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Uncoupling the Archives: Fragments from a Memory Journal

Sylvia D. Hamilton

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Uncoupling the Archives: Fragments from a Memory Journal

Sylvia D. Hamilton

I am who they imagined.

When we came here more than two hundred years ago, they thought, no hoped, we would not survive. We'd be a burden on the scarce resources of the new society. But survive we did. We made a way out of no way. We had to. For them: our kin who died in the Middle Passage. We survived for them, and for the children they would never know. For the children like me, from generations in the future.

I am who they imagined.

Memory is a non-linear, non-chronological moebius strip, it is fluid, porous, a collage. In this temporal site of memory, the real and the imagined co-exist. Much remains unspoken about the historical fact that Nova Scotia was a slave society, and the traces of its legacy haunt us still: in the names of prominent Nova Scotians, in street names, in archival records, and in churches. African people were present here from the earliest period of European colonization. My ancestors were the Black Refugees from the War of 1812. I am their witness.

I am who they imagined.

—*Excavation: A Site of Memory, 2013*

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Forty or more years ago, I didn't know that I would spend years excavating archives, or that I would find ways to bring what I found there into public view in my work through documentary films, essays, poetry, and multimedia installations. Of all the documents from the archival file boxes, old newspapers and manuscripts that were new to my younger self, fragments of three stood out, and still resonate with me, so many decades later.

On Saturday next, at twelve o'clock, will be sold on the Beach, two hogsheads of rum, three of sugar and two well-grown negro girls aged fourteen and twelve to the highest bidder. 1769.

I imagined I was one of those girls.

Ran away from her master John Rock, on Monday the 18th Day of August, a Negroe Girl named Thursday, about four and a half feet high, broad feet, with a Lump above her Right Eye; had on when she ran away a red Cloth Petticoat, a red Baize Bed Gown, and a red ribbon about her head. 1772.

Rock offered a two-dollar Reward along with costs. I was Thursday.

Mary Postell had been enslaved but gained her freedom. She went to court to protect herself and children from being re-enslaved. She lost her case and was sold for a hundred pounds of potatoes valued at 20 pounds sterling. 1786.[1]

I cried for Mary and her lost children.

I've returned again and again to the Nova Scotia Public Archives in Halifax. Yet these three stories read during my early visits have stayed with me. I've continually walked with them beside me.

In 1981, along with friend and anthropologist Savanah E. Williams and former Provincial Archivist, the late Hugh A. Taylor, we organized the first ever public exhibition of thirty-seven archival documents related to people of African descent in Nova Scotia. It was on display from April 24 to August 31. Over the years, my research into African Canadian cultural history has taken me to the National Archives in Ottawa, the Ontario Archives in Toronto, The Buxton National Historic Site and Museum in Buxton, Ontario, New Brunswick's King's Landing Historical Settlement and the New Brunswick Archives in Fredericton. In my travels I've visited libraries and archives in Detroit, New York, North Carolina, and Freetown, Sierra Leone in Africa.

What was I looking for? Traces, evidence, fragments that might tell me something about my ancestral legacy and its implications for my present. But could I trust and interpret the findings, given that the hands placing the material didn't look like mine? How would I know what was missing?

I would have to read between, above and below the lines; create spaces and cross-reference these with oral stories and family and community

1. For a detailed explanation of aspects of African Nova Scotian history see, "African Nova Scotians in the Age of Slavery and Abolition," https://archives.novascotia.ca/africanns/results/?Search=&SearchList1=4. Carole Watterson Troxler discusses the case of Mary Postell in "Re-enslavement of Black Loyalists: Mary Postell in South Carolina, East Florida, and Nova Scotia," *Acadiensis* 37, no. 2 (Summer/Autumn 2008).

Figure 1. ***Excavation: A Site of Memory*, installation view, Dalhousie Art Gallery, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 2013.** Photo: Sylvia D. Hamilton.

archives. I have uncoupled my archival findings (textual and visual records and material objects) from the physical, limited structure of the archive, for repurposing.

I follow poet Emily Dickinson's dictum to "tell all the truth but tell it slant," by approaching the *archive* at an angle, *slant*. In so doing, I don't take what I find on its face as the whole truth. I triangulate, juxtapose, repurpose and re-imagine—all in an effort to tell truthful stories about the lives and experiences of generations of African Canadians.

When I began to think about the creation of an installation, whose original name was *The Slavery Project*, I struggled with how to visualize, concretize the troubling fact of *Black people as property*. How would I render that experience/idea in real time, from the abstract to a physical form? I went literal, for equivalencies: barrels and potatoes.

The Slavery Project became *Excavation: A Site of Memory* and *Excavation: Here We Are Here*, a multi-media installation that evolves with each iteration. The work has been hosted at galleries and museums in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Quebec, and Ontario from 2013 to 2019. This work is inspired by my ancestors, the strong-willed Black Refugees/Survivors of the War of 1812 whom I've written about elsewhere; the original, imaginative Afro-futurists.[2] *Excavation* incorporates still and moving images, soundscapes, large wall prints, and an array of personal and archival objects. In these sites the real and imagined co-exist, memories collide and merge |**fig. 1**|.

The installation has several anchors. *Naming Names* is composed of five twelve-foot wall scrolls printed with 3000 names of African people, drawn from historical records. It lists enslaved Africans, free Black Loyalists from the American Revolutionary War, and free Black Refugee-Survivors from the War of 1812. In the African Baptist tradition, it is a roll call, accompanied by an audio recording of the names being read into the record.

2. Sylvia D. Hamilton, "Visualizing History and Memory in the African Nova Scotian Community," in *Other Places: Reflections on Media Arts in Canada*, ed. Deanna Bowen (Toronto: Media Arts Network of Ontario/Public Books, 2019), https://www.otherplaces.mano-ramo.ca/sylvia-d-hamilton-visualizing-history-and-memory-in-the-african-nova-scotian-community/.

Figures 2 and 3. ***Mining Memory: Sylvia D. Hamilton*****, installation view, Thames Art Gallery, Chatham, Ontario, 2015.** Photo: Sylvia D. Hamilton.

The installation includes hogshead barrels, potatoes, and prints titled *The Ledger* and *Freedom Runners*. The work also includes my own locks of hair, tied with a red ribbon, fashioned to look like I imagine Thursday's might have |**figs. 2, 3**|.

In her novel *Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison examines the significance of names. Her narrator says:

> How many dead lives and fading memories were buried in and beneath the names of the places in this country. Under the recorded names were other names, just as "Macon Dead," recorded for all time in some dusty file, hid from view the real names of people, places, things. Names that had meaning. No wonder Pilate put hers in her ear. When you know your name, you should hang on to it, for unless it is noted down and remembered, it will die when you do. Names that bore witness.[3]

In creating *Naming Names*, I was conscious that the collective names typically assigned to Black/African people erased their individuality, their personhood, from public view and memory. While many did not have names, that is, when they were simply grouped and listed in the archival records as "slaves," each was an individual person whose life mattered. Each person deserves to be remembered.

Journal Entry: January 28, 2015 (Memory Fragment 1: Buxton, Ontario, site visit)

Preparation for Thames Art Gallery exhibition

With great anticipation, I enter the Buxton National Historic Site & Museum. I felt I knew this past. In selecting artifacts to share the space within my installation, I wanted to find parallel traces: first, of the ugly but utterly quotidian nature of enslavement, that could be paired with the hogshead barrels I used in the Halifax displays.

I found that parallel in the iron leg shackles—adult and child—the iron neck collar and a leather whip. As I held the shackles, my visceral, emotional response paralleled how I felt standing before wooden barrels that were my

3. Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (New York: Signet Classics, New American Library, 1977), 333.

equivalent, had I been born in 1780s Nova Scotia. The child's leg irons would have confined my feet. Had I been a woman, the larger ones were ready to restrict me. Stark, concretized evidence of brutal enslavement.

Secondly, I sought special *memory objects* that spoke of the humanity and resilience of early African people in Buxton and their will to survive in defiance of the circumstances. Family Bibles, handmade objects, and photograph albums. When I saw the carefully arranged mirror and hair combs, I saw a thread between and among the women in Buxton and those in Black communities throughout Nova Scotia. I thought of my personal archives, with an array of treasures that speak to Black women's adornment. Shannon Prince, the warm, gracious, and resourceful Curator of the museum unwrapped for me an old quilt, hand-stitched by Buxton church women; it was like my grandmother's quilt: both used a light pink binding. It drew me in. Mama Hamilton, like her mother before her, and my own mother, was active in the African Baptist church in our village. I was in the presence of objects imbued with stories, with memories, with heart.

The Buxton name quilt was a fundraiser: people paid fifty cents to add their name to it. I wasn't quite prepared to hold the heavy iron shackles. Shackles heavy with iron. Whose skin did they bind, whose feet did they force to walk along, stiff-legged, not stride as a body is meant to. The push and pull, the pull and push of history; memory embedded. Skin upon skin. If I cuff myself, if my feet are shackled, what vibrations from past Black bodies will pass through me? There is no longer a key.

I marvel at the treasures here: a fragile family Bible, it could be one hundred years old; a record of the significant events in any life: birth, marriage, baptisms, death. And albums with photographs marking moments—seemingly mundane, the details of everyday life. Who will remember them? We will. I will |**fig. 2**|.

Journal Entry: May 14, 2015 (Memory Fragment 2: Finding Isaiah)

Thames Art Gallery, Chatham, Ontario

Noon. Last big thing to do, set up the old and fragile Poindexter family Bible, the cover is detached from its spine. And there is no money to restore it.

During my visit to the Buxton Historical Museum, Shannon explained to me how to open the Bible: *place the unopened Bible on the stand, take a large group of pages in your left hand, support them with your right hand, lay them to the left, on top of the cover.*

The Poindexter family Bible came to the gallery wrapped in a layer of protective acid-free tissue paper and stored in an archival box. I was extremely nervous. I had not touched any artifact that old for a long time, since my first days at the Nova Scotia Archives. What if I cause it more damage?

Wearing white cotton gloves, very carefully I lifted the Bible from its box. Danielle, the gallery assistant, pulled the tissue out from under the Bible as I placed it on the clear plexi stand. I held my breath; bits of faded,

Figure 4. ***Excavation: Memory Work*****, installation view, UNB ART Centre, Fredericton, New Brunswick, 2018.** Photo: Sylvia D. Hamilton.

tan-coloured paper were shedding from the cover. Remembering Shannon's precise instructions, I placed a gloved finger along the pages, not sure where to open it, measured half finger or so, to first knuckle.

Opening it, I gently laid the pages to the left, to rest on the cover as Shannon had instructed. I smiled, shouted, I could not believe my eyes. "Were you looking for a special spot?" Danielle asked. "Not exactly, I just wanted to open it carefully and didn't want to attempt to find Isaiah. But here he was. Isaiah was in the house, Chapter LVII! It just happened."[4] (fig. 2, Bible is seen on the stand in centre of installation view).

On one wall near the entrance of the gallery, the text read:

Then deep from the earth you shall speak, from low in the dust your words shall come, your voice shall come from the ground like the voice of a ghost, and your speech shall whisper out of the dust. Isaiah 29: 4.

Early in colonial history, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick were one province. Mounting an exhibition at the UNB Art Centre offered me time to think about early Africans and their descendants who were living on that land. Enslavement was a harsh fact of life for them. During a site visit to King's Landing, a re-created historical village and museum, curators offered me the loan of two slave collars for inclusion in my show. Like the shackles at the Buxton Historical Museum, these tangible remnants of enslavement made the condition real in a way that reading a text cannot—wordlessly, deeply felt |**fig.4**|.

Advertisements in period newspapers in both Nova Scotia and New Brunswick were stark evidence of slavery, and of the ongoing resistance and resilience of African peoples. Self-appointed owners hoped to convince others

4. Ellyn Walker's review of my Thames Art Gallery solo exhibition appeared in 2015 in *Magenta Magazine*, https://www.magentafoundation.org/magazine/sylvia-d-hamilton/.

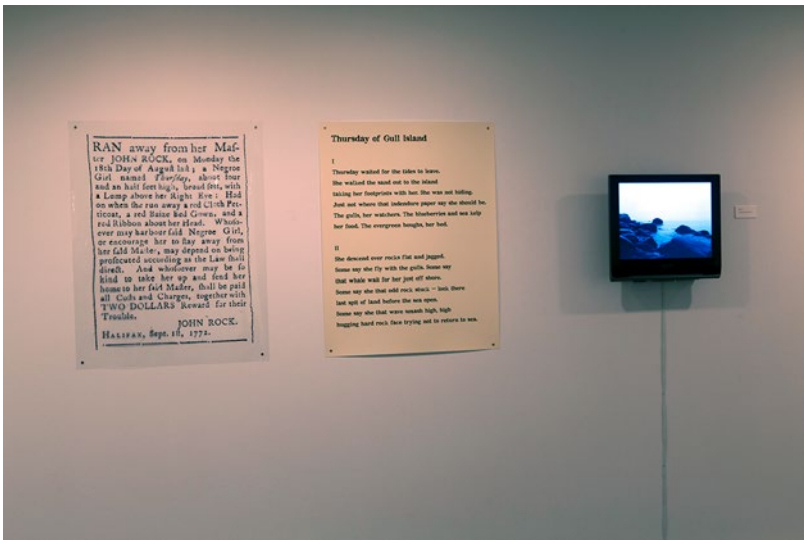


Figure 5. ***Thursday of Gull Island, Freedom Runner, Excavation: A Site of Memory*****, installation view (close-up), Dalhousie Art Gallery, 2013.**
Photo: Sylvia D. Hamilton.

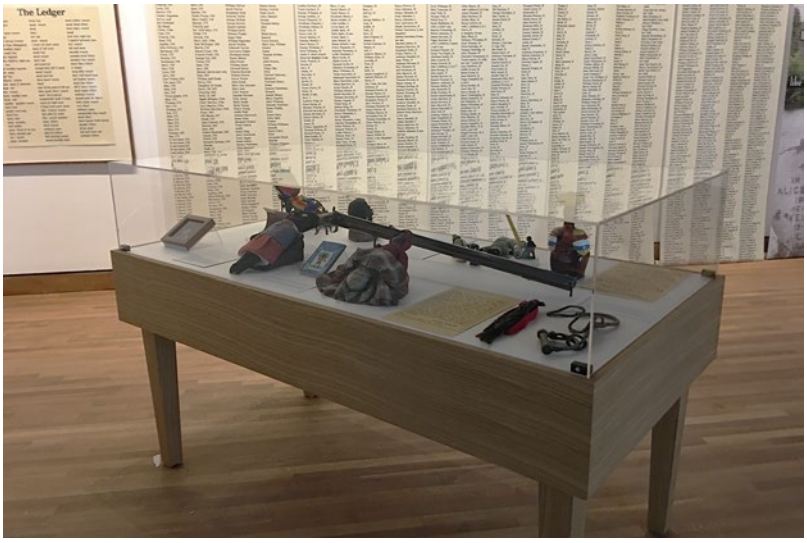


Figure 6. ***Here We Are Here: Black Canadian Contemporary Art*****, installation view, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, 2018.**
Photo: Sylvia D. Hamilton.

like them to capture these *freedom runners*—who exercised control over their own bodies by resisting enslavement. I thought about what it was like for them as they ran. My enlarged text prints, in their imagined voices, are juxtaposed beside the advertisements.

Thursday, Bill, Nancy, Flora, Ben, Isaac, and Lidge were contemporaries in the struggle for freedom |**fig. 5**|.

Objectification of Black people is not a relic of the past; nor is portraying us as hideous objects to ridicule. In addition to museums and archives, I've scanned secondhand and antique shops, bargaining down the ticket price for so-called Black memorabilia, to liberate them. Rarely did I get an argument; some shop owners were embarrassed to have the item on display, especially when faced with a Black person holding it, asking for the price to be reduced. In one case I handed an owner a one-dollar coin while saying, "that is all I will pay for this."

In 2018, when the installation was exhibited at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) in Toronto as part of the exhibition, *Here We Are Here: Black Canadian Contemporary Art*, I arranged a selection of these found pieces from my personal archives in a display case.[5] At the request of curators Julie Crooks, Dominique Fontaine, and Silvia Forni, I wrote a title card to accompany the objects |**fig. 6**|.

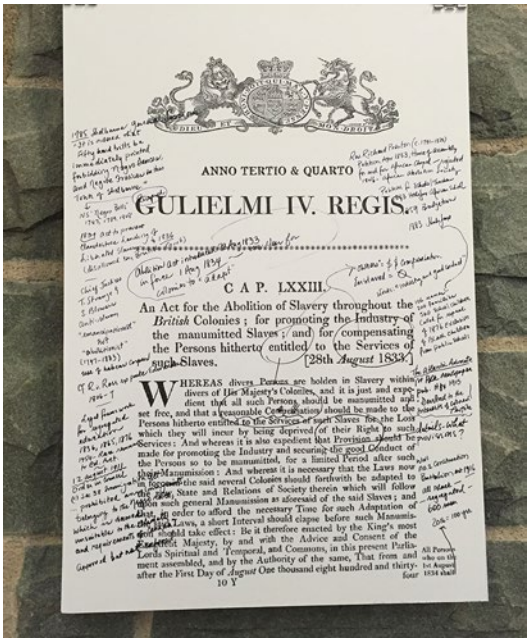
Text card notes for ROM display case: *How They See Us—Still*

Racist iconography, the spawn of slavery and colonialism, that dehumanizes and objectifies Black and African peoples, remains in worldwide circulation. These objects, from my personal archives, were purchased from second-hand and antique shops. Yet, a vast assortment—old, *and newly produced*, is a click away on eBay: dinner bells, toaster covers, finger puppets, note paper holders, pocket mirrors, recipe boxes, fridge magnets, towels and aprons, salt-and-pepper shakers, sugar and creamer sets, and more. My Black girl doll, draped in Kente cloth, asks: is *this is how they see us—still?* Enslaved Black people were routinely left in wills along with other "property," itemized, in the same way as they were listed in newspaper ads for sale at auction or recorded in bills of sale.

Excavation: Here We Are Here, mounted in 2016 at the Schulich School of Law at Dalhousie University, was timed to coincide with the International Decade for People of African Descent, 2015–2024. In addition to the anchors of the installation, I created new work that considered laws, covenants and their relationship to African-descended people in Nova Scotia and Canada.

The series *Freedom When: Works in Progress*, comprised prints of the 1833 Act to Abolish Slavery in the British Empire, and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms of the Canadian Constitution Act of 1982, both annotated, and the 1968 RCMP surveillance report titled *General Conditions and Subversive Activities Amongst Negroes in Nova Scotia*, complete with redactions, which was positioned between the two aforementioned prints. It required no annotations or commentary |**figs. 7a, 7b, 7c**|.

5. This group exhibition borrowed its name, *Here We Are Here*, from my 2017 installation at Dalhousie University Schulich School of Law. A description of the ROM show is found here:https://www.rom.on.ca/en/exhibitions-galleries/exhibitions/here-we-are-here-black-canadian-contemporary-art.



ANNO TERTIO & QUARTO

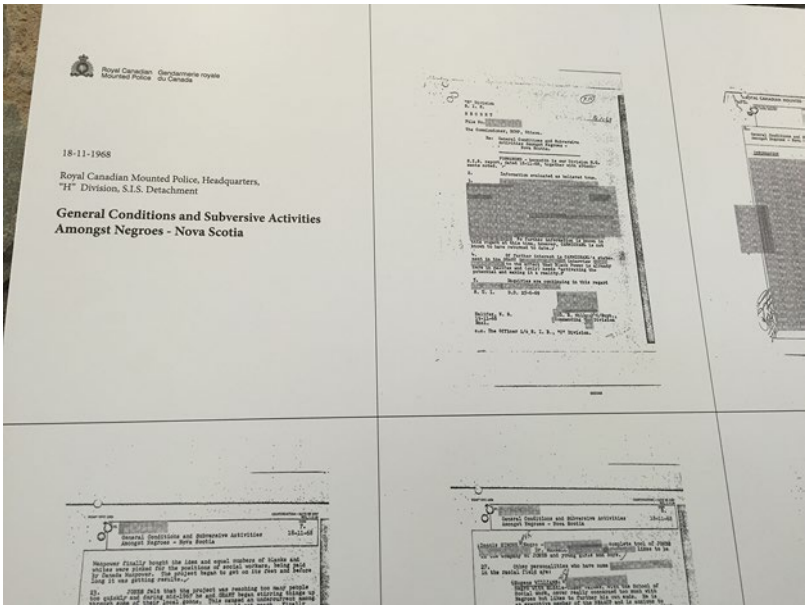
GULIELMI IV. REGIS.

CAP. LXXIII.

An Act for the Abolition of Slavery throughout the *British* Colonies; for promoting the Industry of the manumitted Slaves; and for compensating the Persons hitherto entitled to the Services of such Slaves. [28th *August* 1833.]

WHEREAS divers Persons are holden in Slavery within divers of His Majesty's Colonies, and it is just and expedient that all such Persons should be manumitted and set free, and that a reasonable Compensation should be made to the Persons hitherto entitled to the Services of such Slaves for the Loss which they will incur by being deprived of their Right to such Services: And whereas it is also expedient that Provision should be made for promoting the Industry and securing the good Conduct of the Persons so to be manumitted, for a limited Period after such Manumission: And whereas it is necessary that the Laws now in force in the said several Colonies should forthwith be adapted to the State and Relations of Society therein which will follow upon such general Manumission as aforesaid of the said Slaves; and in order to afford the necessary Time for such Adaptation of the Laws, a short Interval should elapse before such Manumission should take effect: Be it therefore enacted by the King's most Excellent Majesty, by and with the Advice and Consent of the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, and Commons, in this present Parliament assembled, and by the Authority of the same, That from and after the First Day of *August* One thousand eight hundred and thirty-four

Figure 7a. ***Excavation: Here We Are Here*****, installation view, Schulich School of Law, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 2016.** Photo: Sylvia D. Hamilton.



Royal Canadian Mounted Police / Gendarmerie royale du Canada

18-11-1968

Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Headquarters,
"H" Division, S.I.S. Detachment

General Conditions and Subversive Activities Amongst Negroes - Nova Scotia

Figure 7b. ***Excavation: Here We Are Here*****, installation view, Schulich School of Law, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 2016.** Photo: Sylvia D. Hamilton.

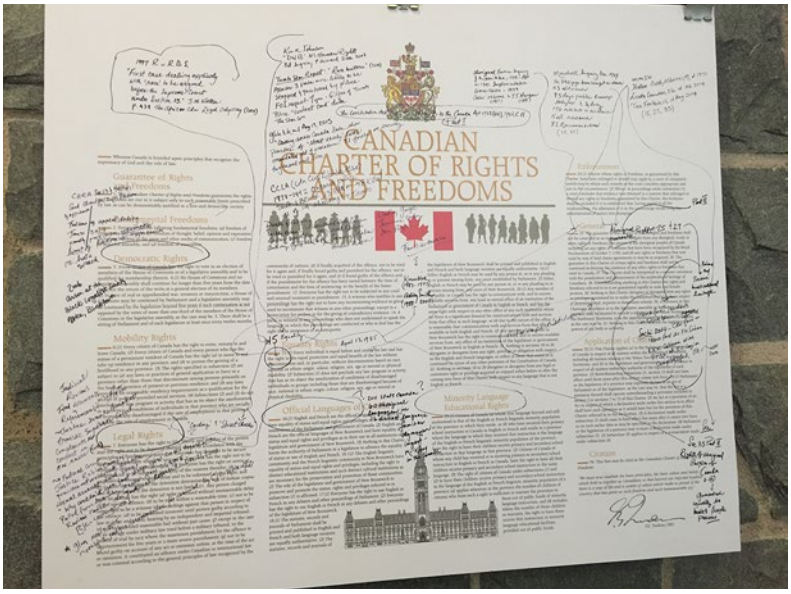


Figure 7c. ***Excavation: Here We Are Here*, installation view, Schulich School of Law, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 2016.** Photo: Sylvia D. Hamilton.

How do we understand these documents as they are thrown in stark relief against our lived experiences? How do we think about, and relate to these texts, two as fundamental pillars of Canadian democracy, and the third, textual evidence that agents of our own government conducted surveillance on its Black citizens? What rights, then, if any, can we take for granted, as others might?

One of Dr. Martin Luther King's favourite biblical passages came from the Old Testament Book of Amos, "But Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." (5:24). I created a six-foot, vertical, free-standing, suspended fabric panel with this quotation to assert that my project is underpinned by ideas of resistance, resilience and defiance as evidenced by the long-rooted lives of African people in Canada

When I think about the redacted names in the RCMP surveillance report, I'm reminded of Morrison's narrator's assertion that names have meaning. Yet, the RCMP and the Government did not want us to know the names of the Black people they spied on. Why were they being tracked? Why don't they want us to know?

What were the so-called subversive activities? What qualified as "subversive"? The public request for human rights? Fair and equal treatment under Canadian law? The inherent right to dignity? Freedom as promised by the Abolition Act?

March 24, 2021, marked a rare day in the Canadian House of Commons. A motion introduced by Liberal MP Majid Jowhari to designate August 1st as Emancipation Day in Canada passed unanimously.

On August 1,1834, slavery was abolished in Canada and other British colonies. Introduced in the British Parliament on August 28, of the previous year, the Act provided for: "the Abolition of Slavery throughout the British

Colonies; for promoting the Industry of the manumitted Slaves: and for compensating the Persons hitherto entitled to the services of such Slaves" (August 28, 1833) |**fig.7a**|.

The Act further allowed for a period of adjustment for the former owners; they needed time to adapt to their loss of free Black labour. The Act would take effect one year later. As to compensation for the enslaved, the act was silent. August 1, 2021, became the first year for commemoration.

There are moments during the creative process when one is struck speechless. It happened to me in September 2016. I read news reports about a forty-eight-pound, six-year-old Black girlchild in a Mississauga, Ontario school. She was wrestled to the floor by two six-foot, white male police officers, each weighing at least 190 to 200 pounds. They placed her face down, cuffed her hands and feet behind her back. She was restrained that way for nearly a half hour.

I experienced a sudden physical reaction; a palpable reminder of the child shackles and slave collars used on Black children that I have displayed in my installations. According to news reports, police had already been called on the girl several times that month. It is unclear what communications may have taken place between school officials and the family about managing the child's behaviour.[6]

These many years later, I still think about her. The results of her family's human rights complaint came in January 2021 when an Ontario Human Rights Tribunal ordered the Peel Regional Police Board to pay $35,000 in damages to her family. They sought $150,000 as compensation for injury and loss of self-respect and dignity and $20,000 for the cost of counselling for psychological damage and trauma. In rendering her decision, Adjudicator Brenda Bowlby wrote:

> In handcuffing the applicant's hands behind her back and holding her on her stomach with her ankles handcuffed for at least twenty-eight minutes, the officers violated the applicant's rights under Sec. 1 of the Human Rights Code to equal treatment in the provision of services by treating her in a way they would not have treated a white child.[7]

Freedom (When), even in the first year commemorating Emancipation Day, is still a work in progress. ¶

6. "Decision against Peel police board comes a year after tribunal found race factored into officers' actions," *CBC News*, January 7, 2021, https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/human-rights-tribunal-peel-police-black-girl-handcuffed-1.5865322.

7. Kayla Goodfield, "Ontario Human Rights Tribunal orders Peel police board to pay $35K after six-year old Black girl handcuffed at school," *CTV News Toronto*, January 7, 2021, https://toronto.ctvnews.ca/ontario-s-human-rights-tribunal-orders-peel-police-board-to-pay-35k-after-six-year-old-black-girl-handcuffed-at-school-1.5257749.