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Article abstract

Dans cet essai, je m'intéresse aux oeuvres visuelles d'artistes du Canada afin de mieux saisir comment la mémoire noire et les actes de préservation fonctionnent en dehors des contraintes institutionnelles. Ces artistes nous permettent d'imaginer une sensibilité archivistique noire émergeante à partir de leurs choix artistiques et esthétiques concernant la vie des personnes noires. Dans cet essai, je cherche à découvrir comment les artistes insistent sur la vie des personnes noires par le biais de leurs portraits, leurs installations et leurs oeuvres en techniques mixtes. Le projet est ici d'explorer, d'amplifier et de célébrer la façon dont les artistes encouragent leur public à voir la vie des Noir·es de manière ouverte, au-delà des schémas hiérarchiques racialisés et des discours sur la mort. Le « plus de vie » que je signale dans le titre de cet essai fournit un cadre pour que nous puissions découvrir, rassembler et célébrer les articulations de la vie des personnes noires dans un moment de puissance algorithmique implacable.

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Introduction

Preservation is a political act; it is never neutral. Acts of preservation are often organized by a state or municipality in an attempt at controlling pub-lic memory. Yet, beyond such forces, Black life has found ways to practice preservation and engage in memory work unbounded by social institu-tions and governmental practices. Institutions of preservation, such as art museums and archives, are by extension also not neutral, as Schwartz and Cook remind us, despite how the archival profession is built on perceptions and myths of neutrality and objectivity.[1] Artists remain in an interesting and important position vis-à-vis archives, as these repositories were original-ly designed to support academic researchers and advance colonial empires. Artists make good use of archives, and their practices and memory work often exceed what gets considered "archival." Works such as Charmaine Lurch's painting-installation series *Re-Imagining Henrietta Lacks* (2015), Anique Jordan's sculpture *Arming by Clara* (2017), or Jordan's more recent photog-raphy series *Nowing* (2021) counter and move beyond the information avail-able to us in the historical record.[2] The memory work by the Black Canadian artists examined in this essay points to how acts of preservation might be marked with a Black archival sensibility. Such a sensibility could take up a salient theme in Afrodiasporic life: acts of refusal that move beyond resist-ance towards a relationality that evades silos and binaristic thinking. My understanding of such a sensibility not only insists on celebrating Black life, but also practices refusal as a strategic action that stretches the boundaries of disciplines and fields to ethically disrupt and discontinue cycles of harm and violence born out of the colonial project.

To explore acts of preservation and Black memory work, I turn to the aes-thetic choices of three contemporary Canadian artists: Deanna Bowen, Mark Stoddart, and Elicser Elliott. Through various methods of confrontation, remixing and citation, these artists illuminate strategies of preservation, memorializing and of honouring Black life. Black memory work and practi-ces of preservation embedded in visual art do not necessarily offer up a clar-ity that can be purchased, apprehended, nor appreciated by all. This opacity is not an accident; it is a practice keenly aware of the surveillant dominant culture.[3] I want to suggest that a Black archival sensibility thinks different-ly about Black life in elaborate ways, which might frustrate existing archival

1. Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, "Archives, Records and Power: The Making of Modern Memory," *Archival Science* 2 (March–September 2002): 1–19.

2. In *Re-imagining Henrietta Lacks*, Lurch challenges scientific and historical memory to recontextualize and reimagine how visibility and invisibility inform how we come to know the experiments that took place with Lack's cells. See "Henrietta Lacks: science must right a historical wrong," *Nature.com*, Sept. 1, 2020, https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-02494-z.

3. Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997). Simone Browne's work on dark sousveillance also importantly informs how I think about opacity, surveillance, and Black life.

4. I want to be cognizant of our present moment in which algorithms are invisible forms of power that attempt to overdetermine our informational choices, our digital life, and dominate our attention spans as part of the expansion of an attention economy. As artificial intelligence works to make content discoverable online and reap behavioural practices in the form of user data online, notions of memory and the archive are destabilized almost daily as platforms change their algorithms as they see fit.

5. See the work of Simone Browne in *Dark Matter: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

6. See SA Smythe, "The Black Mediterranean and the Politics of Imagination," *Middle East Report* 286 (Spring 2018): 3–9.

7. See Kevin Quashie, *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), in particular his conclusion, in which he returns to Glissant's work, which also informs Moten's *Black and Blur* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

8. See Jean-Christophe Cloutier, *Shadow Archives: the Lifecycles of African American Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019). Cloutier's definition of an archival sensibility focuses on African-American mid-century writers like Claude McKay and how these authors were invested in counter-archival practices demonstrating archival sensibilities that "elude institutional capture," 305.

9. Katherine McKittrick, "Mathematics Black Life," *Black Scholar* 44, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 16.

practices and disrupt the increasing hegemony of algorithms and artificial intelligence.[4] By focusing on the nuanced and intimate workings of Black life, a Black archival sensibility is attentive to the myriad ways that life is lived beyond racial schemas, tropes of death, and social hierarchies. This might mean the memory work of Black communities, when focused on the interiority of Black life, sits in stark contrast to virality and the means by which audiences are built and attention captured. Institutional archival work datafies the past through extensive metadata regimes and practices of metatagging. When archival items are digitized and their discoverability increased through metatagging these objects travel across the internet in ways that open up Black life to appropriation, surveillance, and commodification with increased discoverability.[5] Artificial intelligence relies on knowledge graphs to accumulate data and make intelligible information on the internet, but the work of visual artists is not always archivable nor datafiable, at times relying on a level of opacity to speak to specific audiences

Examining visual art by Bowen, Elliott, and Stoddart elaborates ways we might sustain Black livingness beyond institutional archival relations and their colonial inheritances. Put differently, the artists explored here refuse Black death as a necessary condition to practices of memorializing, preserving, or archiving. Following the work of SA Smythe, the artists examined here open up archives (in a metaphoric sense) to a world of possibility by centring Black life and Black livingness.[6] This livingness, usefully elaborated by Kevin Quashie's reading of Fred Moten and Édouard Glissant, is an un-catalogable "ecological disposition" in which words fail to effectively convey meaning.[7] These artists allow us to imagine an emergent Black archival sensibility from the artistic and aesthetic choices concerned with Black livingness. These visual art works and practices encourage an appreciation of a Black archival sensibility amongst visual artists in Canada whose counter-archival poetics insist on Black life directly in the face of how Black death has been a constitutive element of colonial archival practice.[8] In "Mathematics Black Life," Katherine McKittrick, citing Saidiya Hartman, reminds us that "the archive of the black diaspora is a death sentence, a tomb, a display of a violated body, an inventory of property, a medical treatise...an asterisk in the grand narrative of history."[9] My attempt in this essay is to uncover how artists insist on Black living through their portraits, installations, and mixed media works. As the three artists in this article demonstrate, there exists a concerted effort at representing Black life by employing a sensibility that cannot be solely captured and defined by existing archival methods and practices. If, as Richard J. Powell suggests, portraiture is a performative act, then the portraits by both Mark Stoddart and Elicser Elliott examined here do more than simply represent Black life.[10] Similarly, as Deanna Bowen's vast body of work shows, the photograph, whether public or private, governmental or familial, is an archival record that captures a desire to "transform nature into pictorial fact," often by the dominant culture.[11]

Refusal as Frame

Refusal, as Karina Vernon discusses in her introduction to *The Black Prairies Archive*, is one way in which Black populations engage the archive and processes of archival collections. While building an impressive collection of Black life in the Canadian Prairies, Vernon was met with several refusals and decisions from families who chose not to share their archival materials with the book project.[12] Vernon's claim is echoed in Rinaldo Walcott's refusal of the archive in his decision to crush the paper from one of his speeches into a ball and leave it in this crumpled state in the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives (CLGA).[13] Maandeeq Mohammed usefully calls Walcott's actions an "ethnographic refusal." Mohammed is interested in the messiness of the histories of Black life that cannot be contained by the archive. Yet if we zero in on Walcott's actions, his gesture of refusal becomes part of the archive in a way that usefully expands the possibilities of archival work. Histories of Afrodiasporic individuals and communities refusing the terms of archival collections do not exist within repositories where researchers might discover them. Like those who chose not to participate in the making of Vernon's *Black Prairies Archive*, refusal as a strategy of Black living also escapes capture by formal archives. Walcott, however, is able to both refuse and make use of an archive—a useful documentation of Black counter-archival poetics.

Refusal is a useful starting point to consider the many ways in which illegibility acts as an intentional opacity and opens up pathways to consider Black life in relation to the coloniality of the archive. The personal family archive in many ways flourishes outside of the institutional constraints when issues of access, digitization and reproduction are under the control of invested family members. Such family members open up the possibility of multigenerational inquiry and research possibility disconnected from possibilities and restrictions of funding cycles, academic ethics protocols and the consensus or non-consensus of family members.

Archives are predicated on the ability and desire of the researcher or inquirer to know and to know fully with a level of veracity. As both Laura Ann Stoler and Thomas Richards demonstrate, imperial archives were unstable imaginaries where completeness and "comprehensive knowledge" were assumed, yet always illusory. Their legacies continue to haunt archival sciences today and are thus suspiciously engaged by the Black diaspora.[14] In the case of Walcott, his submission of a crumpled speech to the CLGA appeases the institution's desire to accumulate, store, and preserve. More importantly, his act simultaneously refuses, on his own terms, to "play by the rules." It induces an opaque relationship to the document that contains his speech. Refusal is broadly construed here as not just a denial, but also a form of participatory disavowal of institutional protocols and mores.

Confrontation

The artistic practice of Governor General's Award winner and former Guggenheim Fellow Deanna Bowen, in its multiple engagements with Canadian histories, can similarly be read as a refusal to engage the archive in

10. Richard J. Powell, *Cutting a Figure: Fashioning Black Portraiture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

11. Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, exh. cat. (New York: Steidl/International Center of Photography, 2008).

12. Karina Vernon, ed., *The Black Prairie Archives: An Anthology* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2020).

13. Maandeeq Mohammed, "Somehow I Found You: On Black Archival Practices," *C Magazine* 137 (Spring 2018), 8–13.

14. Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London and New York: Verso, 1993), 73.

normative and "comfortable" ways. Unlike the Black families that refused to participate in Vernon's *Black Prairies Archive* book project, Bowen's intimacy with her own family archive has led to numerous artistic projects that open up public debate in art galleries across Canada.[15]

Working not just with family archival content, Bowen's practice takes up public documents and other materials from the "official record" and forces audiences to confront that which can be obscured, sanitized, hidden or intentionally overlooked. The history of Canada's anti-Black racism is just one of these forced confrontations, a refusal of the performative neutrality of whiteness. In the face of Canadian exceptionalism and the consistent denial of racism in this country, Bowen displays the entire 1911 Anti-Creek Negro Petition which Canadians signed to deny access to migrant African Americans from Oklahoma seeking to enter Canada. Displayed across The Kitchener Waterloo Gallery wall, the petition | **fig. 1** |, excavated and reprinted, is made to confront the viewer. Bowen refuses to accept the historical record as dead and disconnected from our present moment; her practice is marked with public confrontation. The signatures of more than 4,300 Canadians who opposed the migration of these African-Americans verify without a doubt the rampant forms of racism present Western Canada both at the turn of the century and sadly ensuring in our contemporary moment.

The visual confrontation that Bowen stimulates with the public exhibiting of the Anti Creek-Negro Petition is not an aberration in her oeuvre. Turning to Bowen's theatrical re-enactment of CBC's 1956 teledrama, ~~On Trial~~, confrontation becomes a key part of Bowen's challenge to her audiences. Commissioned by Mercer Union Gallery in Toronto, Bowen mounted, ~~On Trial: The Long Doorway~~ on November 4th, 2017. Rather than simply uncovering this "lost" story of a Black legal aide assigned to represent a white student charged with assaulting a Black student, Bowen provides archival documentation to set the full context of 1950s Canada and to allow for the possibility for exhibition attendees to re-record parts of this teledrama. In a similar vein, Bowen's exhibition at University of Toronto's historic Hart House and its relatively new Art Museum utilized archival documents from key decision makers in the development of Canada's national identity, including Vincent Massey, Baker Fairey, and A.Y. Jackson. Bowen returns to a 1922 play in which white actors perform in red face, *God of Gods: A Canadian Play*, hailed by Massey as seminal theatre.[16] Bowen unravels the "roles institutional archives play in the making and management of a historical narrative."[17] She makes clear the (not neutral) power wielded in the archival process and dislodges hegemonic forms of memory by allowing her audiences to confront Canada's anti-Blackness and imperial desires. Bowen's numerous projects demand that audiences confront Canada's anti-Blackness.

Bowen's archival disruptions counter Canada's image as a safe haven for African-Americans seeking refuge from American enslavement. Bowen's performance and installation work does not do the kind of preserving expected of state-sponsored archival entities. Instead, documents are

15. See Vernon, 2020. In *Invisible Empires* (2013), *The Paul Good Papers* (2012) and her most recent exhibition, *Black Drones in the Hive* (2020/1), Bowen meticulously moves through archival content relating to her family's life in Alberta and the public and official documents that demonstrate Canada's imperial desires

16. Vincent Massey and A.Y. Jackson were prominent Canadian men who exerted influence over the country's cultural affairs. Massey, a diplomat and politician was asked by the federal government to lead the development of the country's first art council. A.Y. Jackson was a painter and founding member of the influential Group of Seven.

17. Deanna Bowen and Maya Wilson-Sanchez, "A Centenary of Influence," *Canadian Art*, April 20, 2020, https://canadianart.ca/features/a-centenary-of-influence-deanna-bowen/.
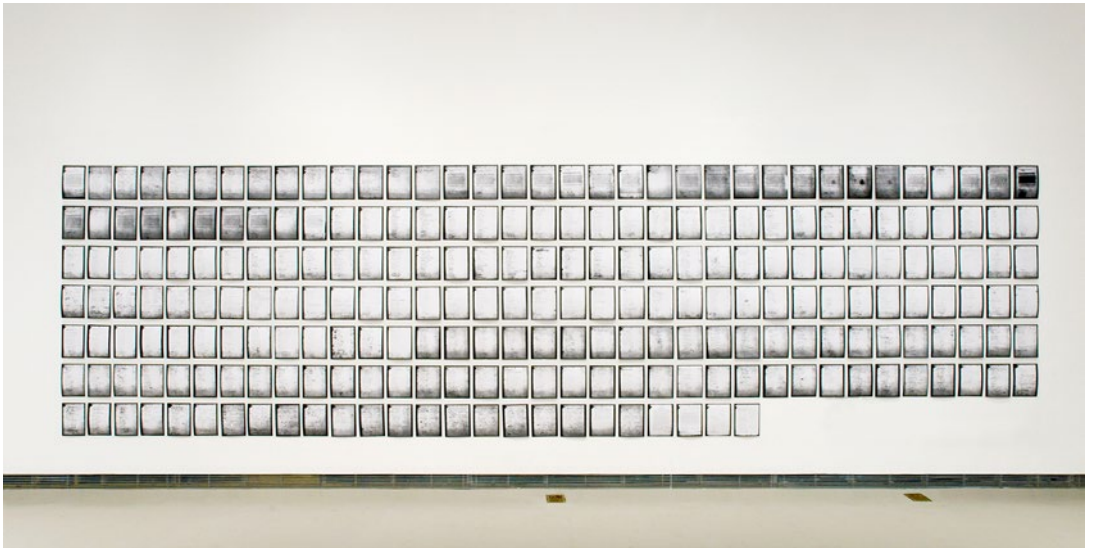
Figure 1. Deanna Bowen, *1911 Anti Creek-Negro Petition*, from the series *Immigration of Negroes from the United States to Western Canada, 1910–1911*, edition 1/2, 2013. Inkjet print on archival paper, 21.59 cm × 27.94 cm.
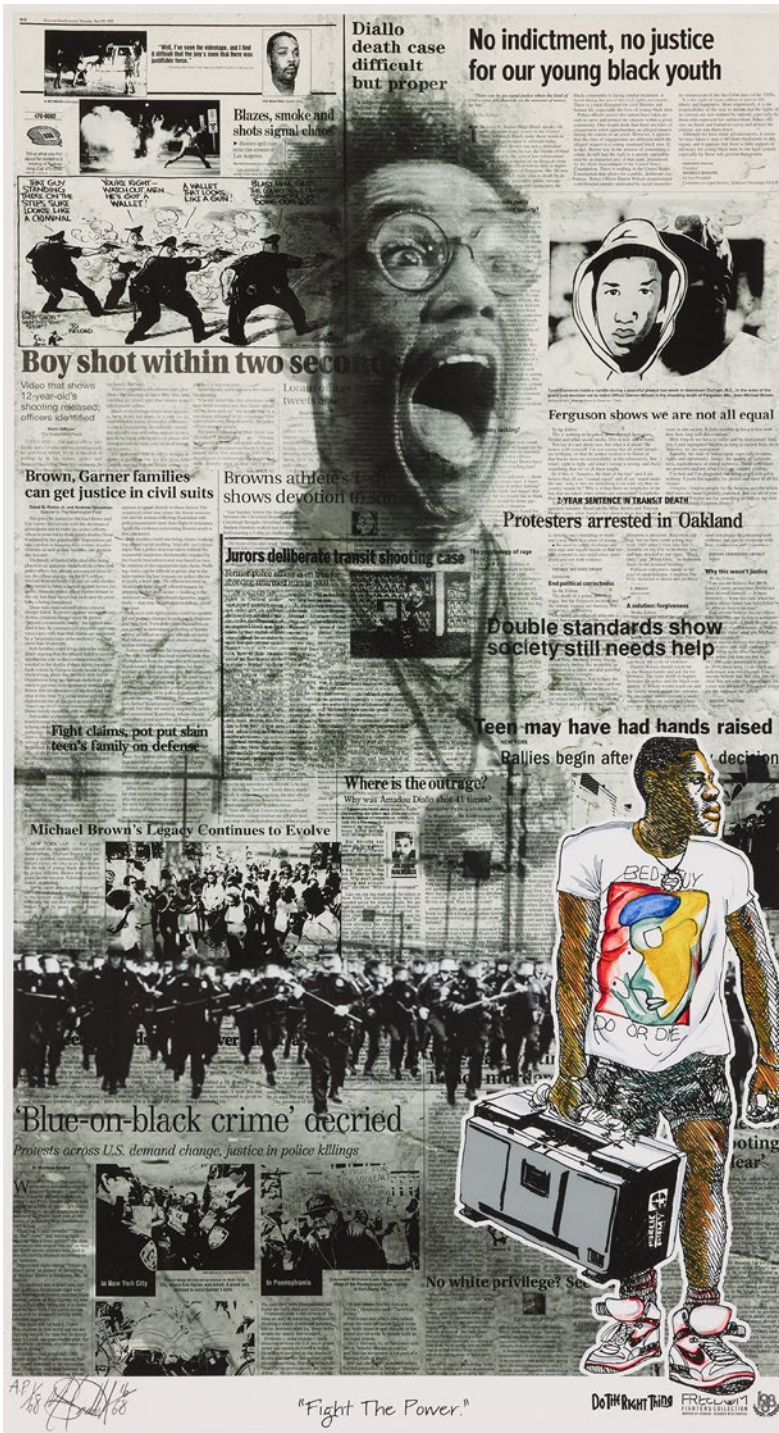
Figure 2. Mark Stoddart, *Fight the Power*, 2016. Collage on watercolour paper, 21" × 35". Courtesy of the artist.

activated to create new memories as these documents are displayed to the public to encourage new scripts of Canada's historical narrative. In some instances, as in her ~~On Trial~~ piece, Bowen actually has the public re-record and re-interpret the historical narrative. Bowen's works do not simply preserve Canadian history, they first disrupt and make messy our settled assumptions and knowledges about Canadian life. Then, in addition to re-writing historical narratives, Bowen's work also provides new descriptive possibilities that deny the performative objectivity with which institutions attempt to sanitize public memory.

A (Speculative) Remix Praxis

While Bowen forces Canadian audiences to confront their nation's imperialist and anti-Black foundations, Mark Stoddart works to secure a greater appreciation of Black diasporic life by merging narratives of Black empowerment with thickly layered, context-building canvases. Stoddart's practice, dating back to the late 1990s, has been a richly layered honouring of Black Power-era leaders and concepts, using political messaging on t-shirts alongside his graphic design work and portraiture to present an unrelenting appreciation of Black livingness. Both Bowen and Stoddart use archives to fuel their projects, with the latter focused on popular Black figures and, more recently, local heroes in his contribution to the 2018 Scarborough Nuit Blanche Art Festival. Mark Stoddart's use of confrontation augments the humanizing of the extraordinariness of Black athletes, leaders, and public figures. Stoddart is invested in a form of representation that recuperates the often-maligned Black public figure. Using both contemporary and archival images and newspapers, Stoddart practices a refusal of the dehumanization and denigration of Black life. His use of archival newspapers as backdrops for portraits of legendary leaders such as Elaine Brown, Jim Brown, Jackie Robinson, and Nelson Mandela forms a dynamic contrast of the dominant narratives circulated by the print media and the image of the individual in each work.

In his 2016 mixed-media work *Fight the Power* | **fig. 2** |, Stoddart builds out from his *Heroes and Athletes* series to dig deeply into the intersections of protest and Black popular culture. In his piece, which was part of a 2016 group exhibition held at a Gallery 918 in Toronto, Stoddart brings back two characters from Spike Lee's iconic 1989 film *Do the Right Thing*. Buggin' Out is an eccentric and memorable character, while Radio Raheem is tragically suffocated to death by a police officer. Applying a collage technique of newspaper stories with a photograph of the central figure blended into the newsprint, Stoddart uses the historical context of newspaper stories as visual context. Further, Stoddart's canvas is decidedly not neutral in its refusal to mirror the white cube that galleries have historically preferred.[18] In his *Heroes and Athletes* series, Stoddart's archival sensibility returns to the theme of the popular media's coverage and framing of events, and he uses this theme as a canvas for his empowering messages. Stoddart scales up his central characters who are superimposed on top and around the newsprint which retains

18. For more on the white background some painters are taught to use as the starting point of their paintings, see Omar Ba's useful reflection on his artistic training in Senegal and his refusal to use white backgrounds. See Mary-Dailey Desmarais, Rober Malbert, Nabila Abdel Nadi, and Gaëtane Verna, *Omar Ba: Same Dream/Vision Partagée*, Power Plant Pages No. 8 (Toronto: The Power Plant Contemporary Gallery, 2019).

its original type set and size. Unlike some of the other figures in Stoddart's series, like basketball legend Bill Russell or baseball superstar Hank Aaron, fictional characters Radio Raheem and Buggin' Out do not have newspaper articles written about them. Instead, Stoddart uses newspaper stories from recent 2015 and 2016 events that eerily mirror the "fictional" police killing of Radio Raheem in the 1989 film.

Centred in the monochromatic work is an enlarged image of Buggin' Out's face in all of his vibrant eccentricity: his mouth ajar, evoking volumes of expressive Black culture as veins show vocal cord strain, while his neck proudly displays a wooden medallion of the African continent. Radio Raheem is sketched into the bottom right corner of the work; his illustrated figure is the only colour image in this otherwise black-and-white piece. The two fictional characters are surrounded by various news reports with legible headlines such as "No indictment no justice for our young black youth," "Boy shot within two seconds," "Blue on black crime decried," "Brown, Garner families can get justice in civil suits," and "Ferguson shows we are not all equal." Stoddart's memory work and archival sensibility collapses a quarter-century of police brutality, and it brings into relation the fictional character and the more recent police suffocation and murder of Eric Garner. *Fight the Power* recontextualizes the moment, with the recent (at the time) murders of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Trayvon Martin (amongst too many others). The result brings Spike Lee's character back to haunt the present and draws enduring connections to police killings of Black Canadians, such as the 1970s murders of Albert Johnson and Buddy Evans, the more recent killings of Andrew Loku, and Jermaine Carby in 2015, as well as Ian Pryce, Abdirahman Abdi, and too many more "connections" to name here.[19] Like much archival work, Stoddart's piece is meant to function in the present by mobilizing memory as a connective tissue. It makes plain the decades-long patterns of police brutality and the excessive force used to kill members of the Black community. *Fight the Power*, in its relationality, connecting fictional and real police murders of Black people decades apart, offers its audiences the opportunity to contemplate and question Western European Enlightenment conceptions of progress.

Stoddart imagines an archival image of Radio Raheem and transforms it into another representational form beyond its video origins and into an illustration. His use of colour in this piece encourages viewers to focus on his sketch in relation to the numerous newsprint headings and the much larger image of Buggin' Out. The news stories which form the backdrop of the work are collaged in their original size and form, in black and white — far removed from the dominant form of viewing news in 2016 via the internet. These newspaper clippings are significant in that they refuse the context of the attention economy and the algorithmic desires of media platforms interested in clicks, click-throughs, and monopolizing audiences' attention. The clippings suggest that a return to the lessons of Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* is possible in a context designed for public contemplation—the art gallery. Stoddart's piece refuses to disconnect the present from the past;

19. One particularly salient statistic tells us a great deal about the situation in Canada: more than 30% of people killed by police are Black, while Black people account for less than 10% of the population in cities like Toronto, Ottawa and Montréal. For a more detailed analysis, Robin Maynard's *Policing Black Lives* (Halifax: Fernwood Books, 2017) is an excellent starting point.

it leverages popular culture to refuse a siloed and sanitized histories of the "one bad apple" narrative of police brutality.

Stoddart's practice of recontextualizing using a collage method (with text, photography, and illustration) is a poignant reminder of the multi-layered ways in which his ethic performs memory and archival work differently from official institutional preservation. Stoddart's memory work combines visual representation, speculative creative reproduction, and a sense of unbounded time, with past and present speaking to one another. A remix ethic in Stoddart's piece employs a sampling practice found in popular music and especially in Black musical forms such as hip-hop, house, and jungle.[20] Stoddart must rely on the painful memories conjured by violent Black death to reanimate this memory in ways that do not rehearse the violence originally visited on the former Black life. In an era in which the constant replay of Black death via social media battles for our attention online, Stoddart's choice to re-present Radio Raheem in this way is important.[21] Radio Raheem is illustrated with a huge boombox in his hands, standing and looking away from the viewer with his attention elsewhere. He is donning fresh pair of red and white Nike Air high-top basketball sneakers and an Africa medallion commonplace in the late 1980s. Providing a new visual context for Radio Raheem, Stoddart engages in the kind of memory work that connects eras by collapsing time through a political priority that insists on Black life while refusing a circulation of Black death. Of all the possible screen captures of Buggin' Out, Stoddart's choice is one of exuberant life, an undeniably oppositional rendering of the piece's messaging around Black death and police brutality.

Public Covert Ops

In contrast to Stoddart's references to two characters from an iconic Spike Lee film, Elicser Elliott's murals of Toronto street scenes depict racialized characters, who populate the city. If *Fight the Power* offers us a remix of sorts, bringing generations of police brutality together in a coherent and legible script, the public street art of Elicser amplifies the visibility of Toronto's claim to be one of the world's most diverse cities in its remixing the concept of visible minority.[22] Rather than reifying whiteness as neutral, as the language of visible minority does, Elicser's public murals centre the multiracial communities that form the majority of Toronto's populations. As curator Pamela Edmonds contends, "Elicser's street art visualize(s) the complex thing that is community, reproducing the multicultural city of Toronto as a space that reflects the hopefulness of living together despite multifarious differences."[23]

Elicser Elliott is a celebrated graffiti artist, painter and muralist whose most notable works depict warm and round-faced characters of multiple hues. The people in Elliott's pieces, both fictional and real, humanize Toronto's concrete canvases as the city's condo overdevelopment dominates the skyline and the agendas of developers and investors. In his aerosol paintings, such as in his 2021 series, *Migrated Dwelling*, the outdoors are

20. Jungle is an electronic music which emerged in the United Kingdom in the 1990s featuring sped-up breakbeats samples from hip-hop and reggae songs. House music emerged in 1970s Chicago in the aftermath of the death of disco, catering largely to Black and Latino queer communities and featuring lengthy dance music tracks, innovative sampling, and DJing techniques as well as remixing long before digital technologies allowed for this practice. Hip-hop music and culture emerged in 1970s New York—sampling records became the dominant mode of music production in the 1980s and has been at the core of high-profile lawsuits due to lack of sample clearance.

21. See Tonia Sutherland's "Making a Killing: Race, Ritual and (Re) Membering in Digital Culture," *Preservation, Digital Technology, and Culture* 46, no. 1 (2017): 32–40, as well as Nehal El-Hadi, "Death Undone," *The New Inquiry*, May 2, 2017, https://thenewinquiry.com/death-undone/.

22. As a term, "visible minority" has been one mechanism used to describe racialized populations in Canada. The term's focus is one of race and phenotype while also obscuring the racialization process, the way in which white-dominant culture uses race as a hierarchical organizing principle.

23. Pamela Edmonds, "A Thousand Words and a Thousand More: Curatorial Imperatives, Social Practice, and the Hip Hop Archive," in … *Everything Remains Raw: Photographing Toronto's Hip-Hop Culture from Analogue to Digital* (Moncton: Goose Lane, 2018), 90–91.

deprioritized with a focus on home and our extended times at home during lockdown in the context of the 2020 coronavirus pandemic. Elliott's work is a careful meditation on the human condition as it intersects with the lived realities of urbanity and Toronto's multiracial realities.

While also working with notions around hip-hop culture, Elliott's 2018 aerosol mural *T-Dot Rooftop* | **fig. 3** | can be read as a complex and nuanced take on Black memory and Toronto's condo overdevelopment.[24] Hung as part of a group exhibition at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in 2018,[25] the work is mounted on a three-panel wooden support, with a spray-painted scene of downtown Toronto centring two racialized photographers. Elliott's take on urban landscape painting intervenes in a gallery dominated by Group of Seven landscapes, which originally belonged to collectors Robert and Signe McMichael.

Along with the two characters embedded in the scene, a woman sitting on a ledge and a male figure standing looking down at his camera, Elliott paints two audio cassette tapes and what appears to be a compact disc, which sit on the ledge beside the female figure. This ledge, a site of graffiti tags, becomes home to Elliott's citational practice and honours his crew BTS and another Toronto-based graffiti artist, Skam. While the two cassettes on the ledge cannot be clearly recognized as a particular brand, such as Maxell or Sony, these items signal a deep contrast to the scale and architecture of the Skydome[26] and the CN Tower painted almost directly behind them. Elliott signals a sense of nostalgia, a reminiscence of an analog era when young people carried these cassettes while listening to Walkmans in transit. More importantly, the compact disc directly beside the cassette is a recognizable album, released in 1999 by a Scarborough based emcee named Mathematik.[27] Shaped largely and more squarely than a rectangular cassette, the album is one of the nuances I quietly noticed when installing the piece. As curator for the exhibition *…Everything Remains Raw: Photographing Toronto Hip-Hop from Analogue to Digital* (2018), I confirmed with Elliott his nod to Mathematik's album. Further, as a practicing DJ with almost two decades of radio programming and mixtapes, I could quickly connect the green and brown outlines on the square compact disc to this critically acclaimed hip-hop album. This curious citation is made to speak to a specific audience, those who regularly decode the esotericism of underground and local hip-hop music in the small Canadian market.

In her catalogue essay, "The Art of Elicser: Reflections on the Visibility of Black and Brown Communities through Graffiti," Felicia Mings describes the artist's representational works as combatting the erasure of racialized people from the much lauded and celebrated paintings of the Group of Seven. Mings reads Elliott's work as a "potent gesture towards inserting, remembering, and reimagining absented communities' relationship to, and place within, the visual representations and physical geographies of Canada."[28] In astutely reading Elliott's works as in "dialogue with the iconic landscape paintings of the Group of Seven," Mings demonstrates how Elliott's "vernacular painting practice" finds itself interacting with the

24. Elicser's art has been a constant presence on the streets of Toronto since 1997. He has often been commissioned to do public pieces. See Yvette Farkas's collection *Toronto Graffiti* (self-published, 2011/2021).

25. This exhibition was on display at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection from March to September, 2018.

26. Skydome was the original name of the baseball stadium built for the Toronto Blue Jays in 1989. It has since been sold and renamed the Rogers Centre.

27. Mathematik is a Toronto based hip-hop artist who rose to prominence in the 1990s when his first single "Learn to Earn" was released by Beatfactory Records. His intricate rhymes and embrace of all of hip-hop's artforms (b-boying, djing, rhyming and graffiti) have distinguished him as a living embodiment of the term hip-hop.

28. Felicia Mings, "The Art of Elicser: Reflections on the Visibility of Black and Brown Communities through Graffiti" in *…Everything Remains Raw: Photographing Toronto Hip Hop Culture from Analogue to Digital* (Moncton: Goose Lane, 2018), 59.

29. See Elliott's *A Little off the Top* (2014), *Sometimes it's Like Holding Fire* (2017) and *Hug Tree* (ca. 2012), documented in Mings, 2018.

Figure 3. Elicser Elliott, *T-Dot Rooftop*, 2018. Spray paint on panel. *Photo: Alex Cousins.*

natural landscape in beautifully surprising ways, taking soot, broken tree trunks and even overgrown folia bursting through bricks as one character's hair!"[29]

The accuracy of Mings' reading is bolstered by the presence of Mathematik's album, aptly titled *Ecology*, in Elliott's *T-Dot Rooftop*. Mathematik's *Ecology* album, when cited in Elliott's landscape aerosol painting, interestingly returns us to Moten's notion of consent as an "ecological disposition," a "non-performative condition." The image of the album Elliott paints includes no words; it is simply swaths of green and brown. Elliott's memory work evades a dominant reading, it cannot be fully recuperated by dominant forms of preservation or memory making. Like graffiti tags, which are often purposely obscure, Elliott speaks to a specific community in his citation of the *Ecology* album. Importantly, *T-Dot Rooftop* honors one of the original formats of the album as it did not circulate as a cassette in 1999. Elliott here helps us think about Black archival practices, in which the act of citation is not just a nostalgic homage, but also a deeply encoded and obscured gesture. By naming the album and providing only minimal visual clues beyond colour and shape, Elliott excavates and celebrates *Ecology* not as a public conversation with gallery attendees writ large, but rather as a quiet, opaque nod to a particular audience.

Using his decades of experience as a graffiti writer, Elliott, in *T-Dot Rooftop*, helps us imagine a way that opacity might be built into our archival practices and memory work. By directing his admiration of this album to those "in the know," Elliott enacts a deeply coded gesture to address specific audiences and viewers aligned with hip-hop culture. Borrowing from the kinds of values and ethics embedded in the culture of graffiti writing, Elliott is able to publicly produce art whose memory work honours the right to be opaque. Demonstrating Édouard Glissant's important intervention of the right for Black people to practice a level of opacity, Elliott provides only clues, not completely unfettered access nor a clarity that can easily be recuperated in the service of someone's agenda.[30] Further, the tags Elliott produces on the ledge speak directly to yet another community, not just fans of hip-hop music but graffiti artists who can decipher the kinds of urban hieroglyphs commonplace in the culture.

Elliott's coded citational practice, Stoddart's recontextualizing remix practice and Bowen's direct-confrontation approach to Black archival sensibility all involve various kinds of refusals, yet they broaden the possibilities of the kind of practices a Black archival sensibility might induce. If we can read a level of refusal in Elliott's work, we might be drawn to his use of the environment in ways that diverge from the kinds of environmental dominance imagined by the colonial project and the romanticism of modernist paintings which rid the canvas of those Indigenous communities already present on the land. *T-Dot Rooftop*, exhibited at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection as part of the...*Everything Remains Raw* group show hung in an art institution known for its celebration of Group of Seven works and presented a divergence from romantic modernist paintings from this celebrated group

30. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*.

of artists. As a graffiti artist, Elliott does not invest in reproducing the discourses that prop up the Group of Seven's works as canonical, his works are filled with a diverse array of "everyday" people. Further, Elliott's embrace of obsolete technologies, including the cassette, the compact disc, and the film camera, also points to a refusal to be convinced of the myth of progress and the linear trajectories at the core of Western European enlightenment. History, memory, and Elliott's own archival retrieval process lay bare his intentions of working beyond the institutional archive and a preference to cite, retrieve, honour and celebrate in ways not legible to established archival discourses. Like Stoddart, Elliott leans into the aesthetics of hip-hop culture and engages a remix practice, which negotiates and renegotiates linear time, with a citational practice designed to recuperate intentionally obsolete technologies. As Elliott samples and recontextualizes as needed, his brown and Black characters urge a rethinking around the term "visible minority" and its hegemonic function of making whiteness invisible. By excavating imperial archives and recirculating, reinterpreting, and even performing this archival content, Bowen's work to confront these histories breathes life back into archives, making them more perceptible as living entities with subjective dispositions and nefarious lineages. Similarly, Stoddart's recreation and recontextualization of the tragic figure of Radio Raheem in *Do the Right Thing* creates opportunities for more black life, not a rehearsal of Black death.

When we situate these practices of refusal, confrontation, remix and citation which preserve and protect Black cultural life within our current moment of algorithmic dominance and the exponential erosion of trust online, they point in a direction that demands further elucidation. If archival work is meant to preserve, the practices of Black artists present us with carefully organized and implemented strategies which do not simply preserve or reproduce anti-Black neutrality and Black death, but elaborate ways to celebrate Black living. If algorithmic life continues to reproduce varieties of anti-Blackness, the practices of Black artists' memory work can expansively re-imagine Black life beyond the machinations of imperial and colonial legacies of preservation and archival practices. ¶