabled Afro-Latina girl and womxn who is navigating systems of creation, along with systems of inequity and violence?** *Sister Ancestor* leads towards shaping/re-shaping a spiritual and artistic practice rooted in both my Argentine and Jamaican cultural heritage.

Keywords:

Autoethnographic storytelling, Caregiving, Decolonizing Caregiving, Grief, Spirituality, Ancestry, Siblings, Decolonizing methodology, Black Feminisms, Interdisciplinary Art.

To the future readers of this document:

Sister Ancestor tells stories of Kai's role in my life as a little sister and spirit guide. It is an expression of my rage, grief and love, related to Kai's transition to the spirit world in 2018.

This story holds many layers, emotions, and textures.

This document includes words about researching Jamaican mortuary practices and the death cycle to develop culturally grounded rituals for ancestral veneration. It is also an expression of my rage and grief related to encounters of violence, misogyny, and racism in my life. In this creative research process, I transform these emotions into a visual language of paintings, sculptures, and installations in which the cowrie shell, sacred herbs, and the colour Black become symbols of spiritual protection. The colour Black is a sacred protective space from which my Ancestors emerge. Black is a space that I can inhabit and feel safe in; one that transcends time, where my love for my Ancestors lives. My emotions are also translated into poems and performances in which I embody ancestral practices. You will also encounter fragments of journal entries.

This body of work became a methodology of caregiving for Kai and our family. Kai inspires my artworks and teaches me how to collaborate with my Ancestors in my creative process. I credit her and our Ancestors for guiding my hands and giving me images to create.

Some of these stories are difficult to tell; please read them with compassion. Some of the text will appear in red to emphasize the words' emotional impact.

Kai held me as I wrote. I hope you feel held as you read.

Becoming Curious About My Grief

Journal entry July 24, 2025

I am so tired. It's so tiring to miss people and places and other times all the time. It's tiring because there is no time for rest.

My littlest sister Kai transitioned to the spirit world in 2018. Seven years later, my unaddressed feelings of rage and grief surfaced and demanded to be addressed. Having moved away from home two months after Kai died to begin my undergraduate degree, I had not processed this trauma. As I began my journey in the Interdisciplinary Art, Media & Design MFA program at OCAD University, Kai began to take up more space in my mind, heart, and spirit. I began to wonder how I could safely release my rage. I realized that in many ways, my rage was an expression of grief. I wondered, **where do I carry grief in my body? How can I work through, or with, grief?**

As Kai's big sister, I was also one of her caregivers. I realized that I was not only missing Kai but the rituals of caring for her. I asked myself: **What are my duties to Kai as her caregiver and big sister now that she has transitioned to the spirit world and become my Ancestor?** To answer this question, I began with another: **How did my Ancestors carry out their duties to the dead? As holders of the memory of the deceased?**

While creating this body of work, I also wondered: **How can I create artistic spaces where my grief-love can be experienced in communion with the living and the deceased? If grief is a universal and inevitable experience, how can I create a space for others to reflect on their own grief journeys? What does Kai teach me about living and dying? What does she teach me about being strong? How am I stronger as a result of this grieving process? Does this material tell my story?**

Now that Kai is deceased, my artistic practice has been re-shaped. I am learning to honour my responsibilities of sisterhood and Ancestral communion. This process is allowing me to work through my grief and reconfigure my role as her big sister and caregiver, now that she is also my Ancestor. I am learning to listen to her, be in communion with her, and honour her life through memory and written/artistic storytelling.

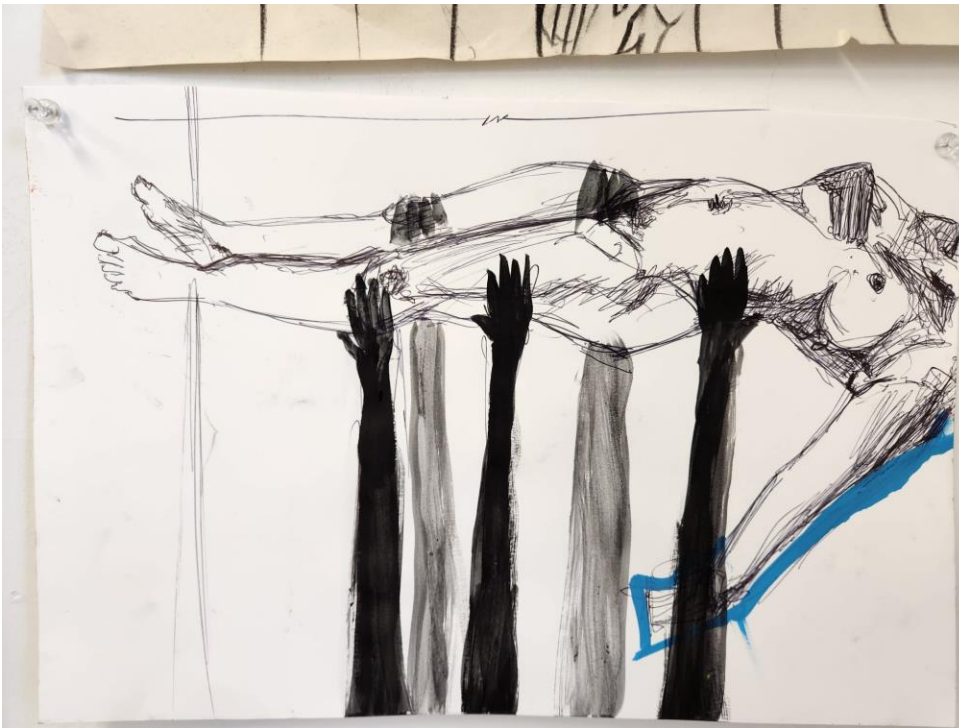
During this MFA thesis journey, Kai has taught me not only how to care for her and honour our Ancestors, but also how to care for myself. She taught me how to be a better sister and a stronger artist.

Journal entry November 9, 2025: Your death was my death, and it was my birth.



Inéz Petrazzini, *Your Death Was My Death, And It Was My Birth*, 2025. Charcoal, oil, acrylic, cowrie shells, sea shells, rosemary, beads, and fabric from Kai's clothing and wheelchair cover on canvas. 9 x 5 feet.

This painting began as the sketch of an image that flashed before my eyes: my Ancestors' arms lifting me up and carrying my body in a funeral procession. In my hand, I hold a calla lily flower, a symbol of mourning often used as a funeral flower in Argentina. The arms of my Ancestors embrace me. They lift me to the spirit realm, and pull me down to the earth where they rest.



Initial sketches of Your Death Was My Death, And It Was My Birth.

Coming To Autoethnographic Storytelling

I have never seen representations of someone like Kai, my little sister, who is an Afro Latina (Argentine Jamaican) girl with cerebral palsy and micro-lissencephaly, in gallery and museum spaces, paintings, books, movies, or scholarship. I have seen Kai hold space in our family's daily life, in care work, and in the medical system. **After her death, I began to feel her presence in the sun, the birds, and the wind.**

Longing for these representations of Kai, and to feel represented myself as an Afro-Latina womxn, big sister and caregiver, I began a consistent practice of reading, journaling, and writing (poetry, personal stories). Authors bell hooks (in her autobiography "A Writing Life"), Audre Lorde (in her collection of essays "Sister Outsider"), and Lillian Allen (in her book of poems "Women Do This Every Day") employ personal storytelling as a practice of nurturing community and asserting their humanity. These Black Womxn authors and their rebelliously vulnerable work challenge racist, misogynistic, and ableist stereotypes and discrimination. They have taught me that Black feminist life writing is also a useful tool for processing grief and creating a space for voices like mine and Kai's to be heard and validated¹. They have shown me how to find and express my voice.

Marginalized and subjected to unique forms of discrimination due to their race, gender and other factors including, ability, status as (single) mothers, and sexuality, many scholars (hooks 1989; Collins 2022; Lorde 1984; McKittrick 2021; Rosenthal and Lobel 2016; Sharpe 2016; Wane 2011) have highlighted the double standards and intersectional challenges that Black womxn face in various societal contexts, especially academia.²

In "A Writing Life", hooks tells her life story non-linearly and distances herself from difficult memories by using the third person. She breaks taboos by talking openly about love and sex in a way that defies monogamist culture. Similar to bell hooks, the stories I share discuss taboo subjects: sexual abuse, domestic violence, racism, misogyny, death, and grief. I share these stories to paint a full picture of the grief I carry; it is a personal grief caused by the loss of my little sister Kai in 2018, and an existential grief caused by my experiences of mysoginoir (gendered racism) and abuse. However, I choose to speak in the first person so as *not* to distance myself from the difficult memories and emotions; **I embody my pain and grief to work through and transform them into physical objects** (paintings, drawings, sculptures, installations, engravings, etc.), **prose, and performance**. Personal stories told by Afro Latina womxn like Kai and me refute the notion of a singular identity separate from social/systemic conditions³. As Lillian Allen describes, such stories are testaments of intersectionality that "create consciousness"⁴, solidarity, and calls to action:

Being a woman and Black at every moment in my life, I felt the need for a new vision of the world that included not only Black people's and working people's rights, but also the full and equal participation of women. [...] As well, I began to make a clear linkage between the specificity of people's lives and the power structures. I made specific connections between oppression of women and imperialism, creating new awareness.⁵

¹ Major, 2002.

² Joseph, Janelle, et al., 2024.

³ Major, 2002

⁴ Allen, 1993.

⁵ Allen, 1993, (p. 19).

This body of works offers a glimpse into what it is like for me to navigate this Heteropatriarchal White Supremacist Colonial Capitalist and ableist system as an Afro-Latina womxn, and what it has been like to care for and lose my little sister within this system. It is not a direct call to action, but rather, an invitation to readers and viewers to reflect on their own experiences with love, loss and grief. **I hope this work will introduce you to Kai, and to the spirit world as I imagine it: Black, with cowrie shells, and smelling of rosemary and thyme.**

At the forefront of resisting anti-Black racism and promoting equity, diversity, and inclusion in Canadian academia are Black womxn. This perspective offers an expansive lens to approach personal narrative storytelling in a way that does not feel limited by the “conventional narrative form of the autobiography [which] lends itself to this obscuring of the inner reality and consciousness of an author precisely because it is usually so focused on the unfolding of a chronologically based genealogy.”⁶

I connect profoundly with Kai by recounting memories with her. **Along this journey of remembering Kai, I became more familiar with myself. I learned more about our Jamaican culture, and about the type of Big Sister I want to be.** As Marlene Nourbese Philip describes, **I was able to decolonize my understanding of death and construct a new self-image and cosmovision:**

The word ‘image’ is being used here to convey what can only be described as the irreducible essence – the i-mage – of creative writing; it can be likened to the DNA molecules at the heart of all life. [...] I-mages that comprised the African aesthetic had previously been thought to be primitive, naïve, and ugly, and consequently had been dismissed not only by white Westerners, but by the Africans themselves living outside Africa – so far were Africans themselves removed from their power to create, control, and even understand their own i-mages. The societies in which these New World Africans lived – North and South America, England, the Caribbean – lacked that needed matrix in which the autonomous i-mage-maker could flourish.⁷

As I journal and write personal stories, writing also becomes a form of ‘i-mage’ making. Engaging in i-mage making allows me to see myself as an active participant in my cultures and my communities: “For it is through those activities – poetry, story-telling and writing – that the tribe’s experiences are converted and transformed to i-mage and to word almost simultaneously, and from word back to i-mage again”⁸. In my visual works, symbols from my Jamaican, Argentine, and Canadian heritage (rosemary, thyme, cowrie shell, goat, condor, pine) contribute to the construction of my i-mage.

By employing the qualitative methodology of autoethnographic storytelling, my works become a re-vindication of my ‘i-mage’ within the larger sociopolitical context⁹. My ‘i-mage’ also takes on a spiritual nature as I develop culturally grounded rituals for ancestral veneration.

Autoethnography is a voyage of self-discovery for the researcher, who is given to both introspection and observation. Major objectives of academia include teaching one how to observe and be self-aware (of the shortcomings, differences, and strengths of one’s culture). Self-scrutiny leads to “the formation of an individual’s professional identity” [24] (p. 339), which is an objective of contemporary education [24]. [...] It is a question of

⁶ hooks, 1994, (p. xix).

⁷ Phillip, (pp. 12-13).

⁸ Phillip, (pp. 14).

⁹ Phillip, (pp. 12-13).

adopting the reflexive posture to maximize the relations between the theoretical bases and the teaching practices by exploiting all the tools offered” [25]. (p. 300). Tools such as introspection, reflexivity, and storytelling.¹⁰

The body of works in this thesis research (culminating in an art exhibition at Ignite Gallery) functions as a **personal archive** that engages with the concept of **Erlebnis** by creating space for Kai’s voice, my voice, and those of our ancestors in artistic knowledge production. The concept of Erlebnis allows me to recognize my work – loving representation of Kai, feeling heard, seen and humanized as an Afro-Latina womxn, being a big sister and caregiver, and making a spiritual connection with my Ancestors – as theory alongside others.

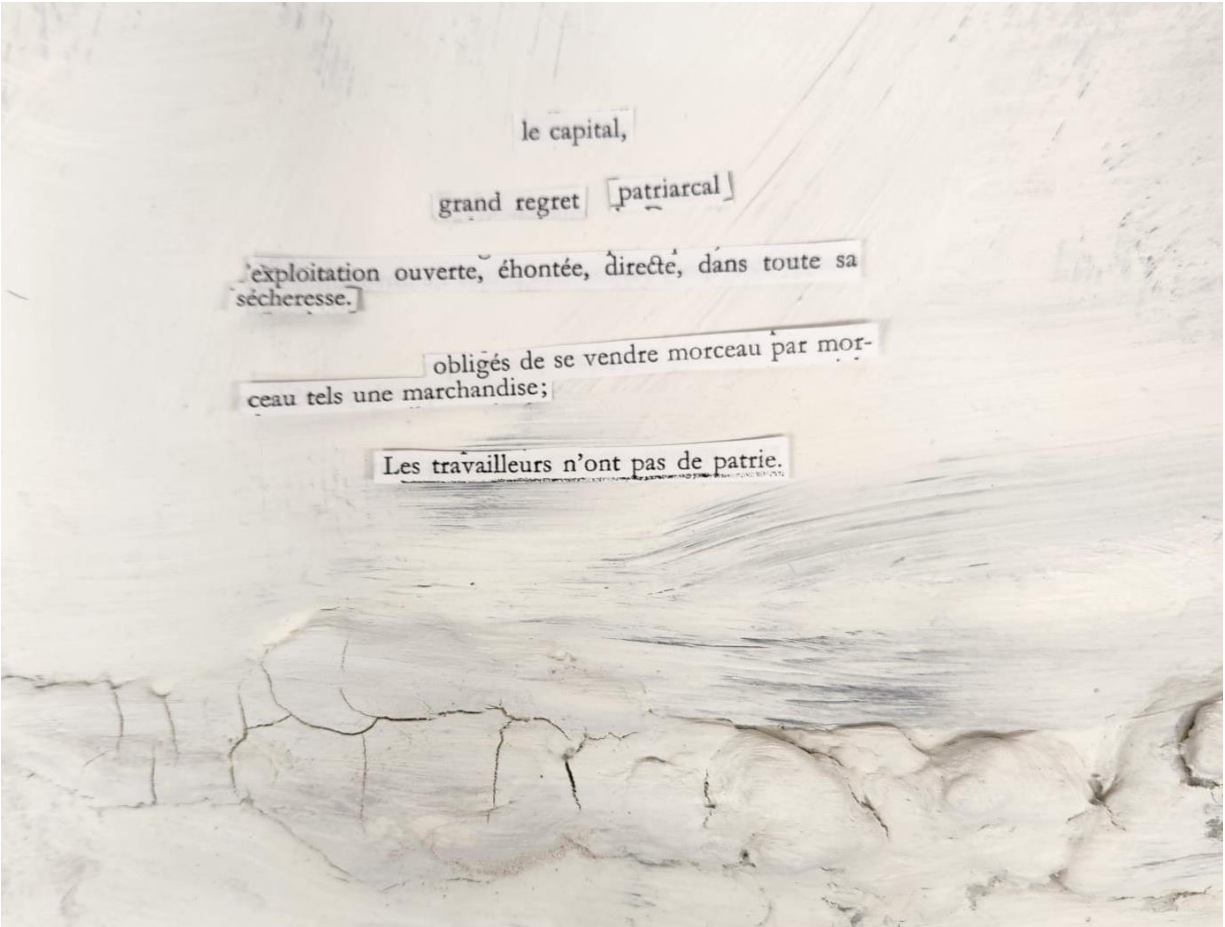
It is through the embodiment of Erlebnis (lived experience) [...] that Black people articulate their suffering, make meaning within and through their suffering, and yet resist and continue to exist beyond their suffering. Erlebnis confronts the “white hegemonic narrative”, where “whiteness masquerades as the metanarrative reality.” [Muhammad highlights] the importance of qualitative research, lived context, and meaning-making within qualitative research... the self-in-context as a valid source for theory and insight.¹¹

The visceral act of **remembering** - remembering Kai, remembering myself, and remembering my family - is **mediated by intuitive artistic creation and storytelling**. Artistic tools allow me to embody my memories and my grief, better understand myself and my place in the world, and translate my emotions in real time. This is achieved through an intuitive process of creation, a moment of communication between my Ancestors and me. My intuition cannot be credited to chance. It is a consequence of profound attunement with my body/mind/spirit, my Ancestors, and my art materials. I feel intuition in my body. It is like a hum or a soft vibration that guides my movement and my hands. It often makes me jump, spin, and dance as I create (paint, draw, sew, sculpt, write, sing, etc.). Music often helps me enter this intuitive flow-state of creation. Images and words flash before my eyes, and the actions within my artistic practice become a necessary release. Often, I feel like sister-Ancestor Kai and other Ancestors are guiding my hands. I consider everything I make to be in collaboration with them. **Creating artworks and telling stories is a practice of caregiving for Kai, of Ancestral veneration, and of self-care**, as it allows me to transmute painful emotions of rage and grief into tranquil feelings of love and gratitude.

The following three stories speak to my love and grief for Kai, and to my rage as an Afro Latina womxn.

¹⁰ Manuel Au-Yong-Oliveira, 2020, Using Reflexive, Introspective and Storytelling Tools, (p.10).

¹¹ Muhammad, 2024, (p. XI).



Inéz Petrazzini, *Quand même esclaves (Still Slaves)*, 2024. Poem collaged with phrases from the communist Manifesto, recycled wood, and gesso.

Loving You

Journal entry October 15, 2025: *Me pregunto dónde y cuándo estás, y me doy cuenta de que estás en mi memoria.* (I wonder where and when you are, and I realize you are in my memory.)

Grieving my sister has taught me how to practice love.

My littlest sister Ancestor, Kai Zona Petrazzini, was born on September 18, 2005. Kai was always small for her age. I knew that because my mom told me. When I was young, she explained that somewhere along her pregnancy, Kai's brain had stopped developing, and as a result, it was small and smooth, rather than large and wrinkly.

Kai's cerebral palsy and micro-lissencephaly were unbeknownst to my parents, who had been told during my mother's entire pregnancy that they were having a "perfectly healthy baby girl". When Kai was brought home, a musical therapist started working with my little sister Ariana and me to help us understand that Kai had been given a one-year life expectancy, and she could pass away at any moment. The therapist was a nice, smiling woman. She brought us toys, played with us, and taught us songs. I distinctly remember two of our sessions. In the first, *I am sitting with this woman at a table. She hands me a doll with white fabric skin and red yarn hair. She opens a water bottle, sets it on the table, and pours a small bit of water into the plastic cap. Then, she takes a marker and swirls it in the water until it turns red. Using a syringe, she suctions this red water medicine and shows me how to inject it into my doll. My doll may have felt a little pain, but she is okay because the medicine will help her.* In the second, *I am sitting with this woman and my sister Ariana in our family living room. The walls are deep red, and we are sitting on the beige sofa that Kai would often rest on over the next twelve years. To the tune of Brahms' Lullaby, we sing:*

*Go to sleep, baby Kai
We love you, our sister
We wish for you that you live a long, long time
With mommy and daddy, Ariana, Inéz
With mommy and daddy, Ariana, Inéz*

Out of necessity, most aspects of our family life became centred around Kai's care. **She taught us the importance of taking up the space you need.** Our house was full. VHS nurses, PSWs and nannies supported my parents in Kai's care. The family room became Kai's bedroom since it was across from the garage, allowing wheelchair accessibility. The space could accommodate her many belongings: a stander, a feeding pole, a nebulizer, a wheelchair, clothing, hair supplies, medication and medical equipment (needles, gloves, medicine, formula). Across from Kai's bed was our warm fireplace, by which we often sat to watch movies together on the TV. I remember the fond feeling of peeking into the room late at night and spotting my dad watching a program on his leather reclining chair with Kai in his arms.

Although she might not have known it, Kai became the heart of our family. She couldn't speak, but she communicated with us through touch, sounds, smiles, and nods in our direction. She

loved the warmth of the sun and a soft breeze on her skin. She enjoyed music and had a large collection of CDs curated by my mom, who would call on me from time to time to play the guitar and sing for Kai. My mom had a CD by the artist Raffi that we used to play on repeat for Kai. It included a song about Anansi the Spider that I remember fondly. I also remember my mom carrying Kai across her chest, swaying gently as she sang Minnie Ripperton's *Loving You* to her. Singing and dancing with Kai was a joyful family affair. I admire my mom's strength, resilience, and care during Kai's life. She was on top of every medical appointment and remained diligent in our education. She enrolled my sister Ariana and me into several extracurricular activities and was an active participant in them. At the same time, she received her Master's in Education, climbed the ladder, and eventually became the first woman and Black person in the role of Director of the Hamilton District School Board. I am proud of my mom, Sheryl. My sister Ariana is a lot like her, smart and ambitious.

I have immense respect and gratitude for my family's strength and love. My parents always included Kai in everything we did. She was with us on park days, museum visits, strolls in the Toronto Zoo, road trips and boat trips. She got to see the whales in the waters of Tadoussac, Montreal, and reach the peak of the Haleakalā volcano in Maui, Hawaii. On the days Kai was not with us, our family outings felt cut short since we had to be home by 6 PM to relieve the nurses who stayed with her. Caring for Kai involved changing her diapers, administering her medications, feeding her on schedule, and supporting her through medical emergencies such as her G-tube¹² falling out, seizures, vomiting, muscle tension and pain from stiffness. Although I participated in family outings and took care of Kai, I regret not spending more time with her. I often felt too shy to talk to her in front of the nurses she was almost always accompanied by. When she was alone, I would sit and tell her about my day. I described things she may have heard but never seen (she was blind).

Journal entry June 27, 2025: Before Kai passed, her scoliosis had significantly worsened. The curvature of her spine was crushing her organs and lungs, making it harder for her to breathe. She needed spinal fusion with instrumentation surgery, but her heart was too weak, and the probability of survival was slim. I will create a bronze or aluminum cast of Kai's back/spine from the mould of her spine on her wheelchair stroller.

The first person I knew who died was *mi abuelo*, Juan Carlos. I was about six years old. I found my dad crying in his basement office right after he received the news. I had never seen him cry before, so I giggled because I was overwhelmed. He turned away from me, embarrassed. Somebody pulled me away as I attempted to stifle my laughter. I felt confused and slightly anxious, but was unable to understand the grief he was experiencing. As a child, I called on the wind to take away bad things and help mediate my fear of death. In exchange, I promised I

¹² "A gastrostomy tube, often called a G tube, is a surgically placed device used to give direct access to your child's stomach for supplemental feeding, hydration or medicine." *Gastrostomy Tubes (G Tube) | Children's Hospital of Philadelphia*, www.chop.edu/treatments/gastrostomy-tubes. Accessed 30 Mar. 2026.

would behave or punish myself if need be. *I promise to do well in school if you promise that my sister won't die.* The wind stayed silent. *I'll kick myself if you promise my sister won't die.* The wind blew. I kicked myself. As an adult, this magical thinking was labelled as obsessive-compulsive disorder. My bruised shins could not stop my sister from dying.

On June 11th, 2018, at approximately 4 AM, my father woke me up to tell me that Kai had been rushed to the hospital and asked if I wanted to come. This wasn't a rare occasion; she often became ill and was rushed to the hospital early in the morning. In the past couple of days, she had looked quite grey and sickly. I wasn't surprised to hear that her condition had deteriorated, but my instinct told me something was different this time. I remember picking an outfit that I would be comfortable never wearing again.

En route, I learned that Kai had initially been transported to North York Hospital but was being moved over to Sick Kids via ambulance with my mom. What had begun as a typical case of pneumonia had somehow developed into sepsis. When Ariana and I arrived with our dad to see her, my mom warned us it might be frightening. Her small, fragile body was connected to several tubes and machines, which were keeping her alive. She was swollen from the liquid IVs. I felt frightened. The following 24 hours were the longest and shortest of my life. As the day broke, family members came to say their goodbyes. Every new arrival marked the passage of time, thrusting upon me the horrible realization that Kai's time on earth was ending suddenly, and nothing could be done about it. I remember my *Tío* (Uncle) Marcelo coming into the room and hugging my dad.

"Que vida de mierda che," he said to my dad. What a shit life.

After the last visit, I played guitar at the request of my mom. We held Kai's small and delicate hands and sang her songs. My mom had bought a blanket and asked us all to sign it and write a message to her. Then, my parents asked Ariana and me if we were comfortable disconnecting Kai from her breathing tube. She had fought a good fight, but she had also lived a life of pain. She wouldn't be alive without the help of these machines. I understood that there wasn't really much of a choice; it was time for her to go. It wouldn't be fair to keep her in pain.

"It's okay, you can go, baby," my mom said to her.

The doctors disconnected her, and we watched her take her final breaths. I remember my father's sob. I'd never heard such a devastating sound. The doctor called Kai's time of death. Under the instruction of my mom, I went out into the hallway, bawling in shock, and called my closest friends at the time to break the news.

I'm sick of flowers. They're ugly. Unfamiliar feet shuffle uncomfortably past mine and deposit more of these tokens of regret on rapidly shrinking surfaces. We will soon wake up to find them wilted, then dead. My sister is gone. I can still hear her last breath and my father's jarringly intimate sob. I can hear the loud quiet after the doctor announced her time of death. I don't want to remember her death more than her life. I close my eyes and try to remember her. I see her eyes; they seem absent, but she bobs her head and aims her grin at us when we speak, just as she does for the sun and the wind. I remember the different wailing sounds she made to communicate. I

remember her crying when she was in pain. I remember changing many diapers, witnessing many seizures, blood, and puke on her blankets. I remember the feeling of panic when her G-tube came out. I remember how every one of her birthdays was potentially her last, but we celebrated them with such glee. I remember the times she was rushed to the hospital in the middle of the night, and the last time. How kind she was to wait. Allowed everyone to say goodbye. I remember the illusion of choice; my mom asking us if we were okay to unplug her and let her go. It was an agonizing wait. I remember singing at her funeral. It was a full house.

For a time after Kai died, my fear of death subsided, and I felt strangely calm. As an adult, a high dose of sertraline helped me recover and resume a functional life. With the help of medication, I was able to graduate from the University of Ottawa with an Honours Bachelor of Social Sciences in International Development and Globalization in 2023, work, and move to Argentina for 8 months, before coming back to Toronto to start the Interdisciplinary Art Media & Design MFA program at OCAD University in 2024. Although I was functioning, I had yet to grieve the tremendous loss of my sister intentionally.

It is the first anniversary of Kai's death. I have yet to cry. We are gathered in the living room of my childhood home. My mom asks me tenderly, teasingly, "What's wrong with you? You need to cry." My father and middle sister agree as she puts on the slideshow from Kai's funeral. I observe the pictures between sobs.



Inéz Petrazzini, *The Zonas*, 2024. Oil on paper.

This was the very first oil portrait I completed during my time in the IAMM MFA program at OCAD University. It is a realist portrait, which is a style I had felt most comfortable with before this research journey. In 2013, the tension in Kai's hips had made it very difficult to change her diaper, and she was scheduled for double hip surgery. Since she had a slim chance of survival, she was granted a wish from the Make-A-Wish Foundation. My parents found it fitting to bring her to Hawaii, since Kai Kai loved to feel warm breeze on her skin.



Inéz Petrazzini, *Missing You*, 2024. Papier mache, spray paint, oil pastel, oil paint on canvas.

On Rage

The yellowing linoleum tiles that plague our old kitchen are more familiar than my father's eyes. He is always home, but we don't speak much unless I'm being scolded. When he is angry, his face flushes red, and his lungs cry for air between shouts. His fists are comically large as they slam into laminate countertops, startling the walls and table toppings. I often seek his elusive gaze for silent approval by stringing together words learned through trial and error. The more he grows angry at the world, the less he concedes to my platitudes. There is no peace to cajole from the eyes of a man who is blind with rage. No string of words that could earn me the kindness I am not quite sure I deserve anymore. Maybe he wants an object, a bitch to train. When I try to remain mute and immobile, his feet slam across the linoleum tiles and chase me down familiar stairs. He scares me, but he loves me. He demands a hug and a kiss every morning before he steps out to work, every evening when he comes home (if the house is sufficiently clean and my chores have been done), and every night before bedtime. He is generous; he has graced me with a bedroom door which, on good days, I may close but not lock. On bad days, he takes it away. He is my teacher; his thoughts become mine and make me who I am. He loves me. I am simply too difficult to live with.

I have often been told that I cannot think rationally when I am enraged because anger is the antithesis of logic and reason. This is wrong.

Rage is a logical reaction to feelings of unsafety and injustice. My body feels rage when my boundaries are violated, when I am abused. Many times, when I express this rage, I am dismissed and accused of being unnecessarily aggressive. The stereotypes of the angry Latina and the angry Black woman have been projected onto me since I was a child.

In primary school, when the White kids did not want to play with me, my teacher told me I must have misunderstood them. When I cried, I was told it was not that serious. For many years, what I felt was sadness and rejection, not anger. My rage emerged as I became an adolescent and began witnessing the unfair treatment of Black boys in my school. Our principal, a gay white man (I mention his sexual orientation to highlight that being part of a marginalized group does not exempt you from racism, or other types of discrimination), banned Black boys in our school from hanging out in groups around campus, alleging that they looked too "threatening". He was the first principal to install cameras on our campus, and often used this surveillance to threaten Black male students. He also banned du-rags and headscarves from being worn by students in school, and forced a student to take off her hijab.

One day, I was walking the halls of my High School with my friend, a tall Black boy whom I had a crush on. That day, he was wearing a du-rag. As we passed the main office on our way to class, a white female teacher stopped us.

"Take that off, young man," she said to him.

"Oh, come on, madame," my friend protested.

"Why should he take it off?" I asked.

"Don't talk back to me, it's disrespectful," the teacher snapped, "you know you are not allowed to wear those things in school; it is not appropriate."

“I am not being disrespectful. I just want to know why it’s inappropriate to wear a du-rag,” I retorted.

“You know what it looks like,” she snapped, “the impression it gives.”

“No, I don’t. What does it look like? What impression does it give?” I asked.

Instead of responding, the teacher told us to go to class and stormed off.

The insinuation was that my friend must have been gang-affiliated because he was wearing a du-rag. This racist teacher had dehumanized him to the point of ignoring that he was simply a 16-year-old boy following a trend. He had worn the du-rag to keep his waves – a hairstyle that requires a careful routine of brushing one’s hair down with lots of water and tying it down with a du-rag to stay fixed - laid and fresh. After the altercation, I followed this teacher into the school’s office, where I found her relaying to the principal what an insolent girl I was.

Like Indigenous students, Black students are disproportionately targeted in Toronto public schools¹³. In my high school, they were always the most likely to be kicked out of class and suspended. They were also the most likely to be sent into the “applied” stream; the credits acquired in the applied stream only allow students to apply to colleges, not universities.

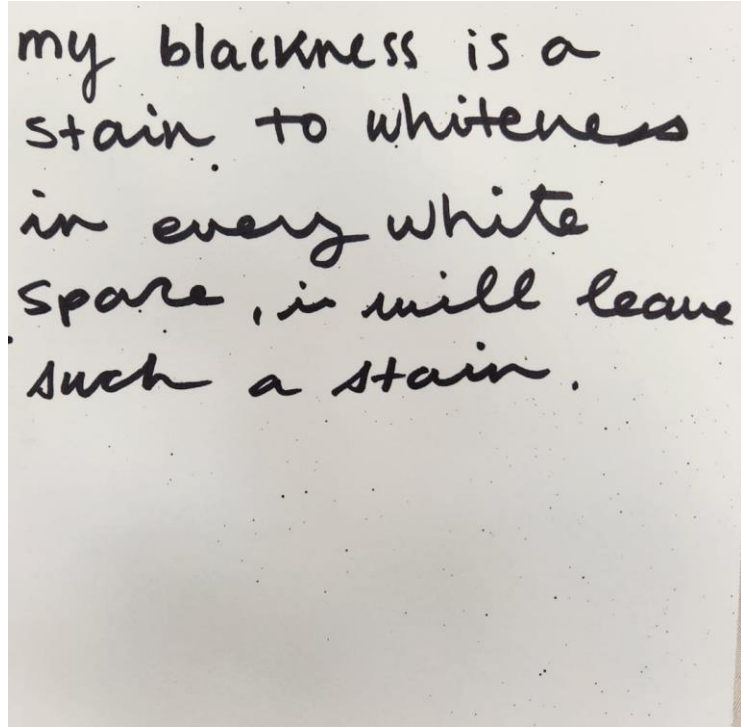
The white supremacist capitalist system creates a culture that encourages the mistreatment and abuse of BIPOC people. I have often had to bite my tongue in instances of receiving micro-aggressive comments from White and non-Black people: “Can I touch your hair?” “Your hair looks like pubes!” “I’m Blacker than you because I listen to more rap and hip-hop”. Yet, Black people are often dismissed and not believed when we denounce microaggressive and racist acts committed against us. This is evidenced by the overrepresentation of BIPOC bodies in the carceral system and in incidents of police brutality¹⁴.

Rage, a natural reaction to racism and misogyny, is often perceived as an exaggerated response, even in the context of racist and misogynistic attacks. However, rage is a tool for liberation and social change.¹⁵ **BIPOC rage, *my* Black Latina rage, is an emotion that deserves to be honoured, transformed, and released in various forms - tears, laughter, aggression.**

¹³ <https://www.tdsb.on.ca/Elementary-School/Caring-Safe-Schools/Annual-Report> (see “2023-2024 caring and Safe Schools Report).

¹⁴ Government of Canada, 2026.

¹⁵ Kelly, 2026.



Undated journal entry.

In February of 2026, I was walking to the gym with my partner. He and I stood waiting to cross the street at the corner of Yonge and Dundas. A young brown man in his mid-twenties to early thirties approached my periphery and stepped in front of me, causing me to step back.

“Yeah, know your place, nigger!” he shouted.

It was clear he was having a mental health episode. The light changed, and my partner and I attempted to scurry away amongst the crowd, but the man was persistent.

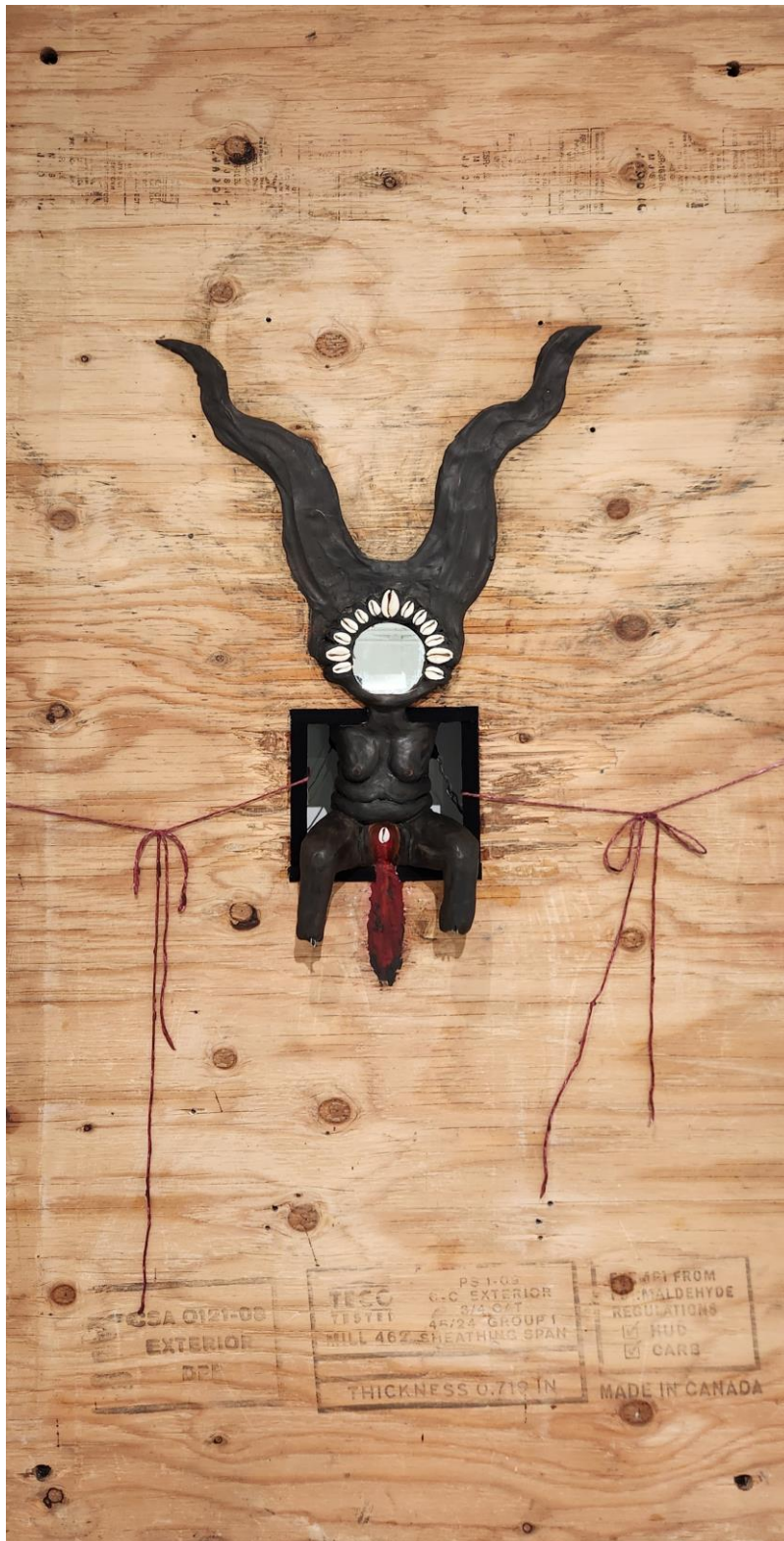
“Yeah nigger,” he yelled repeatedly, “you’re a nigger!”

None of the passersby did anything. Then, he spat at me.

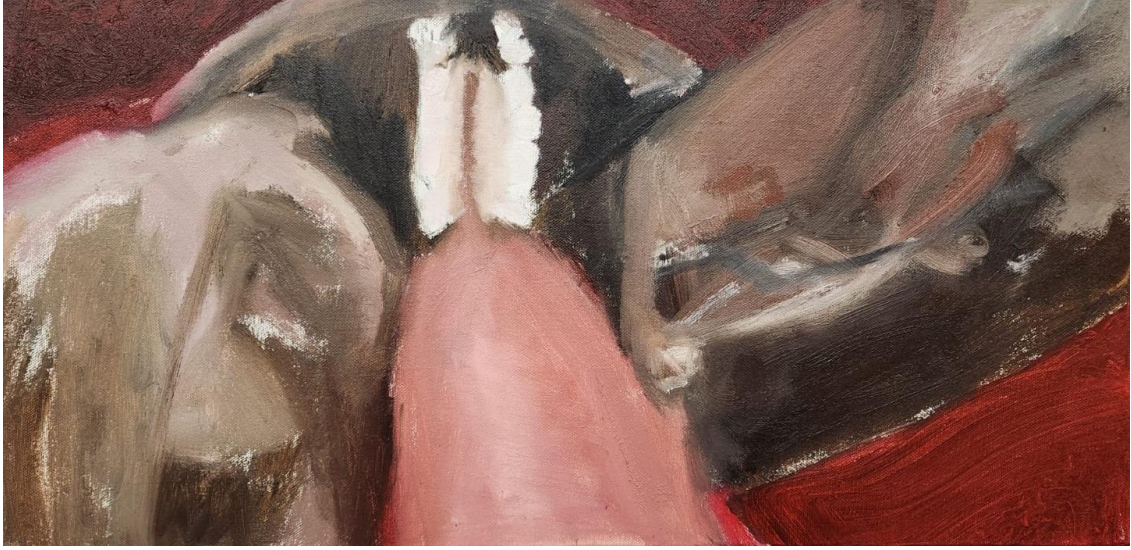
My partner turned around and pushed him away. Out of shock, I froze. In that moment, the man ran up to us, threatened to punch my partner, then spat on my face. Shaken, we rushed to a restaurant across the street. With trembling hands, I scrubbed my face three times with soap and water.

The following week, I suffered from anxious ruminations, several panic attacks, and became afraid to leave the house. I had flashbacks to all the times I was abused by men, and felt unsafe in my own skin.

These experiences, like the death of Kai, are a part of my grief. I carry them in my chest, in my arms, in my head, and in my hands and feet. I release them through rage until I buckle into tears, then I release them by creating.



Inéz Petrazzini, *Dis Fat Pum Pum A Fi Mi/Protector*, 2026. Plasticine, wire, cowrie shell, spray paint, yarn, and mirror, on recycled wood.



Inéz Petrazzini, *Untitled*, 2025. Oil on canvas.

Rage Transmutation

Once, rage guided my fingers down my throat
expelling everything but itself
my first love with
his new wife and daughter
comes in and out of focus
as do those nights
when he demanded my still silence
and with such ease
entered recklessly into my sleeping body

I will resent my father
for teaching me to be still, small, silent
to tremble at a man's rage

when a man as brown as me
at Yonge and Dundas Square
eyes distant, unwell
rubbed his own skin violently
and said, "See, I am a nigger"
pointed at me and yelled, "You are a nigger"
spat on my face
frozen

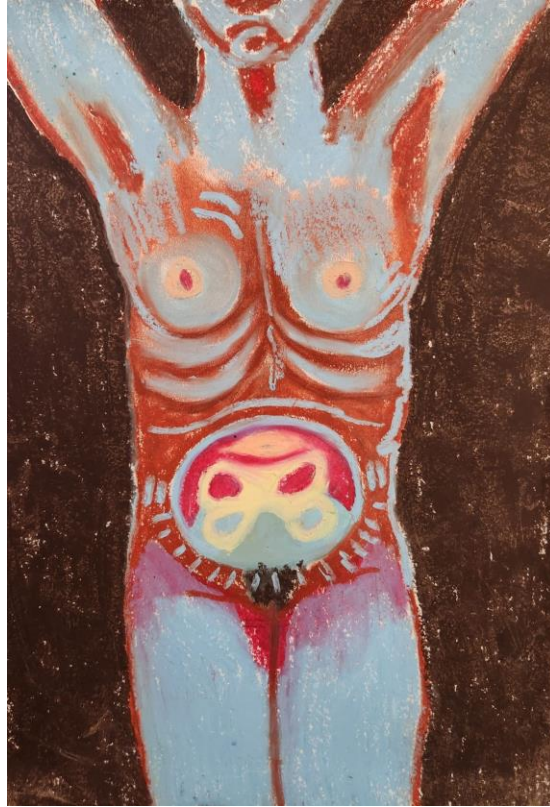
exhaustion is what rage does
when you are taught it is subservience and puffy eyes

ruptures jabbing, grinding up my insides
until I made the first Black portal
the spirit of my little sister Kai reached out
taught me how to walk alongside my Ancestors
offered flashes of images, moments of peace, splashes of wisdom

comfort

In the journey between the living and the spirit realm
I discovered how to transmute my rage
reclaim from the fragments of loss and unbearable pain
transform Kai's clothing into art, her essence
her gentle spirit beside me

cowrie shells as portals



Inéz Petrazzini, *Another Ultrasound*, 2025. Oil pastel on paper.

I arrived for the Interdisciplinary Art, Media & Design program at OCAD University, with rage on my mind. I was angry that life had been so trying – that my father had been so angry, that my littlest sister had known so much pain and died so young, that various men had assaulted and abused me in ways I had not been taught to recognize, and that people had been racist and misogynistic towards me.

In my first semester, a professor was giving a lecture about positionality and asked the class to volunteer an example of a position on Nazism. The class was visibly taken aback by his question. I raised my hand, he called on me, and before I could finish, he cut me off.

“Too many words, not quick enough, too slow,” he snapped.

My heart began to race. I had been called “too slow” my entire life.

“I need time to formulate my thoughts, that’s just how my brain works, I can’t go any faster,” I defended myself.

“Well, you’re going to have to try harder,” he said.

I felt dismissed and belittled in a familiar way. I deflated in my seat and planned to remain silent for the rest of the class. I had no interest in arguing with him or calling out his ableism and mysoginoir. The conversation ended, and the class moved on. Then, he asked us to share our

progress on responding to the questions, “Who are you from? What is your come from?” After the first person presented, he waited for a volunteer, but no one spoke up.

“Who will go next? Let’s see... How about YOU?” he pointed at me with two outstretched arms.

The questions had prompted me to think about my family, but also about my abusers. Though I did not ‘come from’ them, I was deeply traumatized by the consequences of their actions on my mental and physical health. I opened my mouth to speak, and a stream of tears fell.

“I come from an abusive household where I was spoken to and belittled in the same way you just did to me,” I began to cry.

“I am your professor, and I am here to challenge you.”

“Just because you are my professor doesn’t mean you can speak to me in this way,” I retorted.

“Maybe you just aren’t ready to be challenged,” he said smugly.

“I-“

“I’m your professor,” he interrupted me, raising his voice.

“I’m your professor,” he repeated.

I stood up and left the class.

The following week, I was too anxious to go to class. I made it as far as the elevator, but couldn’t step out as the doors opened.

The week after that, I presented an oil portrait of my ex-boyfriend/rapist. I talked about the men who had abused me, and explained that though I did not come from them, their actions had shaped me. My ex and I had broken up over two years ago, and despite his sexual assault and abuse of me, I had kept it. Before bringing the painting to class, I finally completed it. I painted the background the same shade of green as the room we often shared, where on many nights, I would wake up to him sexually assaulting me. In this room, he killed my pet anole lizard. I wrote something on the canvas in green oil pastels (I don’t remember what I wrote, but I remember that it felt liberating). The professor was not there and missed the presentation. Afterwards, **I returned to my studio and stabbed, punched, and kicked the portrait of my rapist. Destroying and disposing of it allowed me to release the rage harboured in my chest, arms, and legs.**

Two weeks later, the professor approached me.

“You didn’t give me the chance to apologize. You ran away scared,” he said, “your generation is too sensitive.”

“Your generation normalizes abuse,” I retorted.

“Well, I am a father. I have daughters, and I am trying to raise warriors. I do this because I love you!” he exclaimed.

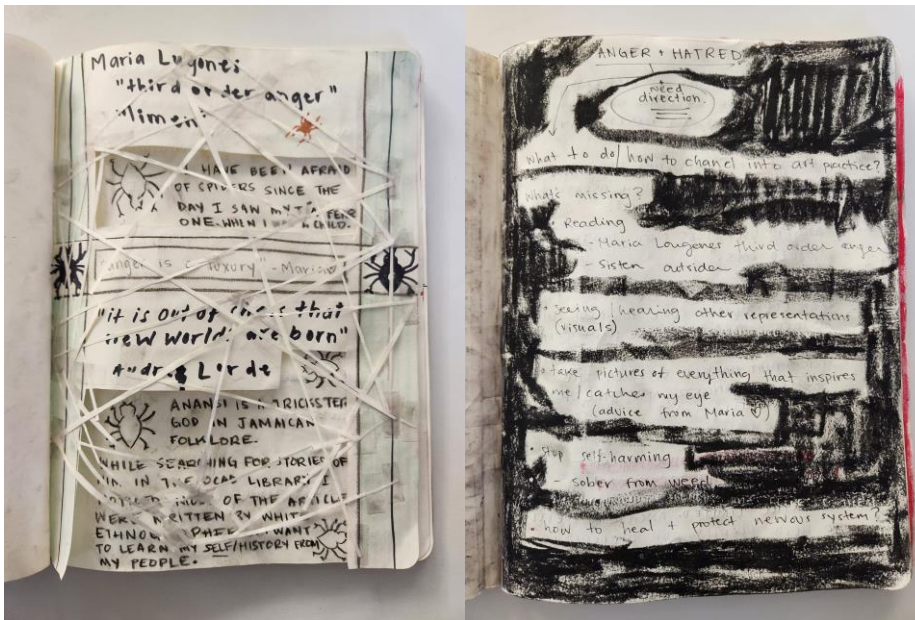
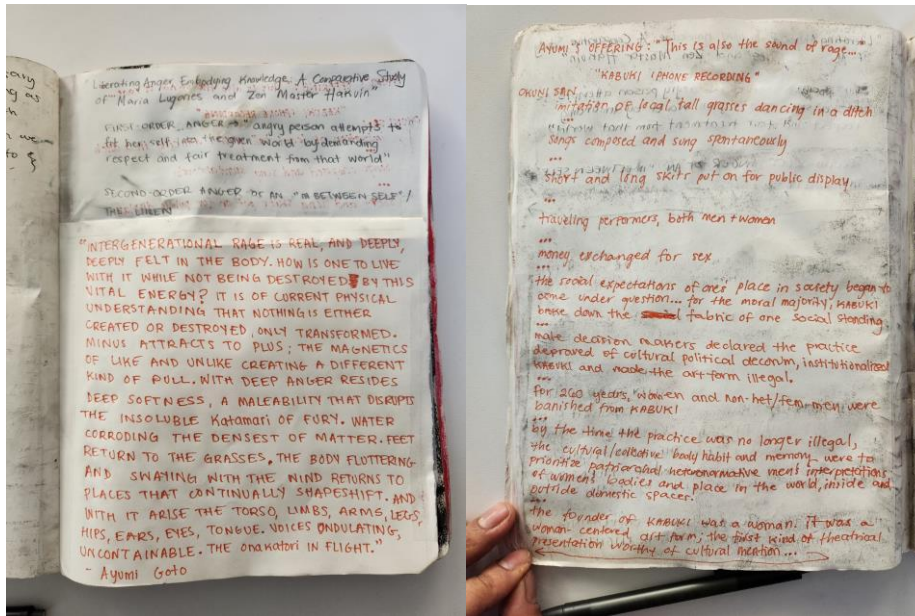
His words were a projection, not an apology. I had met this man a few weeks ago; he was my professor, not my father. His claim of “loving me” made me feel uncomfortable and angry.

I was able to approach my professor, Ayumi Goto, about my rage. She lent a listening ear and offered me three lessons. First, she showed me the Oobleck experiment, which consists of mixing cornstarch with water; if you grab a handful of the mixture and squeeze, it becomes solid, but as soon as you relax your grip, it becomes soft and runs between your fingers. Second, she showed me how to play catch with our loud and soft screams. Third, she shared with me a recording of her Kabuki performance:

Intergenerational rage is real, and deeply, deeply felt in the body. How is one to live with it while not being destroyed by this vital energy? It is of current physical understanding that nothing is either created or destroyed, only transformed. Minus attracts to plus; the magnetics of like and unlike creating a different kind of pull. With deep anger resides deep softness, a malleability that disrupts the insoluble Katamari of fury. Water corroding the densest of matter. Feet return to the grasses. The body, fluttering and swaying with the wind, returns to places that continually shapeshift, and with it arise the torso, limbs, arms, legs, hips, ears, eyes, tongue. Voices undulating, uncontainable. The Onagadori in flight.¹⁶

As part of Ayumi’s direct studio class, I kept a research journal which documented my thoughts, feelings, and questions:

¹⁶ Ayumi Goto

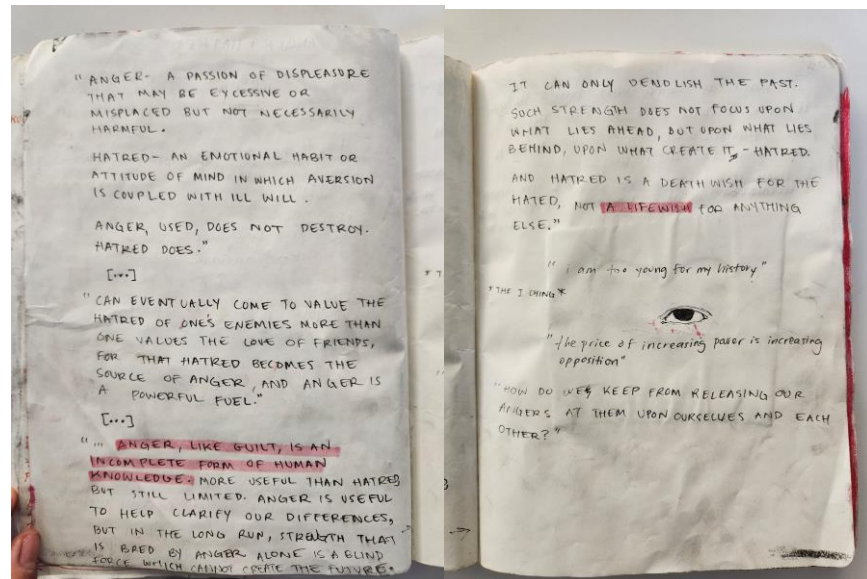


Four pages from my research journal.

After speaking with Ayumi, I became more curious about **where rage resides in my body and how it shows up in my artistic practice. I began to wonder if rage was all there was.** As Audre Lorde teaches us, “anger is an incomplete form of human knowledge.”:

Anger - a passion of displeasure that may be excessive or misplaced but not necessarily harmful. Hatred – an emotional habit or attitude of mind in which aversion is coupled with ill will. Anger, used, does not destroy. Hatred does. [...] Yet anger, like guilt, is an incomplete form of human knowledge. More useful than hatred, but still limited. Anger is useful to help clarify our differences, but in the long run, strength that is bred by anger alone is a blind force which cannot create the future. It can only demolish the past. Such strength does not focus upon what lies

ahead, but upon what lies behind, upon what created it - hatred. And hatred is a deathwish for the hated, not a lifewish for anything else."¹⁷



Two pages from my research journal.

After allowing myself to feel and express my rage, I was able to feel beyond it. Only by allowing space for my rage was I able to arrive at my grief journey. The realization of my grief allowed me to expand my research. I became curious about my Ancestors. **Who is Kai with in the spirit world?**

Working through the qualitative aspect of the emotion of rage became a method for accessing grief, love, and even joy in the act of creating and celebrating Kai's life. This would not have been possible without the teachings from Ayumi Goto and Audre Lorde.

¹⁷ Lorde, 1984, (p. 152).

Rage Transmutation Workshop

In June 2025, I was invited by the Troublemakers Collective to facilitate an arts workshop as part of the Indigenous Arts Intensive at the University of British Columbia Okanagan, in Kelowna, Sylx Territory. During this workshop, I invited participants (whose ages ranged from 5 to 60 years old) to hold space for their rage through feeling, reflection, and artistic action.

I offered three guiding questions:

1. Where and when does rage manifest in your body? How do you experience rage?
2. How can rage serve as a tool that signals when boundaries are crossed or rights are being violated?
3. How much space do you want your rage to take up today?

As I looked around the room, I felt curious about how the questions would resonate differently for folks depending on their identity, culture, age, and life experience. To begin our discussion, I mentioned that rage has many manifestations (violence, laughter, tears, etc.). I shared that my rage manifests in my head, my hands, my chest, and my stomach, particularly in situations of injustice, such as racism and misogyny. One child participant shared that she felt “mad” when her parents did not listen to her. An adult participant (referred to below as P2) shared that they rarely feel the emotion of rage at all; when they do experience rage, it is on behalf of others, not themselves. Another adult participant (referred to below as P1) shared that she often listens to music to process her rage, and offered to play her rage playlist for us during the next part of the workshop.

After this discussion, I explained that we would be embodying and expressing our rage through gestural embodied painting by making marks on white paper using the following tools: black paint, Sharpie, charcoal, pencil, paintbrushes, bear hands and feet. I offered that the white paper could be interpreted as an oppressive space, upon which the participants would make their voices heard. To me, it is a metaphor for white supremacy, which is a source of my rage. I discussed how the shade Black has been demonized and imbued with negative connotations, and that my use of it was a deliberate reclamation of its power. Black becomes a vessel for our voices, a symbol of strength. I invited participants to allow their rage to take up as much space as they wanted by selecting the size of paper they wanted from a large roll. This allowed participants to rage safely and intimately.



Images from the embodied rage painting session.

Once we finished embodying our rage through painting/drawing, I instructed participants to consider how much space they wanted their rage to take up, and cut out pieces from their rage paintings and glue them onto a large collective collage mural. This act of choosing the rage that served us for the mural (and leaving behind the rage that didn't) was an act of transmutation; raging together became a form of community building, self-care, and imagining liberated futures, recalling the words of Audre Lorde: “Anger is a death-wish for the hated, not a life wish for anything else.” Through this exercise, our anger became a life wish.



Images from the collage creation.



Images from the mural creation.

After the activity, the group shared their reflections. This is captured in the following video transcript:

P1 (adult): “It was a beautiful invitation to be really specific about giving us black and giving us white to work with. Also, there was play in the rage expression because you let us have the playlist, and we were laughing. The two sides to the coin of rage that you were talking about, that anger can turn into laughter, laughter can turn into anger, and to think about transferring that to something else. And then, thinking about words after being so physical, to go back to the mind and pull words after releasing through the body and seeing the release actualized on paper.”

P2 (adult): “I think this exercise made me realize that I’m not ready to release my rage. It probably has to do with safety, and it probably has to do with journeys that I have to be very protective about. So, I’m noticing that I have really limited capacity to engage in anger on my own behalf. So, I think I’ll go home with that and think about it. It was really nice though to be in company and to watch other people express and find it. I found it really inspiring. Also, [child participant] came and collaborated with me, and it was so easy for [child participant] to just go there. It was like [child participant] was holding my hand. It’s kind of like mentorship, like someone gets to show you how it’s done. So, I think that was a blessing. It really lovely.”

P3 (child): “I was just excited to paint all over the paper. [Points to mural] That is my masterpiece. I did like this [gestures both arms forward] and [the paint] went all over the place. It’s going to dry to be thick.”

P2: “Did you like throwing [the paint]?”

P3: “I loved it! I stomped on [the painting]! I sort of wanted to sit on it, but my pants would get ruined, though.”

P2: “Sitting on [the painting] would be great!”

P3: “If we had some sort of plastic wrap that we could take off afterwards, that would be great.”

[The group agrees that the next iteration should consider providing plastic wrap to protect clothing, or asking participants to wear clothes they wouldn’t mind getting stained.]

P2: “That way, we could roll around on [the paintings].”

P2: “[P4], how did you find it?”

P4: “I mean I was watching, mostly looking at how the space transformed. When you see the actions turn into something that starts to flow into something else [...] together.”

P5: “There’s also something very normalizing about doing this together. Everybody rages; it’s a very normal emotion. I think that’s the piece that [Inéz] was speaking to earlier, that [rage is considered] a problem, when in actuality, this is a normal emotion, people get angry. And when our boundaries are very violated, we get rageful, and that is okay. It’s actually very important to feel rage, even if you didn’t ever feel anger or rage, you would never have any sense of if you feel violated in your boundaries.”

P3: “And like [Inéz] said, some people tell you to hold your anger in, but that’s not good because one day, maybe it will all come out. This was a great activity to let everything out. I had a really fun time too; I was splatting paint everywhere. It took a while to wash off, but it was really fun.”

[Inéz]: “Yeah, I was throwing paint and walking all over [the painting].”

P3: “Yeah, I got the idea from you [...] I saw your feet were dirty, and I was like, hmm, I accidentally got my feet dirty.”

Being Black in Argentina

“Journal entry Dec. 11, 1986 (Testimony stoops to Mother Tongue)

I want to write about kinky hair and flat noses – maybe I should be writing about the language that kinked the hair and flattened noses, made the jaws prognathous...” – Marlene Nourbese Philip, 1989, p.20)

Wounds from Empire

My father nurses his open wound
trademarked by the Ford Falcon Empire
Abuela searched and pleaded
found her brother with charred temples
shocked mute
30, 000 lives
kidnapped, raped, tortured, shot
thrown from planes
“disappeared”

Exiled north
away from *las sierras* and *el lago de Rumipal*
to yet another place where dreams are built on genocide
my father built his Canadian dream
two cars and a house in the suburbs of *Tsi Tkaronto*
but his ache was never quelled

forbade us from speaking the language that calls *las Malvinas* the Falklands
the language that spreads propaganda
through Hollywood movies and rock music
Yankee exports he could not bear

at home we obeyed father's every shouted order
against childhood imperfection, and the tenderness of naivete
did he forgot
that rock music came from Africa
and that Spanish colonized too

My father made his forefathers proud;
expected dinner on the stove
and shiny floors
and warned his daughters that no one would want to live with a
slow,
 distracted,
 disorganized,
 woman.

His Queenie, my mother, also loses and misplaces things
and she carries children on her back
braving white spaces, fighting against hate
But I wonder, who carries my mother?

My mom, Sheryl, was born in Manchester, Jamaica. She was raised by her grandmother in a small house in the countryside until the age of eight, then she emigrated to Canada to join her mother (my grandmother Daphne Swaby), who had left in search of work. I remember visiting my mom's childhood home in Manchester during a trip to Jamaica when I was a child. I remember a white goat grazing on the tall yellow grass in the backyard. I remember sitting quietly on a couch and watching TV as a family member picked fresh mint from the yard to make us tea.

Growing up, my mom often made traditional Jamaican dishes such as dumpling soup, ackee and saltfish, plantain, callaloo, jerk chicken, and oxtail. She sometimes spoke patois, although my sister and I never learned how to speak the language. Despite maintaining our proximity to Jamaican culture through food, music, and getting together with the few family members who live in the same province as us (Ontario), my sisters and I were more immersed in Argentinian culture. While we grew up with a close relationship with our paternal grandmother, we never had a relationship with Grandma Daphne. Thus, our family gatherings - often organized around the cooking of an Argentine *asado* (barbeque) - were mainly attended by my dad's side of the family. My sisters and I consumed media, books, and music almost only in Spanish and French. My dad forbade us from speaking in English or consuming media in English. This effort to reject U.S. imperialism and propaganda stemmed from his experience having lived through the U.S.-backed military dictatorship and the British colonization of the Malvinas Islands in Argentina. My father is an atheist, and although my mother was raised Christian (Pentecostal and Seventh Day Adventist), she is non-practicing. My sisters and I were raised atheists, and later, agnostics.

In September of 2018, three months after Kai passed away, I moved from Toronto to Ottawa to begin my undergraduate career at the University of Ottawa. The distance from my family home made it easy to avoid my feelings of grief and focus on my anger and rage. I was angry with my father for his mistreatment of us. As a young Afro-Latina woman, I also carried the weight of a lifetime of violence and mysoginoir. In October of 2023, I obtained my Honours Bachelor of Social Sciences in International Development and Globalization from the University of Ottawa. I skipped my graduation to move to Argentina as soon as I could. I had travelled there twice before and felt at home in Rumipal, Cordoba, the small town where most of my paternal family resides. This time, I stayed in sprawling Buenos Aires. Coming from the diverse city of Scarborough/Toronto, Ontario, I was accustomed to being surrounded by Afro-descendant people and culture. But as I frequented cafes, restaurants, bars, shops, parks, and museums in my neighbourhood, I noticed I was often the only Black person in many spaces. My Canadian dollars had allowed me to afford a stay in a wealthy neighbourhood, which was mostly inhabited by White Argentines. As a visibly biracial (Argentine Jamaican) woman with brown skin and afro hair, this shift in demographics caused me to feel more vulnerable, particularly as wheat-pasted Zionist posters sprang up on every wall in response to the escalation of the Palestinian genocide (which began in 1974 with the Nakba). As a colonial country imposed on Abya Yala through the genocide and displacement of its Indigenous peoples, Argentina's White Supremacist nature is deeply embedded in its culture¹⁸.

¹⁸ Morales, Francisco, 2018.

On November 8th, 2023, a month into settling in, I attended the city's first Afro-descendant march celebrating Argentina's National Day of Afro-descendants and Afro culture¹⁹. This event aims to bring visibility to Buenos Aires' Afro-descendant population, who frequently experience racism, systemic violence, and are often underrepresented and underserved in public policy. I arrived at *Plaza de Mayo* and joined the crowd gathered in the bright white courtyard in front of *la Casa Rosada*. I looked around in awe as the soft morning sun illuminated a scene that defied a phrase I had heard my whole life: *No hay negros en Argentina*. There are no Blacks in Argentina. On the contrary, all around me was evidence of a multi-generational, culturally and artistically rich community of Afro-Argentines living in the heart of Buenos Aires. As I would later learn during my visit to the Marqués de Sobre Monte Historical Provincial Museum in the city of Córdoba, many Africans were brought to Argentina during the transatlantic slave trade and contributed significantly to the country's development:

Los esclavos llegaron a Córdoba cuando disminuyó la población nativa; que si bien estuvo protegida por las Leyes de Indias y los encomenderos españoles tenían prohibido su uso para servicio personal, en la práctica no sucedió así. Durante el siglo XVII se produjo una gran mortandad de indios y por esta causa el Cabildo de Córdoba ya en 1591 pidió autorización para traer un cargamento de 6.000 negros esclavos, mandando un comisionado para que se presentara ante el Rey de España. Los negros introducidos como mano de obra que no fueron destinados a las tareas rurales del campo, en la ciudad trabajaron en los oficios, llegando a destacarse como excelentes artesanos, albañiles, carpinteros y herreros. Esta casa fue construida por mano de obra esclava, al igual que toda la obra pública de la ciudad, para la cual los vecinos aportaban sus esclavos, junto con algunos indios conchabados (contratados) que recibían un pago por su trabajo. (Museo Histórico Provincial Marqués de Sobre Monte, Córdoba, Argentina, n.d.).



Pictures I took during my visit to the Museo Histórico Provincial Marqués de Sobre Monte on February 15, 2024.

¹⁹ Here is a video from that day: <https://youtu.be/XtdiD5YPWaU> (Télam, 2023).

As the Plaza de Mayo filled with Argentine and migrant Afro-descendants, my new friend Noir appeared²⁰. I had recently met them at a fair for afro-descendant migrants where they were in a booth selling their art, made from found and recycled rubber. I approached them to buy a lighter case, and offered them a joint as we chatted. I told them that a woman at another booth had mentioned how she had been called *Negra de mierda* - a common insult used colloquially, which literally translates to black of shit - on her way to the event. Noir was not surprised. They told me that police officers had arrested them and beaten them up in a precinct back in Mendoza, where they resided. I hugged Noir now, happy to see them again. They introduced me to their friends. As we chatted, a white man walked up to me and stuck his camera in my face.

“No thanks, I don’t want my picture taken,” I said.

“Why not?” he asked defensively.

“I am not a zoo animal,” I responded. This upset him.

“What’s the big deal? It’s just a picture...” he began.

Then, Noir stepped between us, asked him what the matter was, and told him to leave us alone. He did. I was so grateful for Noir’s act of solidarity. I understood then that I was not as alone as I thought. Later that day, I met Mutante Robin, an Afro-Brazilian visual artist, seamstress, and stylist whose work often depicts the cowrie shell. It appears in their paintings of different Orishas from the Ifa religion (such as Yemanjá, the goddess of water, and Oyá, the goddess of war), in their stickers, their prints, their tattoos and clothing designs²¹. From the moment I experienced Mutante’s artworks, the cowrie shell and its magic never left me.

Inspired by my new friends, I applied to the Interdisciplinary Art, Media, and Design Master of Fine Arts program at OCAD University. I wanted to create art like Mutante’s and Noir’s. Art that spoke to my Afro-descendant heritage, and to the mysoginoir I had experienced all my life. At the same time, art was a tool that allowed me to process difficult aspects of my life (abuse and mysoginoir, mental illness, queerness, intergenerational and epigenetic trauma, sexual trauma, and grief). These themes appeared in the following works, which comprised my application to the program.

²⁰ <https://www.instagram.com/m4d.rakoon/>

²¹ <https://www.instagram.com/lamuirobin/>



I sit with a friend
who's stirring her tea.
Her lips part and move,
I can't hear her speak.

It's my voice I hear,
so worried and bleak.
This spot on my leg
Was not here last week.

I don't want to die...
Oh fuck I can't cry.
But nothing else matters
I don't want to die.

You've seen death first-hand.
The hospital bed.
In chorus you sang,
and then, she was dead.

What if it's cancer
and it can't be cured?
Or what if it's something
of which no one's heard?

No this is not that;
it's just a damned spot!
That's right, it's just skin;
I'm sure that it's not.

I answer my friend
Who's finished her story
"Can you repeat that?
I'm distracted, I'm sorry."

From top to bottom, left to right:

Inéz Petrazzini, 2024. "Who Am I Here?", oil on canvas.

Inéz Petrazzini, 2023. "Kai", oil on canvas.

Inéz Petrazzini, 2023. "Intimacy", collage (pencil on paper, pastel on paper, hair adornment)

Inéz Petrazzini, 2022. "Argentina, 1976-1983", acrylic on canvas.

Inéz Petrazzini, 2023. "OCD", poem.



Inéz Petrazzini, *Waiting for the White Man to Tell Me What to Do (Triptych)*, 2025. Polaroid film (Instax). Toronto, ON.

All the Ways UBUNTU: Transforming Kai's Clothing as a Methodology for Caregiving

Journal entry October 18, 2025: Kai's clothes disappear as I cut them into strips. They will never have this shape again, just like the body that once wore them. Kai's body is now ash; her clothing is now strips of fabric woven into words and images. The deceased are transformed, not gone.

I notice some of the fabric has become mouldy. Has it been mouldy for a while, and I just didn't notice? Everything decomposes and transforms. This terrifies me and reassures me.

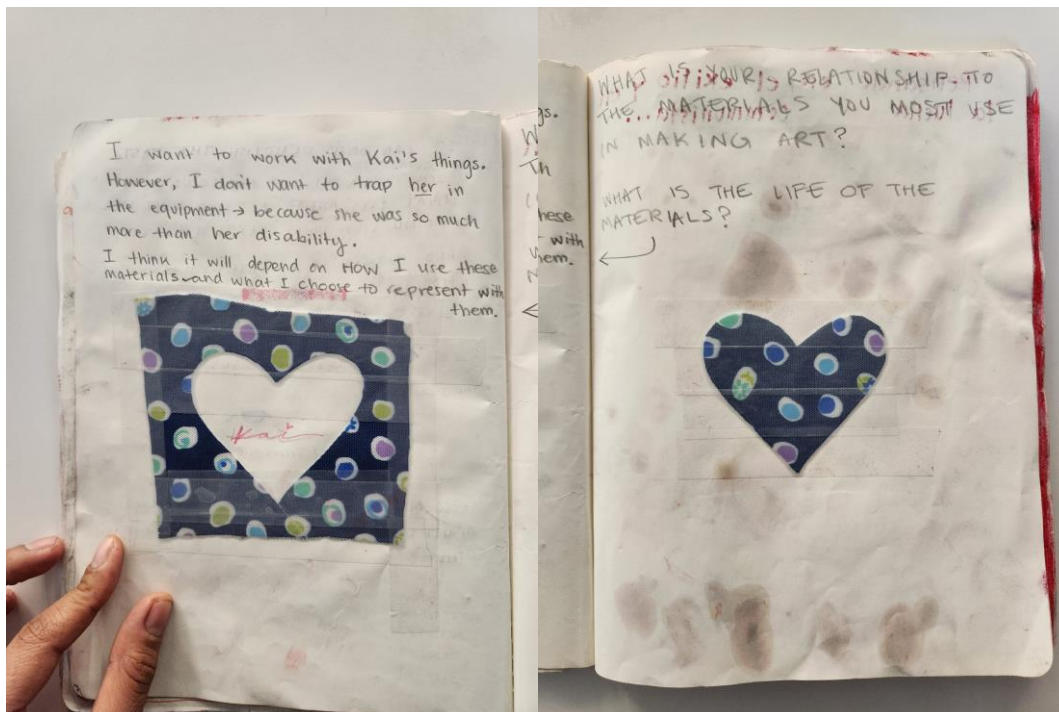
I feel like I have been a better sister in her death than during her life.



Kai's bibs.

It is challenging to determine what to do with people's belongings when they die. Some believe it's healthiest to throw them away. This proved too difficult for my parents, so they kept Kai's belongings packed away in the basement and garage for seven years, until I brought them to my art studio at the beginning of this thesis research journey in 2024.

Many of the art pieces in this body of work include Kai's clothes, which I transformed into new shapes and images. These **textile transformations** became a **methodology of care and processing grief**. The ritual act of remembering Kai and creating works with her belongings has become a way for me to continue caring for her. It has been a way for me to let go of the idea of Kai in this physical plane and understand her new role as an ancestor in the spirit plane. This process allows me to work through grief and reconfigure my role as her big sister and caregiver, now that she is also my ancestor. **As my ancestor, Kai has become my collaborator and teacher. She has taught me how to carry my grief, how to reshape it into love and a celebration of life.** I am learning to listen to her, be in communion with her, and honour her life through memory and storytelling (written and visual). By including (and transforming) Kai's belongings (e.g., wheelchairs, feeding pole, ankle-foot orthosis, hip abduction pillow, bibs, clothing), I have learned to honour my responsibilities of sisterhood and ancestral communion. While Kai no longer requires the material conditions and body of this physical plane, her belongings possess power. They hold her memory. I even imagine her skin cells still stuck to the fabric of her pants. The process of creating these artworks became in itself a **methodology of caregiving** that allowed me to re-situate my understanding of our family roles. In her life, Kai's role as little sister felt more pronounced as I assumed the role of big sister in assisting with her care.



Research journal entries.



Inéz Petrazzini, *The Grief We Carry (Grieving Mask)*, 2026. Kai's jeans, t-shirt, and wheelchair cover, beads, and cowrie shells. Hand-sewn and glued, installed with soil.



Inéz Petrazzini, *The Grief We Carry (Grieving Mask)*, 2026. Kai's jeans, t-shirt, and wheelchair cover, beads, and cowrie shells. Hand-sewn and glued.

This is a mask for grieving inspired by my mom's eyes and nose. It is made from Kai's jeans, t-shirts, and material from the cover of her wheelchair stroller. An eight-foot stream of cowrie shells, representing tears, hangs from both eyes. The bottom of the mask is lined with black beads; there are twelve in each string, in commemoration of Kai's age when she passed away. This row is also adorned with twelve cowrie shells. While creating this piece, I thought a lot about how the bags under my eyes and my mother's eyes became more pronounced after Kai died. This mask shares the burden of our grief with whoever wears it. It also connects the wearer to my little sister Ancestor Kai, through the deprivation of sight (she was blind). Like most of my works, this piece was created intuitively. I layered fabrics on top of each other and built with duct tape, paper, yarn and other scrap materials until the face emerged.

Black as a Spiritual Site



Inéz Petrazzini, *Black Cowrie Shell*, 2025. Acrylic, on canvas.

Journal entry March 10, 2026

The burning of rosemary and or frankincense and myrrh purifies the space by repelling spirits, but also attracts them. [...] Outside of the rituals of death, frankincense and myrrh are used to smudge or bless a house before occupancy. Rosemary, on the other hand, is associated primarily with repelling duppies, and is used specifically during mortuary rites." (Forde & Hume, 2018, p. 124).

I am so grateful to be out here, on my back porch, scraping the paint off of this palette in preparation for painting this portrait of my two little sisters, Ariana and Kai. I am making this portrait to honour them, as a gesture of love. The scraping and cleaning of the palette are rituals that help me prepare for this gesture of love, that is, daydreaming and painting. I daydream about Kai, of memories with her. I daydream about the power of rosemary, thyme and the cowrie shell connecting me to her and the ancestral realm. I pray- I ask the rosemary to become an intermediary between the spirits of my ancestors and me. The burning of the herb opens a portal, a metaphysical third space between this world and the spirit world. I imagine this third space to be Black. Like the galaxy. A space that absorbs

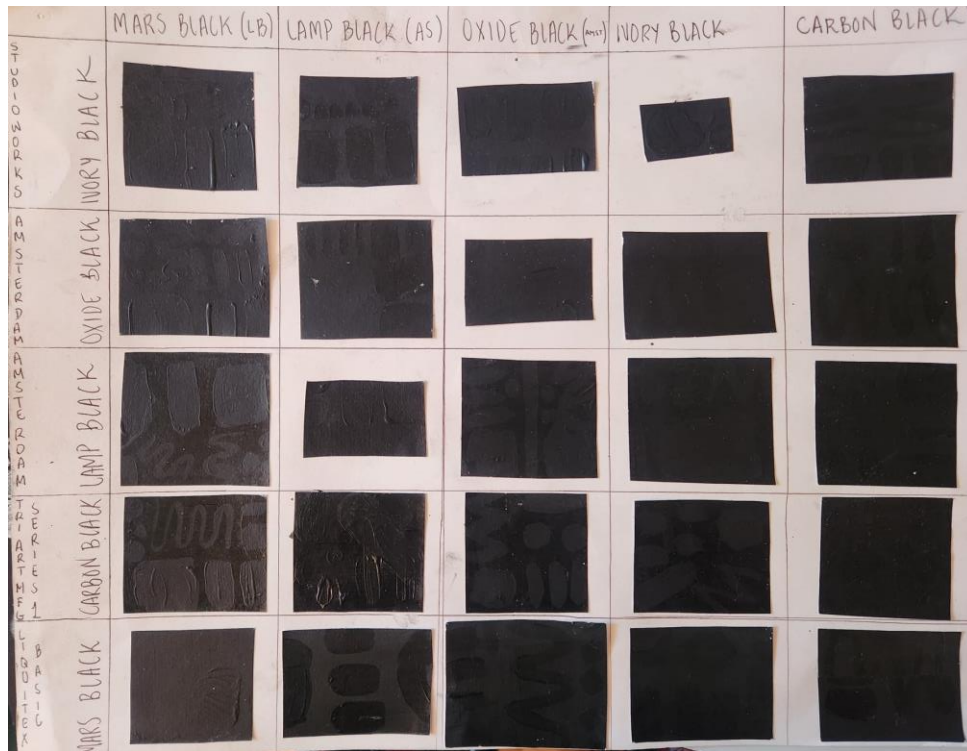
all light and all the colours. Black is powerful, it is warm, it is where my ancestors live. The ritual act of intuitive creation - painting, sculpting, writing, performing - activates this ancestral Black space. Through this making process, Kai is teaching me to see and understand this world, and the transition to the spirit world, in new ways and materials. Creating has become a ritual act of love.

Before coming to OCAD to do this master's thesis research, I did not have a consistent artistic practice. I mostly drew and painted realist portraits. While I took art classes when I could, I had never exhibited anywhere, and I had not yet developed a consistent visual language in my work. Thinking about Kai and my ancestors taught me how to paint more figuratively. After completing *The Zonas*, a colourful oil portrait of my sister and mom, I began exploring the colour Black as a tool for transformation and expression.

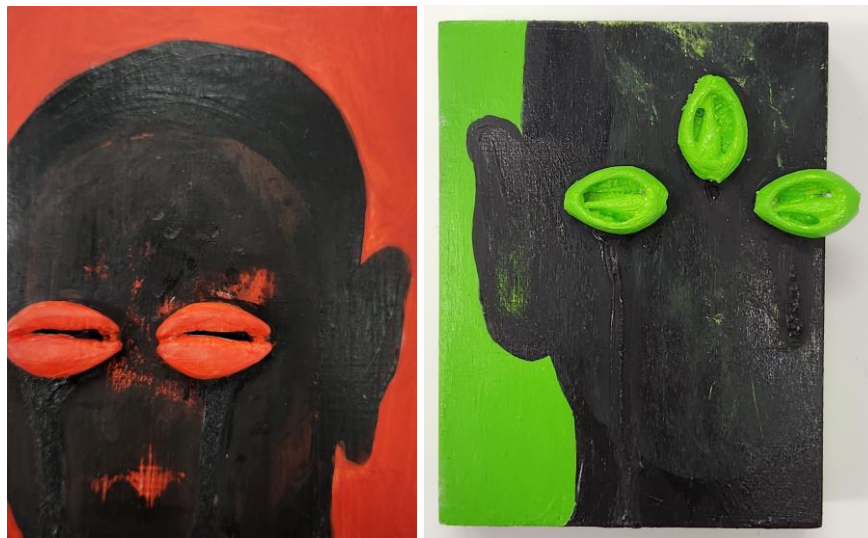
The colour Black is used pejoratively in various expressions and superstitions. We are trained to believe that Black cats mean bad luck. We are also trained to believe that a black cloud brings sadness and anger. I have had countless conversations with visual arts students who often rely on black to represent evil and darkness in their work. In Latin America, the derogatory use of the word "black" (*negro*) is more explicit. For example, the expressions *negro de mierda* (negro of shit), *trabajar como un negro* (working like a negro) are commonly heard in casual conversations.

Having grown up in Canada, I also came to associate the colour Black with funerary tradition and mourning. Here, it is customary to wear black to funerals. In this sense, Black conveys my grief. I was drawn to Black because of its warmth, boldness, and symbolism. In my artworks, the colour black reveals where my ancestors reside- in my memory, in our ancestral lands, in the spiritual plain. In my work, Black is revindicated as a sacred, spiritual site. It becomes the space from which my ancestors emerge, and where I can enter in communion with them. Black is colourful because it holds all colours. It absorbs all light. I reclaim it as a powerful space that offers warmth and safety. I imagine Black as the space where the living and spirit worlds meet.

The layering of black pigments to create images is a lexicon that I am still developing, a black code.



Inéz Petrazzini, *The First Black Code (Study of Acrylic Black Paints)*, 2024. Acrylic on paper, collage.

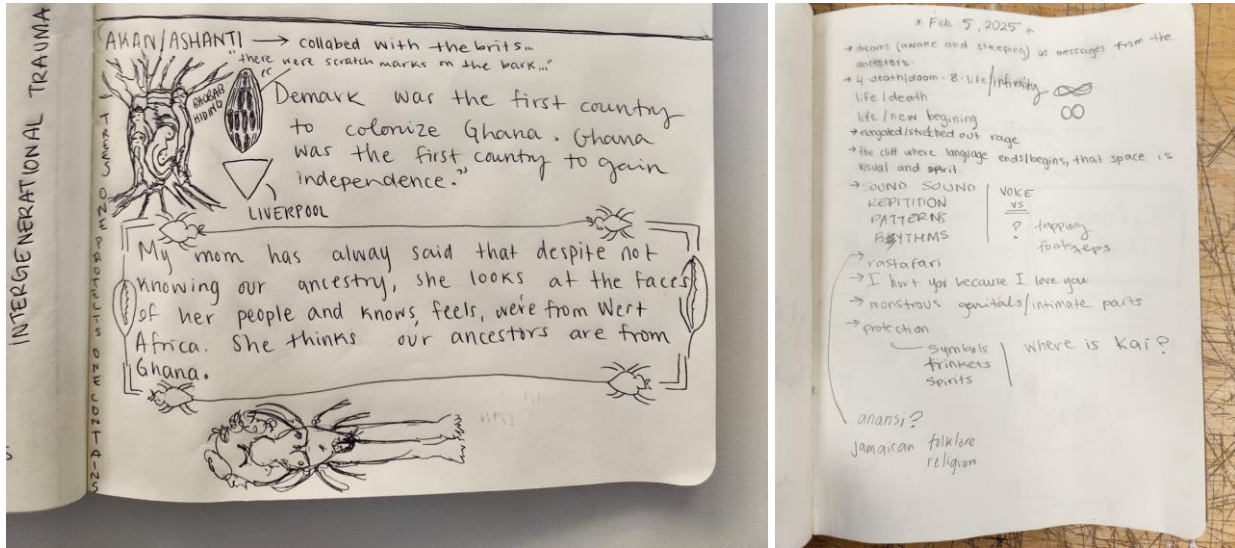




Inéz Petrazzini, *In Communion (Series)*, 2024. Acrylic, glue, and cowrie shell on panel.

These paintings were the first Black Ancestors that I painted. This is where I began using the cowrie shell as a recurring symbol for the eyes of my Ancestors, which gaze from the spirit world into our world of the living.

Jamaican Mortuary Practices



Research journal entries.

Journal entry December 16, 2025: The coils in my hair remember where I am from; they remember the place my mother was born. The melanin in my skin remembers, too. My chin is so much like Uncle Clive's, and my nose is so much like my mom's.

Growing up, despite observing the commemoration of life and death in sites like cemeteries, vigils, and murals around my city, death still felt like a taboo subject. My parents rarely talked about it with my sister Ariana and me, and our family did not observe any religion or spirituality by which we could culturally engage in rituals of remembrance. Turtle Island (also known as North America) houses multiple Indigenous nations with their own respective cultures and death practices. However, the Western perspective and culture of death remained pervasive in my upbringing:

Expression of death is more fundamental to our culture than we can currently reflect upon, as there appears to be a comfortable repression of death. [...] We seem to have consciously created and continue to support a system that institutionalizes most of our dying people, hiding them away in hospitals, and yet we teach our young children about all other life [...] Despite the fact that death is inescapable, we as a society have developed deeply seeded fears about the end-of-life that are being reinforced by each generation. [...] We are collectively culturally stunted in this modern time, remaining in the 'Denial' stage of death.²²

Kai is now with our Ancestors, the relatives, kin, and land that came before us. My artistic grief-love embodiment is mediated by my consistent interactions with my sister Ancestors' spirit, living kin, and my own self. My MFA research and artwork became portals where the Ancestors and I commune; they become a metaphysical *yaad*, a home beyond physical/geographical location that expresses our belonging and reclaims our humanity. Telling stories of my experience witnessing Kai's life cycle has become an exercise in celebrating life and accepting its inevitable end. It has allowed me to understand death beyond the finite, recalling the teaching

²² Christina Doyle, 2015, (pp. 4-5).

from Pomo Elder Mabel McKay that “people [don’t] die in cemeteries. They [die] when we forget them²³”.

Researching **Jamaican mortuary practices**, knowledge from which I have been severed through colonialism and intergenerational trauma, was an important starting point in developing the **spiritual artistic practice** by which I commune[icate] with and learn from my Ancestors. Learning about Jamaican mortuary practices and the death cycle has gifted me a perspective of death that feels so much more alive. It has allowed me to think of death not as an ending, but as a transformation. It reminds me of my responsibility to honour the kin who came before me and the lands they are from/were buried in. Contrary to Western culture, mortuary practices and ancestral veneration are important aspects of Jamaican society.

... the normative social system operative in rural working-class Jamaican society [situates] mortuary practices at the centre of familial and communal life. The social order is so impregnated with moral codes and judgments that can be disturbed by any failure to fulfill an obligation to the ancestral spirits to whom the family is indebted. Performing some form of service through actively recalling the dead and expressing reverence to the departed through one’s conscious, physical labour is what ensures the continuation of those gifts and privileges afforded to the living. The intimate connectivity between the different spheres of existence is consistently made tangible through these “rituals of remembrance”, which Diane Stewart rightly states, “reconstitute kinship bonds across time and space”.²⁴

The ‘physical labour’ of artistic creation allows me to fulfill my ‘obligation to Ancestral spirits’. Art and storytelling are the vessels that allow me to enter into conversation with my Ancestors and the spirit world, with the land and the cosmos, and with community members. They help situate my ‘i-image’ within ancestral knowledge²⁵. **I embody my spiritual practice through the ritual act of artistic creation. By creating a space for my Ancestors to emerge in my paintings, sculptures, installations, and performances, I have invited them to guide me towards self-discovery.**

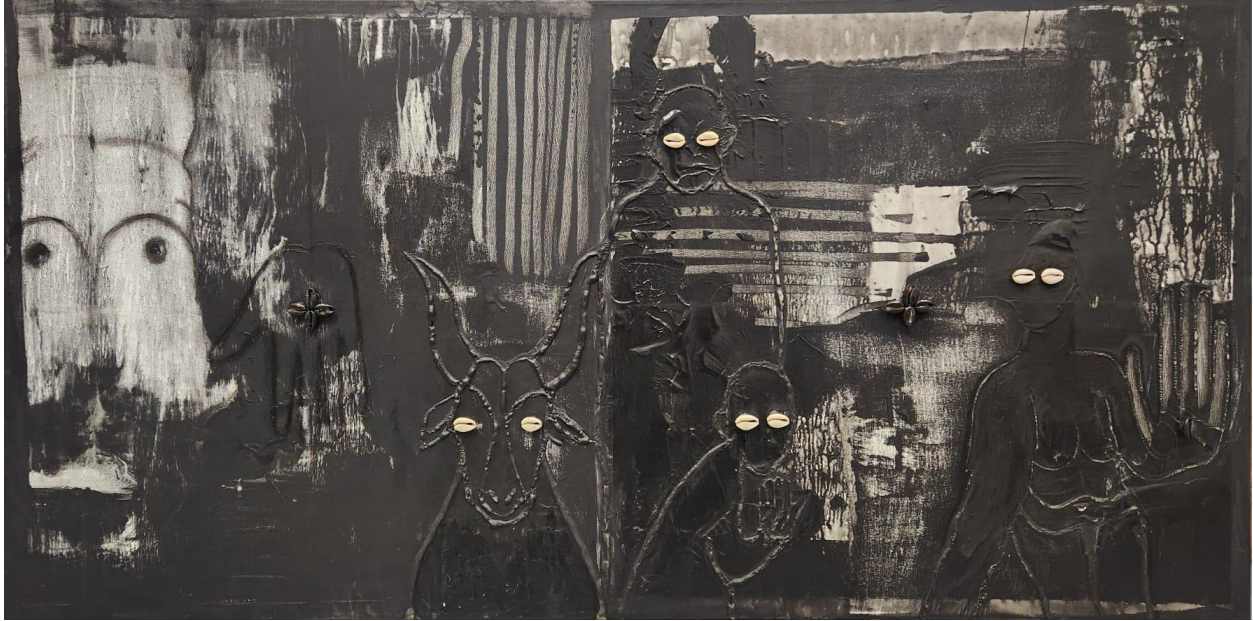
[...] the experience of being embodied is never a private affair, but is always already mediated by our continual interactions with other human and nonhuman bodies... This insight has allowed for a more capacious understanding of how human bodies, nonhuman material bodies, and nonmaterial entities (e.g., spirits, divinities, and deities) interact with each other...²⁶

²³ Sarris, 1994, (p. 34).

²⁴ Forde & Hume, 2018, (p.110).

²⁵ Phillip, (pp. 12-13).

²⁶ Covington-Ward & Jouili, 2021, (p. 11).



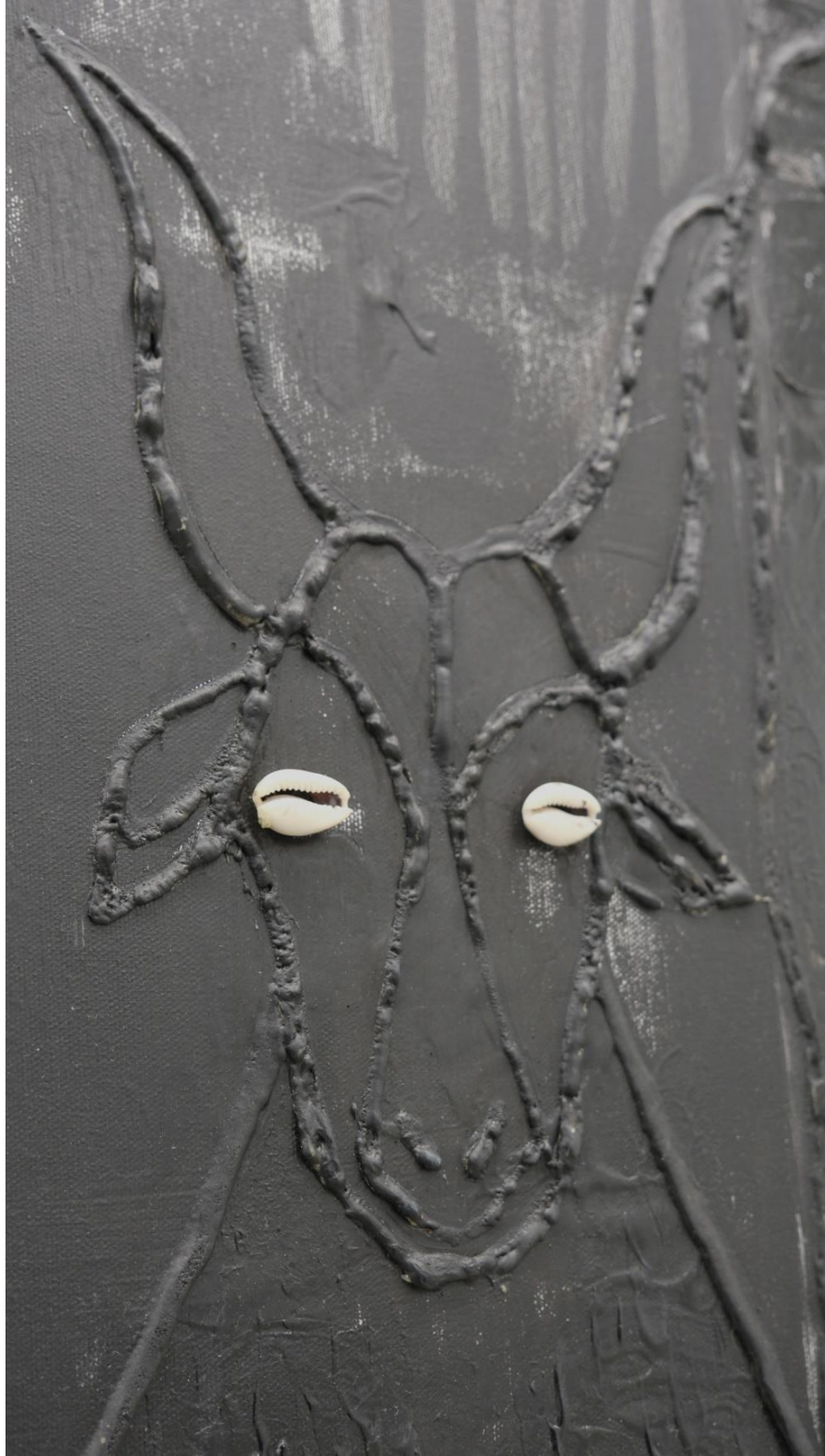
Inéz Petrazzini, *Observe*, 2025. Acrylic, glue, and cowrie shell on paper. 48 x 24 inches.

Ancestors witness us as we observe the spiritual practice of their veneration. This piece depicts my Ancestors gathered for the sacrifice of a goat during Nine Night (Jamaican wake). Women are not allowed to participate in this slaughter because of taboos regarding menstruation²⁷. I queer this idea by depicting myself with breasts and a penis.

²⁷ Forde & Hume, 2018.



Details from my painting, *Observe*.



Details from my painting, *Observe*.



Details from my painting, *Observe*.

Journal entry June 30, 2025: I think I am planning a funeral for Kai. I want to plan a bling funeral. A procession of grief and joy, a celebration of life AND death. It's going to be a party. Her metaphorical coffin might be her wheelchair. I will push it around dancing and listening for her spirit to tell me where she wants to go, the way our ancestors did with coffins of the deceased. I need to bring earth from our backyard, symbolizing a "plot of land consecrated for communion with the spiritual realm" (Hume, 2018). I don't want Kai to be a lost duppy. And now that I am learning the rites of our ancestors - specifically the ones that help duppies transition to their new realms - I want to do my best to have a Nine Night and a funeral procession for her. My family might not like it. Maybe it will be too much. But I feel called to do it. I wish there was money involved in this work, because time is money, and this is all I want to do with my time. I'm doing my best...

Kai is cremated in an urn. She will never be in the land, in a family plot... But Rastas teach us that she is alive in a different realm, in Zion: "Rastas to conceive of an alternative universe where they are not wedded to the land and the physical locality of Jamaica and hence their subjugation... the concept of "livity," or vital life force, shifts the focus away from death, suspending the sentiment attached to the burial sites."²⁸

"A duppy is equated with the soul of the newly deceased corpse or the spiritual force inside the body. The shadow or spirit is the lingering energy or entity. After death, the disembodied duppy is released and journeys in the world between the living and the dead for at least nine days before finally settling in an otherworldly realm; the shadow, on the other hand, is believed to remain or lurk behind (1999, 393). **The proprietary rites and the activities at the wake or Nine Night are thus to assist the newly deceased journey from duppy to ancestor and to also metaphorically plant the shadow into the earth.** [...] The observance of the mortuary cycle thus serves to distinguish these highly potent spiritual beings and reestablish the proper spatial configurations that structure the lives of those who inhabit family land."²⁹

Perhaps I can plant Kai's shadow into the earth... perhaps the earth can hold her for us, and through the earth she will be able to hold us as well... when our toes grip the earth and grass, when the window blows and stirs, she will be there, moving between us, with us in her own realm.

²⁸ Forde & Hume, 2018, (p.120).

²⁹ Forde & Hume, 2018, (p.120).



Inéz Petrazzini, *Smudging Calabash*, 2025. Calabash from Trinidad and Tobago, hand-engraved with Dremel and wood burner.

My friend Emmy gifted me this calabash from Trinidad and taught me how to engrave it. I used a Dremel and a wood burner to draw a cowrie shell and write the words “ubuntu” and “Kai” on it. I use this calabash to smudge during my rituals of Ancestral communion. The practice of smudging helps me invite the spirits of my Ancestors into the space I am in, and into the process of creation. From the moment I invite the Ancestors in, my artworks become collaborative. The cowrie shell, used in many of the paintings and performances, is also one of my collaborators. It has a spirit, and it tells a story. It is a symbol of abundance (it used to be used as a form of currency in Ghana), fertility (as the back resembles a pregnant belly and the front resembles a vulva), and spirituality (it represents the voice of African ancestors and is used in divination/spiritual practices across the African diaspora). Pregnant women wear the cowrie shell as a symbol of protection. The cowrie shell makes me feel connected to water, a vital source of life, and reminds me of the journey my ancestors made from the African continent to the Island of Jamaica. I wear it and feature it in my art as a form of spiritual protection and connection with my African/Caribbean Ancestors.

“History” is both a human storytelling practice and that set of remainders from the past that we turn into stories. Conventionally, historians look only at human remainders, such as archives and diaries, but there is no reason not to spread our attention to the tracks and traces of nonhumans, as these contribute to our common landscapes. Such tracks and traces speak to cross-species entanglements in contingency and conjuncture, the components of “historical” time. To participate in such entanglement, one does not have to make history in just one way.¹ Whether or not other

organisms “tell stories,” they contribute to the overlapping tracks and traces that we grasp as history.² History, then, is the record of many trajectories of world making, human and not human.³⁰

In this sense, I acknowledge that the cowrie shell is also an Ancestor. As are the sun, the wind, and water. They have all existed and contributed to my history. This is why I choose to work with them and represent them in my work.

My great aunt Merlyn taught me that rosemary and thyme are medicines that can help with several ailments. For example, mixed with water and aloe vera, thyme can relieve an upset stomach. Thyme is also an herb present in many Jamaican dishes. In the summer of 2025, I had been growing rosemary and thyme in my garden. I prayed by asking for rosemary, thyme and water to guide me as I created a new painting. Asking these herbs to guide my creation became integral to maintaining the spiritual nature of my work. I also learned to smudge with them:

The "metaphors of purification" (Goody 62), like those of spatial orientation and disorientation, are pervasive throughout this ritual complex, but it is during this preliminary period that the ingredients are gathered, prepared, and used to clear the domestic space of any negative or harmful energies. Although the corpse is removed from the home, the lingering quality of its potent residue still poses a threat for the living and therefore must be purified through burning rosemary and frankincense/myrrh and presenting water in the bedroom and entrances. Water presented in a bowl or glass at the threshold of rooms and under the bed or by the bed head is used to "catch the spirit. [...] The burning of rosemary and or frankincense and myrrh purifies the space by repelling spirits, but also attracts them."³¹

In the summer of 2025, I had been growing rosemary and thyme in my garden. I set up my easel on my back porch, and harvested some of the herbs. I prayed by asking for rosemary, thyme (grown in my garden) and water to guide me as I created. As I painted, a storm of cowrie shells emerged from a black landscape illuminated by the moon. Two fish swim around the moon, which shines upon the herbs placed beneath it. A strike of lightning can be seen landing on the earth beyond. Towards the right, the storm begins to fade. Utilizing materials that tell my story, such as these herbs, is integral to maintaining the spiritual nature of my work.

³⁰ Tsing, 2015.

³¹ Forde & Hume, 2018, (pp. 123-124).



Inéz Petrazzini, *Comfort Storm*, 2025. Acrylic, gesso, engraving, etching, rosemary and thyme on wooden panel.



Detail from my painting, *Comfort Storm*.

A few months later, I completed this diptych by creating *Ancestor Sun*. As I intuitively transform Kai's clothing, the materials take on the shape of faces. The sun, my ancestor, stares at me with piercing eyes, its hair ablaze.



Inéz Petrazzini, *Ansister Sun*, 2026. Acrylic, engraving, etching, and pine needles on a wooden panel.

Taking Kai for a Walk After Eight Years

As part of this embodied research, I took Kai's wheelchair for a walk. This was a common ritual act of caregiving in our family, as we always brought Kai on family outings and took turns pushing her wheelchair stroller. Taking Kai for a walk allowed me to feel her physical absence but spiritual presence. I took video documentation of this walk.

Journal entry June 26, 2025: I just took Kai for a walk for the first time in seven years.

I transported her wheelchair from the graduate building to the main campus, where the technicians and fabrication facilities are. I forgot how heavy her chair was, and that's without her weight on it. The graduate building's service elevator is inaccessible, so I had to carry her stroller down the stairs. This brought back several memories of our family carrying Kai in her chair up and down flights of stairs in inaccessible spaces and places.

As I pushed the empty chair down broken textured sidewalks, I remembered how the wheelchair stroller's shaking from the bumpy ride made Kai sick. The wheelchair is so quiet, but Kai was so loud. It's strange to walk her spirit and not hear a sound.

I remember the way people often interacted with Kai- hesitant, scared, uncomfortable. Now that the chair was empty, I received a few smiles.

Cowrie Shell Portal: A Performance for My Little Sisters Ariana and Kai

Journal entry June 20, 2025:

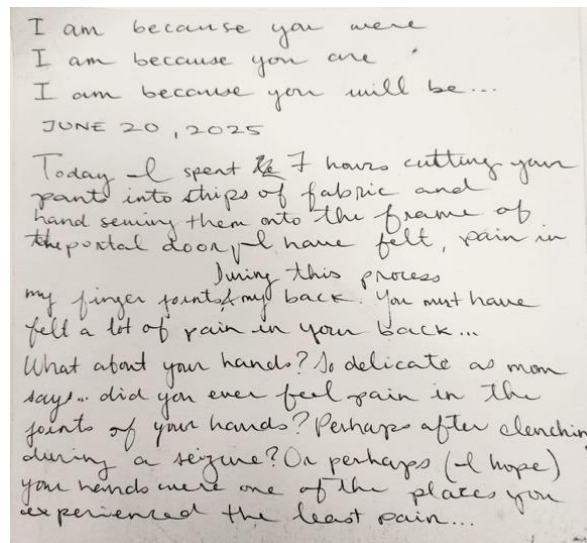
I am because you were

I am because you are

I am because you will be...

Today I spent 7 hours cutting your pants into strips of fabric and hand-sewing them onto the frame of the portal door. During this time, I have felt pain in my finger joints & my back. You must have felt a lot of pain in your back... What about your hands? So delicate, as mom says... did you ever feel pain in the joints of your hands? Perhaps after clenching during a seizure? Or perhaps (I hope) your hands were one of the places you experienced the least pain..."

I realized a little while ago - much to my shame - that my sister would not have been able to experience my works because she was blind!!! I feel so selfish. My works from that moment are not/will not be flat. They can't be... it would be wrong. (note added - June 30)



Undated journal entry.

I don't remember if I spoke more to Kai in English, French or Spanish, but I remember that we sang her songs. In October 2025, I participated in a group exhibition called "Opening Portals" at the Graduate Gallery, OCAD University. The show was curated by Bri Christie, with works from Tavleen Lall, Liv Qiu, and Juliana Gagné. For this exhibition, I designed a cowrie shell portal and a performance for Ancestral communion with Kai.

I created the portal by cutting a large cowrie-shell-shaped hole in the middle of two 48 x 48 inch canvases (pictured below). Being of Jamaican ancestry, I am drawn to the power of the cowrie shell and its connection to fertility/the life cycle, abundance, and spiritual connection with Ancestors (see Ifa, Candomblé, Santería representations of the cowrie). I have often dreamed and wondered what it would be like to be inside the cowrie shell. I imagine it as a safe space, one that could rock me to sleep and whose walls protect me from all the dangers of its exterior.

I cut Kai's pants into strips of fabric, and then stitched them all along the edges of the holes. Then, I braided fabric from her clothing into the following words:

I am because we are

I was because you were

I am because you were

I am because you will be

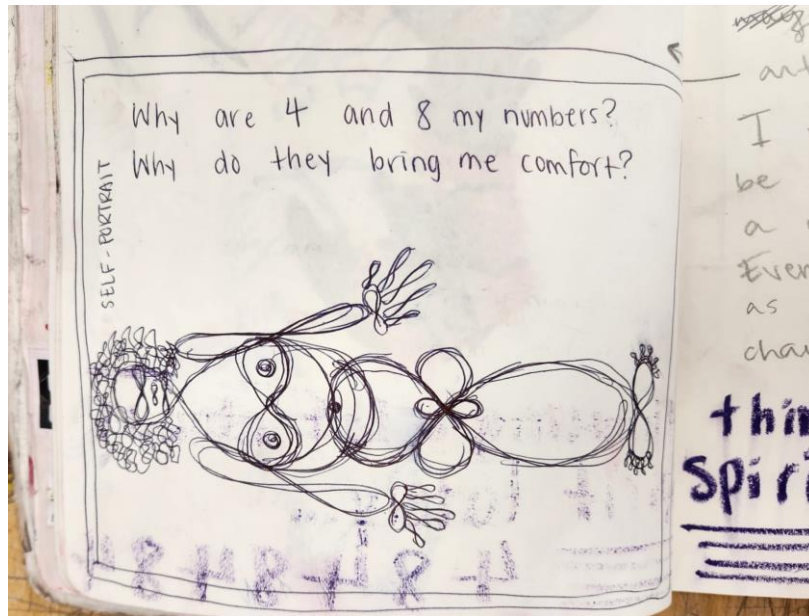
These words are inspired by the term “ubuntu”:

The word ‘Ubuntu’ has taken various meanings at different points in history, along with changes in the social and political spheres. [...] Ubuntu is an extension of the Bantu people as a whole, and has recognisable equivalents in most languages indigenous to the African continent. [...] although different communities may stress different aspects, the origin and existence of the Ubuntu philosophy is attributable to Black Africans as a whole and that the concept expresses a common foundation shaping relations, knowledge, values, and practices.³²

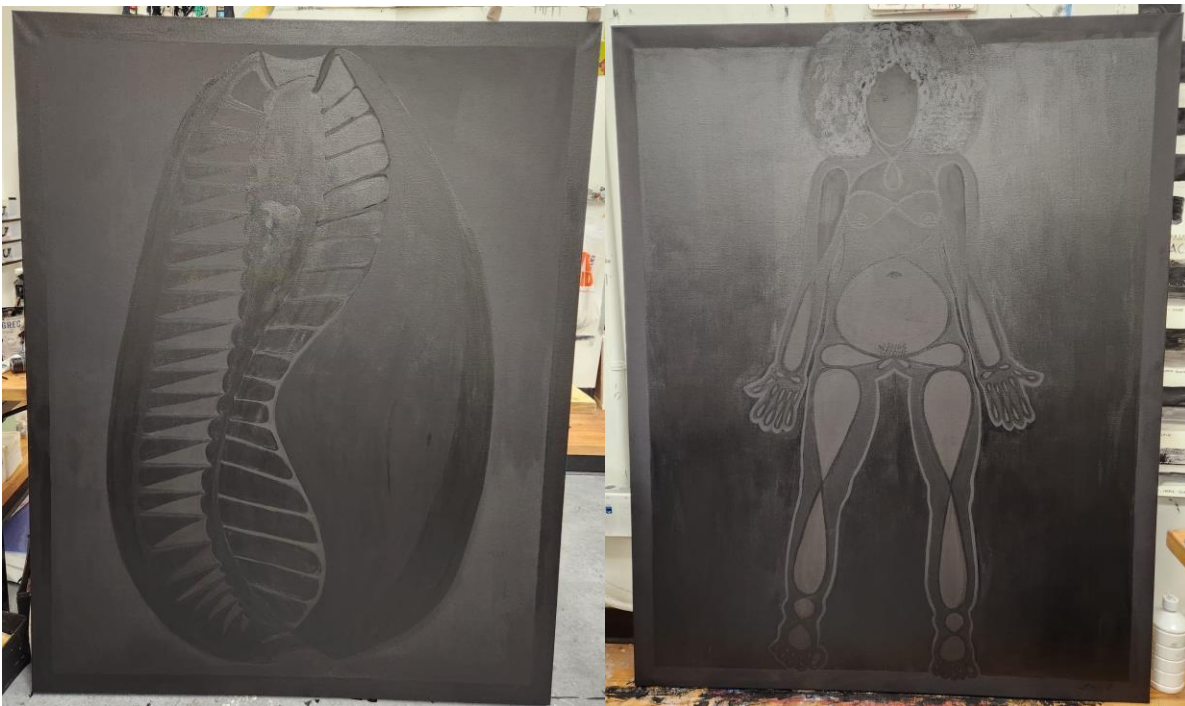
The labour of love that was hand-stitching each piece of fabric into the canvas was a portal in itself. The aches and cramps in my hands transported me to memories of Kai, tense or seizing (she had epilepsy and frequent seizures). This process transformed the canvases into adorned and protected entrances through which my Ancestors’ spirits may pass. This portal is a space that transports my imagination from the present moment, when and where Kai is physically gone, to a metaphysical space, time, and consciousness where she is very present.

This portal is not a space for sleep; it is purposely devoid of any cushion or element that could make lying in it comfortable. This recalls the state of discomfort that Kai was perpetually in. Even though her bed was soft, she was often rigid from pain. The labour of love that was hand-stitching each piece of fabric into the canvas was a portal in itself. The aches and cramps in my hands transported me to memories of Kai, tense or seizing (she had epilepsy and frequent seizures). The cowrie shell portal is a space where I can be with Kai, talk with her, sing her songs, and move with her. Here I engage in an embodied ritual, where the physical movement of pushing her wheelchair stroller transports me to memories of family walks – a familiar (what used to be daily) act. I am also transported consciously, as old feelings and memories of family walks emerge, and suddenly, time collapses. We are there, then, and at the same time we are here, now.

³² Oelofse, Marietjie, et al., 2024, (pp. x-xi).



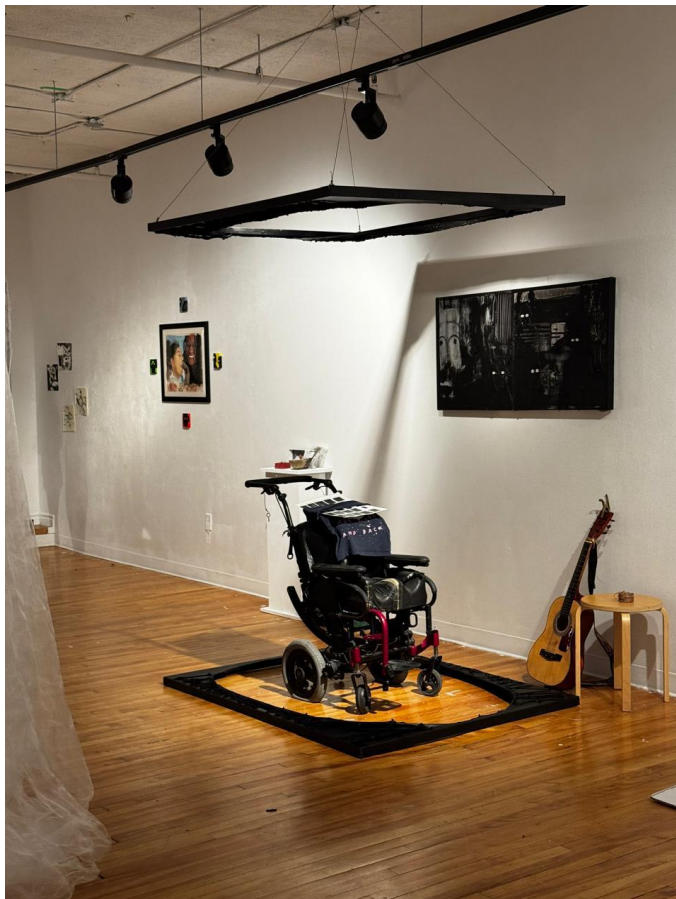
Research journal entry.



Inéz Petrazzini, *Cowrie Shell Portal (First Iteration)*, 2025. Ivory black, Mars black, lamp black, oxyde black.



Cowie Shell Portal, second iteration.



Inéz Petrazzini, *Cowie Shell Portal*, 2025. Installation.

I missed singing to and speaking with Kai, so I designed a performance to commune with her. During this one-hour performance, I addressed myself to Kai's wheelchair, which was placed

in the middle of the portal. Before I began, I smudged the room with rosemary and thyme in my calabash and invited my Ancestors, particularly Kai, into the space. These were the same herbs I had grown with love in my garden over the summer. Then, I sang “Three Little Birds” by Bob Marley to Kai. The last time I had sung this song to Kai was at her funeral. I sang it every quarter hour during this performance. After each singing, I spoke to Kai aloud and continued weaving the iterations of ubuntu into the canvas. For an hour, I lamented, cried, and laughed.

The embodied practice of weaving, speaking and moving in and out of the portal space was informed by my research on Afro-Latinx diasporic religions and their deconstruction of/rebellion against the body-mind dichotomy imposed by European colonizers who demonized embodied spiritual practices such as “possession and spirit-induced trembling, wrestling in pursuit of deliverance, ritual dance”.³³

... the relationship between Christianity and perceptions of Black women’s bodies as objects of property, production, reproduction, and sexual violence in slavery, such that Black women were seen as incapable of rational thought... Discourses about Black religious practices that described them as ‘heathenish observances,’ ‘insane yellings’ and violent contortions of the body” were used to categorize Black people as an Other in juxtaposition to whiteness and support their ill treatment and exclusion from citizenship³⁴

As I spun Kai’s chair around inside the portal, I recalled funerary traditions inherited from my Jamaican Ancestors, particularly the custom of dancing with the deceased’s coffin as the spirit guides the living to its resting place. Engaging physically and moving through the cowrie-shell portal with Kai’s chair was a physiological/embodied spiritual practice which allowed me to mark her presence alongside me always: “... the body has always mattered in various forms of religious expression and practice. Indeed, the body continues to creatively transform people’s shared spiritual lifeworlds in multiple ways.”³⁵ As Kai, the Ancestors, and I communed in the portal, it became a part of our *yaad*, expressing our belonging to Jamaican heritage and culture regardless of physical/geographical location.

I contorted to journey in/through the space without damaging the portal doors. Navigating the space in and around the portal highlighted the fragility that lies within the body. In nature, the cowrie shell is fragile, but in this interpretation, it is rigid, as is Kai’s mobility aid, the wheelchair stroller. Kai’s chair makes known the space it requires and takes the space it needs; it does not change form or mould as the body does. It stands firm and waits to be accommodated. In that way, **my sister-ancestor Kai took up the space she needed - *I am grateful for this teaching***. In her life, when inaccessible spaces and infrastructure were not accommodating of her chair, my mother, father, sister Ariana, and I lifted her in her chair up and down flights of stairs - *ubuntu*.

By performing this grieving and Ancestral communion ritual publicly, I sought to engage the audience in reflecting on their own grief journeys. I was able to share my grief and watch it transform as it became shared among many. I wanted to convey the importance of remembering and speaking to/connecting with deceased loved ones. To grieve is to love, and love is a universal experience that exists beyond time and space.

³³ Covington-Ward, Jouili, 2021, (pp. 1-2).

³⁴ Covington-Ward & Jouili, 2021, (p.4).

³⁵ Covington-Ward & Jouili, 2021, (p. 3).

The following is an excerpt from the performance:

“I wanna love you, I wanna honour you, I wanna be with you”, I repeated several times. Then, I sighed.

“Okay,” I began, “so, do you remember I used to sing this song to you? I sang this song, actually, at your funeral. I miss singing for you. Mom used to always make me, and I used to hate it, and I hope that doesn’t make me a bad sister – it’s not that I didn’t want to sing to you – I was just nervous. I’m anxious. But I miss you, and I’m trying to [...] find the words to express all the different ways that I love you, that I miss you. It’s very hard for me to find the words. But luckily, other people write words, so I’m going to sing you this song, and I hope that you can hear me and that you can dance, because now you are free, and I know that you can dance,” I sighed again.

I grabbed my guitar and sat on the floor facing her chair.

“Don’t worry about a thing. Because every little thing is gone be alright,” I sang and played Bob Marley’s Three Little Birds.

The song ended.

“That felt really good, girl,” I say enthusiastically, “I really enjoyed that.”

“**I miss you. I missed singing to you,**” I began crawling around Kai’s chair, carefully stepping in and out of the portal door, contorting my body to fit in the tight spaces. I speak slowly.

“I miss you... **I love the way that your chair takes up the space that it needs...** I love the way that your chair takes up the space that it needs... I love the way that your chair takes up the space that it needs,” I sighed and breathed deeply.

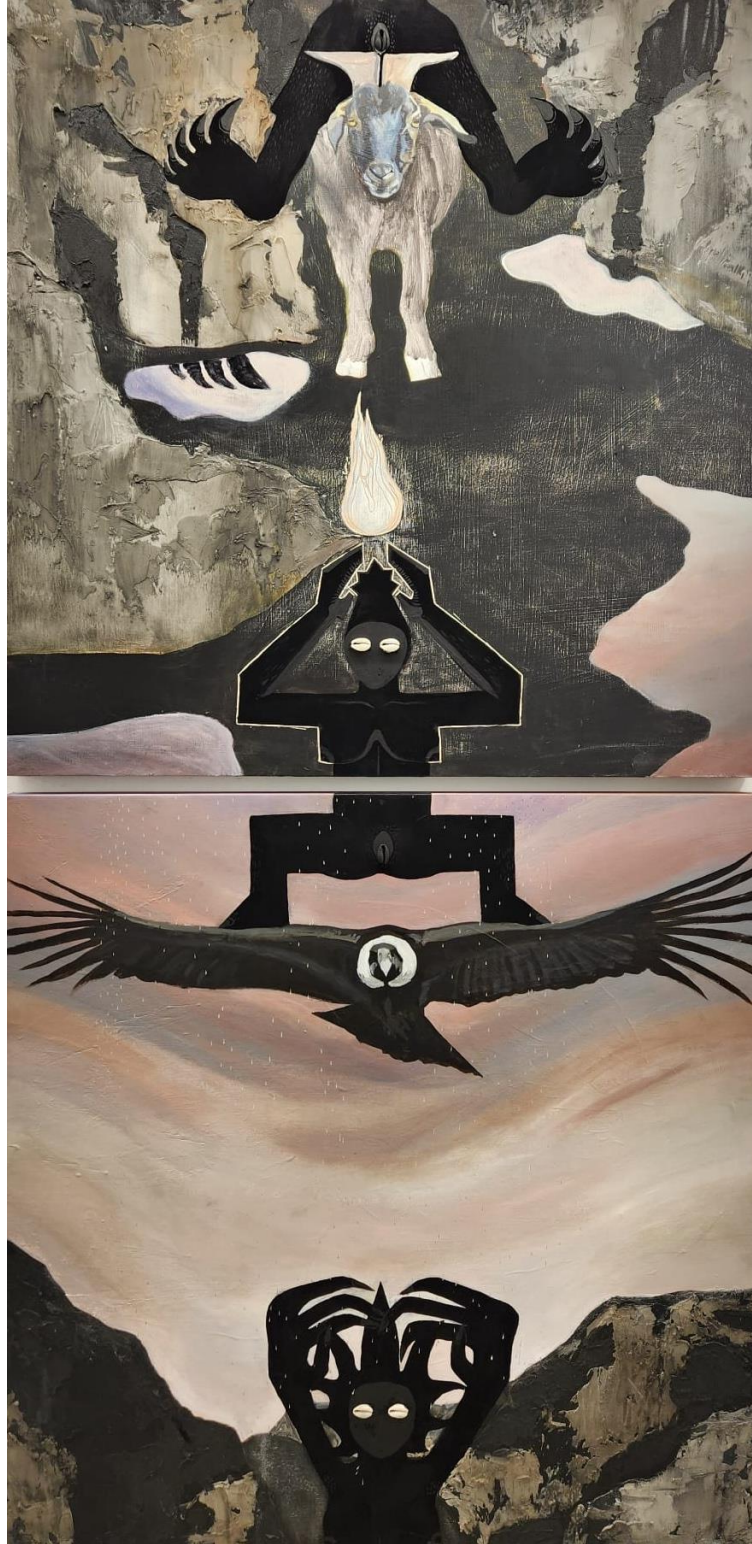
I stood up, walked around the portal, and reached my arm up above my head to grab a piece of fabric dangling from the hanging canvas. Then, I sat back on the ground and began to braid the fabric into the woven letters in canvas on the floor.

“I was thinking about the pain that you lived with. It was a lot. We all went through a lot.”

In a future audiovisual project, I will combine this performance audio with other sounds, such as Kai’s voice, the sound of my footsteps, and the sound of my hammer breaking the wooden board that I used to create *Dis Fat Pum Pum A Fi Mi/Protège Moi*.



Inéz Petrazzini, *Ejército descendiendo (Diptych)*, 2026. Acrylic, texture medium, cowrie shell, on panel. 30 x 30 inches.



Inéz Petrazzini, *Ejército descendiendo (Diptych, Re-arranged)*, 2026. Acrylic, texture medium, cowrie shell, on panel. 30 x 30 inches.

Sister Ancestor: An Art Exhibition by Inéz and Kai Petrazzini

Journal entry October 9th, 2025

we meet
in another form
as atoms and ash
earth and wind
stars in the Black Cosmos
spirit realm
and in the gaze of our descendants
we witness each other
again

As part of this research, I created an art exhibition, which was installed at Ignite Gallery, in Toronto, from March 24th to 30th, 2026. This exhibition was an offering of love to my family, to Kai and my Ancestors. Each piece that I included in the show represents, in its own way, a meeting of the living world and the spirit realm. **It is a lament for the loss of Kai and the material artistic expression of my spiritual journey, learning to navigate my Ancestor Sister-bond with Kai as a spirit.**

To the left of the gallery entrance, a plinth displayed family photos and a poem (I displayed poems and journal entries alongside the artworks). I made four different linocut cowrie shell designs printed on black paper; I placed these as an offering to the public, a thank you.

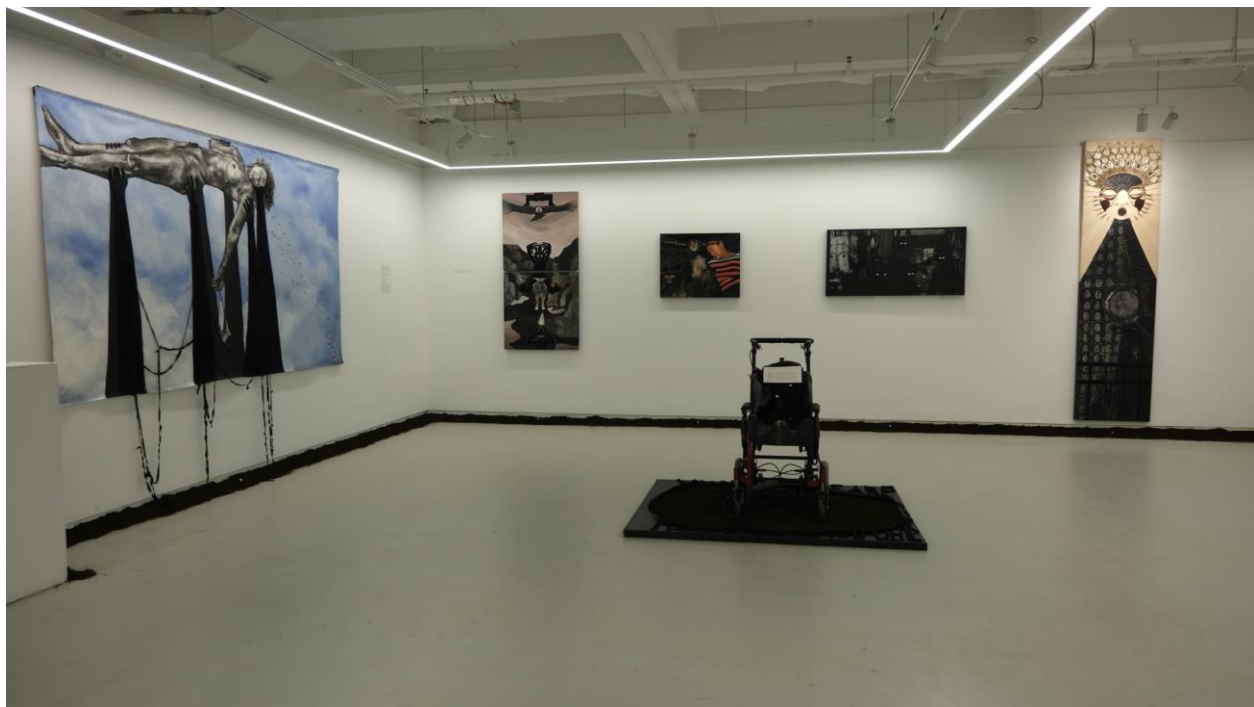


Me standing at the entrance of the *Sister Ancestor* exhibition.

Each painting/sculpture/installation on the walls faced Kai's chair, which I installed in the center of the room. Here, the cowrie shell portal took on yet another iteration; although Kai's body is

now ash, I filled the center of the portal with soil, as a symbolic gesture to honour the earth that holds the bodies of many of our Ancestors. While providing a sense of grounding, the soil is also a potent element that engages in the mortuary cycle by holding and transforming the bodies of the deceased. This is also a nod to the tradition of family plots in my Jamaican and Argentine families. I lined the perimeter of the entire room with soil to ground the space.

A duppy is equated with the soul of the newly deceased corpse or the spiritual force inside the body. The shadow or spirit is the lingering energy or entity. After death, the disembodied duppy is released and journeys in the world between the living and the dead for at least nine days before finally settling in an otherworldly realm; the shadow, on the other hand, is believed to remain or lurk behind (1999, 393). **The proprietary rites and the activities at the wake or Nine Night are thus to assist the newly deceased journey from duppy to ancestor and to also metaphorically plant the shadow into the earth.** [...] The observance of the mortuary cycle thus serves to distinguish these highly potent spiritual beings and reestablish the proper spatial configurations that structure the lives of those who inhabit family land.”³⁶



Installation picture from *Sister Ancestor*.

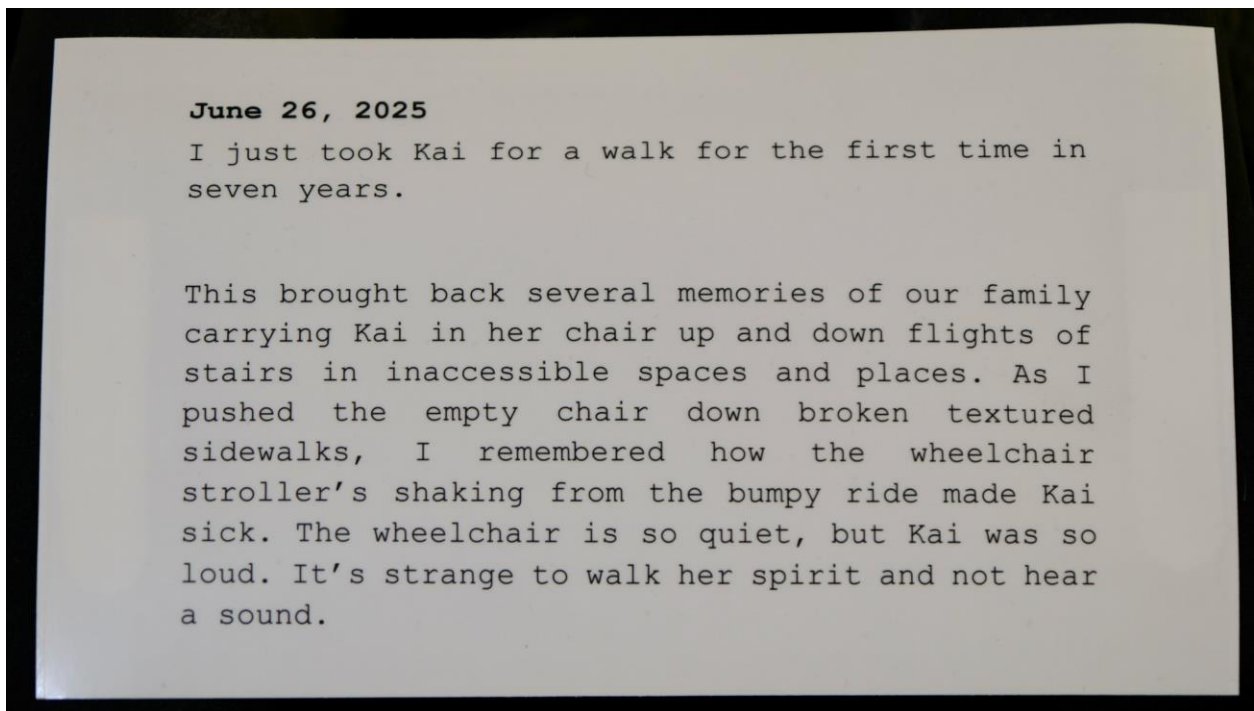
³⁶ Forde & Hume, (p.120).



Installation pictures from *Sister Ancestor*.



Inéz Petrazzini, *Portal Plot*, 2026. Installation: cowrie portal door, soil, Kai's wheelchair, rosemary and thyme ash, cowrie shell, blue beads, journal entry.



Journal entry placed on Kai's chair for the installation of *Sister Ancestor*.



Details from *Portal Plot*, (*Cowie Shell Portal*, third iteration).



Details from *Portal Plot*, (*Cowrie Shell Portal*, third iteration).



I placed a cowrie shell under each artwork as a blessing.

On the right-hand side of the entrance, I installed an altar, my smudging calabash, and a portrait of my mom and Kai Kai.



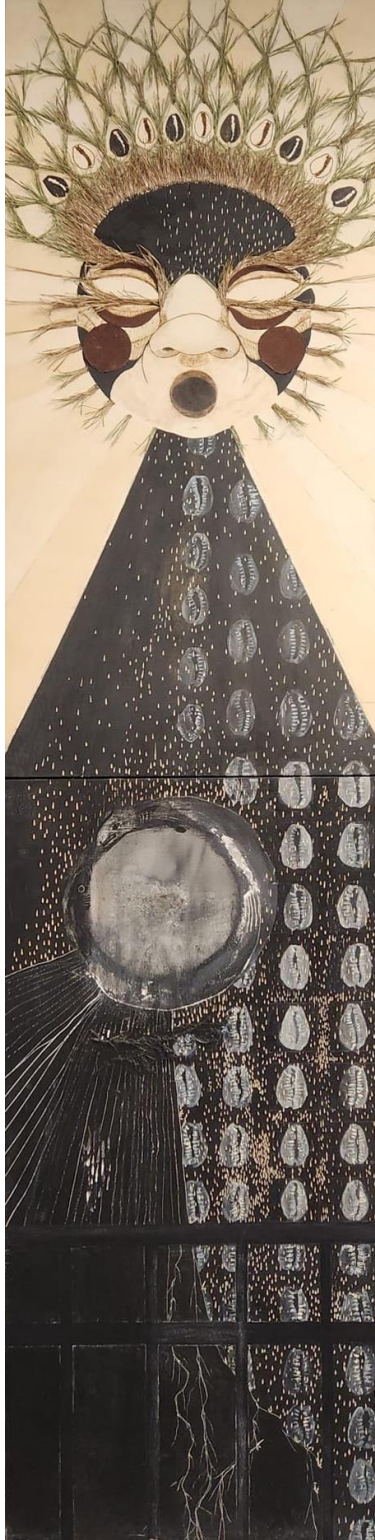
Inéz Petrazzini, *Altar*, 2026.



Installation picture of *Your Death Was My Death, and It Was My Birth*.

I extended this painting beyond the confines of the canvas by having the fabric reach the soil.

I installed the *Comfort Storm* and *Ansister Sun* panels vertically; they became an eight-foot-tall Ancestor:



Inéz Petrazzini, *Ansister Sun Makes a Storm (Diptych)*, 2025/2026. Pine needles, wood burning and engraving, acrylic, gesso, and fabric from Kai's brown leggings, on a wooden panel (top). Acrylic, gesso, rosemary, thyme, and engravings on wood panel (bottom). 2 x 8 feet (2 x 4 feet each panel).

During the course of this five-day exhibition, I watered the soil upon which the Grieving Mask tears fell in a spiral. To my joyful surprise, two plants grew from the soil beneath the tears of the Grieving Mask. Life grew from a lament of death.



Detail of the installation of *Grieving Mask*.



Detail of a plant growing from the installation, *Grieving Mask*.



Picture of me standing next to *Grieving Mask*.

Every day, I smudged the space with rosemary and thyme, thanking my Ancestors for accompanying me and guiding me along this journey. After each smudge, I placed the calabash under Kai's chair until the smoke died out. Then, I poured the ashes onto the soil under Kai's chair.



Images of me smudging the *Sister Ancestor* installation.



Images of me smudging and placing the calabash underneath Kai's chair.



Detail of *Ansister Sun*.

Conclusion

This is the beginning of my spiritual practice. Researching the Jamaican mortuary cycle and Afrodiasporic religions/spiritualities across Abya Yala has helped me process my fear of death, repositioning it in my cosmivision as a transformation rather than an ending. Thank you, Kai, for teaching me to become a better sister. Sister Ancestor is a body of work that I will continue to expand over the following years.

...Jamaicans view life and death as two moments of a continuum. ... [In the tradition] of dancing and journeying with the spirit, we get a sense of the intimate interactions that the living have with the dead up to the point of the burial. As the spirit travels literally and figuratively to its final resting place, the community also marks the journey in their bodies as they dance alongside the corpses.”³⁷

I will continue to honour you. I will make a celebration mask and dance with you.

Journal entry August 29, 2025:

*My little sister came before me; she's my ancestor now
I've been honouring her memory, but I know she's still around
I can feel her in her clothing, and the things she left behind
And when I burn that good rosemary, she reminds me she's just fine
That she's with our other family, all across space and time
And that she will also hold me and teach me when I cry
She brings me closer to our culture and opens up my eyes
I am grateful, little sister, that you are now my guide*

When I feel and think from Spirit, I don't worry about time, because I know it is useless to compare myself to others; I know that time is not linear, and I will be reunited with my ancestors, in the cosmos - our energy will become one again. Ultimately, we are all the universe experiencing itself, so I guess I'm never as alone as I feel.

Every year on Kai's birthday, *Maman* would take Ariana and me out of school to go visit Kai at hers. My mom always brought cake and made me bring my guitar to sing songs. I miss singing to Kai. I wish she had lived longer than twelve years. **I can still sing to her.**

³⁷ Forde & Hume, 2018, (pp. 122 – 123).



Inéz Petrazzini, *Hermanitas*, 2026. Oil, charcoal, pencil, and engravings on panel. 30 x 24 inches.



Details of *Hermanitas*.

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