

"They're all conjurors":

A Conversation with Deanna Bowen & Cecily Nicholson

Emmanuelle Andrews & Katrina Sellinger

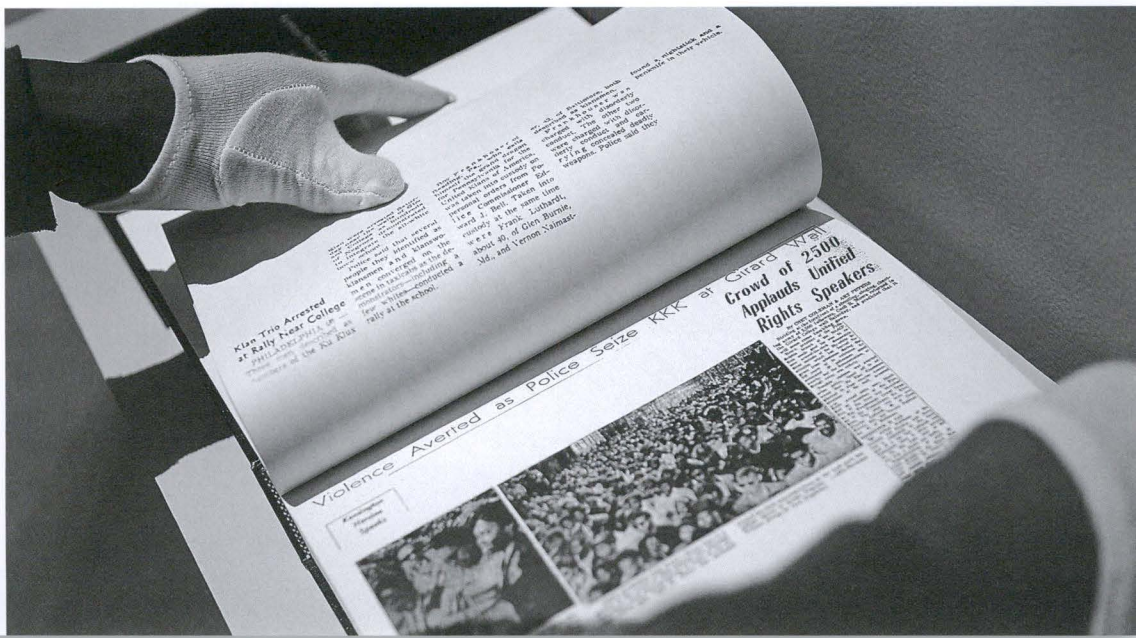
On a Thursday afternoon this past November, we orchestrated a Skype call with Deanna Bowen and Cecily Nicholson across three computer screens and two time zones. We'd come in with a set of questions and ended up getting answers to questions we hadn't even thought to ask.

As junior scholars, we recognize this rerouting as part of our academic experience, but having the opportunity to work through these questions with black women is something new for us.

We had chosen certain words because of what we'd seen as their expansiveness—we liked the potential inclusivity of "creator" and "creative process"—but our conversation brought forth their limitations as well. Words can't always do what we want them to do. They are always in flux. Still, this conversation—this collaborative work—expanded our understanding of what the work of words might look like.

Deanna Bowen: I'm thinking about the failure of language and the ways in which language and words don't do some experiences, some aspects of Black experience, justice. I think about the value of silence and how much silence is just as much a very critical and important dialect, so to speak. Yeah, those are the first things I'm thinking about. I'm also thinking about the work of words as a tool to dismantle the master's house.

Deanna Bowen, "Volumes of Counterintelligence 1 & 2,"
installation view, from *Traces in the Dark*, ICA Philadelphia, 2015
Photographer: Constance Mensch



All: Mm-hmm.

Cecily Nicholson: Yeah, I agree with that. I also think about collaboration and conversation. As a poet I'm working with words and I'm trying to find ways to use my voice, which isn't an easy thing for me. I think it's not an easy thing for many artists. I mean, it's a discipline or it's a work or it's a practice—you know, these things. So I'm trying to find that voice but trying to place it in concert and trying to be present. And I mean that for all my intersections, thinking through a layered positioning, as we all do in a sense. We all live our lives, but certainly as black women and as survivors, ongoing; that work becomes important in terms of holding space. In terms of what I'm witnessing and participating in, sometimes that concert of words in collaboration is about disruption. It's about interruptions. It also is—as Deanna has already pointed out—necessarily, at times, a refusal to make even a sound. Sometimes it's a matter of refusing the conditions in which we are supposed to be speaking.

DB: I think the one thing I'd add to that is this idea that words can do the *work* of articulating our erasure. I can extend that out as far as you wanna go, really, but I think there is something very particular about the Canadian landscape and the ways in which words are *necessary* in defining this notion of the absence of Black bodies on the Canadian landscape.

CN: Absolutely.

KS: I think these are great responses. We didn't want to define “black creators” too closely because we need it to be open-ended, but this might be a good place for us to go, like what are we thinking about as “black creation”? We wanted to include academic work, artistic work, activist work—just all of the different levels of creation—but, yeah, what do you think about this category of *black creation*? What does that include for you?

CN: This word “creator” I can't help but hear in a Christian biblical sense. I understand we're trying to think through creative practice alongside words like “knowledge production.”

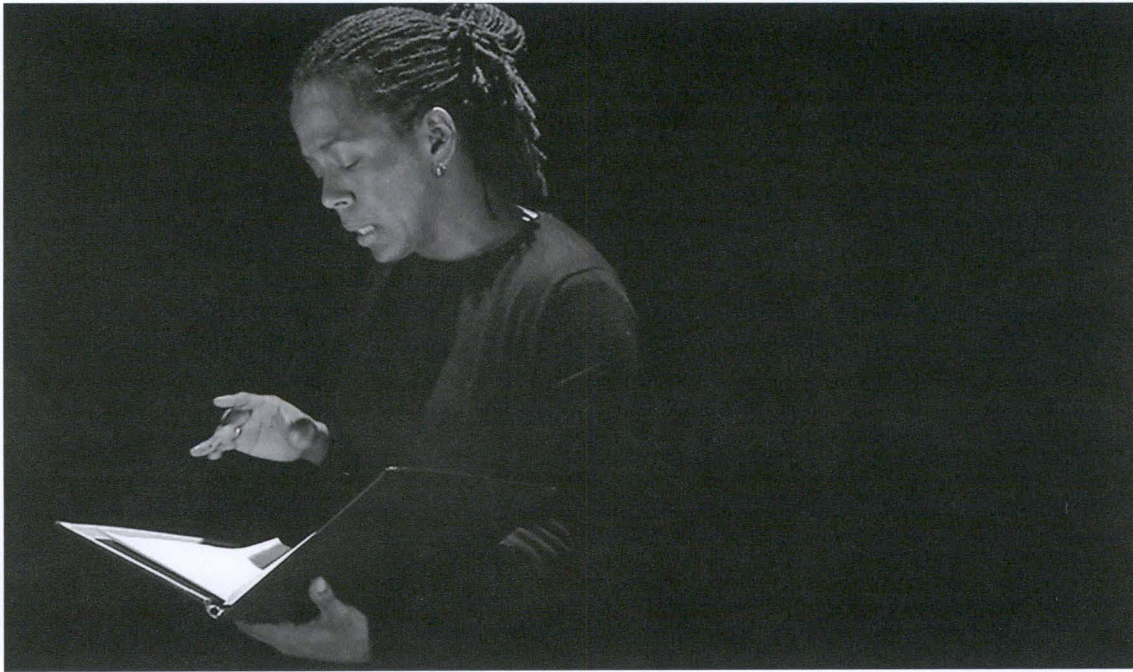
DB: I would like to jump onto it for just a little bit to highlight that the people I'm working with are not just “creative” people. I *am* working with academics. I'm working with a lot of historians and librarians. They're all *conjurers*, and that's the word that comes to mind for everyone I'm working with. These are all people who can contribute to my efforts to define Black experience in Canada.

EA: That's interesting because when we were thinking of this term, "creators," we actually wanted to make sure we *were* including academics as well. In ways, "creators" might actually leave them out, in some respect, or maybe the word does need some more expansion. So, yeah, I'm glad that you've both brought that up because we did kind of take it for granted, I think.

CN: And "conjurers" is lovely. When we're thinking about our everyday people who are not necessarily a part of an institution or gallery and we're meeting on the street, there's a lot of possibility for creating and conjuring in all kinds of ways.

KS: So, then, talking about what you imagine the work of words to be, how do you see that work happening in your fields? Again, this question is kind of broad and vague because we want you to just take it wherever you go!

Deanna Bowen, *sum of the parts: what can be named*, video still, 2010



DB: In the field or in our practice?

KS: Oh! That is a good question. Can we say both?

DB: Sure, just makes my answer longer! First and foremost, I look at my practice as being an act of publishing. I believe that there are many types of languages and many types of dialects within them, and I imagine that just about anything I create—be it video, film, sculpture, whatever—is a kind of language that helps me to disseminate a narrative out into the world. All of my work is archive-based, so obviously words and documents are critical components of my research. They are the tools and the information about experiences that I would never be able to get from, say, the people I've grown up with. Words have been—words *are*—the things that I use in performances and in the construction

of my family stories. I mean, it's just everything about writing words, writing language, defining Blackness—all of those things are taken up in my practice, and so various types of writing inform everything that I do.

CN: I appreciate that breadth. My fields combine social and cultural fronts. It feels nebulous. I have a hard time locating it, except it does have spatiality like the street, the gallery, you know, the venue, on the road. My last work of poetry is mainly in the context of road travel. I'm trying to be more sure about how I use language and how to connect to a plurality or a multiplicity, code-switching, and looking to translation—whatever means of communication. I can't do it as an individual, so it's about the social. I can fall into a tendency to try to control writing and this is supposed to be part of a practice, being thoughtful about things, and being *deliberate* and *intentional*.

*young white university students
son of uneducated, working poor parents
quick of mind. Blonde to a leather face*

THE LONG DOORWAY - ACT THREE, Scene three

(WE DISSOLVE TO THE CELL IN THE DON JAIL. DONALD IS STANDING UNDER THE WINDOW. THE GUARD APPEARS & OPENS THE DOOR. WILSON COMES IN. THE GUARD LEAVES)

DONALD: What do you want?

Frank Wilson WILSON: I want to defend you. *this black man, abt 20 yrs old. intelligent quick intense*

DONALD: Leave me alone. (HE TURNS AWAY) *Walker is a smart sharp. Considerate*

WILSON: I want you to tell me about your fight with Edison.

Don't face: DONALD: What for? You're not going to be my lawyer. *Glasses*
Frank Wilson My Dad's ~~phoning~~ *he's* phoning the Society. *looking*

WILSON: The Society's phoning your Dad.

DONALD: (TURNS) Yeah --?

WILSON: Until they tell me I'm off, I'm on. And while I'm your Counsel, I'm going to get the information I have to have.

DONALD: (GOES TO THE DOOR) I'll get you thrown out.

WILSON: Donald.

DONALD: (FACES HIM) What?

WILSON: Why did you and Edison fight? Were you always enemies? I want the truth.

DONALD: What're you talking about? I liked Edison. I never had a better friend. He's smart, and he's quiet, the way I like a guy. He doesn't spout off all the time, and when he does say something, I know what he's talking about. He's like me a hundred ways, you know what I mean? He wants the same things --

WILSON: Then?

DONALD: (TURNING AWAY) We just fought, that's all.

WILSON: You told me he started it.

DONALD: (PAUSE) Did I? *(FRAGILE)*

WILSON: Was that the truth?

*Consider
cycles of
homosocial
platonic
tension
in that*

Deanna Bowen, "ON TRIAL The Long Doorway - Annotations," artist pages for *Canadian Art* (Fall 2017)

I wanna open up more to an active ad hoc, improv, experimental, river-current, creek-meandering kind of approach to seeing language and words happen—again, also, more in collaboration. It's good to have the poise and confidence to roll with dialogues. That also doesn't come easy for many of us but the words are needed for adaptability, creating safety, obviously creativity—as we're talking about today—but certainly *care*, as well. Many of us do a lot of care work. I say “many of us.” I'm referring just back to this category of black creators. I'm thinking especially of black women that I know, and myself. We do a lot of care work, which involves a lot of listening. So the work of words—back to silences within the refusal—has also meant being still and quiet in order to be able to listen. The work of listening and understanding is a part of my everyday.

DB: Because I'm always dealing with history, I couldn't help but think about the relationship between Black people and the written word, language and writing. Black people could be killed for knowing how to read and write during slavery times. So the thing that's coming to mind is the preciousness of language and writing and speaking up for oneself—and speaking for a community. Then, from there, I think about the failure of the printed text and the way that the printed text, historically, has failed to define Black presence, to define either the individual writer or the field itself. These ideas make me question why I do so much performance, why I'm always working from scripts—what is that about?

I'm also exploring the physicality of language and how actors and performers and performances have a way of bypassing our disconnect from language—certainly from the printed word, anyhow.

Deanna Bowen, *ONTRIAL The Long Doorway*, installation view, Mercer Union, 2017. Photographer: Toni Hafkensheid



With performance I can see this other way in which language works in the world and the way that it can pierce through white disassociation. These are the things that I'm thinking about very much when we talk about the work of words and its relationship to Blackness and Black creatives.

EA: This reminds me of how Christina Sharpe, in her book *In the Wake*, refers to "Blackened knowledge." And even of her use, or her *work*, with certain words. She explicitly traces the word "wake," for instance, and describes it as many things—as keeping watch over the dead, as the path of a ship, as awakening, as consciousness—and she kind of expands that word to mean many things and make it relevant for black people. It's "Blackened knowledge" when she uses it. Could you maybe speak more about that or how that resonates with you, or doesn't?

DB: I read the book very early in the year in an effort to contextualize or to put words to my practice. I had just completed a road movie about my family's migration from Kansas and got as far as my mind could hold.

I thought about Christina's writing, about the wake and being "woke" and all of those kinds of different definitions of the word. What she gave me were the words for an intuitive process, and a bodily process, that I was going through, in which language did not come to mind. So it was an important discovery to find that text. It came to me at a particular time in my research where I was thinking through, really, the history of this Creek-Negro, "Black Indian" lineage that I come from.

And what struck me about the *book*—and I have given a public talk with some other people at the AGO, and I mentioned this there—was that Christina's writing speaks frequently about the relationship of Black bodies to bodies of water. That was one of my disconnects from her writing—because



Deanna Bowen, *We Are From Nicodemus* – Deanna Bowen & Angela Bates,
video still, 2017



my family never talks about water. We talk a lot about the *land*—land that we lost, land that we were running on. And so that opened up kind of a line of query for me: *because* our family has been about the land for as long as we have, it led me to realize that we had always been in relationship to, or living with or around, Indigenous peoples the entire time. The book opened up this other possibility, probability, that this *Black* family line that I was researching was more likely an Indigenous family line that had been interrupted by Blackness via slavery. So when I think about the wake and where Sharpe goes... this is not *her* language—but she speaks to the reclamation of dead bodies, Black bodies, and also the efforts and the generations of grief that one has to go through. Beyond the narratives of slavery and Blackness, I can't help but think also about the thousands of years of genocide against Indigenous peoples, and how my family could be part of that long traumatic history as well. So the wake work has become a compounded effort for me in the last year.

EA: Thank you for sharing that, Deanna.

CN: Brilliant. I appreciate the chord you just struck around, you know, this association with bodies of water when we have been decidedly inland so long. Still, quite often in my work, I'm referencing the movement of water, the river, the creek, the rivulet, the ditch pooling—routes through culverts, yeah, constricted by the state, rerouted by colonialism, and certainly in relationship to Indigenous territories, multiply.

EA: I think one thing that keeps being brought up naturally is also something we've been interested in hearing more about, which is the idea of the work of words being about relationships with other black women or conjurors, or however you want to define that. Katrina and I, for example, read and edit each other's work, which I've found has been integral to my academic growth. And it's not only that support—that physical black presence—but also that ability to be understood by someone. We'll aid each other when we're kind of floundering. When we're talking through our ideas, we help each other recognize the value in what feels like abstract thoughts. The work of words, then, is perhaps also *for* other black creators, and also influenced *by* our relationships with those creators. So could you speak to relationships you've had with other black creators and how those relationships have influenced your practices?

CN: I really appreciate you drawing out this question. I wonder if I could speak, first of all, to the notion of influence before that of relation, because I came through an isolated rural context as a child, and there was this incredibly integral pull, a necessity, to seek out written words. That was what was accessible to me. People were not as accessible as words were at that time. I mean, aesthetics and art history, let alone black art, were not concepts that I understood. I don't know that I would have been able to centre myself as a human being if I hadn't reached out early to literature and poetry. I think of reading Dionne Brand as a teenager, as I migrated into the city, and negotiating understandings of place, like through Toni Morrison's *Jazz*. I can recall since then a number of startling points where I've come across multidisciplinary artists whose practices, like Deanna's, work across a number of discourses and are especially concerned with language and archive. I'm thinking of when I first came across your film, the one that was shown at MICE—

DB: —*oral histories*?

CN: —*sum of the parts*, was it?

DB: Yeah.

CN: It was a very emotional experience. I actually cried as a stranger in the audience, although it turned out I was in pretty good company. And part of what was happening there for me, as someone overly defined by the state, as a former ward of the state and living through kinds of displacement, was

this sense of familiarity. I wrote about this in the afterword of my recent book because I was trying to explain how when I'm looking at Deanna's work, for example, I experience this study. It's not my family—these complex histories to which you've devoted, it seems, a lifetime, in terms of research and care for. And yet, somehow, it did seem familiar. And what I realized in listening through was that even if I can't access those records, even if those archives and those documents and those stories and the orality is gone—and it is violently gone, for me—I still came through, and I came through with what must be parallel threads, narratives, and stories. And it spans out to harmonies of stories and practices. I had a chance just in the last couple of years to meet you, Deanna, but also Charles Campbell, Camille Turner, Khari—actually, Khari McClelland I met years ago—but visual artists, musicians, where I'm just like how's it happened that we've missed each other, or *I've* missed y'all, for so long? And realizing as I look at the different projects, like Charles' *Transporter* project, Camille's *SonicWalks*, and Khari's sense of music as a "transportation device," that all were concerned—are attentive to—movement. The most profound sense of place, I've realized, is in the context of movement and of being *something* that is not simply a displacement. Therein is great meaning and great capacity. It's been a necessary shift, to find a place in the cultural landscape, if you will. And I don't mean CanLit. I mean in the *longterm*, I've never sought to contribute to a national project. I *do* feel a sense of belonging to a convolution of aesthetics, black aesthetics, and solidarity.

DB: I want to follow with what Cecily has talked about around isolation. You know, for me as a family member of this particularly insular community, and then having the experience of trying to articulate who they were in Vancouver twenty-five years ago, it was a very small pocket of Black people that I could speak to in the creative world who understood what I was trying to get at. And I can tell you just how much of a *profound* emotional support that was at that time. Speaking about Blackness in Vancouver—in Canada, generally—is a very difficult thing, and so having allies—having *colleagues*, compatriots—who are doing this work is such a critical part of how we sustain this work, because the isolation will kill you. So I think a lot about that, and I think a lot about how hard I have been working—certainly in the last five to ten years—to battle against the isolation, in part because in the few opportunities that I've had to connect with Black creators across the country, the common lament is feeling

as though we're the only ones doing this work, and how you want to forfeit doing the work because you have this sense of lack of support. So I have just made it a goal, in part because I am so passionately committed to the writing of Black Canadian experience...I've made it a goal to connect myself with as many mutually-concerned Black creatives across the country as I can. Part of this is an egocentric trip about denying the government the ongoing use of this narrative of "lack of Black people" or "no Black people" in Canada, and I want to be able to assemble a body of creatives that completely smashes that lie. Maybe this kind of fits within what Sharpe was talking about around the reclamation of Black bodies, because even this work fits within this practice of "wake" work. I think about the "work of words" when I was in the emerging years of my career, when I was just desperately trying to find language that articulated this middle space of American—Black American—Canadian, and what that was about. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* was a *perfect* text to articulate the invisibility on both sides of this alleged border. *That* book gave me some buoyancy, because I felt that that one individual, that one book, was proof that there was somebody else in the world that experienced the invisibility that I was experiencing. I think, also, about creative works by Black people that you can't access or you resist accessing and the lessons—there is *still* a lesson—in that. By example, Morrison's *Paradise* does the work of articulating all-Black towns in Oklahoma, like Clearview where *my* family comes from. I think I've tried reading it at least five or six times now. And the resistance that I've come to accept is due to the fact that this particular story is too close and too hard, potentially too harmful for the psyche at this stage of the game. But the resistance was a lesson, nonetheless. I think about the blessing of experiencing a kind of Black "Renaissance," as far as creative practices are going here in Toronto. I gotta say that the collective mass, this community of Black makers very focused and very clear about the fact that they are makers, is such a gift to a hard heart because doing the work twenty years ago, there were very few of us out here. And that's not to take up the mantle of, you know, "I built the world." I'm sure Dionne Brand and many other creatives have a similar sense of the singularity of what they were doing, maybe twenty, thirty, forty years ago. So seeing communities of creators that are Black people who are out in the world and *want* to do this for a living, *want* to make this a career choice, *want* to make it a life practice, is so incredibly affirming. It is a beautiful thing to see all of these Black creative people in my world, in the city, across the country, across the nation. I mean, it's huge.

CN: There's always been a foundation wherever my homes are, but certainly on this coast for the last eighteen years. I have people. It's not that we haven't had people. I think of the work of Junie Desil and Julie Okot Bitek. I think of the work of Nadine Chambers—their integral practices and knowledge through the years. I think about what it has meant to be able to have those connections, and to have close allies and righteous poets and a mix of community down with figuring out what it means to be a good friend and ally. I don't hear enough of that around here in Vancouver where there are some insidious conditions for black people and a particular misogyny directed at black women.

DB: To add to what you were saying, I would say, also, that just by nature of the platform that I've been given in recent years, I've put a lot of effort into making space and calling out people who I think deserve recognition. And don't get me wrong, I'm not assessing "are they good or bad?" but just people who I know that have been doing the work diligently for long, long periods of time and have not received adequate recognition. I got a little smart-aleck this year and thought that I could push a little bit further, so I have taken it upon myself to edit a publication on Indigenous, queer, differently-abled, racialized, or otherwise outsider media artists. Again, I had this platform, so I applied for a Canada 150 grant and I got a very large chunk of money to edit a publication and make the way for forty writers, with the intention of having them articulate this place of difference—as cultural producers—in this country. That has been a huge undertaking on my part, but it really is about fostering the next generation of critical thinkers. I was very upfront in the proposal that this was a pay-it-forward strategy of generating critical dialogue about the Canadian cultural scene, and so it's not just about the articulation. I am also trying to help stoke fires of people who will go after the "State" and name the things that need to be changed.

KS: That's amazing. I think this kind of leads into the question that we had started around citational practice, because that isn't *citing* people, but it's helping get their work out in a different way. So, thinking about whose work you cite and interact with...again that's part of the conversations and relationships you're building. But, yeah, if either of you wanted to speak more about citational practices in your work?

CN: Well I don't work in academia anymore and so citations...they're obviously not exclusive to that field, but I find my relationship over the years has definitely shifted about *how* I'd like to use a citation. Sometimes when I use external texts my methods are not always respectful. Sometimes my use of a document that is an

antagonism or an aggression I need to subject to the conditions of my own writing. And there are many moments of great relevance to me that I can't formally cite.

I feel like the moment we talk about citation I'm on my heels a little bit because I think it's been a real challenge to represent sources just this way. That said, I think your question was about citations of black folks, of writers and creative people. It's something to have publications, the moment of the interview, the moment of the afterword, the acknowledgement, the public address...these are all opportunities to point not just to citations but to strong influences that ground me.

DB: I have a few ideas about citations: first and foremost, I think of the ongoing tendency of leaving Black knowledge out. I think it's critically important to cite where wisdom is gleaned. So it's really more of a proactive kind of a stance, in the sense that I tend to be working, more often than not, with folks that are *not* in academia, *not* writers, who are, you know, country folks with a long memory. I think it's important to name those people because they are often invalidated or dismissed, and so it's, again, another moment in which I'm flagging or highlighting people whose wisdom and insight needs to be recognized. I also think about the citation in my practice as a necessary tool because I present ideas and histories that the gallery-going community—the white gallery-going community—is not necessarily keen to take up or believe. Citation has become a necessary tool in order to validate what I put out in the world. Because I'm talking about, say, things like hate groups in Canada, the immediate response tends to be, "Well, prove it." This is where the citation comes into, literally, the arrangement of the works that I produce and where the archive fits into the equation. It is a very purposeful response to the pushback that I've experienced, the pushback that I imagine every time I put some different knowledge out into the world.

CN: And let me just say I appreciate all of those takes, and I agree fully. We are in different kinds of practice, I think, and I can hear how preemptive and necessary what you're talking about is.

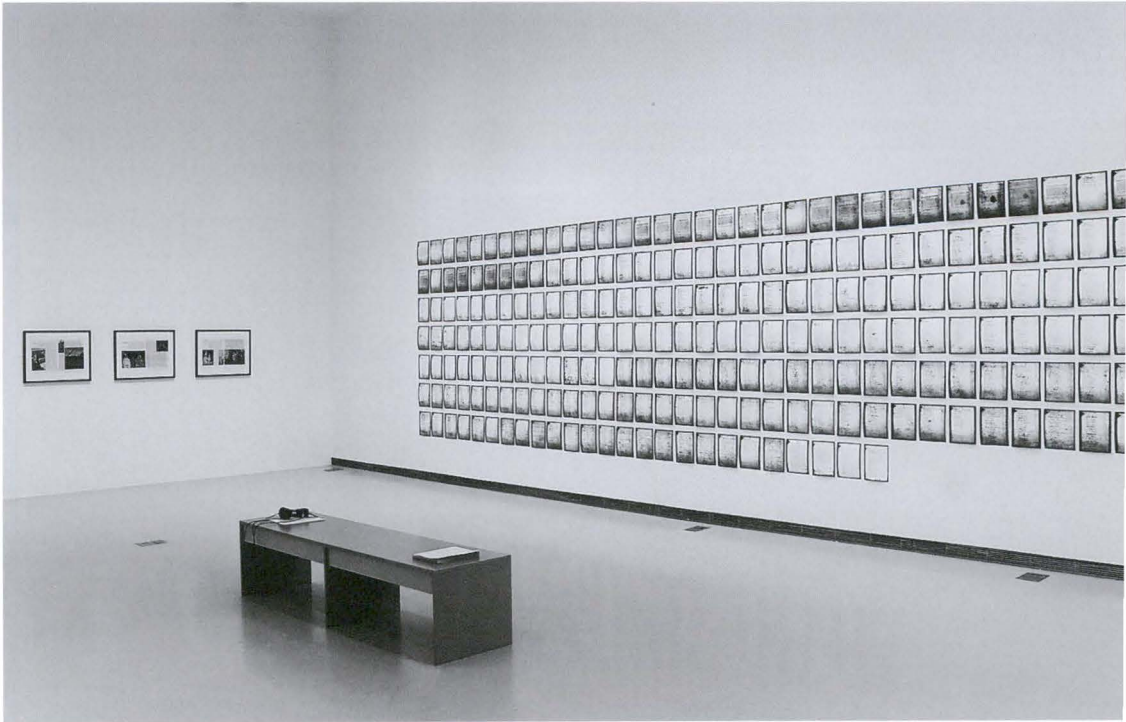
DB: Yeah.

CN: And that's how citations work for me as a reader, for example; I'm looking to them as a point of pedagogy, for sure. For authors or artists I respect, I'm gonna look to see where that map takes me, to how they've formed knowledge.

Especially when thinking about orality, lived experience and knowledge, especially of elders. And we've learned a lot—I hope we all have learned a lot—from relationships to Indigenous protocols around relationships to knowledge and art, specific to community, to nation, and to land. There's critical learning and teaching around protocol, but I don't suppose that you can just transpose it generally. It's an interesting time to learn, to think through methodology. I think there's a lot to grow and I'm not looking to academic spaces to instruct us necessarily.

DB: The other thing I would add, in *this* political climate right now, where everything, *every* aspect of truth, is under attack, I think it's critical to continue to cite other documents, other knowledge, other wisdom, as the power and weight of words and language is being eroded by governments and individuals elsewhere. I think about the histories that potentially can be erased in this particular climate. I think about the necessity to continue to aggressively archive, again, with an understanding that citations will be necessary for the next generation.

CN: Yeah, now I'm gonna be off in a quandary, thinking in terms of the poetry project, because I think there's a freedom I'm searching for, often on that page, and it is not about truth necessarily. It's a conversation. A lot of the times, I'm



Deanna Bowen, from *Invisible Empires*, at the Art Gallery of York University, 2013
Photographer: Michael Maranda (AGYU)

mainly concerned with being in conversation with people who would believe me, if that makes sense. And in recent years, I've shifted away from centralizing particularly a white-dominant assessment, really, of my poetic project as good, bad, or—whatever—ugly, and have become very, very interested in growing networks of communication. So I'm gonna think more about how citations might work in that mode, how I've used them, but I'm also just...I do wanna find some fluidity in language. There are ways in which a visual image can take us far. The citation, the point of reference, is just this place in time—this person took the photo, and this happened. So that is the fact of it. But what happens affectively in relation to that photo, and the atmosphere and context and how it's multiply read—in dialogue, and in the social—it starts to spiral in a way that I think is—or could be, at times—quite beautifully scattered.

DB: Because I'm so preoccupied with history, I think about the archive and citation this way. And it's interesting, also, because more often than not the gallery space is so terribly behind as far as inclusion of other people goes, and because I'm so damn protective of the people I'm making work about, I still feel the need to prioritize “blocking shots,” so to speak. I wish for, and think a lot about, the ability to not prioritize white readers, however which way you want to define that. I haven't completely figured out how to do that, just by nature of the fact that the gallery system is so slow to change. My audience doesn't shift—not by much anyhow.



DJs l'Oqenz & Nik Red spinning “Won't Back Down,” installation view, from *Nuit Blanche* Toronto, 2017. Photographer: Yuula Benivolski

CN: Yeah, and the conditions are violent, so I understand. I wonder, just in musing, listening to you, what is the role of anonymity? So, for example, I've been a part of a poetry collective that publishes anonymously, and that has included black members. To what degree are we doing a disservice, perhaps, or contributing to the removal of our voices, or to what degree are we invested in a kind of communing and commonality in which we're trying to move, in some ways, beyond the individual? Citations overwhelmingly link back to individuals, and I think that's a concern in the long run.

DB: Well, this goes back to one of the original questions about the "work of words." I think that these kinds of exploratory practices and projects are *necessary* as well. We could get terribly, terribly lost on prioritizing the greater good of the afro-diasporic community globally, locally, and with that err on the side of *always* educating, *always* disseminating information specifically for a community. If a broad readership doesn't get what you're trying to *do*, I think that the questions that are raised and the process of trying to do this are really, really important. And the questions that they raise might be the by-product that you're looking for. That might *just* be what the goal should, could, be.

EA: It's so fascinating and such a privilege to be able to talk to you both and hear you speak about these things. It's definitely got me thinking about a lot, so thank you *so, so* much.

DB/CN: You're very welcome.

DB: This was such a fabulous conversation!

EA: Yeah! I'm glad you think so.

DB: I'm thrilled with the chat—I wish we could go on for hours. Maybe we need to!