

Large Text

**Sediment:
The Archive as a
Fragmentary Base**

Curated by Denise Ryner

January 17–March 23, 2024
Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

Works by Sandra Brewster, Filipa César,
Justine A. Chambers, Michael Fernandes,
Louis Henderson, Pamila Matharu, and
Krista Belle Stewart

**Art
Museum**

Sediment: The Archive as a Fragmentary Base

Sedimentation is a geological process of settlement and solidification. Free-floating fragments come to rest at the bottom of a body of water where over time they lose their liquid content. Then gravitational pressure transforms these fragments into solid rock beds that not only become a firm base, but each layer serves as a record of human and natural activity.

The artists in this exhibition re-imagine the archive as these material fragments that may narrate presences, proximities, and solidarities. Sandra Brewster, Filipa César, Justine A. Chambers, Michael Fernandes, Louis Henderson, Pamela Matharu, and Krista Belle Stewart present image, sonic, and performance recontextualizations of state and official repositories, as well as familial and personal documents, to engage the archival image as counter-image through collapses of time, embodied memory, witnessing, and storytelling.

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This presentation of *Sediment: The Archive as a Fragmentary Base* is an augmented version of an exhibition first produced and presented in 2023 at the Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia University.

We gratefully acknowledge the operating support from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Toronto Arts Council.

Each Archive is a World

I realized too late that the breach of the Atlantic could not be remedied by a name and that the routes travelled by strangers were as close to a mother country as I would come.

—Saidiya Hartman¹

There are more Cape Verdeans living abroad than in the country. The film was used to tell these people that their country existed, that it was independent and that they could go back.

—Sana Na N'Hada, Berlin, November 28, 2012²

Diasporas and routes laid through exile create their own geographies and counterflows. The objects and documents collectively assembled and produced by communities throughout exile and migration become the basis of archives that offer evidence of presence, place, and resilience rather than serving as tools of othering and domination.

As a result, archives not only form the recorded history of a people but also become counter-sites to institutions, departing from their conventional role of mapping out historical points in linear time and becoming, instead, tools

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1. From: Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2007), 9.

2. Quoted in: Filipa César, Tobias Hering, and Carolina Rito, eds., *Luta Ca Caba Inda: Time Place Matter Voice 1967–2017* (Berlin: Archive Books, 2017), 231.

of Black, African, and Indigenous futurity around which anticolonial solidarity can be built and sovereignty reclaimed.

Digitized footage produced from archived reels shot by young filmmakers, who were part of the 1960s and 70s independence movements in Guinea and Cape Verde, is interspersed with recent footage featuring those same filmmakers, now elders, as they narrate in place of the lost audio tracks, and describe the contents of their film archives to multigenerational audiences across Guinea-Bissau.

A mobile cinema screening the archival footage had travelled to these audiences (additional screenings were also held in Berlin), and the filmmakers, such as Sana Na N'Hada, shared their memories in person to fill in holes in the historical record not discernable from the soundless, now-deteriorated footage. This entire process constitutes Filipa César's multi-iterative project *Spell Reel* (2017).

César supported the restoration of the Guinean national film archives in Berlin, Germany, and then produced the mobile cinema to share the restored recordings; in turn, she documented the mobile cinema's role as a focal point for gatherings and conversations around the archives, and this documentation, interspersed with the archival recordings themselves and the filmmakers' commentary, forms the film *Spell Reel*. The filmmakers' narration, prompted by their restored film documentation, provides intimate perspectives on the Guinean and Cape Verdean armed independence struggles and the early days of nation building that followed. The national film archive itself was established as part of that very nation-building process, prior to being destroyed through neglect following a political coup in the 1980s.



Filipa César, *Spell Reel*, 2017. HD video, 1 hr 36 mins. Courtesy of the artist.

Filmed documentation was undertaken not only to record historic events, battles, and political declarations for the benefit of posterity; indeed, the filmmakers who founded the National Film Institute of Guinea-Bissau also realized the potential of the film archive to reflect Guinean and Cape Verdean ambitions and thereby create a post-independence sense of shared citizenship and pan-African solidarity through images of workers engaged in education, healthcare, and agricultural labour. As Na N'Hada recalls in *Spell Reel*:

So we created the “Programme of Rural Promotion by Audiovisual Media,” which meant that, with cinema, we could make people from there understand people from here. We would contribute to imagining a national space, together with Creole. For example, in Catió, people think it’s just human laziness to have an ox pull a plough. The ox is very

respected. But in Bafatá, people think it's better if the ox does the job. It is easier to sell an ox in Gabú or Bafatá than to sell one in Catió. In the east of the country an ox is used to help people. While in northern Mansoa, Catió, the ox serves to honour the dead. The useful or financial aspect of the ox doesn't matter much.³

The filmmakers' mobile cinema tour through Guinean communities in Bissau, Morés, Cacheu, Bafatá, Béli, and Boé reinforced the role of the archive to establish a post-independence Guinean and Cape Verdean imaginary. Such capacities are embedded in the collective archive and made apparent through its fragmentation and incompleteness, which invite the active participation of communities comprising both those with knowledge of and those with an interest in the anti-imperial struggles of the past. American artist Renée Green has reflected on the inevitability of archival lacunae, given that archives point to the missing testimony of the dead as much as they depend upon the contributions of the living. Green speaks of those

moments or circumstances in which despite the availability of some records of a past event there exist gaps or holes which in all instances it is assumed that only the dead are able to fill. The impossibility lies in the fact that this will never happen. Those who survived in order to tell or witness are not really capable of filling in these

3. *Spell Reel*, directed by Filipa César (Rennes, France: Spectre Productions, 2017), 96 min.

holes, because they have survived. They cannot know across the limit of death.⁴

However, if one thinks of the archive as a ritual or conversation between the living, the survivors, and the dead, as is done in Black and Indigenous traditions, then temporal linearity and the limits of death, and therefore the function of the archive as limited to the realm of the past, can be bypassed by accessing the space of the wake and haunting.⁵ To refer again to Sana Na N'Hada, regarding the status of the ox in the eastern versus the northern villages of Guinea-Bissau, the ox can both honour the dead and undertake the future-building task of preparing the field whereupon anticolonial empathy and conversation are facilitated.

Anthony Bogues turns to African-derived epistemologies to provide an alternative to the dominant forms of historical study. He asks: "What would happen if we were to shift our archives? Instead of focusing on standard forms of historical production, what would happen if we were to study the interpretations of the Caribbean that have originated from the 'inner plantation' and ask whether there are historical questions posed in *this* archive?"⁶ As a response, Bogues turns

4. Renée Green, "Survival: Ruminations on Archival Lacunae" (2001), chap. 27 in *Other Planes of There: Selected Writings* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 272.

5. George Lamming's 1960 introduction to his essay collection *The Pleasures of Exile* describes and compares a Haitian Vodou ritual, the Ceremony of the Souls, to the role of the Caribbean writer, exiled to England or elsewhere: to converse across the divide, to the reaches of the Black and Caribbean diaspora as well as the home country. George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* (London: Allison & Busby, 1984).

to “dread history,” *dread* being a polysemic term in Rastafari culture. Dread history employs a specific historical lens, derived from the transatlantic slave trade and the Afro-Caribbean experience in the wake of the trauma of enslavement and including Rastafarian beliefs of redemption and utopia, that “collapses standard historical time to understand patterns of oppression and speaks to the silences in the dominant productions of historical knowledge.”⁷

Dread history is bound up with Jamaican and Afro-Caribbean experiences but can also engage the production of history and memory within the cultures of those who have collectively been dispossessed of place, language, culture, or status as human beings. Pointing toward a broader definition of dread, Bogues explains: “Finally, Dread history is a profound radical ontological claim at two levels. The first level is what Martin Heidegger calls the ‘whoness’—the claim of *who am I*. The second level is the claim about historical knowledge—the conditions under which we construct the past, and how narrative and collective memory function.”⁸

In addition to the ‘whoness’ of dread history is the *wholeness* of Denise Ferreira da Silva’s definition of “cosmic time,” which is useful for thinking beyond the fragmented, and towards the haunted, in the production of counter-archives. In her latest publication, *Unpayable Debt*, Ferreira da Silva

6. Anthony Bogues, *Black Heretics, Black Prophets: Radical Political Intellectuals* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 178.

7. *Ibid.*, 179.

8. *Ibid.*

describes the conditions of the “quantic moment” and cosmic time, wherein separability is impossible and sense perception is undermined, thereby invalidating the certainty of apprehension of elemental phenomena: “What the cosmic and the quantic moments do is not so much add other dimensions or levels to knowledge—this is not a matter of scale—but undermine the very bases of post-Enlightenment thinking, its pillars of separability, determinacy, and sequentiality, which transform events and existents into Nature or *world*.”⁹

This collapse of historical time and world, alongside singular apprehension, into a beyond-human, inseparable, collective memory emerges when we shift our attention to the archival presence of Haitian revolutionary leader Toussaint Louverture in British filmmaker Louis Henderson’s *Bring Breath to the Death of Rocks* (2018). The film begins in France’s National Archives, where Paris-based Haitian actor and artist Jephthé Carmil views handwritten letters and documents connected to Louverture and to the Négritude movement and scholarship that followed in the wake of Louverture’s revolution, including a play on Louverture by Édouard Glissant. A voiceover reads excerpts from Aimé Césaire’s *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*. The handwritten letters were penned by the exiled Louverture as he neared death, imprisoned in the Château de Joux, in the Jura Mountains of France; as we watch Carmil walk through the Château’s prison cells, we hear a voice read Césaire’s writing

9. Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Unpayable Debt* (London: Sternberg Press, 2022), 262.

on Haiti and Louverture's imprisonment, suggesting, perhaps, Louverture's ghostly presence. This makes it conceivable for Bogues to invoke Heidegger's *whoness* and to address his questions regarding the possibility of the sovereignty of other archives, beyond standard historical production. Henderson overlaps French and Haitian terrain through transitions between the rocky elevations of the Jura and the forested edges of the Saut d'Eau waterfall in Haiti.



Louis Henderson, *Bring Breath to the Death of Rocks* (film still), 2018. Super 16mm transferred to HD video, colour, sound, English subtitles, 28 min. Courtesy of the artist.

These images move toward representations of cosmic time or alternate space-time through guttural, sonic expressions and digital colour fields that evoke the shifting, otherworldly geological core (and inform the title of this exhibition). The presence of the Haitian revolution in France's archives and history is expanded to propose the haunting, by the Black abolitionist revolt and revolutionary epoch, of the French historical consciousness (although the Château de Joux—the “other” fort—is absent from general narratives of revolutionary French history, which centre on the symbolism of the storming of the Bastille).

Continuing the production of counter-images and counter-institutional archives in relation to state or dominant narratives of history, Syilx Nation artist Krista Belle Stewart's video installation *Seraphine, Seraphine* (2014) alternates between two sets of archived footage. The first is a docudrama produced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) in 1967, which follows the artist's mother, Seraphine Stewart (née Ned), as a young student undertaking the professional training that would allow her to eventually become the first Indigenous public health nurse in British Columbia as well as one of the first Indigenous registered nurses to work in the province. Titled *Seraphine: Her Own Story Told by Seraphine Ned*, the CBC documentary film stock is black and white, and mostly features Seraphine either in conversation or reflection, accompanied by an instrumental soundtrack of jazz flute. The second body of footage features Seraphine many years later, as a septuagenarian, giving her testimony for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's inquiry into the legacy of the residential school system. Filmed in a close-up shot of her head and shoulders, Seraphine

shares her recollections of the isolation, humiliation, and fear she experienced as a young girl in the Kamloops Indian Residential School. Occasionally, she responds to prompts from an unseen questioner.

The film and video archives of the CBC and the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) are replete with documentary footage such as *Seraphine: Her Own Story Told by Seraphine Ned*, footage ostensibly intended to reflect a nation to itself and thereby reaffirm a universalized settler-colonial national identity that accommodates the aesthetics of a pluralistic and modern society.



Krista Belle Stewart, *Seraphine, Seraphine*, 2014. Video, B&W and colour, sound, 38 min 57 sec, edition 1/5. Collection of the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia University, Purchase, 2017 (017.08)

In the same year that the CBC aired *Seraphine: Her Own Story Told by Seraphine Ned*, the NFB, dedicated to the production and archiving of Canadian film, began working with Abenaki filmmaker Alanis Obomsawin on Indigenous documentary production initiatives. Quoting film theorist Michelle Stewart in a recent collection of essays on Obomsawin's film work, Karrmen Crey writes: "Filmmaking, specifically documentary-making, could be used as a platform for the voices of the marginalized, thereby supporting dialogue between "government and the governed, as well as between dominant and marginalized social groups.""¹⁰

Stewart's juxtaposition of Seraphine's dialogues in 1967 and testimony in the early 2000s invokes circular or cosmic time, complicating the two federal institutions' attempts to represent Seraphine's experiences and statements as part of a linear progression or conclusion. In the series of edited clips, Stewart pairs Seraphine's recollections of her years in nursing school, recorded during the Commission's inquiry, with a much earlier conversation found in the 1967 film, wherein Seraphine shares with a fellow nursing student a few brief details of the impact of her time in residential school. Each appearance of Seraphine recollects past and present experiences in a loop rather than linear-time that fixes her memories in history. The film's inclusion of Seraphine's anecdotes about traditional lifeways at her home territory at Douglas Lake, spoken to a government inquiry process intended to erase and undermine such traditions, also

10. Karrmen Crey, "In Situ: Indigenous Media Landscapes in Canada," in *Alanis Obomsawin: Lifework*, Richard William Hill and Hila Peleg, eds. (Munich: Prestel, 2022), 54.

references the importance of oral, intergenerational transmission to Indigenous archival or knowledge-keeping practices and futurity.



Krista Belle Stewart, *Seraphine, Seraphine*, 2014. Video, B&W and colour, sound, 38 min 57 sec, edition 1/5. Collection of the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia University, Purchase, 2017 (017.08)

Artists Sandra Brewster and Justine A. Chambers work with themes of home and the embodied archives of communities borne along well-worn routes of exile and migration, from the Caribbean through the American South and toward northern urban centres. Although their works are not limited to photographic representations, Brewster's and Chambers's engagement of vernacular image, dance, and sound evoke image theorist Tina Campt's proposition that, when one retains the capacity to attune to the quieter sonic frequencies or the counter-register of images as "quotidian practices," rather than documented event, such images become spaces

of refusal, and operate as alternate archives against marginalization.¹¹ Campt builds on the importance of sound and music to Paul Gilroy's framework of the Black Atlantic: "Taking inspiration from Gilroy, it is through sound that I seek a deeper engagement with the forgotten histories and suppressed forms of diasporic memory that these images transmit. I theorize sound as an inherently embodied process that registers at multiple levels of the human sensorium."¹²

A selection of photo-based gel transfers from Sandra Brewster's series *Token* (2018) focuses on the objects of everyday use that take on the role of familial archive when kept as a link to traditional domestic routines and homelands. In the transfer process, Brewster applies sustained motion and pressure across the photo print, weathering the archival paper that supports her images and emphasizing the visual image as a recall. The image's final surface, whether paper or a wall, can lend to the image the incidental imprints or appearances of underlying architectural elements and environmental debris present during the production process. In this iteration of *Token*, the heavy-weight archival paper has also set into sculptural forms of waves and ripples.

The objects in *Token* stand in for those who collected them or inherited them from family members, all belonging to the Caribbean diaspora. Brewster's prints, like a number of her other series (such as *Blur*), are in dialogue with histories of ethnographic imagery, attempting to obstruct the voyeurism

11. Tina M. Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 5.

12. *Ibid.*, 6.

and alienation of such portraiture. With each iteration of *Token*, each object or belonging is re-printed and re-applied in installations that range from the monumental and architectural to more intimate presentations. The chemical and physical process of the gel-transfer adds a patina to the surface of Brewster's work, making each object appear as if conjured in memory rather than photographed. The accompanying audio, *Token Reflections* (2018), centres the role of storytelling to the perception of *Token's* images, allowing each collector to set their object in relation to a distant homeland or an immediate family member, loaning Brewster both the objects and their stories. The objects pictured and described are at once cultural documents and the tools of food preparation or domestic maintenance, activating the collective knowledge of ancestral and familial practices within the Caribbean diaspora.



(1) Sandra Brewster, *Token (Iron)*, 2018. Photo-based gel transfer on archival paper, 30x22in. (2) Sandra Brewster, *Token (Ma Lou Pot)*, 2018. Photo-based gel transfer on archival paper, 30x22in. (3) Sandra Brewster, *Token (Matapee)*, 2018. Photo-based gel transfer on archival paper, 44x30in. Courtesy of the Artist and Olga Korper Gallery.

Justine A. Chambers's performance piece *Heirloom* (2023) continues the exhibition's explorations of the alternate ways that familial and diasporic knowledges are archived, preserved, and disseminated outside the archival institutions of the state or of a dominant culture. Chambers proposes Black American sartorial expressions and vernacular dances—such as the Electric Slide, which she associates with her maternal grandmother's family gatherings in Chicago—as embodied heirlooms that undergird community cohesion and presence, even during past and present dispersions of Black settlements and diasporas due to racial oppression, labour, and affordability crises, or urban gentrification.



Justine Chambers, *Heirloom*, 2023–. Performance documentation. Courtesy of the artist.

Video documentation of Chambers performing *Heirloom* in Montreal evinces the artist's implementation of the body as an archive of evolving vernacular gestures attended by further articulations of bodily sovereignty expressed through apparel. This embodiment, demonstrated by Chambers' mirrored dancing, allowed for the transportation of cultural knowledge, following the networks of American Black communities throughout the antebellum, reconstruction, Great Northward Migration, and Civil Rights eras, up to the present-day clubs and neighbourhood cookouts. The dances in *Heirloom* are associated with cultural survival and continuity not only because they were passed from generation to generation, but also because they established third spaces of refuge, that are below and beyond the surveillance of Black bodies that were, and still are, over-policed.

Michael Fernandes's *Room of Fears* features an overwhelming list of fears handwritten directly onto the gallery wall by the artist. Each fear was collected through an iteration of the project, ongoing since 1995, and became a part of its expanding, but ephemeral, archive—upon the exhibition's conclusion, the list will be painted over. *Room of Fears*, part of the Hart House permanent collection, conveys a sense of intimacy through brief and personal insights offered by an anonymous but direct address; in this way, it resonates with Sandra Brewster's audio installation. *Room of Fears*, however, also evokes institutional instruction, since its white script is reminiscent of a school blackboard, transforming the immediacy of each participant's personal thoughts into a temporary archive of public expression. *Room of Fears'* history of installation in university and public museums also highlights the role of cultural, archival and academic

institutions in the authorship and dissemination of universalized narratives underlying categorizations, exclusions and identification, while simultaneously engendering spaces of experimentation, dissent and critique.

Fernandes insists on using memory-work and his own handwriting to embody the fears. He collects but also edits out any repetitions before writing each fear in the gallery. Generated from a public call, the phrases are written exactly as submitted, and range from the mundane to the sinister: “I am afraid that some are making lots of \$ selling body parts...I’m afraid that I don’t speak properly...I am afraid when my father shouts.” The tension between the individual and the collective, and between the ephemeral and the archival aspects of the project, are reflected in the divergent forms of the fears themselves. Some are temporary, fleeting fears connected to an upcoming event, while others present the impetus for lifelong limitations and motivations. While each phrase is a private thought submitted by an anonymous individual, the fears may be common to an entire community; at the level of the nation-state or other group-identities, fears of chaos, crime or a foreign other often underlie the definition of borders, laws and limits. These fears may not be as obvious in the archives of founding narratives, imagery or documents, but they can be discerned between the lines of collective declarations, criminal codes, and immigration policies.



Michael Fernandes, *Room of Fears* (installation view), 2004. Blackwood Gallery.

Also taking up the idea of the ephemeral and the personal as a counter-archive, Pamila Matharu's installation *INDEX (SOME OF ALL PARTS)* (2019–) exhibits the source material for the video work of the same name shown in the Montreal iteration of *Sediment*. Matharu's work features selections from the artist's personal archive of found and familial objects connected to South Asian diasporas in North America, particularly where Indian and Canadian cultural, political and social histories, including those of anti-colonial activism, overlap. Matharu's installation offers an archival flâneurism, the observation of loosely related images and objects without labels, commentary, or conventional ordering. These objects include flyers pulled from bulletin boards, historical pins, ephemera and

prints purchased “as is” from eBay alongside tourism industry ads exoticizing Indian culture, family photos, and magazine editorials celebrating cultural diversity through the contemporary politician Jagmeet Singh and Monika Deol, one of the first Indo-Canadian television personalities to attain broad visibility in Canadian mainstream media in the 1990s. Altogether these combined images and objects are intended to reflect a Canadian narrative as experienced by many South Asian communities but rarely reflected, documented or disseminated to a broader public.



Pamila Matharu, *INDEX (SOME OF ALL PARTS)*, 2022. Assorted archival prints and ephemera. Courtesy of the artist.

The works in *Sediment: The Archive as a Fragmentary Base* illustrate temporal loops and configurations of collective. The resulting images enact, what Ronaldo Vázquez proposes in *Vistas of Modernity*, a decoloniality as a reorientation towards “those worlds,” and other ways of worlding. The artists’ evocations of counter-archival memory that challenge historical silences recall Bogue’s “dread history,” and engage the entanglements of decolonial memory, such as Ferreira Da Silva’s “cosmic time.” Where these acts of radical remembering and haunting occur, the archive is perpetually re-made; then, layer by layer, re-worlding will follow.

This essay accompanies the second iteration and augmented version of *Sediment: The Archive as a Fragmentary Base*, an exhibition and text first presented in 2023 at the Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia University.

About the Curator

Denise Ryner is the Andrea B. Laporte Curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania. Prior to joining ICA, Denise was part of the curatorial team for the exhibition, publication, and symposium, 'Ceremony (Burial of an Undead World)' at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, Germany. She also served as the Director/Curator of Or Gallery, Vancouver between 2017 and 2022, where she presented a robust exhibition program alongside international symposia 'Bodies, Borders, Fields,' examining histories of Black artistic production and 'Unmoored, Adrift, Ashore' which invited artists and scholars to speculate on sea-level rise as an opportunity to destabilize colonial-era infrastructures.

From 2010 to 2012, she was a Curatorial Assistant at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery/Hart House Art Collection.

Public Programming

Opening Reception: Winter 2024 Exhibitions

Wednesday, January 17, 6pm–8pm

Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

Becoming Collective through the Archive

Saturday, January 20, 2pm–4pm

Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

A discussion between curator Denise Ryner, militant interdisciplinary historian Sónia Vaz Borges, and art historian and curator Gabrielle Moser about their work on the educational uses of the colonial and decolonial image-archive in narrating presences, proximities, and solidarities.

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