Transcript of Conversation between
Deanna Bowen, Pamela Edmonds, Selina Mudavanhu
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Pamela Edmonds: Hi, I'm Pamela Edmonds, the new curator here at the MMA can everyone hear me okay? I'm not mic'd, but seems so. Thank you for joining us tonight, coming out in the bitter cold for tonight's event

You know it's truly representing Black History Month, right? The coldest day, coldest month, but we're here to delve into and unpack some of the ideas around Deanna Bowen's incredible exhibition here, a Harlem Nocturne, which was curated by Kimberly Phillips of the Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver. And very happy to have Dr. Selina Mudavanhu here from McMaster Communication and Media Studies also and delve into some of the ideas around the exhibition and further on.

And so, this exhibition will be touring going to next to Montreal then Halifax maybe others ... and Banff, which is very exciting.

Firstly, I'd also like to recognize that we're gathered on the traditional tour of territories of the Mississauga and the Haudenosaunee nations and within the lands protected by the dish with one spoon wampum agreement. And I think also given the current moment in this country it's important, and I say dare I say urgent, to think about the ways that each of us are connected to land and space and place, whether we're settlers or not and how we can think about making the reality of Truth and Reconciliation real in all of our communities. And so, recognizing the rights of Indigenous people it's important as it's ever been. And so, this event also is in collaboration with the Office of equity and inclusion, so I'd like to thank all the folks that are with that office. These types of partnerships are very important for us and to us and so thank you to everyone involved in helping support that from our program tonight.

So, I just want to also in these last few days of Black History Month recognize that you know we have Black history on and beyond February and that it's important to pay homage to those stories and histories that are overlooked within the grounded narratives of our nation and beyond and so I'm just going to introduce a couple of things about this lady's work here and also introduce Selina and ... should we say?

Deanna Bowen: True story. We were thinking nobody was going to show up so we cut a deal that you know ten people or less and we go to the pub.

<laughter>

Pamela Edmonds: So, your work, if I could speak about you the third person here, highlights your archival research and family lineage and concerns with the histories of Black experiences in Canada and

the US. And as Kimberly Phillips has aptly noted these are histories that remain below the threshold of visibility not because they are impossible to see but because they are difficult for the majority culture to acknowledge and I thought that stood out for me as one of the things that Kimberly talks about in referencing your work. Deanna's work also presents audiences with complex critiques of the media and race relations and connections to historical and social narratives so I thought having the conversation with yourself and also with all of you, because we hope this could be a dialogue would be important to look at critical race media and anti-colonial studies.

Dr. Mudavanhu who is pretty new to campus and just started teaching in the last year holds a PhD in Media Studies from the Center for Film and Media Studies at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. Her current work focuses on understanding the ways those in power constitute meanings on different topics in mainstream media and social media contexts including examining the implications of dominant constructions on the lives of ordinary people, and how they speak back to power, and create alternative meanings on social media platforms and methodologies, such as digital storytelling.

Prioritizing the voices of the subaltern her work has been published in many peer-reviewed journals, including the Journal of African media studies and feminist Africa. This work has also included the colonial analysis of representations on social media of the hashtag including #rhodesmustfall student activists at the University of Cape Town.

Deanna Bowen, whether through curation, activism, teaching, archiving and art making, her expansive career has followed a progressive and unfaltering trajectory dedicated to excavating and exposing the buried histories experiences and contributions of Black Canadians neglected within dominant historical and cultural narratives of the nation. Her work is exceptional and courageous and enters into serious dialogue about anti Black racism and the insidious nature of white supremacy in this country. Working against a national myth and preferred idealization of Canada as uniquely tolerant, she challenges audiences to consider how testimony and witness might take the form of objects and images and how politics plays out through the performing body as well as through photography, video and installation, presented with an arresting clarity and visual eloquence.

Am I embarrassing you? <laughter>

Deanna Bowen: Carry on.

Pamela Edmonds: Addressing difficult issues with compassion deep understanding and honesty, Deanna's meditations on intersectionality race gender and class have worked to catalyze anti-racist feminists and lgbtq+ conversations in order to better represent how and why certain subjects have been left on the periphery of contemporary art and society. In recognition of this important work Deanna is the recent recipient of the prestigious 2020 governor-general award for visual and media arts,

<applause>

…celebrating the exceptional career of Canadian artists. Congratulations on that much deserved honor and thank you for being here.

Join me in welcoming Deanna and Selina.

So, we met and were talking about the format and it sort of moved in a few different directions, talking about media and representation and Blackness in Canada and Deanna were, in the conversation, talking about this particular work, "~~ON TRIAL~~, the Long Doorway" and the conversations that happened around the actors.

Deanna Bowen: mm-hmm Do you want me to tell?

Pamela Edmonds: Yeah

Deanna Bowen: So, I think how we're gonna go about today is somewhat riffing off of this particular four channel piece. And so, the idea is this that that project was, what is seen here is the rehearsal footage of an eight week long installation video production thing thing. The five performances were cut into a one-hour piece and that function does its own thing, but what we're watching is the back-end conversation kind of compiled over the eight weeks of material. And why I chose to do this is because I thought it was more important and more kind of representative of Black experience in Canada in the sense that it's a cast of Black actors who didn't identify as Black prior to the project for a variety of different reasons. And the conversations we had about that, about when they came to realize that they were Black really became the central kind of issue.

Because the project itself is a deconstruction of a Canadian authored script about a race piece and of itself and it was in history. And I think it is actually the response to the Emmett Till trials the Canadian finger-pointing response to the Emmett Till trial. And so, what I was trying to articulate to these actors was this is not…they kept looking for African-American roles to embody and I kept saying this is these are not African-American characters and I don't know and I was struggling as a director - because I couldn't point to any narrative or even documentary work that specifically articulated Black Canadian experience. I couldn't say watch this and you'll get a sense of what's what. so, we ended up having a lot of conversations about well what if it's not Black American, again what is it? What is Black Canadian? And ultimately it became clear to me that Black Canadian identity is not something that you can name definitively. It's more question that it is inherently an answer to anything. So that question is what the conversation hinges on today.

I, as you know…West Coast raised, American born, raised in Vancouver. My family migrates from the deep south in the United States and then it goes into northern Alberta. So that's my lineage and that's what I'm interested in is this relationship between Black Canadians and Black Americans.

And you?

Pamela Edmonds: I was born in Montreal, but my family lineage is in the Maritimes in Nova Scotia. And so, my folks, as far back as I can go is maybe my great-grandfather in the early 1800s, related to the settlements from the loyalists so from Lucasville, Tracadie. But you know growing up in, born in Montreal and Quebec and then moving to Halifax because of the separatist movement and the 70s, my folks were like “oh this is getting heated” there were a lot of Anglophones that moved out of Quebec at that time and my parents we’re like “we're getting back to our roots.” They grew up in fifties, forties, in different Black communities and my mom moving to New Glasgow where Viola Desmond was from - my grandmother went to beauty school with her - you know there was a real history of segregation in those communities.

It was always important for my folks to have a sense of community and I grew up with that. But I also felt connected in some ways, to multiple identities but not fitting into any one you know. We talked about this earlier, the feeling of being how do I belong? I think it's something that I know I connect with a lot of Black artists - because I started studying as a visual artist - about how do I belong here? Because it would always be that question and, I know it's almost a stereotype now, but “where are you from?” and it’s okay “where are you really from?” You know, my parents, we're Canadian, we're Canadian and that was ingrained in me. How come my identity is not, I'm made to feel like I don't belong here? So, it's kind of was a quest to always figure out what Blackness means as a Canadian. Then also I and given the history of miscegenation and all that interesting stuff, of how folks in Nova Scotia deal with that particular identity, because we're often forgotten about particularly within Ontario and narratives around Toronto. But those histories are hundreds of years old. Those folks have been settled there for a long time, but it's part of the conversation.

Selina Mudavanhu: And so, for me I'm Zimbabwean I was born in a country which is located in southern Africa and I lived and worked in Cape Town South Africa for ten years.

When I was growing up in South Africa, I never really thought of myself as a Black person, as a Black woman. It was something that was natural and normal, and no one ever reminded me that your skin colour means inferiority or has other meanings attached to it. And so, when I moved to Cape Town South Africa it was kind of my first encounter with this idea that my skin has meanings attached to it and they are not always friendly. Because as you know South Africa has had a long history of apartheid and colonization and so on and so forth. So, getting into South Africa, I was kind of taken aback by, for example, I go to the shops and you have a security guard always trailing and checking whether or not you have not stolen anything.

And again, talking about "where are you from", the moment I opened my mouth to speak everyone asked me “oh that accent - you are not South African, right?” And my features also were a dead giveaway in the South African context because South Africans typically look a particular way and I don't look that way. And so, I also realized my body is not only being read in these disconcerting ways by white South Africans, but even Black South Africans read my body as not belonging in that space. So, there were interesting layers of being on the margins in that society and having to contend with that and deal with that.

And in the afternoon, we had a conversation about why, then did I choose to identify as Black and own that. And my response was that when I grew up in Zimbabwe I was always affirmed, I was always told you are good, you are good at what you do. There was no kind of labels attached to me, so I grew up with that self-confidence. And so, getting into a space that tells you otherwise was something strange to me. I had always been told you are a good human being and so I decided you know what I will remember those lessons that I was taught. I will embrace my identity the way I was born and raised. I will not let other people tell me otherwise. And therefore, I decided to deliberately identify as Black and deliberately not think of myself as inferior but it is always hard, because there are moments of anger. Because people always try to remind me that your skin color is equal to inferiority. And there was always that push back sometimes, choosing battles to fight, sometimes just letting it go and going and ranting with friends. We go for coffee and talk about those difficult experiences.

Deanna Bowen: I think one of the things that comes to...well there's two things I want to flag: one is the fact that clearly, we illustrate the non-homogenous kind of nature of Blackness in Canada. Perhaps, and I want to say something about say, how it compares to United States – gonna try and catch myself too much tonight to not do that, given what I believe - so just to say that non-homogeneity is something that plays out in that piece. And it's also something that I think is wonderfully rich to tap into as far as kind of articulating a more broad understanding of what Blackness is perhaps.

So, with that, one thing that came to mind, with your conversation Pam was thinking about the ways in which your family can go back generation and generations. My family also can go back a number of generations. And thinking about what you were saying about, so why aren't we framed as Canadian? Right? Being extra outside of Canadian identity and the margins that you speak of Selina. This idea that again we're always on the periphery of something and even within Blackness in Canada, there are our fringes within that too, so I wanted to get your perspectives on…

This is like a weird question that might not fly but I'm just going to just it shoot it at you: So, when do you think you become Canadian? how long does it take?

Pamela Edmonds: Well for me I think it's I get the added layer of being Quebecois, but not French, not francophone. I think the narratives that I understood being there too was that as a Quebecois you're not Canadian either. Or there were fights to separate and I was there going back as an adult and living in a French neighborhood and the Quebec flags were out and I'm speaking English, trying to be on the down low, but you know it was like Quebecois and I'm like “I was born here too man.” I think that I had to claim multiple things. I know in my heart when I go to other places, I'm Canadian. And my mom says this all the time. They grew up not eating soul food, they're eating corned beef and cabbage - it was those Scottish roots were also an influence.

I don't think we even know what Canadian is in the broad scheme of things (hockey maple syrup Tim Hortons) beyond the stereotypes. Don't you think we have a bit of an identity crisis? Canadians do. We're anti-American. It's almost like those those dialectics. It's like Black/white, American/Canadian that

I think, well, maybe we have to remove ourselves from those dualisms. That dialectical way of thinking. But for me and for my folks, I didn't know anything else. But I always pushed against the definitions of what Blackness was because I was growing up. As a teenager, when I came into my own in the 80s, being into punk and stuff, where my family was like “were you listening to that white music?” and … you know what I mean? like “I like Duran Duran.” But still it was like carry on, but you know. At one end it was difficult because I was in a multiracial community in this white suburb, going to school right next to the Black neighborhoods. I wanted to redefine what Blackness was for me because I didn't fit into any stereotype, you know?

So, what does it mean? “Oh well, you act white” and I'm like I just grew up in the suburbs what are you trying to say? you know? it was like, what does it actually mean to be Black and broaden the definition of that? So, for me it became a political choice to say I'm Black too. This is what I look like. But my folks, all the people I love and care about, I never knew the white side of my family ever. And when I was out with my cousins and we're getting followed around in the store and some things and that you know I mean I was like well? or people would say things to me, racist things to me because they didn't really know. It's like…that's why I get politicized with art around Adrian Piper's art the calling card, right? Where it's like dear so-and-so you might not know …yeah but not everyone looks a certain way. And when you're talking about skin colour we get into dangerous territory when we say that Blackness looks and is a certain way. We can define it for ourselves. And so, for me it was always important to have conversations about redefining it all the time. Because when my parents are coming up, they were called colored. My aunt would say “Oh, I'm not Black, I'm Brown” like I'm not coloured and so we're in a particular historical moment that always gets reimagined. And I'm not comfortable always with the terms like African Canadians and such it sort of feels like a government term or something.

For me Blackness is the best definition in this moment for myself and I think I'm allowed to claim it. And I do.

Selina Mudavahnu: For me and other friends of mine that are from Africa, sometimes we label ourselves Black in other spaces and in other spaces we want to emphasize that we are also African although we are in Canada, but I am very much Zimbabwean. So sometimes I'll introduce myself as being Zimbabwean and sometimes I've not quite gotten there yet, where I introduce myself as Canadian. I'm living in this space but my identity, I consider myself Black. As I said, sometimes I'm Zimbabwean, but mainly I'm a Black woman. Because I think of my friends who have lived in Canada, friends from Africa, who’ve lived in Canada for quite a long time. Every time they say, “well I'm Nigerian Canadian,” the question they always get is “you said you are Canadian.” People kind of brush the Nigerian side as if that's not a legitimate identity. And for them, those friends of mine claiming that Nigerianness and all the stereotypes and problems is a political act to say “you know what? I'm not going to brush that aside if it's not who I am”. And sometimes if they go to conferences, they choose to say we are Canadian and that always raises eyebrows. “Canadian? Where is that accent from?” and so on and so forth.

So, it's very much complicated and complex and it depends the spaces that I'm in. But mainly I identify as a Black woman and I don't know if I will get to a point where I will consider myself Canadian. Maybe I will at some point. I just got here. I've been in Canada nearly 2 years now, so I think I call myself Black.

Deanna Bowen: My family's relationship to Canadianness is very much about the migration to the country and crossing that border. And it was about safety, life-saving kind of a strategy to disown the United States. In many ways my family is a displaced southern family Black southern family. I grew up with soul food like, Lord, chitlins, like horrible (laughter) Oh my god nasty. Ya'll have been saved something if you've never experienced chitlins

But really in downtown Vancouver, in this displaced southern family and you know they'd staked claim to Canadianness literally. Once they cross the border and the American aspects of our family history were literally just wiped away. We no longer talked about them the minute they crossed the border. And the family never talked about anything they left behind or the family or anything about it.

I knew we had, my grandparents talked about big momma and big Papa. There was a photograph of both of these people. But I don't ever remember being told anything about them. And they would say, if they ever start talking about who we were, my grandmother would say something like, “we came from down south, period” that was the end of the discussion about it.

So, claiming Canadianness has a lot of weight for a lot of very romantic ideas about what Canada would be for Black bodies coming out of the United States. So, I was raised with this notion that Canada was the promised land, hence the image on the other side and then of course again referencing that image in real life. Clearly the researchers show that this is not the promised land right. And that particular print is actually lifted from a CBC, I don't even know what you call it, variety show maybe or something like that where my family members tell the story of our migration in gospel hymns.

It’s this weird ass super whitewashed fictionalized narrative that hits every other stereotype around Blackness in American culture, you know? These buxom mammy looking gospel singers you know I mean speaking good English and 60s era kind of bouffants and all that kind of stuff. And it's just like the stuff that they spew is just a lie, right?

So, the work resides in that the falseness of this promised land. Canada as this haven certainly contrary to this you know, the storied Canada. Canadians may not know who they are, but they know that this place has been a haven for former slaves in the Underground Railroad and all that kind of stuff. and whenever. If they need to kind of illustrate their kind of support of Black bodies, they bring that card out and lay it on the table. Except that, it's usually used to wipe out every other kind of ill-will about Black bodies here. So, no racism no slavery, you get the gist. so that's one aspect of my family is this displaced American family, southern American family.

And what we were talking about earlier this complexity is what I'm currently trying to work out the nuances of Black more so than Canadian right. And that has come a lot from the fact that most of my

work is very much about my family's Black identity in Black history. But I've also been doing this other research around where our Indigenous bloodline does or does not come into the equation. And what I was talking about earlier was this, I have a theory that I've yet to be able to nail down but well my family my mom tells me a story, one of those long rambling stories like that, and she started telling me about how my grandmother married my grandfather as quickly as she could. My grandmother is quite white skinned, very light-skinned my grandfather is quite dark-skinned. So, it stuck out for me as such an odd story because it's not very often that you hear about, I mean I know it exists, but you don't hear about it very often: about a light-skinned Black woman marrying somebody dark-skinned on purpose to identify and be that much more discernibly Black, right?

But what I'm working through right now is this other understanding, that prior to hitting that border we have always been in or near or married to Indigenous peoples over the course of our migration, but it stops at the border. And it's been helpful for me to think about this Black body in this Black family in time. Because they came in the 1910s, peak British at the beginning of a very real wave of British imperialism that I talk about with another show that starts in the 1910s maybe even 1908 there a little bit earlier than that. And one of the things that lured my family to Canada was this notion of the promised land, right? But what they were also aware of is that Indigenous people were being slaughtered across North America. So, there was an understanding that in Canada coming to the border, that indigenous people were not safe. but what I'm working through and trying to get a handle on is how, when we got to the border, they dropped Indigeneity altogether.

It's the biggest family secret in the community overall and the logic being that my grandmother by example would marry a very dark-skinned man so that she would pass as Black because at least they understood that Canada may be all right for them if they were just Black. Does that make any sense? yeah so, I haven't quite been able to kind of nail that down, but that's where I'm working from. It makes some sense out of the mystery and the whispering of things and there is a lot of support on the other side. The ways - I know this is kind of deviating I know I'm gonna end up talking about the states but anyhow - this community of people that I'm talking about are the same community of people that were massacred in Tulsa. The Black Indigenous people of the Tulsa Massacre, Black Wall Street, however which way you want to call it my family comes from that region.

And so, what I'm talking about and that's kind of other discussion we were having about the erasure of peoples and identities in time. There's something really interesting about how that story is told as only Black people when it is in fact Black and Indigenous communities combined. So why that matters in this greater discussion for me around Black Canadian experience is because much of the work that my body of work is doing is mapping this migration of the Black, Indigenous Black people coming into the country and where my work now has got me looking at is straight up at anti indigenous white supremacy in the nation so there's a interconnectedness so Black is my issue right now less so than Canada okay.

But you're also mapping Hogan's Alley

yeah also right yeah working actively working against Stan Douglas's Hogan's Alley work. Yup I said that.

Well, this is not exactly a dig at Stan Douglas per se, but what I am struggling with as somebody that comes from that community is the only stories that have been told about that community situate white people in the forefront. And it was not a white community and it matters too to say that. so, as a descendant of that I'm thinking very particularly of Helen Lawrence and that piece that Stan Douglas created.

Julie Crooks at the AGO asked me what I thought about that piece and did I go and I said I've never gone to it. She asked me why and I said well why would I go to see something that basically whitewashes a community that was always Black? So maybe that's something that is inherently Canadian about Blackness here is that ongoing erasure of our presence.

And then also, what we were talking about before was this idea you were talking about an internship and the themes of that internship and thinking about how there's so much work that they've done about Afrofuturism right. And then there's so much clearly so so SO much work but not enough work that's done about Black history. But there's very rarely a discussion about Black presence right and how difficult it is to articulate our presence in this current climate. So, I want to put that and give that back to you both about this idea about what you think about Black presence?

Pamela Edmonds: Well I think that like you said we're so used to trying to recoup the history and particularly the narrative that is, or the mythology around, Africville in Nova Scotia is another thing where you know, who's next? you know. I mean my folks weren't from Africville but I heard the stories and on one end it's the community... there was a dump that ran through the railroad tracks in the 60s, people's houses were paid for next to nothing and you know just recently there's money being given but the community is eradicated. They put up the sundial and hmm there you go. And the folks go there every year for a reunion and Irvine Carvery is there in his trailer camped out; I think he's the longest ...

Deanna Bowen: He stopped.

Pamela Edmonds: Did he?

Deanna Bowen: He stopped in the last month. poor health and no money. He couldn't afford to do it anymore. Did you want to explain who he is?

Pamela Edmonds: yeah, he's a descendant of Africville and he's been on that land asking for reparations since the sixties. And is living in the trailer on that land. His health has suffered in many ways you know not just health, mental health and you know it's a reminder when you go there. Nobody goes other than the annual event, you know, it's just this flattened surface. Just grass and the Sun Dial. There was a church that they kept, but other than that it's just that memory of that erasure which is such a reminder of trying to gain that history.

For me even as an artist and then curator I got into curating because I could not find representation of Black Canadian artists. It'd be American and UK. But it's like, I know people are making things I know creative folks. How come there's no documentation and so that history is important. But then also projecting, what could it be like? As artists or imagining all the time of the future, right and this sort of idealism. But I think as you mentioned this idea of trying to build the community and build a presence and having shows like this and to be in this moment… you made me rethink my actual idea...you made me rethink it!

Deanna Bowen: You're welcome.

Pamela Edmonds: My colleague and I are we're planning a show on Black and Indigenous futurisms because a lot of the work and artists we're excited about are doing really interesting things. But they're imagining themselves here see this is the thing about Afrofuturism because it connects with ancient history and the symbolisms around that too. So, it is a continuum you know what I mean?

It is about projecting forward but also being here. But the idea of presence is also very radical because I've been struggling with Fred Moten and his ideas around Black radical tradition and how he talks about Blackness as what is it called, fungibility of fugitives. And the whole idea of Blackness being about the escape like you can't pin it down. That's what Blackness is you can't pin it down, because as soon as you define it - no - this is about the not wanting to be present for that whatever this is, and I think how we show up as invisible. It's kind of important in a weird way because there's so much surveillance that happens of Black bodies that to just be, without being followed or without having to be targeted…

Deanna Bowen: by? or by Black people either. Thinking about the scanning the things that invariably happens when you walk into any space in the media. The thing of looking for other Black people. Y'all know you do it. That's routed in some real stuff because you gotta be aware. where the doors are how to get home, where the people yeah as you go.

Pamela Edmonds: Yeah. If something goes off who's first one…

Deanna Bowen: that's funny but then it's serious, it's quite serious.

Pamela Edmonds: Right because then we have to adapt and cope for you don't know what's gonna… you know. So that idea of presence is a very interesting idea of having to be in the moment.

Deanna Bowen: To be seen. I think about it, because I know that there are some scholars out there that are doing a lot of work around Black joy being a very intentional area of scholarship and when I first heard about it I was like what do you mean Black joy like so what, you're gonna talk you're gonna write papers about watching a Beyonce concert and the joy? but why? What? And then I was quite dismissive of it initially but then over time and I think certainly more as my political engagement with my practice, the bodily impact of my practice kind of takes hold. I do recommend, and certainly within the

political climate of right now, I recognize that joy is in there and there's maybe something in joy is about being here, for minute. I don't know ... I'm talking that through as we kind of go. But I am just thinking about that, the radical nature of being here and happy.

Pamela Edmonds: I've had conversations with a lot of artists in the last while that are talking it with that too - about this idea of joy, self care, nurturing. Part of their exhibitions is actually about taking care of themselves and having workshops and doing yoga and healing because it's such an important thing to do the work especially within institutions. Because sometimes you don't know how you're gonna be positioned. Sometimes within those spaces is an important part of that work and it's a challenge sometimes for that joy to happen.

But because I think the spectacle of Black pain is so prevalent, right you know, particularly in the media. You just get tired. Like there are some people who are just living their good life too - we don't hear that. Not necessarily the rich, just every day like that's what I love about your exhibition is that you know it's dealing with pain and grief but at the same time it's your mom…and the video, you know…

Deanna Bowen: you all got to see my high school picture, and the bangs, the bangs (laughter)

Pamela Edmonds: Curled just right.

Deanna Bowen: That's even a curated spot.

Selina Mudavanhu: I have a question coming from the conversation we had in the afternoon about the conversations that need to be had within Black communities alone and that are not open to the rest of the public. And so putting together a work like this, you want to represent the complexity of your community but there are those conversations that represent that complexity but they are not open to the public do you want to speak a little bit about decisions of keeping some stuff out?

Deanna Bowen: Yeah. So how I answered it today was I explained how this (holds up postcard piece) is actually the beginning of the show in many ways and so this weird quote of my uncle's is actually the beginning of the project. How I originally planned this project was actually rooted, the show was rooted for me anyhow, in an experience that my uncle Danny had. He's about 10 years older than me and he has always been around he's lived with my mom for as long as I can remember. And when I was growing up, he was the smartest man I knew. In a family of deeply religious people he was not reading the Bible. He was not you know a bible thumper I call him and he was reading sci-fi. And i thought he was just the coolest guy. I suppose in his generation he would have been the kid that somebody would have said are you trying to be white too you know? But he really really mattered to me a great deal my big brother.

And in the 1970s, the Vancouver nightclubs were discriminating against Black indigenous and Asian people by, you know, Jim Crow era kind of carding. And the very short of it is that he was beaten by the bouncers in a fight that ultimately became a brawl. And then he was just seriously physically harmed in this fight. He probably would have died and so what I wanted to do was all ‘fight the man’ and I wanted

to use his legal records because he sued the city. And it went on in this long winded protracted civil case that, ultimately, the city basically just dragged it out and wore him down and so he got a really lousy settlement. And you know, truth be told, in real life probably certainly has serious brain damage for sure and that brawl, he never recovered from. And again, so the hardness of this is. This is the smartest person I knew right. He's no longer that person and so I wanted to fight on his behalf. I knew that I had to go back to Vancouver to do this show. And I wanted to tell the story, so I told him, “I want to look at your legal records,” because that's me being archive based. I wanted the nitty gritty I thought I had like first-hand access and he actually he asked me why I want to do it. I said, you know fighting the man and racism in Vancouver and all that kind of things. And he just kind of wrote back and he said yeah just leave it alone nobody needs to know about that shit. So that's the beginning of the show.

And so, the shape that this exhibition takes is because of his on the unwillingness to speak very openly about it. And I was really messed up about it because you know, yes, he experienced the beating, he suffered that beating and that's a very real thing. But in my family's protection of him there's like, a good other ten other family members that were arrested for fighting on his behalf. My mom went there and she got as far as driving the car to the site and opened the door and she was arrested before she even made a swing at anybody. My great aunt is in this footage, my family's in that footage, and this is the footage of the family speaking back to the city. And so, it turned - the beating turned into a very big community-based rallying point about racism in the city. And so, for me it's a struggle because his beating is not just his beating, it's my memory, it's my mom's memory, my aunt's memory. It's the whole family's memories but that battle story is central to our identity. So I needed to produce a show so that I could heal from it because it's like really that memory of that experience of all of my family being arrested was just like this primal wound that probably I just I just needed to deal with it, So I needed to honour him and then I needed to do some protection of a lot of people in my family who truthfully were addicts in that time frame, who truthfully were prostitutes at that time frame, and just not wanting to have their business out in the world, so this is the most careful articulation of that moment, this experience and things that lead up to that as I possibly can. Because prior to say, my going to college, I mean this is a criminal class of people, talking about, the periphery and the margins right. And so, I needed to be able to honour their wishes and still tell the story, still mark the history still heal do all those things. But not all of that is open to the public for discussion.

There's something I've been thinking about a lot. Gary Young for the Guardian wrote an article about “the further away from power, the more you know,” is the headline which I think is just brilliant for how much a criminal class of Black people know about how things work. And so, really kind of taking this all the way back, somewhere intuitively 25 years ago I knew that some of the things that I needed to work through did not need to be seen. Out of deep respect for them and out of us an unformed certainty that whatever it was that I was going to produce would fall in line with every possible stereotype of what a Black person is.

So the first 10 years of my practice is all deeply metaphoric and I tried really hard not to use Black bodies at all and then it switched over to what I'm doing now. So yeah, this is still also somewhere in here, in this discussion about this criminal family on the periphery of blah blah blah. I mean, what they have

seen in the world has been the last 25 years of my practice so it tells you a great deal about the wealth of knowledge and insight in all of that. But there's also something about being able to stake claim and present these people, this particular class of people, in a space like this and present them with a great deal of pride of dignity. And it's not to present them in the painful in the pain porn kind of way that you're talking. yeah Does that answer it? It's a very round the block kind of an answer.

Selina Mudavanhu: It does. I think It is not useful to re-inscribe the same dangerous stereotypes about Black people but it's hard. How do you tell the story of pain? How do you tell the story of segregation without telling exactly what happened? But what exactly happened means sometimes there were nervous breakdowns in the story and you don't want to feed into those stereotypes and so what to leave out, what you add and so on and so forth.

Deanna Bowen: It's like this book A book that's redacted you know and a lot of it has to do with the mental breakdowns that my grandfather had in the fifties. Though the other side of this card by the way is actually the dive bar that my grandfather started drink in after he had a nervous breakdown and left the church. And it's a different kind of Black history story in that he was a preacher for a really long time and he was religious counsel to a gentleman who was a Black man who was executed by Ocala prison in the 1950s. And it's intertwined with the fact that my Aunt Barber was born on the same day as the actual of hanging, the execution date. So it's tangled in that and I know that because my grandfather couldn't be around for me for birth right. So there's that puzzle piece. But the gentleman did genuinely kill somebody but he he had killed a Black woman named Los Angeles Smith and he had assaulted a white woman on the way to doing so. So what drove my grandfather over was the last day, the last moments of this execution, the white guard telling him that this man was being executed not for the Black woman, that he had actually legitimately killed, but for the fact that he had assaulted the white woman. That's what he was being hung for. And that of course sent my grandfather on a spiral and hence the bar. But I think that too matters because Black madness is something that you don't get to talk a lot about a lot. But it is prevalent in everything given the fact that we're talking about most Black bodies are recovering, most Black families are recovering from generations of intergenerational trauma right. There’s a lot of shame in that too.

For me, anyhow I would say that all of this work does the work of helping me shed the shame of coming from a criminal class of addicts and prostitutes and whatnot. And at the same time getting to this fabulous place of pride of being able to by nature of the work that I do, be able to come around and do the work of toppling the group of seven for their white nationalist sensibilities. So, I love my little family of Black people because I that these people are invisible, were meant to be invisible. And the show also speaks to an ongoing kind of surveillance of these people over the generations. But and still even though they were visible and invisible at the same time and I guess what this show does, is by spirit or text or intimation it's still giving them a presence of some sort even though they have been, there have been so many efforts to erase them now.

---- end of formal presentation ---

Deanna Bowen: We had talked about opening this up to the nice people. We had many plans. The way that I really like these exhibitions, especially if they're not in my hometown, or in Toronto ... is wanting to open up the conversation to the community of the shows we're in, to have conversations around Blackness or whatever it may be.

When we were here a couple of weeks ago Colina Phillips came and did this fabulous - and you were here as well thank you very much - so there were a number of things that happened here that spoke to the Black community in Hamilton and specifically to this site. Colina Phillips, a friend of hers, I don't know if you remember all the women that were here, but there was a woman that was herethat was part of the Black woman's Congress back in the day. I don't know you know what the Black Womens Congress is but it was a national organization of Black women activists in the 1980s 1970s 80s. Would have been in the timeframe of Rosemary Brown, when she was in politics. That time frame. And the Hamilton chapter of the Black woman's Congress actually lobbied against this institution to have more Black bodies in this space in the 80s 90s. So there is this very real long history of Black activism in Hamilton that hasn't been brought to the fore, in some way or another. I see people in the back smiling. So, I mean it's all that to say that there really is a long history of activism. Like my community like my family it gets kind of dismissed as you know, every day in a small town, Black people business right or whatever. But there were chapters across the nation that were organized and lobbying on all these kinds of incredible levels and so it's super important for me that you have a senior curatorial position here and I have a show here and that you're here and you all are here because this was fought for by Black women in this community. So, I think I super said that's super important to name that and then what the logic was was to open it to the floor and have a conversation about the challenges of organizing in Hamilton if it's possible. I don't know that anybody does or does not want to open to that but I'm going to throw that out to see how that lands and if a doesn't land then we'll take it back and keep talking over here

Audience Q: As far as organizing Black women in Hamilton, I'm born and raised here, my parents are Jamaican descent. They emigrated here in the 60s early. It's been hard. I am part of the coalition of Black and racialized artists (COBRA) of Hamilton. We formed 4 years ago. And it's still always a continuous challenge ... One of the issues is coming up to what we were discussing earlier about what does it mean to be Black and what does it mean to be Black Canadian? And if I don't identify, where do I fit in? Do I even belong...Sadly, that's a continuing issue.

Everyone kind of...I think everyone's still trying to figure it out. Where they belong. It's a reoccurring conversation that I have with a lot of other Black colleagues in the city.... I oh ya know I do this or that and should I come to COBRA and it's like, Yeah, for sure because there are so many different representations and expressions of Blackness and there is no definition and it's always changing.

DB: Where does art fit into that?

Audience: It's hard to even pinpoint where because my experience as an artist as a Black female artist learning and starting my practice in St Catharines which has historical context but has also been erased.

My first-year university I lived on campus and my court was called the Tubman court and no one knew who it named after. Our mascot was a freaking polar bear

Every year I'd be like Tubman, Harriet Tubman and no one knew. So, it was hard even trying to be the Black artist because, do I want that stereotype everyone's going to ... I'm not really sure where art fits in because it's still really tough finding that community of Black Canadian creators and people who feel they operate in any of those 3 titles.

Deanna Bowen: I don't know if everybody knows about this but I moderate this Facebook group called the Black Canadian art history research group. We don't read very much <laughter> but I post a lot of events that are happening across the country and it really actually comes out of a conversation with the gentleman another lay historian like myself, Wade Compton out in Vancouver writes for, was writing at SFU, a poet, a very good poet. but we were having a conversation five years ago and it was about fatigue it was about being that one Black artist in a community of people that don't know what's what and you're fighting the good fight of maintaining a connection to history and teaching your friends around you and doing all that hard work. But you're doing it in isolation and so I thought and we talked a lot about it and he was like, “I don't want to do this.” He just wants to write poetry this was not what he asked for. He's not even from that community you know what I mean? He’d just been put, by nature of being educated and in the neighborhood, it became his job to keep the history right. And so in this discussion about presence like he was his present-day life was subsumed by this bigger thing, this bigger collective ambition. And it had the potential of railroading his life. And I definitely understood it, I totally was experiencing the same kind of a thing.

We were at Andrea Fatona's State of Blackness conference and that too was a congregation of Black academics and artists talking about Blackness because of the isolation in 2009. I did a piece called Shuttle in the Prairie and it was based on a Royal Winnipeg Ballet, about this farmer whose wife goes mad on the Prairie the peak of winter due to the isolation right. I've been thinking a lot about isolation as a strategy as a political strategy to undermine a community right. Every single Black artist academic scholar in whatever field that I've ever encountered has complained about the isolation being the central issue that's just made them want to just not – not engage, not care, not, just not, and just shut down. And so, the Facebook group came out of this desire to create a national network. And so over time it's become what thirteen hundred people all looking for that that connection piece.

So I'm thinking about that a lot about Canada as a landscape that does somehow achieves this divisive strategy or genocidal strategy even, not to be
heavy-handed about that, but there is a realness around Black history in Canada. And that and that kind of a reality but thinking about the way that dislocation and isolation, what it does to our sense of community or not. And how it's unlike the United States - I did it sorry - there's our collective, our national community is not as cohesive. We have the regional differences. I think that's something that even friend of mine was talking about which often she's also from Nova Scotia and this idea of you know Toronto kind of being the center but then there's a language different than Montreal with the large Haitian community you know and then you know there's pockets people think there's no one in the

prairies right - there are lots of people in the prairies - or a very small minority in in BC which is why I love this show, which is showing yeah there's a historic community and you know there's but yeah. There's not the same sense of America. unlike the cohesion engine yeah so those regional differences make a real big difference. Also connection to the Caribbean community and you know the differences that happen ethnically as well so you know we're just ...poly - it's a poly consciousness of Canada because there's language and ethnicities and different things that make it different than the US. The poly-ness of it all

How do you feel so far how do you feel being so far away from your community which does not even engage in this in any way do you miss that?

SM: I do miss that and I try to keep connections with scholars who do similar work and I'm beginning to actually, like we were discussing in the afternoon, see similarities between the context that I've known for almost a decade to Canada. And this one idea that we spoke about in the afternoon is how in South Africa there is this myth of a rainbow nation that is dangerously imploding and how in Canada there is this idea that we're a multicultural people and we are good. And so I'm beginning to see actually some parallels between what the context that I've known and this new context and I actually didn't need anyone to school me about the dangerous myth that we are multicultural in Canada. Just living and being human, it just hit me in the face that oh, we are not.

I would like to think of myself as a critical thinker but I was dangerously deceived when I was doing the immigration process to come to Canada. I bought into that myth. I thought Oh yay I will have a break from trying to justify my existence and always try to you know but yeah you get it. it is a different context I would say it's much more friendlier than what I was used to but it's okay. There are those moments, there are those jabs that quickly remind you, you know what, you are Black and you are being read in these particular ways. And what is so kind of disturbing for me is that in South Africa it was in your face, you kind of knew it. And yet kind of you know the subtext that's going on and if you are not careful you start blaming yourself and thinking am I overthinking this everyone told me this is multi culture connecting that were open. Am i bringing my baggage from, you know, experience of being in South Africa here? And I found a community here at Mac and also in Hamilton of people. Sometimes we just speak this is what I encountered, and am I overthinking things, and I think I think I do miss my community but I'm increasingly finding that just being here and just living.

I'm beginning to develop you know other ways of other interests, other research interests. And I just finished a paper that was looking at Black bodies on Instagram pages of universities and I realized before I went very far that the absences of Black bodies Black if they are there, they are not speaking about their research or teaching like what the other colleagues are doing. They are just being probably to pose in a picture, not to speak and so on and so forth. So, while I do miss South African in the context that I've Known, I'm beginning to have these parallels. And so, between South Africa and Canada and I'm beginning also to see things happening in this multicultural so-called multicultural - it is multicultural, but not the multicultural they mean - in quotations.

DB: Any questions from the audience?

Audience: I wanted to ask you a little bit more about the notion of Black joy, how you see it in your work...the piece about choreography and music would be one?

DB: I'm a miserable person. I'm trying to think of the but well you know Black joy from me right now is that video of all things. It's silly mmm. It's me and my mom shooting the shit not edited in any way it's ridiculous in all kinds of ways. But of anything in this space it's probably the most present and just is what it is piece in the whole show. My mom is losing her memory now so all of these things are super important right but this one in particular probably speaks to a moment where I just kind of got I just accepted that that was what it is I think in some ways there's like some of the not happy parts about the work that I'm doing is it's all a fight against time to understand my mom right so that's a hard part about it. But this is a lovely moment and I probably categorize it as a moment where I was able to embrace the fact that she's losing her memory and I just let her go wherever she goes. And so, there was an honestness about that and she's silly. And we shoot the shit about ridiculous things, like her pink hair in 1960 whatever - right what was she thinking? Right? But I mean she's that is one of the most joyful, challenging but joyful, aspects of the work that I'm doing is the friendship that I have developed with my mom it has not always been like that and again I'm thinking about intergenerational trauma and stuff like that again that first wave the first 10 years 15 years even was me working out my relationship to her. We were estranged for a good solid 10 years and so being able to be at this place and be able to put her out in the world this way. And I've been able to take her along to see the screenings and stuff like that and she thinks it's hilarious. She may not remember that she did it the next day, in the moment she thinks it's the most hilarious thing and people that are younger than her think she's a hoot and so she really enjoys being seen you know.

The Harlem Nocturne is - I thought that my mom would think – the heart of Nocturne telling a story about the nightclub would be fun and she hated the job. And so it was just like oh well that's not joy, but there was a lot of beautiful things that came out of that space, right? Some really wonderful parties and some great dancing and some incredible musicianship. So I would say, more broadly speaking, those kind of those memories over there are joy.

It was certainly a pleasure to work with Justine Chambers and Ben Ho to recreate Lenny Gibson's dance pieces. Intense and adventure-filled. We had a different actor a different dancer and he went to a music concert one weekend and just didn't come back, so it was like Oh shit! Who've you got your back pocket that can do this? And so we have this Juilliard trained dancer who kicked in and learned the dance pieces on the day of the shoot and that's what you see, intense but a beautiful afternoon.

(gestures towards the ~~on trial~~ video installation)

And these people are the most generous wonderful hard-working patient people to have worked with. And they were a lot of fun to work with. It was really hard work, but at the end of every single rehearsal we were still able to kind of come back to a joy. And we are a team and a family by the end of it.

Intimate enough to cry in front of each other. People that haven't known each other before. Intimate enough, really. I think the biggest kind of triumph of the pieces is we became intimate enough that they were able to share their anxieties and confusion about their identity on camera, and let it be out in the world. And that just as an indication of like how much they trusted me and that gives me some great pleasure. I at least feel like I'm doing what I'm doing right.

Audience: Can you talk a bit more about this work (~~on trial~~), and how you said that they didn't identify as Black?

DB: Yeah um it's a mishmash.

Momito was in the middle there with the head wrap came from the UK and her understanding of Blackness is rooted in 2 things. Like for her in the UK her identity, the issues with her identity, are more situated in class less so about Blackness per se. And racism is there but that's not the thing that got in the way for her. And she didn't understand Black Britishness in the same way that Black Americans understand that are Black North Americans understand Blackness so that was a big shake-up for her.

Whitney is super young she and Allum who played she's on the far right corner with the reddish hair those two performers insisted that they had never experienced racism and so it's, I'm kind of 'how does that work?" But it became really that conversation about Blackness they I definitely understood. They had spent most of their time in Toronto, but again very just different backgrounds, not born here but came here but the conversations about Blackness we were having really were about racism, right. The inherent racism that goes with Blackness and I couldn't figure out how to teach these actors to embody not-Black American characters if they didn't understand what racism was in the first place, if that makes sense at all. And then it became a discussion about well they didn't sign up for me to -- if I wanted to get the performance I wanted, I would have to break their bubble and illustrate how they could experience racism as a Black person in Canada. And I had to make that decision of not doing that. And I made the decision to make peace with the performance I got because they did not sign up to have their Black identity and a sense of Black self-cracked on camera although it did come up in many ways.

Kato is a model and that means exactly what I think it sounds like he really wasn't thinking about a lot beyond whether or not he looked good. And trying to have a conversation with him about Blackness really just met with you know -- he just needed to know which angle and that was really frustrating. And Really, he has two really complicated roles. So it was a challenge.

And Putty is Guyanese, and he kept speaking in patois and just speaking super crude and it was just horrible and other people in the cast understood it. But I don't understand patois and I'm not Guyanese. I'm a very particular other kind of Blackness so I kind of got what he was getting at, but I often missed the joke in many ways, in the ways that most of the other cast members did get yeah.

So bringing us all together Momito had a major kind of meltdown come week three about her identity and that is somewhat some of the decision that kind of turned the project around about making it about that because it was continues to be that in my mind the most important experience of that whole thing is having that conversation which turned into how do we as very different Black people how do we take care of each other in this. And it goes against everything that I was telling you -- how I was raised. And this is really embarrassing we go ahead and say it anyhow but I was raised to distrust African Americans and then to also stay away from Black Africans so that was just a weird kind of plantation trickled down kind of logic about where we as good upstanding Black Canadians should function in the world right. So, to have this cast of very different kinds of Black people required me to really check some really old things that had been taught about who these people were and what they were to me.

I also wanted to let folks know that the full video will be shown April 3rd at LR Wilson so you can see the entirety of the fine performance. Not the regular but the hour-long piece. Yes. Which is an interesting thing to see outside of this context because it does have its own flow yeah, it'll be interesting to see what you think of that.

Audience: So, Kimberly Phillips, the Curator of the show in her essay she talks a lot about the shadow archive. And what I think is interesting is that shadows of dark matter they sound like they're same thing but they're not quite, in the sense that Dark Matter cannot really be measured, and shadows can be measured by spaces they inhabit.

So I think all these artifacts of this material that's the show is comprised of you know they're a lot more like shadows, you know if you like are asleep and you look at a pile of clothes and it looks like a monster but it's actually laundry like you know what happens when we shine a light on things that were previously obscured by shadows. So, when you bring all these things into this gallery what are you hoping to illuminate exactly?

DB: Two things. I agree with the idea that these are shadows and the first thing that came to mind after that is that the dark matter the wisdom of the dark matter is the thing that glues it all together does that make sense? And you're right I can't quantify what that is. I don't know the boundaries of that wisdom. I don't know where it stops, starts, that kind of stuff right?

What does it mean to bring these pieces, these shadows into this space into any gallery space? I'm thinking about the shadow of the original being that this shadow is made of if that makes any sense at all. The individuals whose stories these actually these documents, these shadowy documents take space for or take the space of. I'm thinking a lot about that. These in many ways are embodiments of individuals for me. Their stories. That's my mom in her struggle with her Black identity for me, that overhead. it cracked me up because my mom has never worn an afro in her life right and I'd asked her about and we talked about her over here in this video right. And a lot of it has to do with she's not a militant right, so but that's how she understands her. So, she's not a militant? I go but what do you call that? And she would she would very she would say that I was just standing up for my brother, but it was

within a political context. But she's just got this clarity about her idea of what a Black person that does that is inherently a militant right. So, I think that for me that's what that piece is about right, the newspaper clipping is over there that is about the collective Black bodies that were arrested and that were active, that we're fighting. What's behind me this is my whole damn family and how we came into being and again this is the story told by my mom. And what this piece speaks to in my mind is all of the fabulous rich crazy can't even imagine it wisdom that my mom has. The secretary that you know lived most of her life serving white men in the offices and the stuff that she knows about the men that she's worked for and the things that she's seen, that's what this is about.

And that's that shadow which is very much a present thing is my aunt who died right and giving presence to somebody who's whose death has cast an enormous shadow over my family that has never really been -- the light has not been shone on that in any kind of way so that's what that is you know. You see what I mean? Every piece is a person in this show for me and it's and these shadowy documents are the most available and most reflective of those individuals in my family, in my personal narrative. We were here. Put it another way, we were here, we have always been here, right?

And this speaks to several decades of Black presence and that is what brings
me here to this present day right now.

One more question.

Audience: So, I was looking at a documentary in which you were talking about not knowing how to be in the world if you do not do this work of recording voices and stories that have always been on the margins and bring them to the fore. And so, after this, after Black History Month what next?

DB: I make less money. It's high season y'all**.** I will make less money come March first it's sad. what happens after this I'm developing a few projects I'm working on extension of god of god exhibition that was at the art museum and that really is about the white supremacist foundations of the group of seven as connected to an anti-Black petition that was generated in response to my family's migration. So that's a show of receipts that is not a hypothesis that is a concrete fact. So that is what that is. And how I'm expanding it is I'm expanding it to open up into German white Germans preoccupation with performing indigeneity at the Berlin Biennale and that show is also opening up to a discussion a project about the number two Construction Battalion for Kitchener Waterloo in September. And that is the number-two Construction Battalion was an all-Black battalion formed in the First World War a highly unwanted battalion of Black men and of course I have a family member that was part of that battalion so I'm sussing that out and find him give shape to that unknown community of soldiers. And then that connects to crazy anti-German sentiment in Kitchener when it was formally called Berlin which of course makes the connection between Berlin.

And that's what I'm doing. Black people everywhere, that's a story. But in all sincerity like opening up the number two Construction Battalion opens up all kinds of things - your mom and I having this conversation and Ottawa in passing and she was telling me all of these things about how it brings, that

number two Construction Battalion that was formed in Toronto is all about Halifax. It's all about the Black men in Halifax my family member that's connected to the battalion is like an offshoot and of a very small pocket of Blacks that came from the United States that were willing to serve for the Canadian government they were they remembered how they were treated and did not want to serve but Halifax is where the bulk of the bodies come from so in a roundabout way I mean. Geographically it's all over the place, but it still does the job of mapping these different communities across the country.

Great work. Thank you for coming out