

Aesthetics of the Archives

Desmond A. Miller

March 7 – August 23, 2020

Ritual, Process, and Ancestral Homelands by Alyssa Fearon

As I write this reflection, Black people around the world are taking to the streets in uprisings to decry the injustices of our shared realities. Dubbed the Floyd Rebellions, the recent deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Regis Korchinsky-Pacquet, and Tony McDade have re-ignited a rage in Black communities over the past few months. Yet, one could argue that this rage was never really extinguished. As James Baldwin put it, “to be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all the time.”¹ His statement referenced the Black experience in the United States, but the sentiment also rings true in Canada.

When I look at my computer screen and see digital images of the untimely passing of these individuals – sisters, friends, parents, community members – the underlying theme is their (our) dehumanization. I see images of them as they lay dead or in the midst of dying. I see a cordoned off scene where their death happened only moments ago. I watch as they are physically attacked and killed.

In mid-April, while working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic, I turned to my computer screen once again to view digital images of Black being. This time, I paused to observe images from Desmond A. Miller’s solo exhibition, *Aesthetics of the Archives*. The exhibition opened on March 7, 2020 at the Art Gallery of Burlington, but closed abruptly on March 13 due to the pandemic. Shortly after the closure, Desmond reached out to me to arrange an online studio visit to discuss the work in the exhibition and share ideas on how to spread the word about the exhibition in the midst of the pandemic.

Full disclosure, Desmond and I are friends, having met in 2015 at the Black Canadian Studies Association Conference in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Since then, we've collaborated on community-based projects and I've followed the evolution of his artistic practice with great interest. Although I wasn't able to see the work in person (at the time I resided in Brandon, Manitoba), I accepted Desmond's invitation to write an essay that would allow me to reflect on the themes present in his work and current events.

Aesthetics of the Archives is a multi-media exhibition that features a series of portraits of Miller's Caribbean-descended ancestors and elders from his paternal lineage: his Nana, Uncle Ken, Auntie Germaine, and Auntie Gwen. The four triptychs include an archival portrait of the elder on one side; a contemporary portrait on the other; and in the middle, an image that combines the first two portraits in the centre of a handmade quilt. In instances where the elder transitioned to ancestor, Miller sits in for the relative in the contemporary portrait and incorporates a handwritten poem to represent them in the centre quilt.

In the contemporary photographs, Miller's body enters the frame and he channels his relative's ancestral spirit by mimicking their sitting pose and modeling their overall demeanor. Yet, the contrast between his light, near-white complexion and that of his elders, who have much darker skin, is stark. Seeing Miller's complexion in juxtaposition with his elders and ancestors calls attention to the geographic and temporal dimensions of the work, namely his mixed Caribbean and European ancestry. Miles apart from his ancestral homelands, Miller offers a deeply personal look at the disruptive legacy of colonialism in the Caribbean and generations of forced displacement of Africans from their indigenous homelands.

The connections to our origins and ancestral homelands have been ruptured over space and time. Making an attempt to locate ourselves within the Diaspora is a necessary rite on the journey towards actualization and self-determination. On one level, the rupture is visible simply by observing the difference in shades between Miller's light skin and his elders' darker skin. However, our dis/connections to homeland need to be investigated more thoroughly. We are generations and geographies removed. As Metis writer Chelsea Vowel explains², the descendants of enslaved Africans and

Indigenous peoples have experienced metaphysical rupture that altered our connection to land and spirit realms. In the context of ongoing dehumanization of Black peoples in Canada and globally, it is through introspection and mining his family's personal archives that Miller collapses the gaps between Diaspora and homeland, the living and the spiritual, and pulls us into his process.

In one triptych, my attention hones in on a sepia-toned image of Nana. Her mahogany skin is glowing, illuminated from within, as she sits for an in-studio photography session. Her eyes do not meet mine. Instead her gaze is fixed upon some object just beyond the frame. Her closed mouth nearly forms the shape of a smile, but the expression perhaps reveals an impatience or exasperation with the lengthy process of having one's image captured professionally. Superimposed on the portrait is a poem in Miller's handwriting printed on silk chiffon. I'm drawn to the words, "sister, sister, sister" and "how much I / miss you, present / as you are." These words bring my mind back to Regis Korchinsky-Pacquet and how much she is missed, having left too soon.

How might we sit with, embody, and simply be in the presence of our ancestors – both our biological lineages, and our shared bloodlines who have crossed into the ancestral realm? In *Aesthetics of the Archives*, it is through a methodical process of remembering, and even embodying his ancestors, that we see Miller's earnest attempt to make sense of who he is and possibly who he hopes to become. One of my favourite Adinkra³ principles is Sankofa, which refers to the notion that we need to know where we are coming from, in order to know where we are going. Miller's work fully expresses this principle. It's a foundation for him, and can perhaps provide a guide for us as we figure out what we need in order to persist during these catastrophic times.

The title of the exhibition, *Aesthetics of the Archives*, references a 2016 interview that Miller completed with Anique Jordan for the online publication *no more potlucks*⁴. The two discussed the power dynamics of the institutional big 'A' Archive and unofficial little 'a' archive, referencing the overwhelming absence and distortions of Black people in Canada's official archive system. In the interview, Jordan opines, "I think that the archive for us looks like memory. And it looks like gesture. It looks like body language... That's where our archive is. Really." Memory, gesture, body language – these elements are all present in Miller's work. By incorporating these

elements, he speaks to the histories of the little ‘a’ archive and enters in dialogue with his elders, both the ancestral and living.

¹ Baldwin, J., Hughes, L., Capouya, E., Kazin, A., & Hansberry, L. (1961). *The Negro in American culture: [comments by James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, Lorraine Hansberry, Emile Capouya and Alfred Kazin]*. Berkeley, Calif: Pacifica Radio Archive. Retrieved from:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jNpitdJXWY&feature=youtu.be>

² “Who is a Settler, According to Indigenous and Black Scholars” (2019) by Ashleigh-Rae Thomas. Retrieved from: https://www.vice.com/en_ca/article/gvaji4/who-is-a-settler-according-to-indigenous-and-black-scholars

³ Adinkra symbols are used in parts of West Africa to represent concepts or proverbs. As Kwame Anthony Appiah, puts it in his book *In my father's house : Africa in the philosophy of culture* (1993) Adinkra symbols supported “the transmission of a complex and nuanced body of practice and belief”.

⁴ “What’s in an Aarchive?” (2020) by Desmond A. Miller. Retrieved from:

<https://www.desmondamiller.com/post/what-s-in-an-aarchive>

Alyssa Fearon is dedicated to working within a collaborative framework to expand the ways in which communities engage with contemporary art. Integral to Fearon’s curatorial practice is a community-based approach that prioritizes the voices of historically underrepresented audiences. Fearon currently holds the position of Director/Curator at the Dunlop Art Gallery, Regina Public Library. Prior to the role, she was Curator at the Art Gallery of Southwestern, Manitoba and in 2018 she was Curator for the inaugural Scarborough zone of Nuit Blanche Toronto. Fearon has also held positions at the Art Gallery of Ontario and the New York-based Independent Curators International. She holds an MBA from the Schulich School of Business and an MA in Art History from York University. She is also a Salzburg Global Fellow.

Desmond A. Miller, MEd, is an Artist/Researcher who works with stories. His work explores themes of family ancestry, balancing the masculine and feminine, practical animism and the spaces in between. Miller’s practice employs textiles, poetry, photography and group facilitation. He is currently a 2019/20 John Willard Fibre Artist in Residence at the Art Gallery of Burlington (Canada) and serves as the Community Research Coordinator (Toronto) for the community-based research program *weSpeak: Heterosexual Black Men Building Resilience to HIV in Ontario*. Miller lives in Toronto, Canada, traditional territory of the Anishinaabe, Mississaugas and Haudenosaunee.



The Art Gallery of Burlington is located on land that is part of the ancient Dish With One Spoon Treaty and also the Brant Tract Purchase, Treaty No. 3 3/4 of 1795, 1797 and 2010. The AGB is grateful to the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation and the Six Nations of the Grand River for sharing this territory.



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