Dear Ms, Margaret : Exploring Art Practice as Ancestral Veneration

by Sade Alexis

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Figure 1. *Me and Grandma.* Pencil crayon and ink illustration. (Artwork by Sade Alexis, 2026)

Abstract

Dear Ms. Margaret : Exploring art practice as ancestral veneration

> "Relationality requires that you know a lot more about me before you can begin to understand my work.[1]" —*Shawn Wilson*

The majority of this thesis paper is written in an epistolary voice directly to my late paternal Grandma, Ms. Margaret Nagaur. The thesis picks up other valences as well, reflecting a focus on research, process, technique, and final manifestation of artwork. The quotation from Shawn Wilson above continues: "It is [his] intention to build a relationship between the readers of this story, [himself] as the storyteller and the ideas [he] presents." My intention is to build a similar relationship with my readers.

My relationship with my grandmother is one that exists within and outside of this thesis support paper, and is deeply based in our survivance under colonial rule: her in Trinidad, a young dark skinned, mixed-raced woman in the 1930s, and me, a Queer Black Woman of mixed race living in the heart of empire in so called canada[2] in the 2020s. As such, this thesis addresses the following questions: How can I use my art praxis to build a relationship with my Grandma, Ms. Margaret, as my Ancestor? Can critical Black and Women of Colour Feminist theory bring me closer to the Women in my lineage?

To answer, I discuss the ways my art and letter-writing practices, combined with a research methodology premised on relationality and love, literary research, and conversations with my Aunts and Uncles, builds a relationship with my Grandma as my ancestor. In addition, I discuss the artworks I made to express said relationship, the creation of and interaction with a family photo archive, and the objects created to use for ancestral veneration and the creation of a living altar.

Finally, via a solid theoretical underpinning of Black and Women of Color theorists such as bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Saidiyah Hartman, I will show the importance of history, lineage and ancestry for those living in the heart of empire. This support paper is not a memoir, nor is it the detailed story of my Grandma's life. Instead, it aims to establish corollaries and examine contradictions between our lives, to describe my research process, and reveal these as derivations of the artwork manifested throughout this process.

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[1]Shawn Wilson, *Research is ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. Halifax: Fernwood Pub, 2019.

[2] Throughout the text I choose not to capitalize colonial place names such as canada or vancouver, I do this to symbolically remove them of their power, and to remind readers and myself that these colonial titles are not natural, nor are they permanent.

Acknowledgements

There are many people who came together to help make this work possible. I would not be doing this work without Ms. Margaret. The ancestors whose names I do not yet know are a part of this work in ways I can't describe. Thank you for guiding me, for keeping me safe, for giving me valuable lessons, and for making the space for me to exist in this world as I am.

Thank you to my partner Roy Kuo. You have been by my side through the past 10 years, forever my biggest cheerleader. You have listened as I read aloud each chapter of this document, sometimes multiple times. You cheered me on, during late night work sessions, you held me as I cried because of the deadly racism I was facing in these white institutions. You have been the only family I have had consistently by my side here in Tkaronto. I would not have survived so far from my community without your love and support. You have built me up when I felt these white systems threatened to silence my voice, you encourage me and remind me that my voice is my most powerful tool.

To my sister Olivia, thank you for calling me and texting me every single day. Asking me about my life, keeping me company over facetime while I write or work. Thank you for keeping me laughing, for loving me more than anyone on the planet does. The love of my big sister fuels this work. Any time I felt this system would break me, my sister was there to remind me of how loved I am.

My comrades Sofia Sue-Wah-Sing and Jules Dufrense helped me survive my studies at ocad. We worked together in the ceramics studio weekly in our final semester. We shared moments of autistic joy, frustration at the confines of the institution and encouraged one another through the final stretches of our research. Without their support I would not have felt comfortable working alone in the ceramics studio. Sofia drove me home after every late night at the studio even though it really wasn't on their way. Without both of their access to cars the three of us wouldn't have found furniture that was shared between the three of our exhibitions. Jules provided their printer (on which I printed all 102 photos), their home, and their beautiful cats were an oasis in times of distress.

Without my parents I would not exist. Without their love, I would not be the artist I am or the writer I am. They have always nurtured my creativity, celebrated my unapologetic Blackness, and my fierce moral integrity. Words cannot describe my gratitude for my parents, I have always known my worth because of them. I am so glad they travelled across the country to be present for the opening of my exhibition.

Stella Zheng has been my best friend for almost 10 years, she has supported me and inspired me as an artist. Her dedication and excitement for artmaking has sustained my love of art. She reminds me that joy is part of the process, and that art should be made in community. Stella helped the week leading up to the exhibition and made the backdrops possible, she also paid for food and drinks and many rides to and from the gallery. Without her, this exhibition would not be what it was. Stella supported me emotionally throughout this process, she consistently made me feel seen, validated, and loved; through institutional violence, family trauma and grief, and interpersonal conflict. I am eternally grateful for our friendship and its ever growing depth.

I cannot thank my primary advisor Daniel Drennan ElAwar enough. I could probably write an entire paper about how and why I admire Daniel as an educator, artist and activist. I would not have made it through my undergrad without his support, and the safety that his open door office provided. Without Daniel as my advisor throughout this work, I would not have been able to be as honest, as true to my vision, or as critical of the institution as I wanted. Without the trust we share, I would not have created the exhibition that felt true to what I wanted. I have learned so much from Daniel, I cannot fully explain here the impact he has had on me as an educator and an artist.

Thank you to Judith Doyle for agreeing to be my secondary advisor last minute, after things went awry with my original advisors. Her guidance and care for me and my work helped to make this all possible.

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Preamble / Intro / Disclaimer

Dear Ms. Margaret,

I am writing to you because I began this thesis project with the intention that the written component would be addressed directly to you and that the artwork I made would also be for you. I stay true to my intentions. Unfortunately, Grandma, this written component cannot be written only to you, though you are my main audience, because I am in a master's thesis program in an art university; I am aware that this paper will be read by other art academics, my friends, family members, and hopefully other artists one day. Throughout this paper, when I am writing directly to you, I will use this font style. When I want to address a more direct audience, which might take on a more formal tone, I will use this font style.

Grandma, we have been on this journey of creating a relationship through these letters, and through my art practice since 2022; it's now 2026, and I see this relationship I have built with you as part of my life's work, so writing this "Thesis Support Paper" for my "Master's Research Project" has felt both daunting and confusing. The relationship I have built with you through my art practice is inherently anti-colonial, so writing a research paper about this feels wrong. Part of the reason for my feelings of unease is my knowledge of the fact that you would never have been welcomed into white academic art spaces like ocadu, and you sure as hell would not have been reading thesis papers. That is why large parts of this paper will be written directly to you, because it is about you, so it should be written ***for*** *you. But also as an act of resistance. I am choosing not to write in an academic tone because to do so would be inaccessible, and all too often, academic writing becomes extremely self-serving when the only people who want to read said academic writing are fellow academics. So I am writing like this to speak to those outside of*

The Academy, because that is where you are. As my work is directed to audiences that include you and which lie outside of academia, I hope to address you directly.

Hi reader, I hope you are doing well, and I hope you are reading this somewhere nice. I am writing to you from my desk in my home, my home that I came to almost three years ago. My current home is on the stolen land that has been cared for by Haudenosaunee, Anishinabewaki ᐊᓂᔑᓇᐯᒧᐊᑭ, Wendake-Nionwentsïo, Mississauga, and Wendat people since time immemorial[3]. I came here to Tkaronto specifically to go to york university, an experience that was wrought with anti-Blackness and misogynoir at the hands of administration and my colleagues. I dropped out of the program I had originally moved here for, and with the support of fellow Black Women Artists, I was encouraged not to abandon my studies, but instead to try again at ocadu. I am writing to you now to tell you the story of my master's thesis research.

Figure 2. Seṅáḵw or "kits beach." (Photograph by Sade Alexis, 2026)

I was born and raised, lived, grew, loved, and resisted for 24 years on stolen land that has been cared for, tended to, loved and lived with by ʷməθkʷəy̓əm, Sḵwx̱wú7mesh, səlilwətaɬ peoples since time immemorial[4](figure 2). I do not support the violent illegal occupation of Indigenous

[3] I learned this from a website (www.nativeland.ca) that has a map (Figure 2) of all of the traditional territories of Turtle Island. I hope that as I learn about and from this land, I build a relationship that is more reciprocal. I want to be in a place where I see the land as my relative, because I think that is maybe the ontology closest to the ones of my ancestors, and because the Indigenous teachers I have learned this from, live life in a good way that I admire. My relationship to the land is still deeply affected by capitalism, and my colonial education in so called KKKanada. I am growing towards the land, I trust that in time I will get there.

[4] For a very long time I saw myself as a settler on these lands, because of my lineage on my mom's side, but my dad came to these lands as a young person, as a child, and that means I am here in part because of this. My father comes from stolen people, this means I come from stolen people, my friend Sii-am Hamilton

land that we know as “canada”, I am not a "canadian". To be that, would mean being proud to stand by genocide. This would mean defining myself by violence done to my people; it would mean celebrating colonial conquest in my body, it would mean turning my back on my kin. This means that my personhood is committed to resisting colonial capitalist conquest. This means that I reject the status quo, and that I look for opportunities to step down from my class position.[5] This means that I am automatically in opposition to systems that act to divide and conquer, to maintain the status quo, or that place human life after capitalist gain (the university, the museum, the nation state, the criminal justice system, nationalism, imperialist conquest, etc.) and that I work against the strategies these institutions use to exert power and maintain the status quo (racism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, ableism, fatphobia, and classism). I feel this way not because I experience this violence in my body, but because I cannot stand to see colonialism and capitalism win. My work, my life, my love and my labour, will never be working towards upholding these systems.

(www.instagram.com/siiaamhamilton) taught me this, they are a sto:lo and nuučaaʔuuɬʔatḥ land defender. They taught me that Black people are Indigenous people who were stolen from their land and brought to stolen land. My kin didn’t choose Trinidad, and my dad did not choose these lands. I come from a people whose land has been taken from them, that cannot mean settlers. Settler implies choice and power. Yet I am also very keenly aware that the other half of my ancestry are the direct descendents of settlers.

[5] For guidance I look to this quote from a piece written by my mentor and advisor Daniel Drennan ElAwar: “Quoting a former Black Panther I conversed with in oakland in 2010: “I may not live to see the revolution, but it is my duty to carry the torch aloft for those who follow.” In this light, decolonization starts with self: the willful descent from class positions, from individual comfort zones, from plateaus of privilege. From there a regrounding, a reformulation of relation to place, to the land in solidarity with others doing the same.
”Drennan ElAwar, Daniel. *“On Extirpation, Rerooting, and Creative Liberation.”* Jadaliyya. Accessed March 17, 2026.
I also look to this quote from Audre Lorde that reminds us that as marginalized people, our freedoms are inextricably linked: “I am a lesbian woman of colour whose children eat regularly because I work in a university. If their full bellies make me fail to recognize my commonality with a woman of Colour whose children do not eat, because she cannot find work, or who has no children because her insides are rotted from home abortions and sterilization; if I fail to recognize the lesbian who chooses not to have children, the woman who remains closeted because her homophobic community is her only life support, the woman who chooses silence instead of another death, the woman who is terrified lest my anger trigger the explosion of hers; if i fail to recognize them as other faces of myself, then I am contributing not only to their oppressions but also my own and the anger which stands between us then must be used for clarity and mutual empowerment, not for the evasion of guild or for further separation. I am not free while any other woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own. And I am not free as long as one person of Colour remains chained. Nor is any one of you.”Sister outsider - 131-132

Introduction

Grandma,

I have been making art for as long as I can remember being a person. I have always been drawn to making things with my hands. I came to drawing and portraiture out of convenience—paper and pencils are always available, and it was something I could teach myself. I did not consider myself an artist until part way through Art School, where I finally realized why it was that I felt called to share my art, rather than just make it. It was because my art practice was a way for me to do something about the injustice I saw around me. It also quickly became a way for me to spend time with Black people, by choosing to draw only Black people, I was able to spend hours of my day looking at us. My art practice has since been both my voice to express explicit political beliefs, but also a salve, a place to take joy in the intricacies of Blackness. My art practice exists for me to find belonging, and to express my desires for collective liberation.

Research Question

I am writing this paper/letter in order to tell the story of my art-based research that I have practiced over the past 2 years as part of my master's thesis at ocadu. Though my research did not begin with a question, it began with desire and longing—in a thesis, there is always an underlying question. The questions I chose to focus on are: How can I use my art praxis to build a relationship with my Grandma, Ms. Margaret as my ancestor? How can literary research help me to understand my Grandma's life? How can my relationship with my Grandma bridge a relationship between my Aunts and I? Can critical Black Feminist theory bring me closer to the women in my lineage? How does my relationship/understanding of Ms. Margaret and the women in my lineage, help me feel belonging and self understanding?

How can I use my art practice not only to honour you, but also myself? How much of me is you?

"Relationality requires that you know a lot more about me before you can begin to understand my work.[6]" - Shawn Wilson

My Context

I have loosely introduced myself to you reader[7], I have told you where I come from and how I came to art, but more information about how I grew up, and who raised me, is needed for you to understand my relationship to my Grandma, and why my art practice exists to explore Blackness. As mentioned before, I was born and raised in so-called "vancouver" where there is a very small and quite dispersed Black community, and an even smaller Caribbean community. This dispersal and erasure of the Black diaspora in "vancouver" is purposeful. The provincial and federal governments are responsible for the physical erasure of the once thriving community of Hogan's Alley, and there were efforts to dissuade Caribbean and African immigrants from entering the lower mainland. Dispersal and isolation is a key tactic of colonial domination.

Figure 3. Family photo from Tobago. Roy, Marc, Sade, Tara, Olivia, Ellis. (Photograph by Olivia Alexis, 2023)

I was raised in a loving family, my parents Marc and Tara are still happily married after 34 years together, and my sister and I are close friends (figure 3). My mom was born in Richmond, BC and is the 4th generation white settler on her side. My dad is an immigrant, he was born in San Fernando, Trinidad, to a large family with 10 siblings. He left everything he knew at age 15 to move to nanaimo, british columbia, where his older brother, my Uncle Joe, was living at the time. My

[6] Wilson, *Research is ceremony.*
Wilson goes on to say, "It is my intention to build a relationship between the readers of this story, myself as the storyteller and the ideas I present. This relationship needs to be formed in order for an understanding of an Indigenous Research Paradigm." (6) This is what I am intending to do in this section, build a relationship with my reader, by sharing who I am, where I come from and why I have found myself engaging in research about my Grandma.

[7] I choose to address the reader here, and not Grandma because she knows all of this. She has been with me since my birth, whether I knew or not, as my Ancestor. She knows why I am who I am.

parents both worked as high school teachers my entire life which meant they were home for holidays, weekends and summers; it meant we were a very close family and still are.

Out of both proximity and affordability, our family holidays were spent with my mom's side of the family. Her family all live in british columbia, and she only has two sisters, whereas my dad's side of the family lives across the Caribbean and the states. This meant that as a little mixed girl who was almost always identified as Black[8], that I was mainly raised by white women. The only consistent other Black girl in my life was my sister, who was on her own journey to Black consciousness[9]. My parents did their best to educate us on Black history, with a heavy focus on the history of Black folks in the states and across canada. Unfortunately my parents love and education could not protect me from the realities of being a loud Black girl in predominantly white institutions from the ages of 5 to present day. There were very few Black people around me growing up, I could count on my hands how many Black classmates I had throughout elementary and high school despite going to the larger schools in the area. I grew up longing for Black people; I knew I was Black and I was very proud of this fact from a young age. I have always loved being Black, but outside of my home, I had nowhere and no one to share this love with.

Though most family time was spent with my mom's side of the family, there were a few times that we visited ft. lauderdale, florida to visit my Auntie Josette.[10] These visits were some of the

[8] I use the word identified here, to reference the fact that for many Marginalized Identities the way we are perceived by the outside world shapes how we see ourselves. I was always seen as Black by the outside world, I did not choose this until later in life.

[9] We are 3 years apart, and both experienced Blackness very differently growing up. Her journey to loving Blackness looked very different from mine, partially because of how we look, and our interests. My sister having looser curls and slightly fairer skin, meant she was identified more often as mixed, whereas I was always perceived as Black.

[10] My dad's choice to take us to florida rather than Trinidad is one that did not go unnoticed by the rest of the family. A large part of why we visited Auntie Josette more than anyone was because she really liked my mom; not all of my family members on my dad's side had the space for more white people in their life, but Auntie Josette always had space for my mom. This meant we spent more time with her, because my mom booked and planned the family trips.

few times in my life that I was surrounded by not only Black people, but Black people who were related to me. We went to florida as a family 3 times (figure 4), and my dad and I went together in 2021 and 2023. Auntie Josette is not the only family we have in florida; Uncle Winston and 4 of his 5 children, Monique, Rene, Michelle, and Wayne, live there with their kids, who have started having their own kids. Aside from them, Auntie Josette's two sons and their kids live in ft. lauderdale as well. My first cousins are all almost 2 or 3 decades older than me, and their children are in the same age range as my sister and I; therefore, *my* Auntie Josette was my cousin's (second cousin's) grandma—so she was our grandma (figure 5). This meant that when we visited as kids, Auntie Josette's house was the hub for the family: us kids would be swimming in the pool, while the adults were drinking and playing cards in the kitchen, all the while Auntie Josette would be cooking and talking shit.[11] She would cook from morning until night, and was always in bed around 8pm. She also had an open door policy, much like Grandma did, if you were a friend or a friend of a

Figure 4. *Family photo*, Jojo, Olivia, Sade Tiger, Elijah, Zaire, Ashley. (Photograph by Tara Alexis, 2005.)

Figure 5. *Auntie Josette.* Graphite and ink on paper. (Artwork by Sade Alexis 2025)

[11] This is something everyone in my family does. By talk shit, I don't mean in the pejorative sense; I mean we talk about any and everything, we tease each other, we tell stories, we yell over each other. Auntie Josette loved to argue with people for sport. I would say my Uncles and my dad do this as well, but Auntie Josette was extremely quick-witted and hilarious. She would make you cry but also laugh because what she said got you so good.

friend and you came to the house, and there was food, you could come and eat. Auntie Josette was the closest thing I had to a grandma, and those few weeks growing up were the closest thing I had to the kind of extended family closeness I wanted so badly. The last time I visited Auntie Josette, I could barely recognize her; she has very late-stage Alzheimer's now, and had aged rapidly in the two years between our visits. I realized that it was too late to ask her all of the questions I had about her life as a Black woman in new york and her relationship with Grandma. The pre-emptive grief I feel for Auntie Josette is different than the grief I feel for Grandma, or Auntie Leona, both of whom I never met. I know Auntie Josette, but only in moments, and mostly through the eyes of a child. I grieve having not taken opportunities that I *had* to talk to her.

In time, I understood myself to be a Black woman. I knew this because I learned about artists like Amy Sherald, Carrie Mae Weems, Elizabeth Catlett, and Kara Walker during my personal research in my undergrad. I saw their work and I saw myself. During this time I also read books by bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and toni morrison and in their words I found reflections of myself and my experiences. By this time I was no stranger to Black history, nor was I a stranger to racism, but I was longing for an experience of Blackness that did not begin and end with pain. During this time, I began to see my art practice as a space to explore Blackness, and by focusing on portraiture, I learned I was able to tell our stories through the combination of writing and art. I also learned my portrait-drawing practice was meditative and could be used to build a relationship with a subject.

Grandma's context

Grandma, I hope you know that even when I am writing to a greater audience throughout this paper, I am still writing to you. Which is why, in this next section about your life, I will write strategically. The things you experienced in your life need to be told for your survivance to be understood. The facts of your life, no matter how heartbreaking, must be told because they connect you to a greater struggle. One against patriarchal domination, and ultimately against colonialism and capitalism. I cannot imagine the things you experienced, but I hope to tell some of your story here, to both honour you, and show reverence for the things you survived.

Figure 6. *Ms. Margaret.* Archival photo. (Photographer unknown, year unknown)

Ms. Margaret Nagaur was born on May 15, 1917 in Cedros, Trinidad; she was my dad Marc's mom, my Grandma (figure 6). Cedros is a small village in southern Trinidad, populated mostly by the descendants of Indian indentured labourers.[12] My Grandma had multiple siblings; however, I do not know where she fell in birth order, nor do I know how many siblings she had.[13] My Grandma came from a poor, mixed-race family. She was both Black and Indian which meant she was expected to work, rather than go to school; because of this, my Grandma did not know how to read or write. This made her ever more adamant about her children seeking

[12] In Trinidad, slavery was abolished in 1834 along with the rest of the british colonies. This left a hole in the colonial economy as free labour was still needed. The british filled this hole with indian indentured labourers who were brought across the Caribbean to places like Trinidad, Guyana, and Jamaica. My Ancestors were brought to Trinidad with the promise of land in return for work. For more on this topic, see Jaikaran, Elizabeth. Trauma : a Collection of Short Stories. Brunswick, Maine: Shanti Arts Publishing, 2017.

[13] There are many things that I do not yet know about my Grandma and her ancestors. Many names to be learned, and places to be visited in order for me to know these things. I do know that my Grandma had a sister named Tillary; there are photos of her, my Dad, and his ex-wife during one of my Dad's visits back home in the 70s.

higher education. No one in the family knows much about my Grandma's life in Cedros, besides the fact that she loved the movies. At 15, she was sexually assaulted, and she became pregnant. In Trinidad in the 30s, an unmarried pregnant girl was unacceptable and, despite the high rates of sexual violence that spread across the country,[14] an abortion was not an option for an unwanted pregnancy. Instead, my Grandma was exiled from her home. The details of how she ended up in San Fernando after this are unclear, but I do know that Ms. Margaret's parents took her first child, Patrick, from her, and he was raised outside of her care, as she was presumed unfit to raise him.

My Grandma ended up living with friends in the big city[15], San Fernando, where she met my Grandpa Leon "Jezzel" Alexis. He was nearly 10 years her senior, but he was very intelligent, charismatic and handsome. She became pregnant at 16, and again because of my Grandma's social status as an uneducated, dark-skinned Indian girl, she was presumed unfit to raise her second child, Leona. Auntie Leona was raised by my Grandpa's mother, Philippa. His family were the descendants of enslaved Africans, originally brought to Grenada. The socio-political climate of Trinidad in the 30s and 40s was fraught with racial tension between the African and Indian diasporas: a strategy of the ruling class to further conquer and divide the people. By pushing the false narrative that Black and Indian people could not coexist, or that there was a clear line that could be drawn between the races[16] to divide the working class, the ruling

[14] I have come to learn that sexual violence is one of the key strategies of colonial domination. Our colonizers use it against us to gain power and to subjugate, and then we do it to our own in an attempt to replicate our oppressor. This is described in the first chapter of Wretched of the Earth, Concerning violence, where Fanon discussed the inherent violence of colonial domination, and the way said violence affects the colonized person's mind. (see Fanon, F. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by C. Farrinton. New York, New York: Grove Press, 1963).

[15] Dad recently told me that Grandma was brought to San Fernando by her friends, and these same friends were the ones who set her and Grandpa up. Dad said he remembers these friends and that they were present in Grandma's life when he was around.

[16]Elizabeth Jaikaran, *Trauma : a Collection of Short Stories*. Brunswick, Maine: Shanti Arts Publishing, 2017.

(european) class could maintain control by creating the illusion of two distinct racial groups in Trinidad.

Jezzel and Ms. Margaret ended up having 10 children together, in the following birth order: Patrick (1933-??), Leona (1936-2020), Joe (1938), Clive (1939-40), Marlene (1940-41), Winston (1941), Kathleen "Kay" (1943-2023), Josette (1945), Marc (1953), Paula (1954), Marlon (1957), and Margot (1959). The only photo that exists with nearly the complete group of siblings was taken at Grandma's funeral (figure 7). A response I often receive when I talk about my Grandma's life was that, "It was customary at the time to have large families, and for working class women to start having children early." People try to downplay both the reality of her life and the physical, emotional feat it is to house 10 babies in your body, birth them, feed them and raise them to adulthood. My Grandma's first pregnancy was at 15 and her last was at 42. I cannot imagine the toll that many years of pregnancy and breastfeeding take on a person's body; although, I do know my Grandma complained of constant pain in her older years. My Grandma's life was her children: She was there morning, noon, and night to feed them, clothe them, and took extra care to do my Aunties' hair. She sent all of her children to school, many of them the best schools in the country, which she took great pride in. When my Grandpa passed at only 62, she was able to keep the family afloat by selling food and renting out rooms in the house. Each

Figure 7. *Grandma's funeral,* Winston, Josette, Joe, Marc Anthony, Marlon, Margot, Paula, Marc. (San Fernando, 1992)

of my Grandma's children left her for a better life in the west, except for my Auntie Margot who saw it as her duty to stay in Trinidad until after my Grandma passed in 1992. She made the sacrifice of saying goodbye to each of her children, because they were forced out of their homeland in search of "the great immigrant dream."

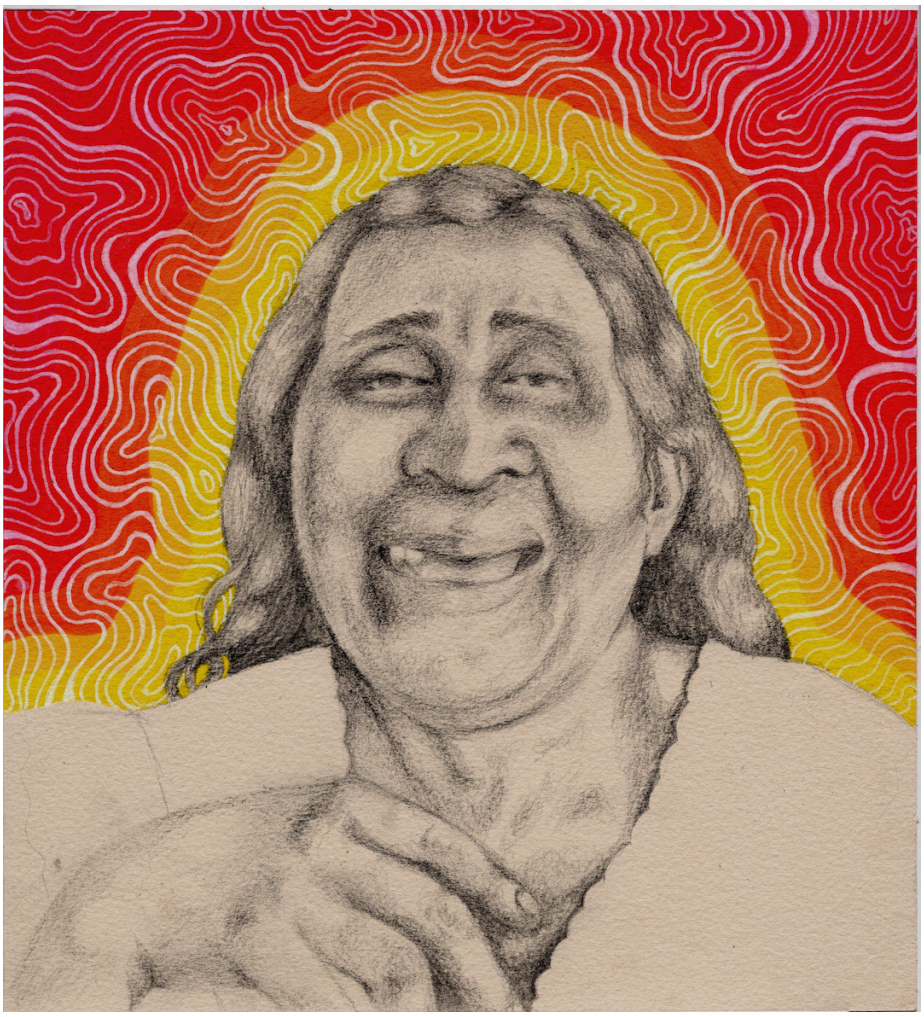

Figure 8. *Grandma Laughing,* Graphite and Ink on paper. (Artwork by Sade Alexis, 2026.)

Intentions / considerations

August 8, 2023

Dear Grandma,

I am at school today, behind me I have photos of you, my Aunties and Uncles, and Grandpa too. I feel you all protecting me. I have a photo of you in front of me, but still I am reminded that I am not welcome here. I remember the things I experienced here. I remember that these places aren't meant for us. I also think about what it means for me to bring you into this space. Am I putting you in harm's way? How can I protect you here when you are already trying to protect me? How do I do this work here? I guess I have to remember that this isn't for these people. This is for us. Me and you. It feels weird to have to put this on display. In September, we have a group show and it doesn't feel right to share this within ***this*** *space. Not after what has been done to me here. What we are doing means more to me than something a gallery can contain. I wonder how I will feel displaying this work in the spring; I need to remember why I am doing this.*

What am I doing? Who am I doing it for? Why am I doing it? I

I think it is important that I continually ask this. And that I ask this with you as my witness. I want to remain true to you, my Aunties who have passed, and the family we have living.

I am making an archive, a love letter, a collection to and of the Alexis-Nagaur Family

I am honouring my ancestors, my living elders and creating something for those to come

I am honouring Margaret Nagaur Alexis

I am celebrating the people who make me up

I am lifting up a woman who deserves it

I am listening to stories and telling stories

I am drawing as a way of knowing

I am making images as a way of paying homage.

I am making art to claim space, to resist domination

I am doing this for my family. I am doing this for those who long for home they do not know

I am doing this for the many women like my grandma

I am doing this because my grandma deserved better

I am doing this so that I can always know I come from people, land and culture.

*I feel so much less close to you here. I felt you so close by in T&T, (*figure 9) *I could feel you in my chest then. Maybe I am losing focus. It is so hard to be far from those you love. I imagine what it was like for you to have all your children so far from you. How big of a sacrifice that must have been for you. To only have moments in far away places with your children. It must have been so painful. Without your sacrifice I would not be here, far from those I love, just like my dad was, just like you were. I feel some of what my aunts and uncles must have felt all those years ago. Trinidad is so far from Vancouver. It must have been so hard for you to have Joe so far from you. I am glad he visited you and that you got to visit Winston as well. I imagine the grief you felt knowing there were so many of us you didn't get to hug and kiss because of the distance.*

I hope you know how loved you are.

Sade

Figure 9. *View from Grandma's yard.* San Fernando Trinidad. (Photograph by Sade Alexis, 2023.)

Methods

The previous letter was written in the early stages of this research, and this iteration of our relationship. It provides a clear set of guidelines, concerns and intentions for what I hoped to accomplish through my master's thesis program. I had just come back from going back to Trinidad and Tobago for the first time, and it felt very clear why I was reaching out to you, and that you were reaching back. From the start I have been adamant about doing no harm to you, any of my other ancestors or my living relatives. This meant that the ethics and subsequently the methods of this research needed to ensure that I would not be objectifying myself, my family, or our pain.

Relationality

It was during this stage of my research that I was taking a class at York called "Methods of Research Creation"[17] *where we discussed different forms of research methodologies. I found myself mostly surrounded by white artists' theories of "research creation" that felt very detached from human life, and the lived realities of students and artists. Luckily, I was taking this class with the only other person of colour in the entire graduate program at the time, and when voicing my frustrations with the intense colonial nature of the class we were taking, she suggested I read* Research Is Ceremony *by Shawn Wilson. Reading just the beginning of the book felt like a breath of fresh air. This was the first time I had read about research methodology that prioritized the well-being of the population being studied.*

[17] Research creation is the canadian university term for arts-based research. The term was created in order to correctly categorize arts-based research alongside the social sciences and humanities. This categorization is needed in order to dole out wads of cash in the form of SSHRC grants (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council). The class was full of readings by "canadian" white art academics raving about how research creation could drastically improve the lives of art students. It was very clear to me that this term was simply another institutional label created with the sole purpose of doling out and withholding funding for research projects.

It felt kismet for me to be directed toward Shawn Wilson's Research is Ceremony. *Wilson is an Anishnaabe researcher and writer so it makes sense for me to use a methodology that is based in the land I am on.*[18] *Throughout the book, Wilson tells the story of how he found an Indigenous research paradigm based in relationality. This research methodology has become the ground on which I do this work. Wilson argues that when we use a methodology of relationality, "rather than seeing ourselves as being in relationship with other people or things, we are the relationships that we hold and are a part of."*[19] *When I think of this in terms of my own artistic research praxis, I see the research I am doing not as something to be extracted from you, but rather the research is the relationship between us. Contrary to common academic research practices, I am not posing myself as a researcher or author, but instead, as your collaborator. I am doing this research with the sole purpose of building, maintaining, and exploring my relationship with you as my ancestor. This is where I have gotten into some trouble working within the confines of art academia. Research in the academy is thought to result in findings, statistics, or a final product. Here, the research or relationship is the result itself.*

Wilson tells his research as a story, which has deeply affected the way I am writing this research. He does so because he argues that "Stories allow listeners to draw their own conclusions and to gain life lessons from a more personal perspective. By getting away from abstractions and rules, stories allow us to see others' life experiences through our own eyes."[20] *Here, I am emulating this in hopes that your life, and the story of our relationship, can be understood by viewers in meaningful ways that do not further objectify you or me. He also writes his story to a direct audience, his sons, because he argues that by writing to an audience whose context he knows, he*

[18] Tkaronto is on stolen Aanishabeg, Mississaugas of the Credit, Wendat, Chippewa, Haudenosaunee, Wendat land.
[19] Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony*, 80.
[20] Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony*, 17.

is able to maintain relational accountability.[21] *This is in part why I write directly to you, to maintain accountability, and to ensure that you are being centred throughout this process.*

It is important to me that I continue to use a methodology of relationality in regards to the sources I use for research. Throughout this text, the sources I use are mostly books that I have physical copies of, ones that have been dog-eared, highlighted, and annotated. I committed early on to only cite sources I have a real relationship with, which is quite different from the way I have done research before. In the past, I scoured internet journals for pertinent quotes, unaware of who the authors were or what their context was, often reading the first and last paragraphs only. In this case, the sources I cite are ones I have long-standing relationships with, whereas with others, my relationship is still growing, but it exists.

Love as a Verb

> "To truly love we must learn to mix various ingredients—care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment and trust, as well as honest and open communication."[22] —bell hooks

At the beginning of my research, I read all about love by bell hooks. hooks' writing has been a guiding force behind my artwork for many years, so it felt natural to turn to her for guidance throughout a master's research project. From the start of this project, my intention has been to do no harm to my Grandma, my family or myself. In order to do so, I felt I needed to view love the way hooks teaches us to, as a verb, one that requires action.[23] I also needed to view love as a method for my research, meaning I am working with love for my Grandma and my family at the

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[21] Wilson, *Research is Ceremony*, 22.
"It is imperative to relational accountability that as a researcher I form a respectful relationship with the ideas I am studying. In order for you to also be able to see this relationship and how it was formed you need to form your own relationship with me as a researcher."

[22] bell hooks, *Bell hooks: "All about love."* Washington, D.C: WAMU, American University, 2000, 5.
[23] hooks, *Bell hooks: "All about love"*, 5.

forefront. Throughout the book, hooks discusses different forms of love, such as community love, spiritual love, romantic love, and grief as love. She frames love through a Black feminist lens and discusses the ways in which we as Black women are taught not to lean towards love in Western media and that this is, in fact, a form of colonial domination.

It is clear to me, as a Black Woman living in the heart of empire, that love is antithetical to colonial domination. True love, like hooks discusses in *all about love*—that is, based in honesty, a healthy spirituality, and a strong community—exists to work against colonial domination. Thus, using love as a methodology helps to align this work with anti-colonial struggles across the globe. Throughout all about love, hooks discusses the importance of love that exists within community, love that resists individualization, and sees each of us as deeply interconnected to one another.[24] She also discusses living one's life with a love ethic,

> "Commitment to a love ethic transforms our lives by offering us a different set of values to live by. In large and small ways, we make choices based on a belief that honesty, openness and personal integrity need to be expressed in public and private decisions."[25]

bell hooks makes it very clear that in order for me to do this work using a methodology of love, that methodology must be deeply concerned with the ethics of my artwork and research. This work blurs the private and public, and by holding myself and my work to a love ethic, as hooks has laid out for me, I am ensuring further that the work I do is aligned with collective struggles for truth and liberation.

This research, the desire to know and build a relationship with my Grandma, is born out of deep grief that I feel for my Grandma, Auntie Leona and Auntie Kay. The matriarchs of my family, who all passed before I had the opportunity to meet them, sit down and talk with them. For a

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[24] hooks, *Bell hooks: "All about love"*, 76.
"I am often struck by the dangerous narcissism fostered by spiritual rhetoric that pays so much attention to individual self improvement and so little to the practice of love within the context of community."
[25] hooks, *Bell hooks: "All about love"*, 78.

very long time, I did not believe that the grief I felt for my Grandma was justified, as I had never met her. Western concepts of grief do not have space for the type of mourning I felt. Reading the penultimate chapter, all about love, gave me guidance on how to view this grief and how to move forward with it. Hooks tells the reader that:

> "We are taught to feel shame about grief that lingers. Like a stain on our clothes, it marks us as flawed, imperfect. To cling to grief, to desire its expression, is to be out of sync with modern life, where the hip do not get bogged down in mourning. Love knows no shame. To be loving is to be open to grief, to be touched by sorrow, even sorrow that is unending. The way we grieve is informed by whether we know love."[26]

Here, hooks gave me the courage to view my grief for my Grandma and Aunties as a deep love. She goes on to encourage the reader to see grief as a form of communication and communion. By viewing grief for my Grandma as a form of communication, I am able to relinquish myself from the shame and discomfort I experienced in the past when met with my grief. Now I see I can use this grief as a form of communication with my Ancestors, and by using my art practice as a way to express said communication, I am able to share this with my family and community.

The Personal is Political

Much of my academic research is grounded in the lived experiences of Black Women. I understand myself because of the writing of Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison and bell hooks; three Black Women theorists who wrote extensively on what it means to be a Black Woman in Western society. These women—who I now see as my ancestors—show us through their writing that the personal is political, and that this rings even more true when you are at the intersections of Blackness and Womanhood.

[26] hooks, *Bell hooks: "All about love"*, 200.
Hooks goes on to say that "Our mourning, our letting ourselves grieve over the loss of loved ones is an expression of our commitment, a form of communication and communion."

Audre Lorde's collection of essays titled "Sister outsider" informed the structure of my writing here. The collection spans across Lorde's writing career and includes several speeches she gave throughout the 80s and 90s. Her writing style is personal, honest and cutting; she is able to weave together personal anecdotes, historical context and socio-economic theory to display that each personal experience is fraught with socio-political hierarchies that connect us to larger movements of political struggle. Lorde's essay "The Uses of Anger" has provided me guidance on many occasions. This essay teaches readers, specifically Black Women, that our anger need not be feared and that instead it is a just reaction to the violence of racism, sexism, and homophobia that can be used to fuel our fight against said violence. She frames her own anger as "libation for fallen sisters,"[27] which serves as a reminder to me that the anger I feel in the face of deadly racism is a libation for my Grandma and my Aunties, each of whom experienced racism and sexism in a multitude of ways. Lorde shows readers that the deeply personal experience of anger is inherently political. I have struggled for many years with my anger, sometimes it feels as if I feel the anger of all the women in my lineage burning in my chest. My anger has so often been met with an effort to silence me, squash out my flame, or tame my temper. I refuse to be silenced, and so I use my anger to fuel my fight. I remember that Lorde tells us that anger is a justified response to racism, I remember that she teaches us that for Black Women like myself anger is a powerful tool to fight against violence.

In addition to *All about love*, I have been reading *Sisters of the Yam: black women and self-recovery*. In this novel, hooks discusses the ways in which Black Women's health and well-being are affected by deadly racism and sexism. Along with this, she provides opportunities for healing that revolve around honest communication, love, and community. Throughout the

[27] Audre Lorde, Eva Bonné, Marion Kraft, and Nikita Dhawan, *Sister outsider*. München: btb, 2023, 130.

novel, hooks reminds readers that our suffering is not where our existence begins or ends, but that there are ways through the violence we experience. hooks, much like Lorde, combines personal anecdotes with theoretical research in order to make clear to readers that as marginalized people, specifically Black Women, our experiences of pain are deeply political, and that our healing from said experiences are just as political and worthy of exploration. *Sisters of the yam* has provided a guide for me, to heal from the violence of racism, and in turn share that healing with my Grandma as my ancestor. At the end of the first chapter, hooks recounts words spoken to her by a student seeking support: "Healing occurs through testimony, through gathering together everything available to you and reconciling."[28] I am beginning this lifelong journey through this research. I intend for this work to heal myself, and in turn heal my Grandma from some of the harm she has experienced.

Oral Tradition: Visiting my Aunts and Uncles

Family histories, Black and Indigenous History, histories of queer folks, and the stories of marginalized people across the globe have been told orally from person to person since time immemorial. This method of sharing stories across kitchen tables, in classrooms, in living rooms, on balconies as the sun sets or rises, is one that is deeply tied to radical movements of resistance against colonial regimes[29]. As a way to connect my work to this greater collective struggle, and as a way to respect my cultural tradition of oral story telling, I chose to do a majority of this research orally. I look to Dionne Brand's *No Burden to Carry: Narratives of Black Working Women in Ontario* for inspiration, and see my work as connected to the purpose of the book. At

[28] bell hooks, *Sisters of the yam: black women and self-recovery*. South End Pr, 2009, 9.
[29]I look to Rosemary Sayigh and her work in Palestine. She poses Palestinian Oral Storytelling traditions as actively resist and subvert zionist colonialism and its subsequent suppression of all Palestinian media, writing and artworks.

the very beginning of the book, Brand states that she does this work, of recording the stories of working class Black Women in canada because our history as Black people on these lands has been long since ignored, and erased in the greater national narrative of this country.[30] *No Burden to Carry* both negates the national narrative that Black people don't live in canada, and uplifts the experiences of Black Working-Class Women living in the heart of empire. By working in the same methods as scholars like Rosemary Sayigh, Brand and many more radical BIPOC women scholars, I align this research, the story of my relationship with my Grandma, I place our story alongside the academic continuum created in order to resist white supremacist narratives placed upon Turtle Island and Palestine.

Figure 10. *Dad at my place.* Tkaronto (Photograph by Sade Alexis 2023)

Visiting my Relatives

When I began this research my relationship with my elders—my Aunts and Uncles—was still largely dictated by my parents' relationships with them. As mentioned before, distance, and a longing for closeness with my Aunts, Uncles, and cousins were the guiding factors for why I wanted to learn more about my family history, beginning with Grandma.

At the beginning of the journey in 2023, I started with what I knew, which was calling up my Dad and asking if I could interview him. My Mom and Dad came to visit me in my new place in Tkaronto in March, and I took that opportunity to set up a camera and try to document an

[30] Dionne Brand, *No Burden to Carry: Narratives of Black Working Women in Ontario, 1920s–1950s*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Women's Press, 1991, 12.

interview with my Dad (figure 10). I began by interviewing him about his life, hoping my Grandma would be a major part of the conversation. I found that because of my Dad's lack of closeness with Grandma, his stories often centred around my Grandpa, who took an interest in my dad as an intellectual from a very young age. I don't fault my dad for not knowing Grandma as deeply as I wanted him to. He grew up in a highly patriarchal version of Trinidad and left his parents at only 15; he didn't have the chance to know his parents as adults.

Figure 11. *Uncle Joe and Oliver,* Ink and watercolour on paper. (Artwork by Sade Alexis, 2023)

In the summer of 2023, I was back home in so-called "vancouver" for a few weeks and had the chance to visit with my eldest Uncle Joe (figure 11). He lives in the dunbar area with his wife, his son Joey, his daughter Allison and her children Josh and Oliver[31]. I sat down with Uncle Joe on a warm day in his backyard. This was one of the first times I had visited my Uncle on my own without the rest of my family, and I think it may have been the first time Uncle Joe and I were alone together. I recorded this conversation on my phone; it began with Uncle Joe asking what my intentions were for my project and why I wanted to focus on Grandma. I told him that I was

[31] Uncle Joe is why my dad came to canada, specifically nanaimo on vancouver island in 1968. My Dad and Uncle Joe have a complicated relationship partially due to their large age difference, and because Uncle Joe was put into the parental role of a 15 year old (my Dad), at only 30. Despite this, Uncle Joe took care of my dad through high school and the beginning of university. Growing up, Uncle Joe and his family were the most consistent Alexis family presence in my life. We were especially close when my sister and I were younger.

searching for belonging, and that my aim was to honour Grandma and her legacy, and that as a Black Woman myself, it makes sense for me to look to the matriarch of my family for belonging. He liked these answers and agreed to talk more with me about Grandma.

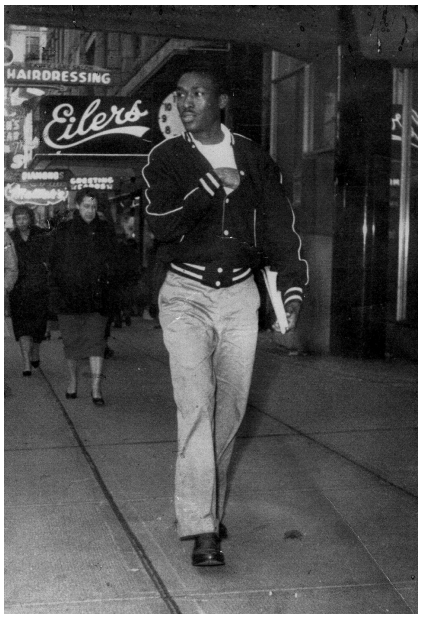

Figure 12. *Uncle Joe on hastings* . (Photographer unknown)

I had also brought my laptop and scanner to scan all of his collected family photos. Uncle Joe had photos I had never seen before, of my Dad and himself as young men (figure 12), photos of the family home in Trinidad, and photos of my Aunties and Grandma that had been sent to Joe while living in vancouver. He also showed me a photo of my Grandma that I hold very close to this day: my one and only photo of her laughing (figure 13). I remember feeling a sense of warmth in my chest that day that I hadn't felt before.[32] I began asking Uncle Joe questions about Grandma and what she was like when he was growing up. He talked about how devoted Grandma was, that when he was growing up, his Dad could not be counted on, but his Mom could. She was there every night doing the girls' hair and making sure all the kids did their homework, offering her help despite not being literate. Uncle Joe also talked about my Grandma's pain, how, as a young man, he did not understand why she complained so often about


Figure 13. *Grandma laughing.* Trinidad (Photograph by Joseph Alexis, 1980)

[32]This was the first time that I felt I had a Grandma, she felt like mine, because I was beginning to see myself in her, and believe that she would have loved me.

pain. He admitted that he was ashamed that he did not understand Grandma's pain then, and that now, as a sick man in his 80s, he understood her pain all too well. We talked about how Grandma carried and gave birth to twelve babies, and the toll that must have taken on her body. Uncle Joe also discussed the physical violence she experienced at the hands of Grandpa. I didn't ask many questions; I let him follow his thoughts.

Similarly to the conversation with my Dad, the rest of my time with Uncle Joe was spent talking about Grandpa and why he was the way he was. Uncle Joe spent a lot of time being angry at his Dad, and shared his journey to understanding him with me. These were valuable stories, but they still centered on my Grandpa, much like the stories I heard about Trinidad as a kid. In order to understand my Grandma further, I knew I would have to speak to her daughters: my Aunties, Paula and Margot, who, prior to this, I hadn't had much contact with or really a relationship to speak of. At this point, I hadn't met either of them as Auntie Margot lives in New York, and Auntie Paula lives in Trinidad. In order for me to even begin to feel comfortable and ethically sound about asking my Aunties about their relationship with Grandma, I would have to build a relationship with them.

This project, combined with my Dad's health[33] gave my Mom the idea to take the family to Trinidad. In the summer of 2023, my Mom paid the airfare for herself, my Dad, my Sister and her husband, and my partner and me to fly from vancouver to Trinidad. My dad would only agree to one day in San Fernando and a week relaxing on the beach in Tobago. It had been 30 years since Dad last visited Trinidad; he was last there for Grandma's funeral. My Sister, Mom, and I had never been to Trinidad, and I tried to convince him to let us stay for longer than 24

[33] My Dad, Marc was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in 2021. There were a few years where he struggled quite a bit, and we supported him as a family. He is doing great these days, and works hard to take care of himself. I am proud of my dad for "keepin on keepin on" as he'd say.

hours. My Dad has a lot of traumatic memories from his childhood, so he was not necessarily thrilled to be going back home.[34]

Visiting Trinidad

Grandma, Trinidad was a whirlwind. It took us basically 24 hrs of air travel to get from vancouver to San Fernando, Trinidad. We had multiple layovers, and left in the evening on the west coast and landed the next evening in San Fernando without having time for a single meal. Auntie Margot had arranged for a friend of Uncle Marlon, Earl, to pick us up and be our driver for our short stay. I am not an experienced traveller; this was my first time leaving the continent of North America, and I was extremely anxious. It took ages to get through customs, my Dad got lost along the way, we were all hungry as hell, and none of us had the number for Earl. The 6 of us flowed out of the airport stressed, sweaty and hungry, searching for a man we had never met and didn't have the phone number to.[35] Through the powers of Auntie Margot, across the world in NYC we found Earl who had been there for hours waiting due to our many flight delays.

Earl was sweet and warm, his smile was big and he had a soft voice. He drove us from the airport to San Fernando where our air bnb was and made a stop at a grocery store for us to get food for the next day. We were driving as the sun was setting, and I was getting the first glimpses of our country. I saw houses on stilts to protect from flooding, I saw rolling hills filled with trees and fields filled with sugar cane. We drove past roadside rum shops, doubles stands, and so many car lots. I remember thinking that the class divide was so clear here, some living in mansion-sized homes with cars and barbed wire–laced front gates, vs homes with pieced

[34] This is not my story to tell, so I will not go further into why my dad only wanted to spend one day in Trinidad, or how he feels about it now. Some things are not for *me* to tell.

[35] *I flashed back to my first visit to Ft. Lauderdale, shocked by the heavy wetness of tropical air which stuck to my arms and legs, overwhelmed, excited to be around Black people, and impatiently waiting for Auntie Josette to pick us up, in a time before cell phones wide availability.*

together fences, painted bright colours, and with dogs milling about. I felt uncomfortable at the fact that the airbnb we were staying in was a house like that of the upper class. A big home with many bedrooms and a pool in the backyard. This dissonance was not lost on my Dad; I could sense his anxiety about being in a place like this, in the city he grew up in.

*My anxiety was so high during this trip, partially because I really don't do well with being far from familiarity, and because there was so much weighing on this trip for me. I was in the place I had wondered about, dreamed about, fantasized about, for my entire life. The next morning, Earl picked us up and drove us to the family home—**your** home—on Cipero Street, which now belongs to Auntie Paula, and Uncle Marlon and his children Sumaiyah, Jamaal, Sayed and Mustapha, his wife Kim and their children Khalid, Kaya and Khalil. Auntie Paula greeted us, and I think I may have started crying immediately. She felt like Auntie Josette; she felt so familiar, instantly. Uncle Marlon looked so much like my dad, but he was so much more alive. He was gentle and had such a nice smile. I met my cousins, who were all doing their own thing throughout the house. Jamaal (*figure 14.) *was in the back room playing video games, and suffering from an allergy attack, he was rubbing his nose just like me; I laughed with him about allergies being in our genes.*[36]

Figure 14. *Jamaal and Sade.* San Fernando (Photograph by Olivia Alexis, 2023)

[36] Jamaal passed away in December this year. These are my only memories of him, and I had always hoped we would make more together. He was only a year older than Olivia, he was supposed to live a longer life. May he rest in peace.

We walked past your backyard. It looked so different from the photos I had seen; so much had changed in the 30 years since Dad took those photos. Auntie Paula brought us upstairs to her part of the house, as Uncle Marlon was working downstairs. She had pictures of you and Grandpa up, as well as a graduation photo of Uncle Joe I had never seen. I don't remember what we talked about; I just remember sweating a lot and being given a cold glass of juice from Auntie Paula. She brought out a photo album where there were photos of you I had never seen, photos of my Dad and my Aunts and Uncles in their youth. Near the end of the album was a section of photos of Olivia and me. Photos my dad had sent over 20 years ago, that my Auntie, who had never met me, kept safe and close all these years.

Figure 15. *View from the cemetery.* San Fernando (Photograph by Sade Alexis, 2023)

*I was really adamant about needing to see your burial site at the cemetery (*figure 15.). *I knew it was the closest I could get to you. The cemetery is sort of at the base of San Fernando Hill, so it was hard for my dad to traverse, with uneven ground and high inclines. The now seven of us silently walked through the cemetery lined with white headstones. Auntie Paula stopped at a plot that had the names Philippa and Garvin; I wasn't sure who they were at the time, but she told us they were our relatives. We walked to the far back corner of the cemetery, almost at*

the back fence. Auntie Paula stooped at a rectangle of sparse grass with a white concrete border. This is where you are buried. Auntie Paula explained that there was a conflict in the family with your and Grandpa's burial, and this led to your headstones being destroyed. Auntie Paula began to cry and pray; she spoke directly to you. I became overwhelmed with emotion; I wanted to lie down on that grass to feel closer to you. I wanted to be cradled by the earth that you now exist within, to cry for all the grief I felt in that moment, but I didn't want to cause a scene. I wished I could have had a moment alone with you.

We left your house as the sun was setting. I wanted more time with Auntie Paula, but I was also exhausted. The next day, Earl drove us to the airport again, and we took a short flight to Tobago. Watching our island pass by under the shadow of this small plane made me feel more connected to you than ever. We stayed in the nicest place any one of us had ever been in, my parents included. We spent a week there, and I think it was the most relaxed I had ever felt. I spoke to you in the moonlight while floating in the pool, and I felt a deep peace that I have been searching for ever since. I know I will come back to our Island soon.

Literary Research

The Secrets We Kept by Krystal A. Sital

This family memoir written by Krystal Sital beautifully weaves the stories of her Grandmother Rebecca, Mother Arya and the history of Trinidad, with her own experiences as a young Caribbean woman living in new jersey. After Krystal's Grandfather "Mistah Shiva" has a life altering stroke, her once idyllic view of him is changed when she sees a haunting but shared look in both her Grandmother and Mother's eyes:, They want this man dead. Upon seeing this Krsytal is intent on finding out why. In the warmth of their new jersey apartment, over shared meals of curry chicken, stew peas, and dasheen cooked with salt fish, Krystal finally asks first her mother and soon after, her grandmother "what did he do to you?" Krystal finds that her mother and grandmother had been waiting for someone to ask them their stories.

The reader is first carried through the life of a young Arya living in Sange Grande, Trinidad in 1972 on the family farm where she and her siblings are expected to do hard labour before and after school while living under the tyranny of their father Mistah Shivah. Sital weaves lush descriptions of the flora and fauna of Trinidad with the violent memories of her mother's childhood, many of which involved witnessing her mother's frequent near deathly beatings at the hands of Shivah. We are taken along Arya's journey for independence and to not end up like her mother, trapped under a man she feared. She pursues school, a career, and ends up like many women in Trinidad, finding freedom from her father, through traditional courtship with a man who values the respect of her father more than her opinion of him.

Sital invites the reader further into both her family and Trinidad's history by telling her grandmother's story which begins in 1954 in a small coal mining village in the mountains. Rebeccah tells her granddaughter of wanting nothing more in life "dan house, lan, and motohcah." We come to find that, just like her daughter, Rebecca found freedom from her father, in the security of a man with wealth and power. The three women's stories painfully illustrate the patriarchal violence that was and is the reality for many Indian women in Trinidad. Sital perfectly displays the cyclical nature of domestic violence, and uses the telling of these powerful memories to break free from the generational cycles of violence, she, like many women of the Caribbean diaspora, find themselves in. This book reminds us that for marginalized women, telling our stories is powerful.

This book gave me such a clear image of what Trinidad was like, in the later parts of your life, Grandma. In the 70s you were a young mother, with multiple children living out of the country. Dad was born the year prior to the beginning of Rebecca's story in 1954. This book let me see into your life, but from another point of view. Throughout the book Sital's rich and descriptive writing style shows the reverence she holds for Trinidad. She writes about the land itself with fondness and a clarity only someone who has truly taken the time to understand the island and our culture can have. It feels like a privilege to be able to read these stories. I wonder if you loved the land like she does, I wonder if you felt loved by the land.

Krystal Sital makes clear the importance of cooking; a practice shared between her and her mother and grandmother. Cooking protected them, fed them, and brought them together. She takes time to describe in awe of the specific ingredients and cooking methods of many classic Trini dishes throughout the novel, and I am made to think of the many stories of your cooking. I

also think of Auntie Josette's cooking, something that always made me feel connected to my culture. I have heard stories about how you once supported yourself and the family by selling roti out of the tailor shop. I know you were known in your neighbourhood as an excellent cook. I love to cook and I love all things food. I wonder if this is a gift from you.

Trauma: A collection of Short Stories by Elizabeth Jaikaran

In this heartbreaking collection of short stories Elizabeth Jaikaran weaves together a narrative that delves into the harsh realities of the lives of Guyanese women. Each captivating, soul-crushing story is followed by a short non-fiction chapter describing the historical context of the previous story. Jaikaran makes it clear in the first chapter of this work that some of these stories are her own, and some have been told to her, so the reader can understand that these stories are very much real, despite the literary embellishment here or there. Throughout the series of stories we meet Guyanese women and girls across different ages, races, and time periods, and through this diversity of narrative, with the common thread of trauma and womanhood, the reader is able to grasp a real understanding of the violence facing Guyanese women, and the complexity of their relationships to their homelands and cultures. Through these stories of love, violence, sexual assault, child loss, friendship, and joy we can see the lasting effects colonialism has had, specifically on women in a place such as Guyana, that is often overlooked and not discussed. Jaikaran reminds us readers of the power of telling our stories, as descendants of women who did not have the power or capacity to tell their own.

This book broke my heart with each chapter. Each story I knew there would be something horrific that would happen. So while getting to know each character I had a looming anxiety that something terrible was about to happen to this woman who seems so much like my Auntie, or my

Cousin, or you. These stories hit very close to home, each one I could connect to a story in my own family or one close to mine. Reading this collection of the lives of Guyanese women who were Black, Indian, Muslim, Queer, Hindu, Indigenous, young, and old felt like a gift. It felt like an honour to know their stories, no matter how heart- breaking they were or how much they made me cry. These stories allowed me to see that my grandma's story is not specific to Trinidad., Her experience of misogyny and violence is one that women across the Caribbean diaspora know and understand.

Through this book I garnered a closer look at what it was like to be Indo-Caribbean, which in turn helped me to understand my grandmother's life. A pattern is becoming very clear to me: Many girls are born into poor families, indentured or previously enslaved, and their childhood is filled with violence and hard labour usually at the hands of their father, and the only way to escape this, is by accepting the control of another man, their husband. So, young girls marry at 14 and 15 to men they barely know in hopes of some experience of freedom, only to be pregnant for the next ten years of their lives. This is the cycle of domestic abuse, and I am learning it is rampant in our Caribbean islands. This was the cycle your life repeated.

There is a story in the book of a woman who loses two children. One as an adult and one as a baby and in this story the woman describes the pain of losing a baby while it is still nursing. She describes the babies she lost as tearing through her soul.[37] *She makes it clear that no matter how many times a woman loses a baby the pain does not dull. I am grateful to this story because it lets me come closer to understanding the pain you must have felt when you lost Clive and Marlene. I refuse to believe that just because the infant mortality rate was higher then, and many mothers experienced this form of grief, that this was normal. I will not normalize your pain.*

[37] Jaikaran, *Trauma : a collection of short stories*, 36.

Memoirs, Fiction, and Graphic Novels

Alongside the two former novels I read quite a few memoirs. I knew I was not writing a memoir, but I knew I would be able to learn about strategies of writing—that work to preserve the dignity and privacy of my Ancestors and living family members—from personal memoirs and family memoirs. I read *I'm Still Here* by Austin Channing Brown, a personal memoir that centres around Brown's experience of being a Black Woman in predominantly white institutions. I read this shortly after withdrawing from york university's MFA program. I was seeking guidance not only in how to write about my family, but in how to continue to survive in these violent, white institutions. I knew I would be going to ocadu in the fall, and would be back in another predominantly white institution. I related so deeply to Brown's experiences of silencing of Black People, of being gaslit, segregated, and of being frustrated by white people's fragility. I felt inherently seen by Brown's writing style and its content, I knew that I wanted to be able to write something like *I'm Still Here.* In the middle of the book there is an interlude titled "Why I love being a Black Girl"[38] That brought me to tears. This interlude was purposeful, because amongst experiences of violence are experiences of Black Joy, that are inherent to my Grandma's story, and the story of our entire family. This book modelled a way to write that is honest and holds both capitalism and colonialism accountable for the violence these systems create for Black Women, while also providing a description of Black Womanhood that centres around joy. The two can exist at once: violence and joy.

[38] Brown, Austin Channing. *I'm still here: Black dignity in a world made for Whiteness*. 2023 (81-84)

Graphic Novels

As a trained illustrator I am drawn to visual methods of storytelling like graphic novels. I hope to write and illustrate one myself. I had considered a graphic novel as a possibility for the visual components of this research. However I realized I would need to take much more time and focus than an MFA program would allow. I read the graphic novels *The Best We Could Do by* Thi Bui, and *Memories from Limón* by Edo Brenes, each providing insight on how to tell stories that are only partially mine to tell, and how to do so visually, through illustration.

In the Best We Could Do, Bui tells the story of her childhood as a young Vietnamese girl in southern california, alongside the stories of Bui's entire family fleeing by boat from Vietnam at the height of American occupation in the 60s and 70s, and the stories of her Grandparents living under colonial rule. The stories of Bui's family are told alongside the history of Vietnam's resistance against colonial rule. Bui begins the novel with the birth of her first child. She tells the reader that this monumental moment in her life, transitioning from child to parents,[39] made her think deeply about who her parents really were. Bui created this graphic novel from a deep desire to know who and where she came from. The story of her family is told through flashbacks into the past, and through depictions of conversations had between Bui and her parents. I was struck by the honesty of her writing, and inspired by the simple black ink illustrations of her family, her home in Vietnam and the many stories shared between Bui and her parents. Near the

[39] "Family is now something I have created, not just something I was born into" Bui, Thi. *The best we could do: An illustrated memoir.* 2018(21)

end of the novel Bui illustrates a family tree stemming from the roots of a tree, alongside this she asks “How much of me is my own and how much is stamped into my blood and bone, predestined?”[40] I read this novel for the first time in 2020 right as I was finishing my studies at emily carr. I read this sentence and asked the same of myself, *how much of me is made up of you? How much of me comes from a woman I knew nearly nothing about?* Asking these questions prompted me to draw my first portrait of Grandma, and planted the seed in my head that my Grandma’s story is just as much a part of me as my own.

Memories from Limón written and illustrated by Edo Brenes tells the story of Brenes finding a box of old family photos at his mom’s house, which prompts him to go through his relatives, and interview them about the photos and their lives in Costa Rica through the 40s–70s. The novel flips between depictions of Brenes interviewing his elders, and vignettes of the stories being told. The majority of the story centres around Brenes’ Grandparents, and his Great Uncle. Throughout the novel, Brenes chooses to directly illustrate each photo he is using as historical reference. By doing this, the reader is constantly aware of the source material, the scans of the actual photos may not be present, but the photos are shown as a valuable source of information. Reading Memories From Limon gave me a framework for working from family photos. I was inspired by this novel, to begin to draw my family photos, both as inspiration for stories, and as a way to interact with the photos in a more meaningful and personal way.

[40] Bui, Thi. *The best we could do: An illustrated memoir.* 2018. (324)

Artworks and outputs -Letters

When I decided I wanted to communicate with my Grandma, I was met with the problem of how. I was not raised in a spiritual or religious household. The most religious my parents got was the tradition of pancakes and gospel music on Sunday mornings. This meant that ancestral veneration or prayer in the traditional sense didn't feel natural to me in the beginning. The idea of outright speaking to my Grandma felt out of this world in the beginning. When my dad first moved to so-called canada in the 60s, he would communicate with my Grandma by writing her letters that were read aloud to her, most likely by Auntie Margot. My Dad has a large collection of letters sent back and forth between Trinidad and nanaimo, and later, vancouver. During this time, letters were my Grandma's lifeline to her children living abroad; this is how photos were shared and how updates were given. My parents used to write letters to one another when their schedules didn't allow for quality time together. When my Sister was born prematurely, and she was in an incubator for six weeks, my parents coped by writing her a letter every single day. On birthdays, my parents wrote long letters in our cards. Writing letters seemed to be what we do with big feelings, to cross distances, or to deal with pain.

During my undergrad at ECUAD, I created an arts-based research project with the intent to honour Sarah Baartman.[41] It was here that I learned my portrait drawing/painting process could be used to honour people like Sarah (figure 16), and that through this, I was able to see Black Women like her who have passed on, as my ancestors. During this time, I wrote to Sarah like she was a dear friend, I talked to her about the process of drawing her and researching her life; I told her my intentions, and why I wanted to use my art practice to show someone like her love.

[41] Sarah Baartman was an enslaved Black Woman who was stolen from the cape of Africa. Sarah was stolen by dutch slave traders from her KhoiKhoi land and people and taken to europe to be shown in human zoos. She lived a life filled with violence and did not find peace even in death. For more information on Sarah and my relationship: https://www.sadealexis.com/#/safehomesarah/

I came back to this letter-writing practice in 2023 when I decided I would dedicate my thesis to Ms. Margaret. It was intuitive for me, and it felt good to be able to talk to my Grandma, someone who I knew would accept me and understand the things I was going through. Moving across the country was extremely difficult; I have no family here, and no prior friends before moving to Tkaronto. I was also experiencing anti-Blackness in the graduate program I was in at york; I was the only Black person in the entire graduate arts department and the only person of colour in both cohorts of the master's of fine arts program. I was even more isolated than I found myself in my undergrad, and was seeking guidance, acceptance, and most importantly, belonging. When I began writing to my Grandma, I found I was able to be honest about what I was experiencing, and I was able to see how the systemic violence I was experiencing connected me to her. By writing to Grandma, I was able to talk to her as how one would talk to a close elder. I was able to ask for guidance, update her about my life and talk about my experiences at school. I found myself writing to Ms. Margaret in times of uncertainty or deep loneliness. I found myself writing to her almost every time I left home (figure 17.) In these moments, I felt deeply connected to my Dad and my Aunts and Uncles and found solace in writing to Grandma, much like they did. Over the past three years, I have written to Grandma on my phone, in my sketchbook, in notebooks, and on this computer. Writing letters

Figure 16. *Safe Home Sarah.* Ink and watercolour on paper (Artwork by Sade Alexis, 2020)

gave me the confidence to move my communication into the physical. I began creating altars and collecting archival family photos. Talking to Grandma, believing she loves and accepts me, gave me the courage to reach out to my elders.

Figure 17. *Letter Obscured 1,* Ink and pencil crayon on vellum and paper
(Artwork by Sade Alexis 2024)

January 11, 2024

Dear Grandma,

Every time I get on a plane, I think about my family. I think of Uncle Joe getting on his first plane ever in 1957 to fly across the world from a tiny little speck in the ocean, across continents, to this huge piece of land. I think about my Dad missing his flight to vancouver in 1968, and Uncle Joe waiting for him at the terminal. I think about Auntie Josette flying out to new york by herself. I think of Marlon going to meet Uncle Joe and dad in vancouver in the 70s. I think about you getting on the plane to visit your kids for the first time in washington, dc. I think of Uncle Winston boarding a plane to go to Howard University.

I wonder if they were scared of the turbulence like I am. I wonder if they cried as they watched their island pass under the shadow of the airplane. I wonder if you wished you could have stayed with your children. I think of you saying goodbye to your children one by one, not knowing when or if they would return.

Did you cry? Did she put on a brave face to ease her children's nerves? I wonder now, when did Auntie Leona move? When did Kay leave?

I think about Auntie Margot, staying behind to take care of you, watching each of her siblings leave Trinidad for school, to become "something". I think about the decision to leave home, and I wonder if it is ever really worth it. I wonder what my dads life would have been like, had he been close to his family.

I wonder too for myself, have I fallen prey to the same narratives my elders did, that something somewhere else is better than where I am from? That leaving my family will bring me more and better things? I keep wondering; what is more important, the place that I live, or the people who I live near?

I think about the future, would I ever want my children to move from me, to leave their people for something more, something better, something different. I think about how this, in and of itself, this myth young Black and brown people are taught, that their homelands have nothing for them, and these beacons of whiteness (new york, vancouver, toronto, washington, houston, maryland) have more to offer, is colonialism in action. We are taught to leave what we know and who we know, to go and work for these colonial empires, to dedicate our minds and our bodies to their upkeep and maintenance. Do we all trade our homes for the promise of success? Do I believe in leaving home? What has it done for my people? What has it done for our homelands? Who do we serve when we leave our lands and our people? Who do we do it for? What do we do it for? I keep asking myself, why am I leaving everyone I love, Land that has loved me, for a place that doesn't claim me? Can I make a home somewhere else if my community is not with me? Can that place ever be home?

Drawing photos

I have been drawing for as long as I can remember. It began with drawing from my imagination, and quickly moved on to tracing photos I had printed off of the family computer of animals and cartoon characters—I would tape them to the living room window to create an at-home light box. During my undergrad, drawing and illustration classes were the few studio classes I had access to; drawing was also the most accessible medium for me, as it was the only one I was truly comfortable with. I continued drawing with a focus on Black portraiture, and became skilled at drawing us. In this period of my life, I was very concerned with rendering well; I wanted to prove to my classmates that I had the skill that matched my conceptual ideas. I put immense pressure on myself to achieve high levels of skill and to also make artwork that meant something to me. I burned out very heavily after graduating and, truthfully, did not come back to my drawing practice with the same vigour and joy I once had for a very long time.

Only recently have I truly connected to my drawing practice. This started when I began drawing from family photos. Drawing photos of myself as a kid (figure 18), my Dad and Auntie Paula as kids (figure 19), and other archival photos has allowed me to connect to drawing on a more emotional level. When I draw you, I am not trying to prove to anyone that I can draw. I am also not really concerned with drawing you perfectly. I am trying to make something that feels like your spirit with pencil and paper. Now, when I draw my dad as a kid, I am meeting him as a kid for the first time, as I focus on each detail and slowly render his little kid face, I can see my own, my sisters and my cousins. When I draw little Marcus, I feel like he is with me now. When I draw you as a young woman around my age, you are with me now. When I draw Uncle Marlon holding a cutlass and a bushel of bananas, I feel like I was there in 1976, standing over my dad's

shoulder, taking the photo with him. Drawing helps me know things I could never experience, like dinner on your balcony or Auntie Margot cooking in the backyard.

Figure 18. *Olivia and Sade,* graphite and pencil crayon on paper (Artwork by Sade Alexis 2025)

Figure 19. *Dad and Paula,* Pencil crayon and ink on paper (Artwork by Sade Alexis 2026)

My drawing practice is extremely slow and meditative. It takes me ages to draw a complete portrait because I obsess over the details of each person's face. I was recently drawing a photo of my Dad, Auntie Josette, and Uncle Winston (figure 20), and it took me over 6 hours to draw a palm-sized graphite portrait of Auntie Josette. While drawing, I thought of the first time I met her, I thought of the warmth of her house, of the sound of my cousins coming from her sewing room. I thought about the many nicknames she has given my Dad, my sister, and me over the years. This is how the process usually goes. As my eyes and hands are busy looking at my photo reference and slowly building up form on my paper, my mind is going over all the memories I have of the person. I talk to them in my head as well; I ask them the questions I always wanted to ask. I spend hours with whoever I am drawing.

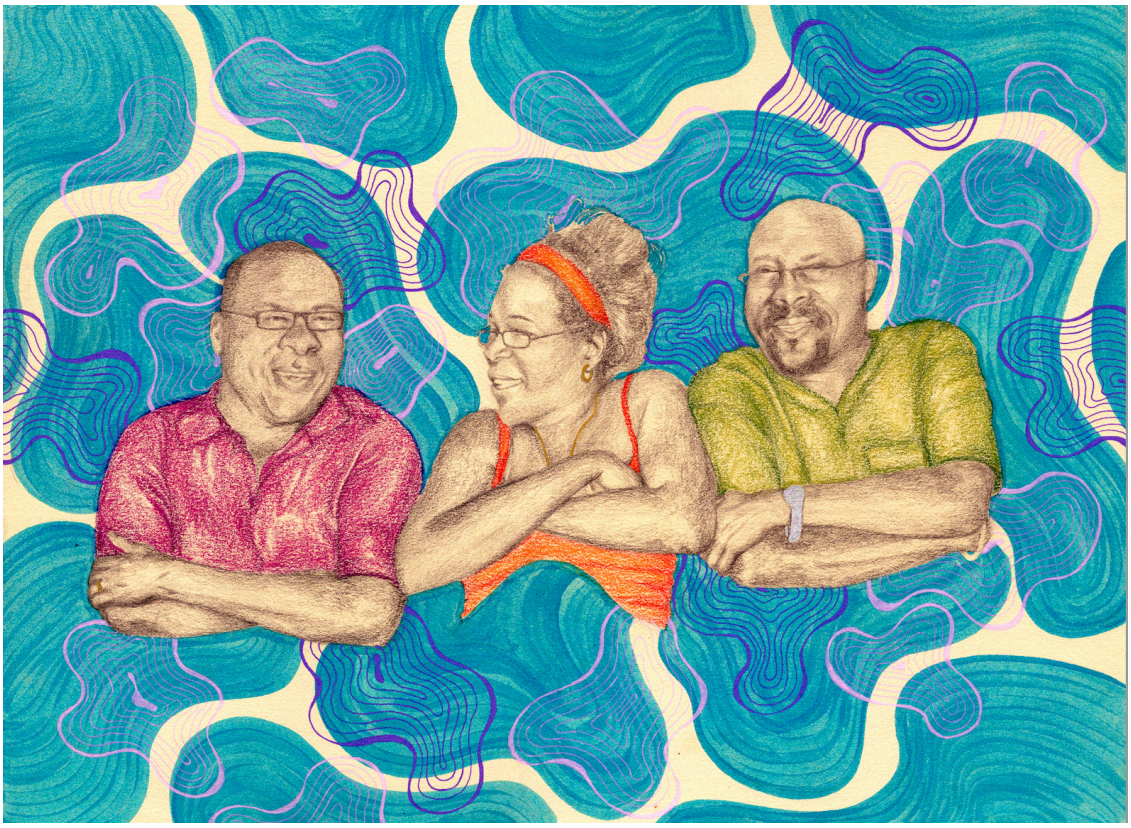

Figure 20. *Marc, Josette, Winston.* Graphite, pencil crayon, and ink on toned paper. (Artwork by Sade Alexis, 2026)

Throughout this process of drawing our photos, I have been able to see how deep our resemblance goes. Growing up, I was often told I did not look like anyone in the family, and with very little family actually present, it was easy for me to believe this. This added to my isolation, my Mom's family is white and ginger, so I often heard jokes about me not looking like my Grandma's granddaughter, and was often asked if I was adopted—if people had only met my Mom. This made me feel so othered, and I could not turn to your side of the family to see my face reflected back at me. I did not have the photos I have now, as they were tucked away in boxes and drawers. Now that I have those photos, I see myself reflected in the faces of my Aunts and Uncles as young people. I see myself in your laugh. Through the drawing process, I am able to see your face in each and every one of the faces that you made possible.

Fibre arts

I have mentioned throughout this work that I have been drawn to making things with my hands as long as I can remember. Making objects, artworks that exist outside of a piece of paper, is innate for me. As a kid, I was constantly crafting and showed an interest in art making of any kind.

My maternal Grandma Pam Tovell took care of me and my sister while my parents were at work until I turned 6. Then, we moved to Burnaby, and our parents put us in before- and after-school care. My Grandma Pam was a large part of my life growing up. She was there for all of our special occasions and filled in at school events when a parent was needed, but mine were at work. Pam is an extremely skilled craftsperson; when we were young, she handmade matching outfits for my sister and me, hand-knit sweaters and cardigans, and was adept at embroidery, needlepoint and cross-stitch. She passed some of these skills down to my eldest Aunt Corrine, but my mom and her sister Bev were not very interested in arts or crafts, so my Grandma Pam did not have many people to share her skills with.

Pam taught me how to sew starting as early as five; it started with buttons, and moved on to learning different stitches. I became obsessed with handmaking clothes for my stuffed animals, which never fit because I refused to make a pattern. My Grandma Pam would supply me with materials like fabric, buttons, and my very own sewing kit. Within a few years, I had upgraded to a kid's sewing machine that Pam had found at the thrift store she volunteered at. By the time I was 10 years old, I had moved to the greater world of crafting, and had been spending all my birthday and Christmas money at local craft stores buying bracelet weaving kits and pom pom making kits. For Christmas that year, I asked my Aunts and Grandma Pam for craft kits, and I received six or seven full cross-stitch, needlepoint and embroidery kits. I remember sitting down

with Aunt Corrine on Boxing Day, learning how to needlepoint. I fell in love with needlepoint, but when it was time to cross-stitch and follow a pattern, I completely lost interest.

I came back to embroidery as an angsty teen when I saw handmade patches going around on Tumblr. I made a few for my friends and me, and tucked my embroidery supplies away. Over the years, I would come back to embroidery to customize my clothes or to make gifts for loved ones, slowly making bigger and more elaborate patches. During the lockdown of 2020, I came back to embroidery as a recently graduated BFA. I began with leaves and patterns, which were prominent in my artwork at the time. I realized I could probably transfer my drawing style—working with radiating lines to create form—into embroidery. I began working on my first embroidery portrait in the summer of 2021; it took many trips to the craft store and many, many hours of hand-sewing. I was extremely happy with the results, but was already frustrated with the slowness of my drawing and illustration practice, so turning to an even slower practice like embroidery was not appealing. The next embroidered portrait I made was for the group exhibition for the fine arts graduate program at York in 2022. Aside from one Indigenous PhD student, I was the only brown person in the entire show, which meant I was the only one in the entire program.

Figure 21. *A version of you I can hold to my face,* Embroidery floss, watercolour and Ink on muslin fabric (Artwork by Sade Alexis, 2026)

*I decided to make an embroidery piece of you this past September (*figure 21) *because it felt like the right medium to contain my adoration and grief for you. When I make an embroidery portrait, every single stitch represents a moment of my concentration. There is something different between drawing line upon line in swift motions and creating a line out of a series of stitches. This portrait took me over 200 hours; when you look at it, you can see how much time I spent thinking about you, looking at your photo, trying to capture your spirit in thread. In the*

end, I am left with a portrait of you that I can feel, one that I can hold to my face and imagine it is yours. This embroidery feels more real than any drawing I have made of you, maybe because I can hold it, or maybe because I made it with my hands. Maybe it is because I know this practice of Women weaving, sewing, looping, and knotting travels through both sides of my ancestry. Maybe because this practice is one that connects my two disparate lineages, and reminds me they can exist within me, and come together to create something meaningful. My lineages have things in common, contrary to what I have been taught to believe.

Ceramics

I have been drawn to ceramics since I was in my undergrad. I always dreamed of taking ceramics classes, but they were always filled up by the time I was able to register for classes. When I began my MFA at york, I expressed interest in ceramics and was told York had all the facilities for me to learn to make and fire ceramic pieces. This was a lie; there was one very small kiln, and there were many students trying to use it. Due to my lack of safety at york, I never found the courage to work in the ceramic studio. When I made the choice to move my studies to ocadu and begin again in the first year of my MFA, I again went with the intent of learning ceramics. I wanted to come out of this degree with at least one hard skill, I had already spent thousands of dollars on my education and desperately wanted to get something concrete out of this degree.

I found it near impossible to gain access to any of the studios at ocadu. This is due to the fact that the program I am in went from 12 students, to 40 in one year, without building new infrastructure in the school to accommodate the increase in students. This increase is not specific to my program either, which means the entire school is now overbooked and understaffed. Meanwhile, the provincial Ford government has been slashing away at education budgets. To

“accomodate” this problem the ocadu has made it so that graduate students must ALREADY have the skills necessary to work in the various studies across the school independently, to make up for the lack of technician availability. In order to gain access to the print studio, for example, I would have to apply with a portfolio of images that prove my knowledge in the medium. My dreams of making ceramic objects for my exhibition had come crashing down once again.

In the cohort prior to me, folks like Jules Dufrense and Char Carborne advocated collectively for more opportunities for studio experimentation for graduate students. It is thanks to their collective activism that a few studio technicians began offering skill-based workshops that could open access to the respective studio for whoever completed the workshop. A 3-week ceramics handbuilding workshop was offered by Robin Thieu, the ceramics studio technician. She is an incredibly skilled ceramicist/potter and has very high and clear standards for how she runs the studio. I found it easy to meet her expectations and completed the 3-week workshop.

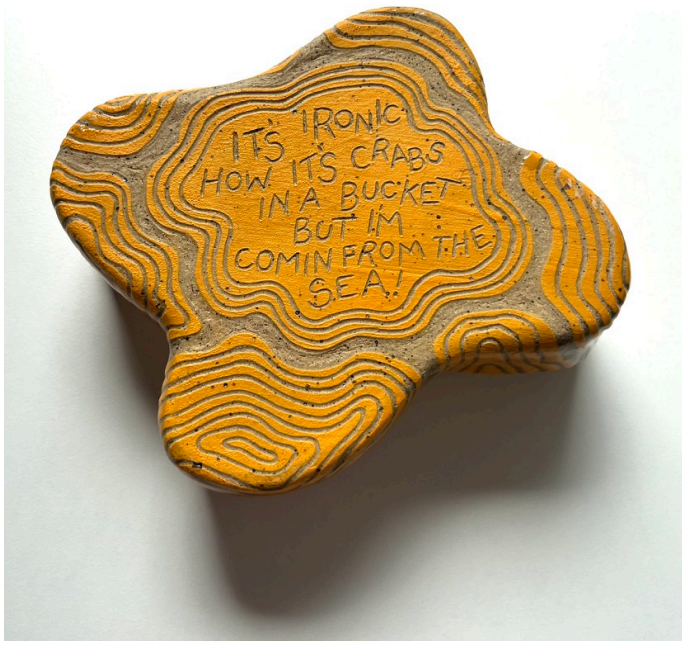

Figure 22. *Its ironic how its crabs in a bucket.* Ceramic (Artwork by Sade Alexis, 2025)

Once I gained access into the studio I knew I wanted to make objects I could use in an altar, and for ancestral veneration. The first piece I made was a yellow incense dish with dark speckled clay. I wrote the words “It's ironic how it’s crabs in a bucket but I’m comin from the sea!” on the bottom and

used the sgraffito technique to carve my patterns into it, and, after bisque firing it, I glazed it in a clear glaze (figure 22). It felt amazing to make something I could use to connect myself to Grandma. I had begun a practice of lighting incense, burning sage or palo santo, and praying to my Grandma in front of a small altar I created at home. Each time I came to the studio, I worked very intuitively, the years of watching tiktoks and instagram videos of ceramics tutorials had paid off, and it felt very natural to be working with my hands and clay. I felt I understood the material almost innately and it felt easy to let myself trust my instincts and create without much hesitation. Over the past two years I have made ceramic pieces for worship (figure 23). I have made 5 sconces for holding candles and incense, 3 small dishes for water or other offerings like money or fruit, a tray for fruit, 2 small plate/bowls to use as spirit plates, a mango-shaped container to hold incense, and a small plant pot. Each of these ceramics were not made just for the intent to display, but for them to live with me in my home, and my daily practices of prayer and ancestral veneration. I wanted to know where the objects I use for prayer or celebration came from and how they were made, I wanted a deep connection to them that I knew could only be achieved by making them myself.

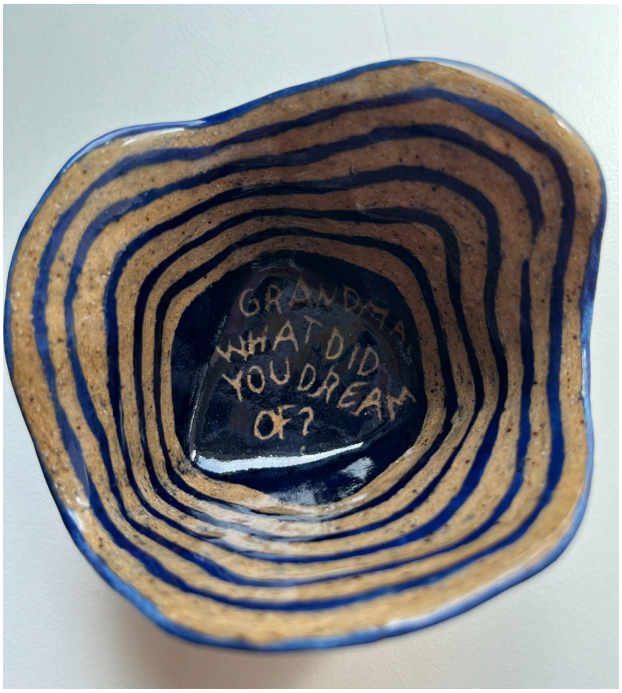

Figure 23. *Grandma what did you dream of?* Ceramic (Artwork by Sade Alexis, 2026)

Patterns and Visual Excess

There is a very clear visual theme in my artwork, regardless of medium. (figure 24) I cannot seem to make anything without adding some sort of repeating pattern in it, whether it is in the face itself, the hair, the clothing or the background of a portrait, there is a pattern somewhere. My ceramics and embroidery have these same patterns. I gave myself and my partner tattoos of these patterns because they have become such a part of my artwork—they feel like sort of a signature.

Figure 24. *Exhibition entrance,* Artwork by Sade Alexis (Photograph by Wang Yi Fan, 2026)

Not in the way that I feel it doesn't "look" like my artwork if I don't use them, but in a way where I am excited to incorporate these undulating lines into a drawing or artwork in some way. It is the part of the process where I am not concerned with rendering or texture or depth. I have spent a lot of time trying to figure out what these patterns "mean;"[42] my dear friend Lucinda Clader once said these patterns look like if you tried to visually capture joy. Some people have compared these lines to weather patterns, topographical maps, or water patterns.

I like to think of these patterns as all of these things combined. The truth is, I think they visually represent my autism;[43] many of us on the autism spectrum are skilled at pattern recognition, and

[42] Often in class critiques, I was asked to explain why I drew these patterns and what they meant or represented in my work. I found that as a Black woman artist that often the answer "It felt good" was not an acceptable one for me, but it would suffice for any of my white counterparts.

[43] I am on the autism spectrum. Diagnostically I would be considered minimal needs, high-masking autistic. This is something I have always known about myself, but did not know how to describe it until I started seeing and hearing

find joy and comfort in them. I have always loved patterns, I distinctly remember learning about them in kindergarten and becoming obsessed with finding repeating patterns in my daily life. I often find myself absent-mindedly looking at patterns in the ceiling tiles, or in the leaves. In my art practice, the repeating patterns represent moments of neurodivergent joy[44] that exist within my art practice. They are a moment free from the pressure of representing a real person, a moment for my brain to relax and go quiet.

Figure 25. *Ms. Margaret*, watercolour, pencil crayon and acrylic marker on paper. (Artwork by Sade Alexis 2025)

When I make a drawing or illustration,[45] I use bright saturated colours, often using a wide colour palette including neons, and very sparingly use true to life colours of subjects (figure 25). This began because I was never traditionally trained in colour theory, or how to build form using layers of pigment. I decided to

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the stories of fellow late-diagnosed adult women, and saw myself in their experiences. A helpful and expansive definition of autism is presented in *Unmasking Autism* by Devon Price.

[44] Morénike Giwa Onaiwu, "*I, Too, Sing Neurodiversity."* Ought: The Journal of Autistic Culture 2, no. 1 (November 23, 2020).

[45] During my undergrad I took a class called "Illustrating movement" taught by Mike Markowski. In this class we discussed the difference between illustration and other forms of figurative artworks. As a class, we defined illustration as artwork created with a clear message for the viewer. If the illustration does not accomplish this, the illustration is at fault, not the viewer. I understood this to mean that when we illustrate we are explicitly communicating with a viewer—our message or desired understanding from a piece is clear.

use my watercolours straight from the pan, as a stylistic choice. What began as a way to make-up for a lack of skill[46] became a part of my practice I enjoyed—choosing a colour that fit my subject. I now like to think that each photo reference, or in this case, each person in my family, has a colour that in my mind represents the feeling of the photo or person. These relationships between subject and colour are not fixed for me, the choice is intuitive and often is made in a second, it's a moment of listening to and trusting my gut.

My use of colour and pattern combined with the occasional tropical plant or bird create what can be considered as visual clutter. I do not shy away from this, I like to fill a piece of paper up with colour when I make an illustration. I do this as a way to resist the minimalism and figurative whiteness of western conceptions of modernity; the proposed universalism of modernism's minimalism might be described as a way to distance and efface cultures seen as pre-modern. I also do this as a way to create visual excess, as described by Jillian Hernandez in *Aesthetics of Excess: The Art and Politics of Black and Latina Embodiment.* In this book, Hernandez describes the visual language of Black and Latinx women that is often looked down upon as trashy—big hair, loud colours, materials considered cheap, heavy makeup, neons, patterns upon pattern—as a way that we resist colonial domination.[47] Hernandez also argues that the reason collectively these attributes are considered trashy or low class, is both a classist and racist assumption that paints Black and Latina visual culture and embodiment as pejorative or less than.[48] I emulate this visual excess in my artwork to pay homage to the Black and Latinx women of the Caribbean diaspora,

[46] I am a firm believer in the fact that anyone can learn how to render, how to draw or paint the images they make in their head through practice. I was very behind when I entered my undergrad, I had no formal training and desperately wanted to tell stories about Black people, and in turn, draw or paint portraits of us. I learned to become skilled at portraiture by practicing, and by watching Youtube videos of portrait speed paints.
[47] Jillian Hernandez, *Aesthetics of Excess: The Art and Politics of Black and Latina Embodiment.* Duke University Press, 2020, 6.
[48] Hernandez, *Aesthetics of Excess*, 7.

and as a means of aligning myself with the visual culture created by working-class Black women.

Printmaking

In my final semester of my undergrad degree I took an independent study with Daniel Drennan ElAwar. He offered a class titled Relief Printmaking: The Art of Protest and Resistance that focused on the political history of printmaking and its deep ties to resistance movements like the Black Panther Party and across the globe in Palestinian anti-colonial movements.[49] Daniel and I created our directed study based off of the 3 projects assigned in the class; however, because I was on my way to graduate, I opted out of learning more streamlined processes like using a letterpress.[50] I did this because I was interested in learning practices I could continue on my own, without access to a studio. I chose to do the projects as lino-blocks rather than experimenting with woodcut, as this was the relief print method I was most interested in.

I completed the first project which was a 2-colour relief print postcard with a political slogan or message. I made a postcard with the words "say her name"[51] on the first layer, and on the second, I listed Black Women who had been murdered by the police, or by the hands of white people in the past 10 years (figure 26). The second project was another 2-colour lino-block print, based off of the series of posters

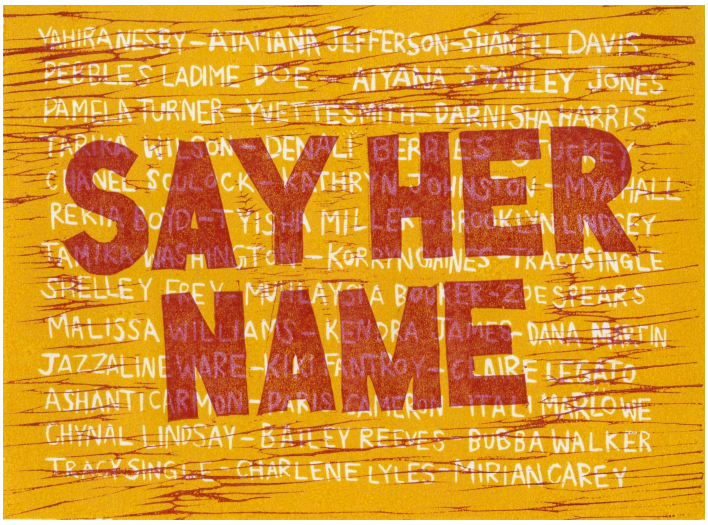

Figure 26, *Say her name,* relief print on paper (Artwork by Sade Alexis 2020)

[49] Daniel Drennan ElAwar, "Decolonizing Illustration: Rerooting Culture, Language, and Activist Practice." College Art Association Conference, January 1, 2019.
[50]Daniel Drennan ElAwar, . "Syllabus for Relief Printmaking: The Art of Protest and Resistance." Spring 2020
[51] Based off of the Say Her Name movement, started in 2014 by the African American Policy Forum. The movement was created to bring attention to the fact that Black Women are murdered by police at the same rates as Black men, despite the fact that the murders of Black Women are grossly underreported.

produced by the justseeds collective. The series is titled Celebrate People's History and highlights and celebrates revolutionaries across the globe and into history.[52] For this project, I created a 2-block print featuring a portrait of Zora Neale Hurston and her quote, "If you are silent about your pain, they will kill you and say you enjoyed it," intended to highlight both Hurston's legacy as an author and an activist. However, I did not have the chance to print these blocks, as I was preparing to print them the week of March 13, 2020, the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

My journey in relief printmaking ended there, as I did not have the facilities to continue printing at home. Upon beginning my studies at ocadu, I was interested in working in the printmaking studios, but faced the same barriers I had when trying to access the ceramics studio. In this case, no workshops were offered that would allow for graduate students to gain access into the studios. I did not feel confident applying to work in the studios, as I had only created one completed print, and I knew this would not suffice as proof of skill in the area. Despite this, I wanted to create a lino-block print of my Grandma. I wanted to be able to make prints and mail them to each of my Aunts and Uncles, and any cousins that are interested. I am inspired by Black Activist artists, like Elizabeth Catlett and Emory Douglas, and see my print-based artwork as aligned with theirs. I felt that, by making a portrait of my Grandma in a similar method to that of Elizabeth Catlett and the many other radical Black Women printmakers who follow in her footsteps, I am placing my Grandma along that continuum.

I chose to make a portrait based off of a photo of my Grandma that has been a constant in my life. No one in our family knows how old she was in the photo, but the photo hangs in the homes of all of my relatives. For many years, this photo was the only one I had ever seen of my Grandma. For me, this photo represents the beginning of my relationship with her. The process of creating an image for a lino block requires you to draw the image multiple times, first as a sketch, second a line drawing, third to transfer onto the block, fourth to redefine the linework, and a fifth time while carving the lino-block. By this time the image is now a part of your body in a different way than a single drawing is. The carving process is even slower than my drawing process, and forces me to pay even closer attention to the subject. Now, I

[52] Daniel Drennan ElAwar, . "Syllabus for Relief Printmaking: The Art of Protest and Resistance." Spring 2020

have a series of prints that can be shared with my family based off of this photo, and I have a lino block that I carved over many many hours that can be brought with me throughout my life—a block from which I can print time and time again (figure 27).

Figure 27. *The First Time We Met,* Lino-Block print on japanese paper (Artwork by Sade Alexis 2026)

I would not have been able to print this edition without the help of Rhiana Mitchell, an extremely skilled studio tech whom I had the privilege of meeting when I TA'd for a class they were a student in. Rhiana invited me to create a round of prints on a Sunday when they worked as a technician in the print studios. They gave me a quick refresher on hand-printing lino blocks, and gave an excellent tutorial on how to know if your block has enough ink on it. I am extremely grateful that this edition of prints was made with the help of a fellow Queer Black person who is also part of the Trinidadian diaspora. Working collaboratively on this project reminded me that art like this cannot be made in isolation, and needs community to thrive.

Exhibition and Installation

Dear Grandma,

*I am sitting in our exhibition (*figure 28). *I am surrounded by photos of our family, like I have always dreamed. My favourite music is playing on my speaker, the books I have read in the past four years are spread throughout the exhibition. I wish I could light incense for you,*[53] *to call your spirit to this place and to let you know that it is safe for us here. I have placed my portraits of Nina Simone, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Toni Morrison in the entrance, so that they protect our family. They have been my guides for many years. I first drew these portraits to accompany my portrait of Sarah Bartman, they were made to protect her and to ensure her spirit is safe in whatever space I display her portrait. Here, they act to protect our family from harm. In my mind these four Black women who are the mothers of Black Feminism, would understand your life, and why you and our lineage needs to be protected.*

Figure 28. *Sade in the exhibition space* (Photograph by Roy Kuo, 2026)

I didn't want to force you into another space that was not made for us. Galleries are literal white cubes, they exist to uphold whiteness, white cultural production and most importantly, these galleries are spaces for capitalist gain. Gallery spaces aren't welcoming to people like me or you. They have harsh lighting, intense silence, and a series of unspoken rules you must abide by. They are spaces gatekept for those who "belong" in the art world, those with

[53] Gallery services informed me that I would not be allowed to light incense or candles without the presence of a fire marshall.

*RRSPs and inheritances, they are for people with university degrees and generational wealth. Gallery spaces are not made to house neurodivergent people, people with disabilities, and those who are working class. The lights are low here, just like they are in my house, there is furniture, a comfy recliner, a small loveseat, and a kitchen table. On the kitchen table my books, sketchbook, photo album, and journal are available for viewers to flip through (*figure 29).

Figure 29. *Exhibition view.* (Photograph by Roy Kuo, 2026)

I have used batik fabrics[54] *that I bought at the Guyanese-run fabric store on queen west Affordable Textiles. I chose the fabrics intuitively, being drawn to colour and shapes. My friend Stella Zheng ironed, measured, and cut the fabrics into 3" by 3" squares, then pinned each square into groups of four., sewed across all the seams and hemmed the edges. I used these patterned quadrants as the backdrop for my artwork and photos. I knew I did not want the walls to be white, and painting them would be too labour intensive for a one day install. During my time at both ocadu and york, I experimented with using batik fabrics as a backdrop. I have been drawn to these fabrics since I saw the work of Yinka Shonibare, early in my career. Shonibare uses these batik fabrics as a stand-in for the colonial relationship between Africa and Europe.* [55] *For me, these fabrics represent this, and they remind me of Caribbean folks who use*

[54] Batik fabric refers to fabric that is printed using wax resist. It was brought to west Africa and Thailand by the dutch, and has become a popular practice across west africa.
[55] "Yinka Shonibare and Wax Print." *Selvedge* magazine, March 26, 2021.

these patterned fabrics to signify our ancestral connection to west Africa. I've used the fabrics here, to both transform the space, and to call to our roots in the continent.

When placing my artwork and photos in the gallery, I worked intuitively. I had the help of my Sister Olivia, my Brother-in-law Ellis, best friend and Stella, and my Partner Roy. They made it so I could focus on curation, while they did the manual labour. Without them, this show would not be what it was. After the fabrics were hung, I laid out all my drawings, letters and photos. I knew intuitively that the altar for you would be right around the corner from the entrance of the gallery. I wanted the altar to be out of view from the hallway. I worked from that wall moving to the left. I placed Jamaal, Auntie Kay and Auntie Leona close to you, and their families close to them (figure 30). *When placing the rest of my artworks, I trusted my gut instincts. I put family members next to the ones they have conflict with. I made a space that focussed on Auntie Josette* (figure 31.)*, and a space that centred around you and Auntie Margot. I knew your bond needed its own space. Each photo, letter, drawing and ceramic was*

Figure 30. *Exhibition view, Jamaal,* and *Leona.* (Photograph by Wang Yi Fan, 2026)

Figure 31. *Exhibition view.* (Photograph by Wang Yi Fan, 2026)

placed both intuitively and with intention, I had to listen to myself and trust my understanding of our family.

I was present in the gallery for every moment it was open. I couldn't bear the idea of people coming in here and not knowing whose family these beautiful people were. This meant I was there to tell stories of my Aunties, to tell stories about my Dad, about you. This meant I could take joy in hearing the stories our stories brought up for people visiting the space. So many people said they wish they could spend all day here. I created a space I want to sit and stay and live in. This exhibition reminds me that our photos and our stories cannot go back into albums, onto shelves or drawers. Our stories need to keep being told, our photos need to live on our walls and in our homes.

Figure 33. *Exhibition view,* (Photograph by Roy Kuo, 2026)

Final Thoughts

As I sit here inside of this exhibition in front of the altar I have made for my Grandma and me, the altar that normally sits as the centrepiece of my home (figure 33 and 34). I reflect on what this exhibition has meant for me, and what it means for people like me. People who grow up without representations of themselves, people who long for kin, people who do not grow up with stories of their people, people who savor moments of family and culture knowing they will end in a week or two. People who long for closeness across continents, who grieve family they never had the pleasure of knowing, people who have grown up isolated. I have seen

people brought to tears while reading my letters, I have been told people's precious family stories that reflect those of my kin, I have seen people flip through my family photos, and take time to ask who each portrait is of. I have been affirmed that by telling my family's story, space is created for people like me, to share their own stories, and the stories of their kin.

Figure 34. *Exhibition view.* (Photograph by Wang Yi Fan, 2026)

Stories like my Grandma's are not unique. This is the reality of the colonialist and capitalist systems, they make the lives of Black and Brown women, working class Women, Queer people, steeped in violence. Stories like mine are not unique, stories of longing for ancestors, longing for Matriarchs, longing for belonging. When we tell our stories, that feel so coated in pain and hardships, we are reminded of our resistance. We are reminded of the joy of meals shared with family, and laughter over card games, we are reminded that despite it all we are still here.

I do not see the work I have done here as even near finished. I still want to know more about Ms. Margaret, I still want to go back to Trinidad, and spend time in the mountains that my Grandma grew up in. I want to see how this work transforms when I am not working within the confines of an institution. I want to see this exhibition in a space that actually allows for candles and incense. For me, this thesis research project is a jumping off point. I will continue this work for the people who came before me, and for the people who come after me.

Addendum and Continuations

Dear Grandma,
A week ago I had my thesis defence. I was afraid that this process would be very procedural and bureaucratic, I had seen these sort of things take a dark turn, where the committee turns against the student. However, I knew, guided by Daniel Drennan ElAwar my mentor and primary advisor, I would be okay. Alongside Daniel were the chair of the committee who, my secondary advisor Judith Doyle[56] and the external juror that was invited was Byron Armstrong[57]. I am not going to assume that all readers know how thesis defences are set up, so it feels important to explain what they are and how they work. The thesis defence is supposed to be an opportunity for further conversation about the students work, questions are posed by the 3 committee members and the student answers the questions. This conversation goes on for about an hour, or sometimes more if needed, then the committee "deliberates" and they discuss whether the student passes with or without revisions, or in the worst case scenario, the student does not pass.
During my defence, the conversation was fruitful and exciting. I had friends and family join online, as well as my friends here in Tkaronto in person. It didn't feel like I was defending anything, it felt like everyone there was excited about what I had created, and were looking to delve into the possibilities of where this work can go. We discussed the emotional toll this work has taken on me, and the pressure of putting us, our story and our family on display. This kind of

[56] I had the pleasure of being Judith's TA in the fall of 2025, I enjoyed working alongside her. Judith showed me trust and respect as an artist and educator and I respected her care and dedication to our students. When my original advisors dropped me and Daniel stepped in as primary advisor I was desperately seeking a secondary advisor. As I lamented about my struggles to Judith, when she had invited me and a few fellow TAs to her home for dinner, she offered to be my secondary. She admitted to not being the perfect advisor in terms of subject matter and material, but she believed in me and my work. I am grateful that Judith stepped up, I felt comfortable knowing she would be there on the day of the defence.
[57] Byron Armstrong is a writer, art critic and curator. Byron is the spouse of one of the few educators who had a positive impact on me at ocad, Ilene Sova I had the privilege of taking a class from Ilene Sova in my first year at ocad, the class centred decolonial pedagogy and I felt celebrated and supported in the class, which led me to believe Byron could be a good fit as an external juror.

artwork and research has not been easy to do, and it has only been made more difficult by working within the confines of colonial institutions like universities, art galleries, and museums. I talked about my desire to share this work in true community spaces like community centres, peoples homes, and other grassroots community based spaces. The reality is, this work cannot be continued forever.

Nearing the second half of the conversation, Daniel asked that perhaps what I bring forward from this research isn't the artwork or research, but instead the methodology I have created for telling family stories. He asked if this was what could be brought forward, and how this could be brought into my teaching practice[58]*. I took this opportunity to dream. I imagined that I was teaching a class about family lineage, and creating personal archives. I imagined what I would want to share with my students, and how I would maintain a safe, anti hierarchical learning environment when dealing with such intimate and precious subject matter like family histories. The methodology I would bring to the class would be one that centres love, relationality, real life conversations, and most importantly, self protection and respect for our ancestors. What I will bring forward from this work is the way of working. Connecting intimately with ancestors like I have with you, so that love is centred in the relationships students create between themselves and their ancestors, themselves and the artwork, themselves and their family members. In this dream classroom I will empower students to make artwork that is inherently loving and respectful, by treating them with love and respect. I will share with them the power of learning your own lineage, the power of knowing your ancestors, and the power of building relationships.*

[58] My Grandma knows this, but many readers may not. I believe teaching is what I am here on this earth to do. I have always loved sharing knowledge with my peers, and I have always believed in the power of sharing knowledge. Almost all of my professional experience outside of being an illustrator is in child and youth care. I have been working with youth since I was 14 years old, beginning with coaching field hockey, and moving on to youth arts programming, with a specialization in working with children with disabilities. I am continuously inspired by youth, and I believe they deserve teachers who want to uplift, celebrate and protect them.

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