

**All  
The Space  
You Cannot See**

A film: by Jeary Payne

Thesis Advisor: Nyssa Chow

A thesis submitted to the  
Faculty of Columbia University  
In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Arts in Oral History

For my mother, who is standing in the veil.  
Her mother, my grandmother who is with us still,  
And all the *mothers* who have helped to shape me along the way.

## Table of Contents

<i>Instructions for Participation</i> .....	4
<i>Introduction</i> .....	6
<i>Preface</i> .....	11
<i>A Family That Prays</i> .....	14
<i>This Is a Portal</i> .....	27
<i>Space In Praxis</i> .....	34
<i>A Woman, A Rendering</i> .....	44
<i>Epilogue</i> .....	46
<i>Works Cited</i> .....	55

# Instructions for Participation

This thesis is best experienced in the following order:

## **Read:**

Introduction

Preface

A Family That Prays

## **Watch:**

All the Space You Cannot See (film)

## **Read:**

This Is a Portal

Space In Praxis

A Woman, A Rendering

Epilogue

Who will tell the stories after us?  
Record our moments, triumphant or forfeit.  
How will they remember you and I?

What if they forget?  
And decades wash over them like high tides in the sea of time,  
drawing out our collective memories with its current and deep into  
its center.

These pictures serve as monuments erected in our own image to  
honor our his(her)stories. Be that in some old dusty photo album  
or displays of grand family pride in my Granny's living room.

Full of gold furnished, baroque-styled picture frames and hung  
en masse alongside **green felt covered walls...**

## Introduction

I think about the place of art is black life, connections between the social construction of black identity, the impact of race and class, and the presence in black life of an inarticulate but ever-present visual aesthetic governing our relationship to images, to the process of image making.

I return to the snapshot as a starting point to consider the place of the visual in black life— the importance of photography.

—bell hooks, *In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life*

On its face, oral history is about story— it is about creating new knowledge's and canonizing that knowledge. It is an examination of the past—through our memories, as we have known them. And how the past informs our present. It is contextualizing and, in many instances, re-contextualizing what we know and understand about time, and place and space—how that new knowing can situate one better, firmer, in our own present context. It is both a widening and narrowing of the self in relationship with and to a thing. We are actively reinterpreting the present. And it is how, Nyssa Chow (my thesis advisor) has also taught me to see, that memory is not a chronological thing, it is not static, that is associative. And as an artist and oral historian, I've been more interested in exploring what oral history, as a living and creative practice, can both do and be used for. And in my search of a visual language, something that is

tangible and spiritual and emotional, it has been photography and image making that have been the conduit through which I see and hear and feel. Photography, and visual arts more broadly, are flat mediums— how do you three-dimensionalize a flat object? You do it by making a thing feel more *worlded*. Through story, through song, through objects— through reaching back and pulling forward. Through telling and retelling. And so, an image is not just an image but also a portal, also a bridge. And it is in the creation of that *worldedness* where the possibility for a different kind of encounter takes place. And if I am to believe as Tina Campt believes (and I do) that “listening to images is constituted as a practice of looking beyond what we see and attuning our senses to the other frequencies through which photographs register. It is a haptic encounter that foregrounds the frequencies of images and how they move, touch and connect us to the event of the photo” (Campt 2017, 9).

My bio on OHMA’s (Oral History Master of Arts) website reads that “as a photographer” I am “interested in documenting scenes that capture the nuance micro moments of Black life and experiences of real people.” And how “through the program”, I am also “interested in exploring Black collective memory.” But what *is* Black collective memory— as a photographic practice? And how is it deployed? When I first wrote these words I hadn’t yet arrived at a more substantive meaning or definition for myself as much as it had been a feeling and emotion I was after and endeavoring to observe, in more intimate ways, visually— what I affectionately call the in-between moments.

This is about forming my creative practice, but in order to define it, I need first to define what it is in-relationship with and *kin* to— but also, what it does not embody fully. In her essay, “Photography and The Practices of Critical Black Memory” professor and author Leigh Raiford introduces me to the concept of Critical Black Memory. And how it is “a mode of historical interpretation and political critique that has functioned as an important resource for

framing and mobilizing African Americans social and political identities and movements.” (Raiford 2009, 113). And she explores this by foregrounding her essay through the historical archive of lynching photographs. And she asks us to inquire what is the significance of photography? And for the Black American more directly, “what is the role of the visual medium for a people who have long held up a mirror to the underbelly of U.S. society, reflecting back a fractured nation?” (Raiford 2009, 113). For Raiford, *Critical Black Memory* names “an ongoing, engaged practice through which a range of participants speak back to history and assess ongoing crises faced by black subjects” (Raiford 2009, 114-115).

*Crises*— So much of Black memory seems to begin with/in crisis.

146 years before Raiford’s interrogation of archival lynching photos there was first the image of Gordon, a runaway Mississippi slave or as it is also known as, “The Scourged Back”. One of the most famous slave portraits of the time, attributed to the duo McPherson & Oliver. We see the sitter’s left hand resting on his inner thigh, his disfigured back hunched over, his gaze starring off and elsewhere and not towards the direction of the camera, because he (personhood) is not the focus— his body is. A body that would reveal for us the deep absurdity and horrors of Black life under the conditions of enslavement. An image that would be *used* throughout the Civil War to build up the abolitionist movement, and garner empathy among the elite white, social class. An image, not so different from the ones I see today of black, disfigured lives viewed on released, police cam videos and used, *again*, to drum up some kind of consciences among those reluctant to acknowledge an ongoing epidemic— which Christiana Sharpe calls “the constant production of Black death” (Sharpe 2016, 124). An image that up until a few months ago, could have been seen on view at The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

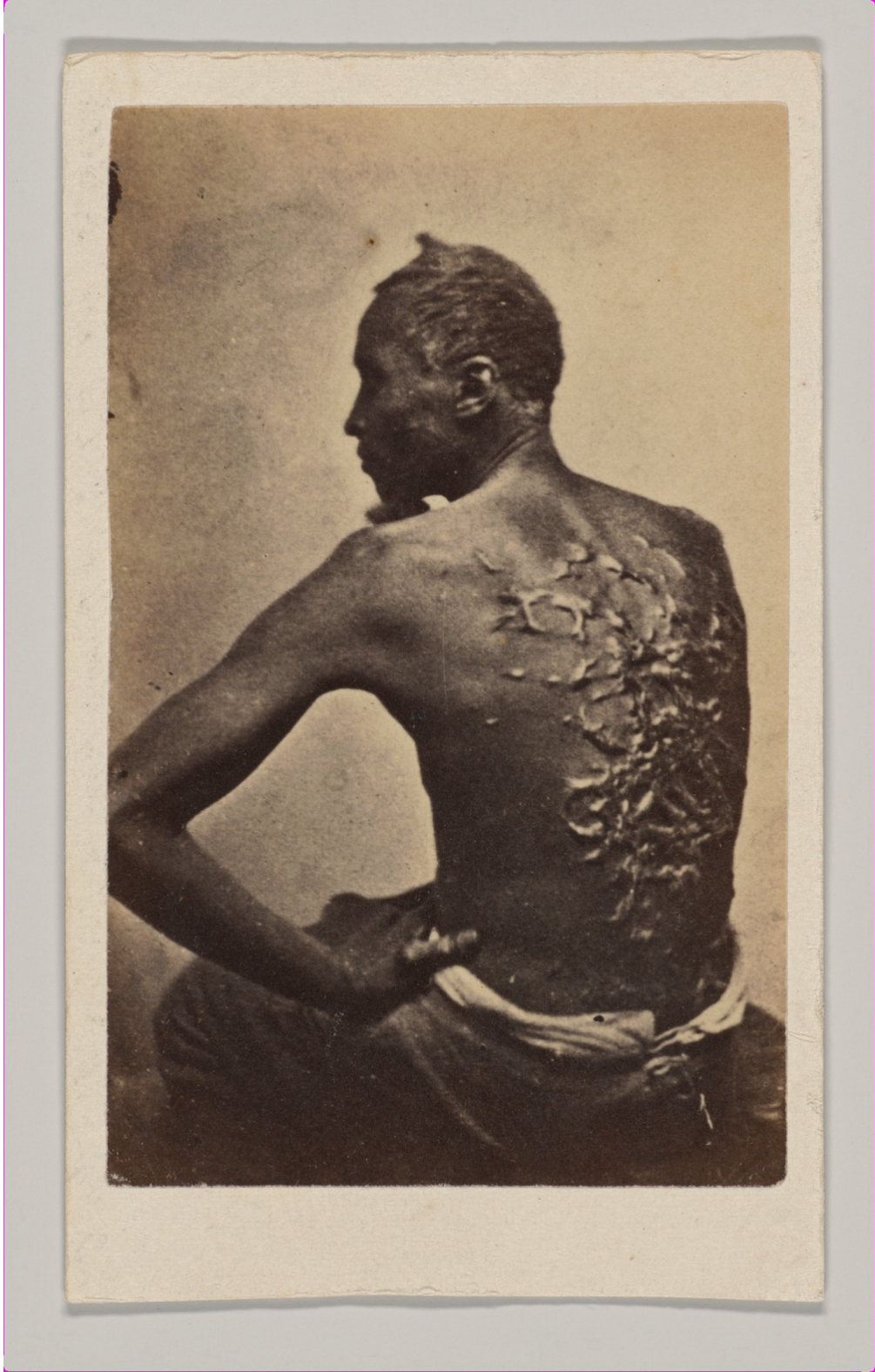


Figure 1: Gordon (The Scourged Back), McPherson & Oliver \*attributed\* 1863

Black collective memory is about our shared histories, and the ways in which we remember, exist and interact within and through a black cultural context— what I am referring to as *Lineage*. And how memory and story both, acting as markers of time— can situate us within those past and present context/lineage in relation to other worlds or temporalities resonating around us and intersecting with our own. Black collective memory is a container, and in it holds our grief and loss and absences but not any more than it holds and uplifts our love and reverence— our time and space and memory. It is a practice that assumes an already knowing, an innate awareness of what Saidiya Hartman names “the afterlives of slavery” (Hartman, 2007, as cited in Sharpe 2016, 14-15). And with it, all that it encompasses— and thus it is political simply by virtue of the subject matter. This work draws on the practices of refusal which is “a rejection of the status quo as livable. It is a refusal to recognize a social order that renders you fundamentally illegible and unintelligible. It is a refusal to embrace the terms of diminished subjecthood with which one is presented and to use negation as a generative and creative source of disorderly power to embrace the possibility of living otherwise” (Campt 2019, 25). And it is a practice informed also by acts of survivance. The indigenous concept that Anishnaabe scholar Gerlad Vizenor defines as “more than survival, more than endurance or mere response” and how, at its crux, survivance is “an active repudiation of dominance, tragedy and victimry” (Atalay 2006, 608-609).

This work has allowed me the opportunity to further crystallize an approach to image making and documentation. To be both artist and scholar— photographer and practitioner, whose work is guided by and rooted in a black visual politic. I have endeavored to language for myself an oral history practice that is mine, bespoke. While also seeped in the traditions of Black oral historians before me, both known and unknown and aim to reCanonize them as practitioners and contributors to the field. This is a film that I am defining as a Black,

Oralgraphical-documentary— that involves slow listening and intimate looking at images. I am inviting you to sit with them and travel with them, wherever you think them to be. These are images imbued with the textures of love, joy, laughter and also grief, and absence, space and time.

## Preface

I did not know that when I booked my flight to Granny's, that Uncle Billy, one of Dada's younger brothers would have passed. And that his homegoing service would end up being the weekend before I would travel there, with the intention of sitting with my mother's sisters. You know it's odd, or maybe not odd at all— maybe it's divine that my grandfather (who was the oldest of the boys) and two of his younger brothers, who he preceded in death, would each pass in the same months they were born in. I think about Uncle Albert, the last of my great-uncles and I wonder if he knows what I know and if he's sees it how I have seen it.

I remember being concerned with the timing of it all— as if death's coming is ever convenient for the living. I thought about how my family would gather soon for the celebration of life of my great uncle. And how difficult it is to bring a family together, one as large as mine, and

twice in one month. Sitting there at the airport terminal, waiting for my flight to board, I receive a text from Aunt Marcia who tells me that early on Saturday morning we'll be headed to Bill's house, wrapping up his place because everything needed to be out by Monday. And that this was an all-hands-on deck situation. She told me to "bring some old jeans" and I responded by telling her that I was already on the way— and that what I packed will have to do. I realized immediately that the plans I drew up, would not be going quite how I envisioned them to go. And so, I resigned myself to the notion that first, I must give myself over to the process— for any meaningful conversation I was hopeful to have, would first have to go through Billy's house. And second, whoever was there when I arrived is who I would sit with, and that whatever it was that I was to hear and know and feel would be enough. This would be my deposit— "How did you earn the right to hear one more word?" is what Nyssa would say.

What makes up a life? I had never had to clear out a home that someone left behind. Even in my mother's passing, her things mostly remained because my father lives there still— And though, I do wonder if at times it feels like mausoleum to him. Now, standing there, in the living room of Uncle Bill's half emptied home. The house in Tarrytown on Clark Road, the one that he had lived in close to 30 years. And I watched as women in their near 70's clean and scrubbed and ushered his things into large black bins, you know the ones, with the yellow tops. And I would stack them like giant Legos into the back of the U-Haul truck.

But there was one bin that had not yet been moved, and I opened it out of curiosity, and what I found inside was a life. Hundreds of vinyl records and it is my belief that you can learn so much about a person from their music. It was like meeting Uncle Bill for the first time and seeing myself reflected back to me. This bin would soon end up on the back of a truck with all the other bins and then driven to a storage facility where it would be offloaded into a small dark room where you'd only know it was there because each month, you'd pay a housing fee to store

it. But I will know it's there and one day I'll go back for them or send for them. And so instead, I took from the bin a few of Uncle Bill's records to take back home with me because what better way to honor a life than to extend it. It is in every time I play one or tell someone about them and where they came from but more importantly who they belonged to. Miles Davis, Grover Washington Jr, Nina Simone, Yusef Lateef, Tjader and Zawinul who I had never heard of but on the back of the album cover was a note from Miles and that was good enough for me. My uncle was a Jazz man. I wish I had known it sooner.



*Figure 2: A photo of Mommy & Uncle Bill that Aunt Marcia sent me after the weekend. (Btwn 1974-77)*

## A Family That Prays

My Aunts knew why I was there and that I was there for them— I told them as much in the weeks prior in my email to them, I address them by their birth order:

“Dear **Aunt Marcia, Carmen, Yvette, Chandra, Tamara, Tina**, DeAnna and Aunt Evie,

I hope you are doing well and in good spirits.

As you may know, since 2022 I've been attending Columbia University and pursuing my master's degree in Oral History. As of this past May, I have completed all of my required course work. I've been saying that I'm done but I'm not finished. What remains for me is the completion of my thesis, due this November. I'm reaching out to formally request your participation and co-creation towards my thesis project.

Over the course of the past few years, and since my mother's passing— I have had the privilege to share and hold space with you, and talk more deeply about her, her absence and the ways in which it has affected me. Through my graduate studies at Columbia University, I have an opportunity to craft a project that can help me to tell

and create a more expansive story of who she was, is and has become in her absence. I'm interested in interviewing you as a part of an Oral History project that I've titled "All the Space You Cannot See" (formally, Things My Mother Said and Might've Told Me). Through this interview I hope to fill in gaps in my own memory and understanding of who I knew my mother to be through your lens and unique relationship with her. I see this process also as a form of healing. I endeavor to assemble a collage, make a portrait, render an image of my mother through the shared and unheard remembrances of you, her sisters. To see her face and hear her voice in your voice through shared stories and memories. I want to know who my mother was— the woman. And I want to know and experience her through your remembrances. Exploring who my mother was/is overarchingly— I secondarily want to attempt to answer for myself, who do people become in our memory in their absence? And lastly, through this exploration I want to better examine the ways in which certain space(s) and location coalesce to form a sort of container for our memories— and how those memories can be site specific and therefore tied to personal geographies. And how in these geographies they exist forever and become part of the emotional, spiritual and metaphysical architecture/texture of that space.

For as long as I can recall, Granny's kitchen has been the central nervous system of our family. It is where we gather and I have spent many of nights held in court around her table and it had long since occurred to me that in order for me to do this work properly, I must come home and speak with you there, in the kitchen. I am now finally able to do so, and I'll be making my way out to [REDACTED] on Friday, June

27th! My request is that you join me there this weekend and that you grant me the time and permission to interview you and document our time together. I know that many of you were just home this past weekend for Uncle Billy's homegoing and I do understand if you are unable to make the return trip (but I hope you will try lol) alternatively, we could find a way to beam you in over zoom or facetime and join us in the kitchen in that way. I imagine that this project I'm working on will be iterative and that there will be future opportunities to come together and gather again. My advisor said that I should look at my thesis not as completing the whole book but rather writing its first chapter. That said, I'm looking to record between 3-6 hours of conversation over the course of the weekend until my departure on Sunday, June 29th and whatever I leave with will go towards the final thesis. I look forward to speaking with you soon, I am open to any feedback and welcome insights you might share as it relates to your participation in this project.

Thank you, I love you and be well.

Jp.

A conversation is never just a conversation but also each of the moments that will lead up to it. My arrival began on that Friday with Aunt Marcia, driving us around in her silver, mini van, the gospel channel on the radio, bumping and we're out securing provisions for the house because this weekend will be a full one. Aunt Marica drives us a ways and over to the Seafood Shack and Deli, the kind of fish market where everyone is standing around waiting on their order to come up next. Now, this ain't a restaurant but an order, get it, grab it and go type spot. And she ordered enough fish, shrimps and chips for 10 people. I can still smell the way it filled the van, with each pothole we hit like a fan, wafting it up and throughout the car. And even

now, my saliva glands reacting to the thought of it, especially the taste of the shrimps I didn't get because I was too slow getting in the kitchen.

On that Saturday evening, after having spent that morning at Bill's, I asked the Aunts if I could take their portraits before we sat down to talk. And so, I waited as each of them, one by one got up to fuss and gather themselves— you know— dress, hair and face. Observing the ritual we all do to adjust and prepare ourselves to be in front of someone's camera. I started taking photos of my family back in 2016, during my visits and it is the same year I got into the medium. My friend Jon Jon had just gifted me my first film camera and it set me down off on this path— a Canon Rebel T2 is what I used to make some of my earliest images.

I always knew this work would lead me here. The majority of our time would take place in Granny's kitchen and so I wanted to capture them there, where we would gather. I would take their individual portrait and then all of them together at once, around the round large oak table in the middle of the kitchen— with few exposures left, and as if perfectly on cue, Granny (who made 92 this year) makes her way into the kitchen. Wearing her good wig, red lip and her favorite pair of pearl earrings and matching necklace, doubled around her neck. Because how could we be in Granny's kitchen and Granny not be present, she had heard all of our commotion and wasted no time getting herself ready. I took Granny's portrait too, and then she sat there at the table with us, nestled between her two eldest daughters'. Marcia, to the right of her and Carmen on her left and her facing the rest of us.

My Aunts in the order in which they introduced themselves:



Figure 3: Tina Valencia Smith #7 (b. 2/14/1961)



Figure 4: Chandra Kay Smith #4 (b.10/19/1957)



Figure 5: Tamara Dolores Smith #6 (b. 1/1960)



Figure 6: Marcia Delise Smith-Woodard #1(b.3/17/1954)



*Figure 7: Carmen Rene Smith-Tisdale #2 (b.2/18/1955)*



*Figure 8: Ruby Etaw Smith-Nichols "Granny" (b.2/16/1933)*

I checked the levels on my Zoom; I place it in the middle of the table and press record. We are now ready to begin.

*Expert from the transcript:*

Me: So, we could first open up in prayer. I'll lead us, bow our heads. Our father and our God, we come to prayer right now. We're just saying thank you for communion, thank you for family. We ask that you just continue to watch over us and guide us, Father, God and Lord, we want to say thank you for a traveling grace. Bringing us all together here in this space and in this room, Lord Jesus and Lord, we also just want to say, Lord, that you just fill the room with your presence, Lord, and that we are able to think and feel and express and communicate Lord, what is in our hearts and in our minds, Father, God and that Lord and that you bring forth our remembrances in this space, Heavenly Father. Lord, I just pray that you just continue to lift us up. We set this intention for being here as a family, to be in conversation, in a relationship, and also, Lord, I also want to call out my mother, who's an ancestor, who is standing in the veil with all our other ancestors, and Dada's who's also in the veil. I lift up their names and their spirit and their presence also in this space, Heavenly Father, Lord, and I just pray that you also share them with us also here in this room, Lord. And thank you, Lord, in Jesus name I pray, Amen.

All: Amen!



Figure 9: Five of Momma's sisters, gathered round' the kitchen table

This kitchen, like a waterless baptism.

Where you submerge the weight of all you carry and resurface some lighter in the presence of God and family.

To sit and watch as my aunt hot-combed her sister's hair.

Listening as they laugh and bicker. I imagined them as younger girls,

Granny sitting just out of frame watching her daughters

I wondered if she too, imagines them as younger girls.

I retreat into my own memories and pull forth my own moments, where I too, sat in my momma's kitchen as she hot-combed my own hair.

And how I fussed about the heated touch of the comb hovering above my earlobe and her laugh peeking through her apology.

## This Is a Portal

The kitchen table represents physically and symbolically an inclusive space for Black girls and women to come together, to be seen, to be heard, and to just be.

The kitchen table signifies the rich history of our foremothers and grandmothers who sat at the kitchen table where, beyond gossip and social talk, women bared their souls and received healing and affirmation in the company of their sisters.

—Marcelle Haddix et al, *At the Kitchen Table: Black Women English Educators Speak Our Truths*

I've always been fascinated by the kitchen and the kitchen table's role in our lives as Black folk. And I see the kitchen as a sort of waypoint— a superposition or anchor in the physical world that serves as an interface to a far less tangible, yet spiritual one. One that connects us to larger worlds, those both known and not yet revealed to us. Put another way, the kitchen is a portal. And it is in this portal where we gather— seeking out ancestral, and communal knowledge and that seeking is a form of ancestral wayfinding. A practice of sensing a path or paths spatially through time to arrive to place and being by way of memory. And it is a process achieved through what I am languaging as epistemological location through divination. This type of

locale connects for us the ways in which we are situated in terms of our own present geographies, and personal histories— and it accounts for the how and when and where we know things on a familial level. And it is in this configuration, that for me, I see the kitchen as being a foundational entry point. This is a belief affirmed further by an Indigenous Knowledge System and other ways of knowing, that Western Apache and horseman like Dudley Patterson, who would share with writer and cultural anthropologist Keith H. Basso, that wisdom sits in places. And these places hold for us, the capability of “triggering acts of self-reflection, inspiring thoughts about who one presently is, or memories of who one used to be, or musings on who one might become” (Basso 1996, 55). And in seeing wisdom as an extractable particle from memory, the kitchen becomes both a portal to and container for these held memories and so my returning to Granny’s Kitchen, is predicated on the premise that our memories, when engaged and interacted with as a tangible/intangible material, are indeed, site specific and become tied to and baked deep within the spiritual, metaphysical and emotional architecture of a place— and ones that can only be accessed again properly once we are there, within their proximity. And it is in this notion of place, that Basso illustrates for me further that our “relationships to place may also find expression through the agencies of myth, prayer, music, dance, art, architecture, and, in many communities, recurrent forms of religious and political ritual” (Basso 1996, 57). What he is describing here is what is we also know as material culture, and I would include sounds, smells, taste and images. And this too, is also oral history.

The kitchen, as it is sensed by Dr. Jessica B. Harris, the culinary historian is one that is “more than simply a room of memories. It’s where life lessons are learned ... the place where we bring the lessons learned from our grandmothers and our mothers to the next generation” (Eves 2005, 290). It would be through this exploration of the kitchen as place and portal and how it allows for us to harness this ability to travel in and around and through time, and where

conversations of the like with my friend, and fellow artist Shefon N. Taylor, coupled with Nyssa's teachings from Roots and Branches during that fall semester of 2023, whose influences both began to create for me new pathways of knowing that all began to coalesce around this abstract idea. During one of these rich exchanges, Shefon, among many other insights introduces me to the writings of French philosopher Gaston Bachelard's book *The Poetics of Space*, and shortly after another friend and artist, Khidr Joseph from our many conversations about form and place recommends to me the Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa's *The Eyes of The Skin*.

Through these shared texts I've been able to perhaps grasp for myself a firmer and more expanded application for my own overarching framework of Black Collective Memory and its use—one that also ask me to consistently recognize the ongoing and interspersed relationship between space, and image and memory construction. To quote Bachelard, "great images have a history and a prehistory; they are always a blend of memory and legend, with the result that we never experience an image directly... every great image has an unfathomable oneiric depth to which the personal past adds special color" (Bachelard 1958, 53). And it is in this, that I consider the efficacy of the *haptic* images, that I produced that live at the center if this work.

Between Basso, these Indigenous Knowledge Systems, the aforementioned texts, and bringing them into dialogue with what I've set up in the introduction, I'm establishing for myself a mycelium network of sorts. Adding in a final branch of this network, drawing from and making attempts to expand on a term that scholar, Cheryl J. Fish had coined through her work and research on the relationship between the great poet June Jordan, and architect Buckminster Fuller's 1965 collaboration, *Skyrise for Harlem*. She offers up to us the *Architextual*, in which she describes and uses to "emphasize architecture as text and text as thickly descriptive, multidimensional [and] serving as a scaffold to build a vision of hope and

embodied environments” (Fish 2007, 331). My intent here, however, is the emphasis of our memory/memories instead, as a kind of “thickly, descriptive and multidimensional” forms— but observed through the lens of an architextual apparatus by spatial, spiritual and emotional embodiment, and thereby encountering them in place— as a kind of fabric-like, textured construct— ones that are temporal and can also be intervened on. Pallasmaa, for me hints at this kind of intervention stating how “in memorable experiences of architecture, space, matter and time fuse into one singular dimension... We identify ourselves with this space, this place and this moment and these dimensions become ingredients of our very existence” (Pallasmaa 1996, 76-77). And as place is a space that must be “sensed together” (Basso 1996, 57).

According to Native views, when this is done, a previously unknown “physical world becomes accessible to strangers” (Basso 1996, 57). Therefore, what has been contextualized for me in this, is that through this sensing of place and space together and dimensional travel, from those within proximity, acting as temporal conduits create for those on the peripheral a way to peer into a now revealed world. And this film, this Black, oralgraphical as a production, is a thinning of the veil in which a portal into a “*space of contraband*, first framed by Nyssa Chow. Whereas a specified legibility becomes temporally and temporarily made available but only ever at an allowable distance.



Figure 10: Granny's Kitchen in [REDACTED]



Figure 11: Peering In



Figure 12: Peering Out

## Space In Praxis



Figure 13: Flyer designed by Jonathan F.

On Friday, April 25<sup>th</sup> of this year, I completed my first Student Artist Residency at Barnard College's Movement Lab. I premiered my residency project, a piece that I have been calling an *installation performance film* and what the Lab refers to as a MeMoSa or a Media Movement Salon. This culmination was also a part of a larger, final graduate student exhibition Annotations on Memory: 2025 An Interactive Oral History Experience, curated in relationship and collaboration with the classmates who I've been in cohort with throughout my graduate program and stewarded by my professor and mentor, Nyssa Chow. A Black woman, a Trinidadian woman and an artist. It is important that I say that.



Figure 14: Nyssa Chow, taken by my classmate Yuri Fujita

April 25<sup>th</sup> was also the 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary of my brother Freddy's passing.

This installation performance film *On My Journey Now/A Man in Time* is about my mother (**who has passed**) reciting a poem, by Maya Angelou (**who has passed**) and my grandfather, (**who has also passed**) retelling the story his traveling to Washington, DC to hear Martin Luther King, Jr (**who has also passed**) speak at the Lincoln monument, in 1963, during my grandmother's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration in 1995 in [REDACTED]. What it is *really* about, is *Black Collective Memory* and how our shared histories, and the ways in which we all continue to exist within a context/linage. A methodology I name previously in this paper, but this is the instance where it would first actualize in praxis. This installation film was

an immersive experience about grief and loss and absences, but it was just as much about love and time, reverence and space and memory. So much of the textures that I had been exploring over the past few years through my oral history work, has been summed up best as “inviting us to reflect on how we mark, interpret, and map the geographies of collective and intimate remembrances.” Following the viewing of the installation, it had taken me a little over a week to return back into my body, to process it all and I don’t know yet that I fully have or ever will. To an intimate audience of some 50 plus people— where guests had to remove their shoes before entering onto the floor of the Lab— made up of some of my closest friends— people I grew up with in Arizona and those who I have grown with since moving to New York over a decade ago. A room of my classmates from Columbia who I have been steeped in this work with, colleagues from the Metropolitan Museum of Art who I work with daily and the young people, who I’ve been granted with great joy, the responsibility of stewarding over. And Victoria, my partner at the time who held, supported and encouraged me through much of this process but up until that moment, had not yet seen this side of me.

I showed a 30-minute film, displayed across three separate walls, ones that featured my mother, my grandfather, Maya Angelou, Mahalia Jackson and Martin Luther King— and it was the most vulnerable piece of creative work that I have ever offered up publicly. I was uncomfortable, anxious, tender and exposed. I wanted to curl up and into myself— even what I wore that night was an attempt to shield and shroud my body, but also to comfort and calm myself within my body. I was tinkering up until my guests arrived at the door.

What does Badu say? “I’m an artist and I’m sensitive about my shit.”



*Figure 15: Installation attendees, by Yuri Fujita*

Inspired by the archival footage of my grandmother’s 1995, 60th surprise birthday party celebration. And since her birthday is in February, it also doubled as a Black History Month program and an African-garb themed family reunion. One of my cousins sent me the footage over a year ago and I had just been living with it and unsure yet what to do with it. The residency gave me the opportunity to play with it as a material and explore what creating something new from it could be. What makes it so special, in addition to having this forgotten memory of my mother, her voice and face on camera return to me, is that my dad is the person who recorded the whole two-hour and plus program. And as I’ve waded deep into the waters of my own memories— what has now come up for me, is how it was my father, all along, who was the one marking time and keeping and documenting our moments. He was the first archivist and historian I ever knew, and how so much of who and how I am now, and have become, comes from him. I was hit by this towering wave of realization, that he’s always been right here. I just wasn’t paying enough attention, and it is impossible for me now to look at my artistry and creative practice and not trace it back to him directly.



Figure 16: My Pop in his vest. My mother (Black and Pink hat) her parents and 7 of her 8 of her sisters.

In an assignment I did for Roots and Branches, I wrote about *ancestral echolocation* and how images and objects are like portals that can be used to project ourselves through space and time and memory. Within the Lab, to accompany the film I brought with me an autographed copy of Maya Angelou's book "Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now" that my mother recites and that Maya's sings about. A book titled "A Knock at Midnight" a collection of sermons by King that was owned by my mother and inside it, used as a bookmark, an obituary card of my

grandfather face. And lastly, the Kenti inspired vest from 1995 that my father wore during the celebration he recorded. *Can you feel that?*



Figure 17: Ancestral objects

This has been an attempt to bring you with me— back into the space— into my own mind. This installation that was designed to be experienced in-person, exclusively within the Lab, with its 4 projectors reflecting on and across its large, white walls. And as you have now seen, a segment from that installation, is what serves as the basis for this very thesis. This experience has created in me a fissure— a demarcation in my visual practice, that would introduce me for the first time, as an installation artist. And that feels powerful, and I am holding both so much gratitude and overwhelm. Overwhelm, because I can't go back and I am afraid, and concerned

and inspired by the demands of what my practice is asking of me now. This was about process and encounters— this work and overall residency experience allowed me to create a physical (*space*) container and one capable of holding many things. Central among them being our collective hearts. And we what we experienced together, in that room, was an encounter— where the walls were hot, sweating, and we could feel as heat filled the room. And see the steam rising from up off the ground. After the viewing, and with the walls and floor still warm I opened the room for dialogue among those present. And I held for them what they had been holding for me, and we talked about our collective grieving and loss, of our loved ones and of the world. I listened to their stories and remembrances and their own journeys' finding healing. Together we cried and laughed and danced and prayed and rejoiced.

This is how I exercise my grief— and it was trance-like.



Figure 18: The Movement Lab, Installation



Figure 19: Image by Yuri Fujita



*Figure 20: Side by side, image by Sean Lyles*

## A Woman, A Rendering

Knowing that every day that I left the house many of the people that I encountered did not think me precious and showed me so, my mother gave me space to be precious—as in vulnerable, as in cherished. It is through her that I first learned that beauty is a practice, that beauty is a method, and that a vessel is also “a person into whom some quality (such as grace) is infused.”

—Christina Sharpe, *Ordinary Notes; Beauty Is a Method*

My mother’s absence looms largest around the holidays— the stretch of time between Thanksgiving and Christmas and then the day after Christmas, which is her birthday and all of it, a heaviness that always feels of a particular kind of weight and weightlessness. There are few processes more difficult than the attempt to fuse together dislocated memories— the ones I know exist but live outside of my body and in the bodies of others. Finding them and binding them together through grief and love, across space, place and time and them working as an adhesive for the heart and body and mind.

I always knew this work would lead me here— back to her home where so much of her is still left unexplored. And where I would endeavor to develop a new rendering of her from

whatever I would be able to excavate from Granny and my Aunts. To see her in a new composition and affirm her as *is* rather than just *was*. Memories reconstructed from the remembrances of her sisters, in every loud laugh that bellowed out of Granny's Kitchen, and onto the porch where I'd forgotten I had sat with her and Dada. In every tear, held hand and rubbed shoulder. In every shared story heard for the first time; like when she flipped off that police officer from the back window of Granny's station wagon. Or how a racist teacher in elementary school held her entire class back and not one parent caused a commotion about it, not even Granny because they didn't know they could. Then I think back to when I was in elementary school, and when they wanted to hold me back because they said I was "developing slowly" and how I would benefit from repeating the grade over. She wouldn't let them do to me what was done to her. She fought for me and did whatever it took to ensure that I would catch up, and it wasn't easy or comfortable, but I did. And that makes me feel closer to her, it allows me to see her more clearly. This is one of countless other instances that have been mirrored back to me.

My life, in so many ways is but a constellation of my mother's lived experiences and in this, I've been thinking a lot about my own construction—the parts of me that are also shared with someone else or of the things that make us along the way, the encounters we have that shape us into form. A cosmic blend of our becoming. So much of my practice is informed by my mother's passing and the many passings that preceded her own. I leave Granny's Kitchen with the understanding that this work is incomplete and may always remain so. But there's solace in the knowing that as long as I am seeking her, I will always find something new. And so, the picture rendering of her in the eye of my mind's memory comes closer into focus. It is here that I return to the words of Christina Sharp's that instruct us on the ways in which one might apprehend the wake and what it might mean as a practice to be there in it. She tells us how

“wakes are processes; through them we think about the dead and about our relations to them; they are rituals through which to enact grief and memory... [and] allow those among the living to mourn the passing of the dead through ritual” (Sharpe 2016, 21). These ideas woven together have given me new language and confirmed for me a feeling that I have only been able to describe up until now as a sort of transdimensional-longing reaching out and back and forward and through temporal geographies. I think a lot about portals— space and time. The binding and splitting apart of multiple temporalities. I think about pastness and how past is also ahead of us as much as it is behind us. And it is in the there and the not there that we can find our own healing.

## Epilogue

Every part of this work, even this moment right now that I’m writing has been muscular. And it has asked more of me, than anything else. I think those of us who find our way to Oral

History, do so because we are interested in the intimate, vulnerable and personal worlds around us, mostly our own and some maybe more than others. We all arrive here first, with unanswered questions and if we commit ourselves to the rigor of it, we answer some of them along the way. But when we allow ourselves to be immersed and transformed by it— what we leave here with, are all new ones.

What do you know about yourself to be true? Was the first questions I asked of my Aunts, and what was revealed to me over the next three days that I would spend with them, sitting among them and holding tightly to the contours of the container that I created, and asked them to join me on inside of, was that they had some shit to say. The facades fell away and it stopped being an interview after about an hour or so and for us/ them, it became real. The table held up their grief and grievances and what I realized was that there had remained some great silences around my momma's death, like regret. And the table became a healing circle, to say their hard and heartfelt things. I remember feeling unsure of what would become of the final product because some much of what was said and felt and heard, of what I recorded initially, felt too delicate too tender and too honest to share. And how I choose to share them, is also an act of thoughtful care. What became apparent was that I wasn't really in control, my Aunts began to respond directly to each other and then ask their own questions. And I thought that was beautiful, because what happened, is that I became a witness! It is impossible of a task to take three days and distill it all down into a 30-minute, cohesive and compelling narrative. But I think I did as well as anyone could. I cried through so much of it and there is so much of it still, that I left on the cutting room floor and I hope in the next iteration of this film that I can add a bit more depth in some areas, as it was important for me to end it on a note that felt like an arrival. What the film doesn't reveal but feels central to the story and overall viewing experience is how Granny sat there, among her daughters and listened to their grief and

grievances and some of them were about her and how they remembered her at times and she just held it listened and allowed them to have their say and truth. And I thought how sweet and loving of a gesture that to be.

This film is about a Black American family, about love and a faith in God. It is about grief and loss and my mother's absences. But what it is really about— is about me—it is about these women, and their interior worlds that shaped their lives. The same ones that would shape my mother's life and thereby inform my own, and all of it is associative. What if my life story didn't begin in 1986? What if when we are born, we are also born in the past of our mother's? And this film that I've made, which is also this paper as a love offering is a portal, some sort of ancestral echolocation that I can use as a way to trace a path through the wake, through time and space back to her. For as I am making, I am being made.

I think about all the space you cannot see, and with it— all the things that it contains.

I think about all the space you cannot see— but feel.



*Figure 21: Green, felt covered walls*

Death is always a rupture.  
Grief is an encounter, it is embodied.  
And memory is what ties and binds it all together— into a shape and  
form and that too, is also love.

# Acknowledgements

None of this work has been done alone and even in my most isolated moments, I knew that I was not without love, support, grace and encouragement. A rising tide raises all boats, and we lift as we climb. I want those in the *future*, when they gaze back at this time and me in this time, and us in this time I want them to know that we were all here together. This has been one of my most tightly held beliefs and it has been a constant driver in and through my work.

To my mentors and colleagues, Sandra Jackson-Dumont and Darcy-Tell Morales who both wrote my recommendations for this program, thank you for making a path for me and ensuring that I was prepared and capable of seeing it through. I am here, not just because you believed but because you first cared enough— to believe.

Thank you, Amy Starecheski, for your leadership. For creating an environment to learn and grow and explore ourselves in and through this work. For welcoming me into the program and seeing from the very beginning, the value I could bring to this program, the work and the field.

Shout out to my 2022 cohort mates, Aya, Aurianna and Ambar and Vy (who me and Aya later adopted) I stand on your shoulders and sit at your feet. I couldn't have imagined making it through that first semester, let alone the entire year without y'all. It made it all the difference in not just the work, but in the experience.

To Nicki Pombier and Liza Zapol, *Serious Play* was the unexpected revelation I didn't know I needed. Thank you for allowing me the freedom to *play* and to *participate* and create for myself, a new mode in which to operate in, understand and explore not just this living, breathing work through performance but also myself.

To Sara Sinclair, *Indigenous Oral Traditions and Anti-Colonial Histories* was the most rigorous course I've taken. Your assignments made me a stronger writer and asked me to think and examine our world and the work more critically. Thank you for your stewardship.

I have said this, and to your face on many occasions and I will say it again here, for the archive. *Roots & Branches* was the single most impactful course and experience I've had throughout my time at OHMA. What an unimageable time to learn and a no more fitting time to do so. You rewired my brain chemistry, and I left every class with my mind on fire. Thank you, Nyssa, for being such a brave and vulnerable teacher, leader, advisor and mentor. I'm grateful to have known you and to now call you friend and sister.

My friends, who are also my family, Tasha Sleigh, Justin Sisson and Chris Thomas who sat with me for hours and let me interview them for my first significant Oral History project, *The Transplant Project*. You showed me so much care, and grace and that foundation helped to lay the groundwork for me for the remainder of the program.

To my brother Jonathan F. Thank you for being down for whatever. For being the subject of many of assignments, for reading and editing work, for listening and for the impossible tasks of translating my ideas into images and helping to elevate the story and experience of the things I created and wanted to put out into the world.

Shefon, your influence on *me*— my creative practice and the shift in which I began to think differently and more deeply about what it meant for me to be a *fine artist*, cannot be

understated. I can't imagine the past few years without you— and the post class debriefs. I'm grateful to have ever had a thought-partner and collaborator like you in the work. Thank you, Fon.

Genevea, you are without a doubt, my dear sister. And I have felt so held by you over these years by your friendship. Thank you for the encouragement, counsel and at the times I needed it most, radical honesty. We have talked so much life over lattes, and it has kept me sustained.

Mahaila, you have been in the trenches with me since day one. Since the Carter G. Woodson Lecture series at ASU, and even before that. Thank you for constantly reminding me that I can do hard things. For leading by example first, I remember watching you get your master's and to have had your encouragement, insights and sometimes even your *pushing*, me along the way since has been invaluable.

Sylvia (La), you were the first person I called after crying from my acceptance into Columbia, into OHMA. You, who are my sister but also my first mentor, first artist that I ever knew and first example of living out the possibilities of imaging a world and life differently. Thank you for being *my friend, and sister*. For helping me to get here, for embodying Mom and standing in the gap.

Thank you, Pop. For so much of who and how I am, I am also because of you. It was you, who was informing my choices long before I realized it. Countless hours thumbing through family photo albums, that you captured and curated and I finally see your hands, in my own hands.

Thank you to the Line of Nine. My mothers' sisters, Marcia, Carmen, Yvette, Chandra, Tamara, Tina, DeAnna and Evie. My aunts who I have spoken and sat with already, whose voices and stories live at the center of this work and those who I am yet to sit with but will.

Thank you, Granny, for being the source and traveling with me many times over many places,

before I even understood where I was going or what I was doing and what it would all be used for. I understand now.

For Christina & Tina & Saidiya & Leigh & Toni & bell.

For the Desert Babies passed on, and standing in veil— for Freddy, for Stubbs, for Mark, for Josh and Cornell, For Mo Fresh and J. Smith.

Thank you, all. I love you.

With gratitude.

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