

Pilot episode: *Should I Stay, or Should I Go* with Alyssa Fearon

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Curator, curatorial practice, calculated risks, uprooting, Toronto, Scarborough, Prairies, Brandon, Manitoba, Art Gallery of Southwest Manitoba, Regina, Saskatchewan, Dunlop Art Gallery, research, Black geographies, Black historiographies, success, context, opportunities, community-building, support network, Billy Beal, Black artists, Billy Beal, place-making, Black joy.

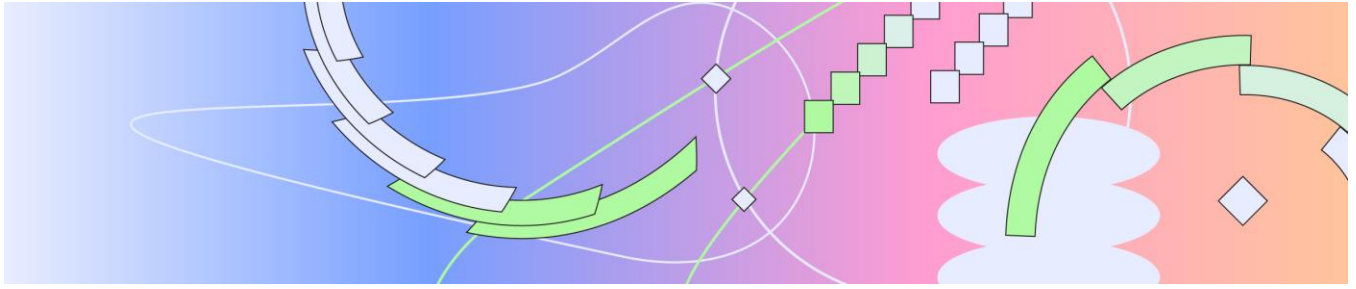
SPEAKERS

Alyssa Fearon, Geneviève Wallen

Intro 00:00

Welcome to *The Conversations that Carry Us / Ces conversations qui nous soutiennent*. I am your host, Geneviève Wallen. I am an independent curator, writer, researcher, and workshop facilitator. This podcast stems from ongoing discussions sustained by peers, colleagues, and esteemed friends. Over the past few years, I realized that in my field, soul-nourishing conversations and attentive knowledge sharing happen more commonly in informal settings. I have learned so much about the realities of curating around intimate dinners, post-opening celebrations in a noisy sports bar, coffee dates, subway rides and casual walks. These moments of intimacy are what gave life to my practice since curatorial practice is deeply seated in the generosity of dialogue and council. I want to take advantage of this platform to democratize knowledge and contemplate new possibilities in curating.

Alyssa Fearon and I met a few years ago in Toronto, and I have always admired her passion, curatorial ethics, and rigorous approach to research. It has been an immense pleasure to converse with her on a sunny Saturday morning, in the spring of 2022. In this episode, *Should I Stay, or Should I Go*, Alyssa shares pivotal moments in her career, where she took what she labeled as a “calculated risk” to access leadership positions outside of Toronto. In 2018, after the creation of the memorable first edition of



Nuit Blanche Scarborough¹, she moved to Brandon, Manitoba, to become the Curator of Contemporary Art at the Art Gallery of Southwest Manitoba², and then moved on to another role that she still occupies today as a Director and Curator of the Dunlop Art Gallery in the Regina Public Library in Saskatchewan. Through our conversation, we explore reasons behind seeking curatorial opportunities outside of one's hometown, how to navigate new art ecologies, the reality of [locating] in a foreign social landscape, the importance of a loving network to support your aspirations, and the ever evolving of the Prairies' Black geographies. Integral to Alyssa Fearon's curatorial practice is a community-based approach that prioritizes historically and systematically excluded audiences. Alyssa is also an Art Canada Institute fellow researching African Canadian visual histories of the prairies. Alyssa Fearon is based on Treaty 4 territory in Regina, Saskatchewan, the original lands of the Cree, Ojibwe, Saulteaux, Dakota, Nakota, and Lakota, on the homeland of the Métis Nation. Alyssa recognizes the historical relations between African Canadians and Indigenous peoples. We know there's a long history of Black and Indigenous relations on this land, sometimes at odds, but often working together to resist settler colonialism. The kinship between these communities is not new and continues to grow and evolve today.

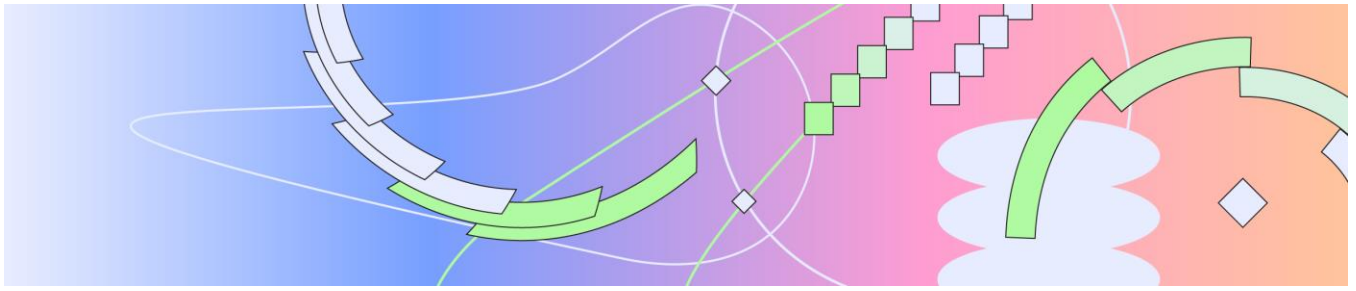
I am very grateful for her generosity in this discussion with me, and I really hope that you enjoy it as much as I did. Thank you for tuning in. And let's unpack the realities of curatorial practice one episode at a time.

Geneviève Wallen 03:54

Alyssa, I'm so happy to have you here to talk about your move from Toronto to the Prairies. This is something I was really excited to dive into because as I told you before, I really admire you for uprooting yourself like that and going for the big opportunities that you went to get and I want to encourage others who are thinking about doing the same type of move and are maybe concerned about, How do you rebuild a life elsewhere? I think it's very different to think through rebuilding a life, uprooting oneself for school versus uprooting yourself for work. I think the way that you build and create a community is different. Maybe a little bit less straightforward. There's also the reality that for many who are not from that region, it can be intimidating as well. And there are

¹ <https://globalnews.ca/news/4499635/nuit-blanche-toronto-2018-getting-around/>.

² <https://agsm.ca/news/alyssa-fearon-appointed-curator>



certain centers in Canada that many feel more inclined to move to and gravitate towards. We know that Toronto is a mecca, also for the arts, especially for racialized folks from different type of positionalities and intersections. But first thing's first: I want people to know how amazing you are, and what kind of work you're doing. And what is your practice? So, if you can share a little bit about that.

Alyssa Fearon 05:39

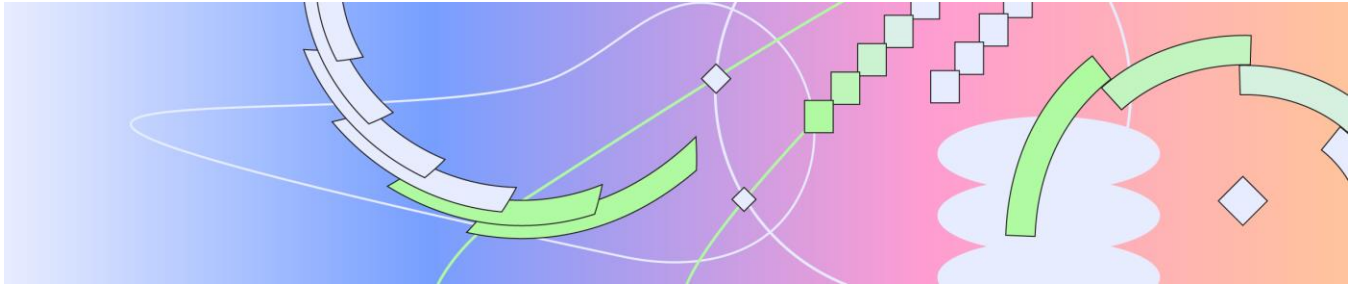
For sure. So right now, my position is Director Curator at Dunlop Art Gallery³, which is situated inside the Regina Public Library, here in Regina, Saskatchewan. I think my curatorial practice and my directorial practice have started to intertwine. So as a director, my work is very much focused on considering underrepresented or historically underrepresented communities that have been systemically excluded from participating in the gallery milieu. I'm quite deliberate in my work about supporting the practices of artists from those groups, those communities. In terms of my curatorial work there, there are similarities. I'm also quite interested in that which has been excluded, that which has been underrepresented. Right now, I'm quite interested in ideas around place, community and Black historiographies, and especially Black historiographies as it pertains to the Prairies region, those narratives that have been quite underrepresented, quite excluded when we think about what gets told about this place.

Geneviève Wallen 07:14

It's also what was, for me, the alluring aspect. I'm having this conversation, because Black historiographies, Black geographies in Canada are not often inclusive of the Prairies. And I just want to highlight that there's a rich practice, there's a rich history; we just need to get there, talk more about it. And I want people to follow your work and follow the work of other curators who are there that I've briefly encountered, through the Black Curators Forum⁴. There are things happening all over, but less exposed than others. And then so I think, in terms of doing this research of Black historiographies, and being over there, I really want to know the beginning of the story. My question is, what triggered the decision to apply for the position of Curator of Contemporary Art in Brandon, Manitoba? You have just curated Scarborough Nuit Blanche, which is huge. And I had the pleasure of going to it and navigating the first edition; it was such a celebratory moment. My curiosity was, what was happening during that time?

³ <https://www.reginalibrary.ca/dunlop-art-gallery>

⁴ <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/294301/black-curators-forum/>



Alyssa Fearon 08:50

That was in 2018. And it was such an exciting time, not only for me, but also for my community, for the people around me, for people who didn't know me. It was a pivotal moment in terms of various trajectories, including my own career trajectory, once I curated that. Actually, I applied for the position in Brandon before Nuit Blanche happened.

Geneviève Wallen 09:23

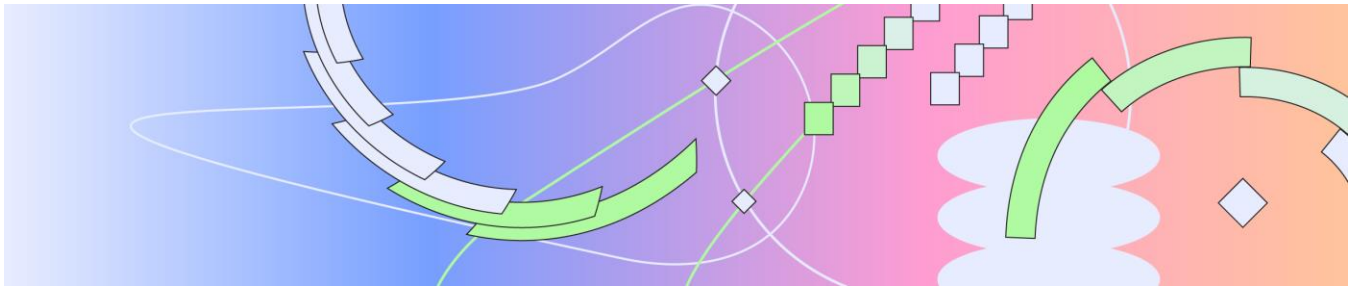
Oh, okay, okay.

Alyssa Fearon 09:24

I was going through the interview process, quietly, silently, while I was also working on Nuit Blanche. But I knew that as I was doing Nuit Blanche in Scarborough, I knew that I wanted to continue doing curatorial work professionally full-time. I didn't want to go back to my previous nine-to-five position, and I knew that I wanted to just work as a curator. I thought, I really want to give this an honest try and see how I can do this, where it will take me. How might I develop in this through doing this work? I saw the position posted in Brandon, and I had a lot of fear around even applying for the position. I didn't initially set out to leave Toronto, that wasn't the initial motivation necessarily. The motivation really was I wanted the opportunity to work professionally full-time as a curator. And in Toronto, I had gotten various offers, but they were more gigs, more short-term contracts. And I had decided I didn't want to pursue curatorial work in that route any longer. I had wanted to do something full-time. And so, I saw the posting in Brandon, I was like; "Okay, well, I guess I'm going to apply and see what could happen in Brandon." I knew at the time when I was doing Nuit Blanche, my visibility was at its highest point.

Geneviève Wallen 11:20

Capitalize on it, let's do it!



Alyssa Fearon 11:24

My visibility was quite high. And I thought, “If I’m going to get an opportunity, then I’ve got to apply for it now while people are seeing me and people know me.” So that’s how that came to be. And I felt good about going to Brandon, because at the time, the director who hired me was John Hampton⁵, who now is actually the CEO at the Mackenzie Art Gallery here in Regina.

I felt really good going into the institution where they had articulated a clear vision, one that aligned with my values, and they had a history of doing some quite strong curatorial work. So that’s what prompted me.

Geneviève Wallen 12:22

And then you got the position. So then, what was the decision-making process? How did you organize [it]? Maybe people want some tips about movers. And where do you store stuff?

Alyssa Fearon 12:41

I had great movers. Thinking about the logistics, I had a great team of movers, and they packed up everything. They moved everything. I can give those details later.

Geneviève Wallen 12:55

We’ll put it in the podcast notes (*laughing*).

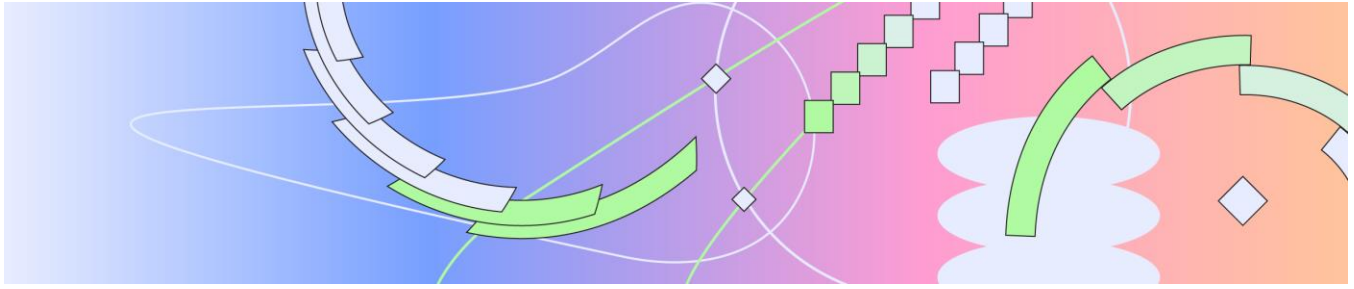
Alyssa Fearon 12:59

I actually wrote them a really great, strong Google review as well. Once I was offered the position, I think that I had two conflicting emotions. On one end, I was super excited, because I can do my thing as a curator, and I’ll be in this institution that will have those resources, that support. And on the other hand, I was really scared; what does it mean to leave behind my support network? What does it mean to leave behind my community? And what does it mean to move to a place where I don’t really know anyone?

Geneviève Wallen 13:47

And the winters are long (*laughs*).

⁵ Learn more about John Hampton <https://globalnews.ca/news/7358528/shaping-saskatchewan-john-hampton>



Alyssa Fearon 13:52

The winters are long. Yes. *(laughs)*.

Alyssa Fearon 13:57

The winters are long, and they are COLD. I also had to learn how to dress differently for winter.

Geneviève Wallen 14:06

Yes, you got to get better boots. Not those little high tops, Timberland height. Not the same [winter]! Wow, okay.

Alyssa Fearon 14:16

No, no no no no. It's not the same, no no no. So, I had a lot of fear around that transition and going to this place that I didn't really know anything about. I just knew it was predominantly white, and a very small population. The population of Brandon is only about 50,000 people or so, which is tiny. It just meets the threshold for it to be called a city and I grew up in Toronto, all my life, specifically Scarborough, which has millions of people.

Geneviève Wallen 14:52

Yes.

Alyssa Fearon 14:53

I had a really strong support network, and they encouraged me, they motivated me to take the leap.

Geneviève Wallen 15:08

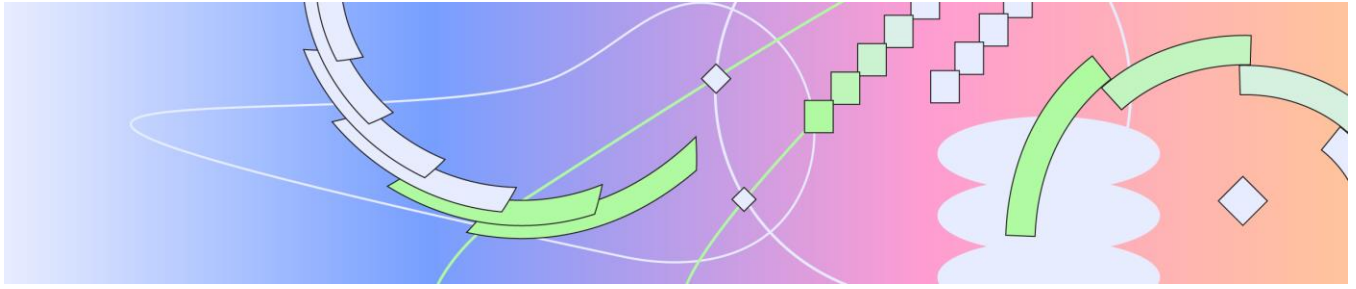
Aw. That's amazing.

Alyssa Fearon 15:10

They motivated me to take the leap, to take the risk. I went with that—carrying their belief in me and my abilities, even though it would take some time for me to catch up to that in my own self, but I knew that I had their confidence in me. So that was enough, I think, to—

Geneviève Wallen 15:41

Aw, that's beautiful. And also, it's true, your support network, when they believe in you and they encourage you in that way, it definitely makes you believe that you can do it.



It's what happened to me also when I applied for grad school, and then uprooting myself from Montreal to Toronto. And then changing my whole life was also having my community be like, "You should apply, you should do it, you can do it." And then, I spent many amazing years in Toronto. I ended up staying six years, even though I thought I would stay two at the beginning. And then I had an incredible experience. It's true that support from your community can carry you very far.

Alyssa Fearon 16:32

Definitely. I owe so much to those people because it's hard to take these kinds of risks and go out on your own.

Geneviève Wallen 16:46

So, you moved, you did the position, you worked as Curator of Contemporary Art at the Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba. But then you transitioned, and you accepted a new role. You made your way to be a Director and Curator at the Dunlop Art Gallery. I also wanted to touch upon how you have been creating this path for yourself and navigating this new art ecosystem. If we can talk a bit about how it was being a curator of contemporary art in the first institution and then transitioning, and then being the director of the Dunlop, which is more like a community center, because it's a part of the library, right?

Alyssa Fearon 17:46

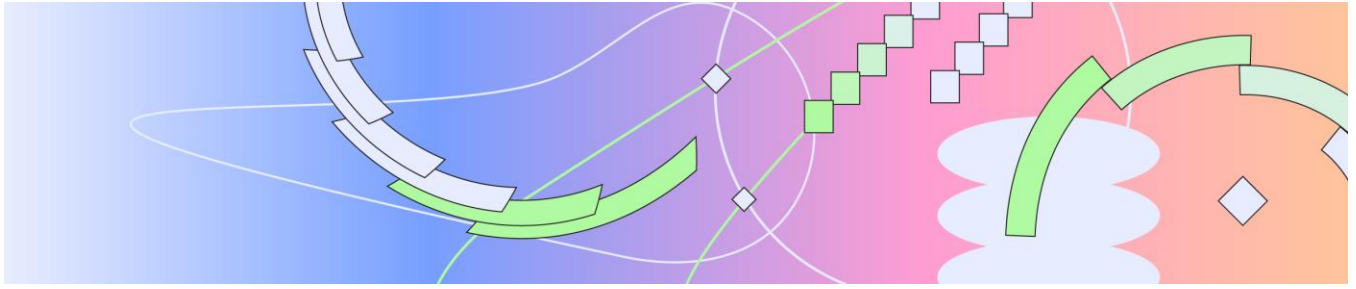
Yeah, that's correct.

Geneviève Wallen 17:47

It's definitely different vibes, different contexts of practicing. I'm really interested in those different roles. What's your experience?

Alyssa Fearon 17:59

I should also say, I'm based on Treaty 4. And in terms of the transition of moving from Brandon to Regina. Primarily, the transition for me was in the level of responsibility. In Brandon, I worked as a curator, [and] very much focused on curatorial practice. And then, now my role here in Regina is as a director, it's a different approach to working with the community, working in a gallery. When I got the position here at Dunlop, some of the same sentiments around being fearful definitely came into play. Because I had been working in Brandon as a curator for only two years. And then, this position came up in Dunlop and I was like; "Oh, am I ready to be a director? Am I ready to be a



leader?” And I think at the time, I felt like maybe I'm not quite ready for this yet. And what is that elusive, magical moment? The more I take risks in various aspects of my life, I'm learning to let go of whatever this elusive magical moment might be. And just begin where I am. Just start where I want.

Geneviève Wallen 21:04

Yes, yes, yes! More people need to hear that, yes!

Alyssa Fearon 21:08

Just start where you are and go from there. Also, part of it was, as a Black woman, and particularly as a young-passing Black woman—I am 34 going on 35—but quite often people assume that I'm much younger than I am.

Geneviève Wallen 21:35

It is a curse, but it is also a blessing.

Alyssa Fearon 21:40

I moisturize.

Geneviève Wallen 21:40

We got the lotion seminar (*both laughing*).

Alyssa Fearon 21:47

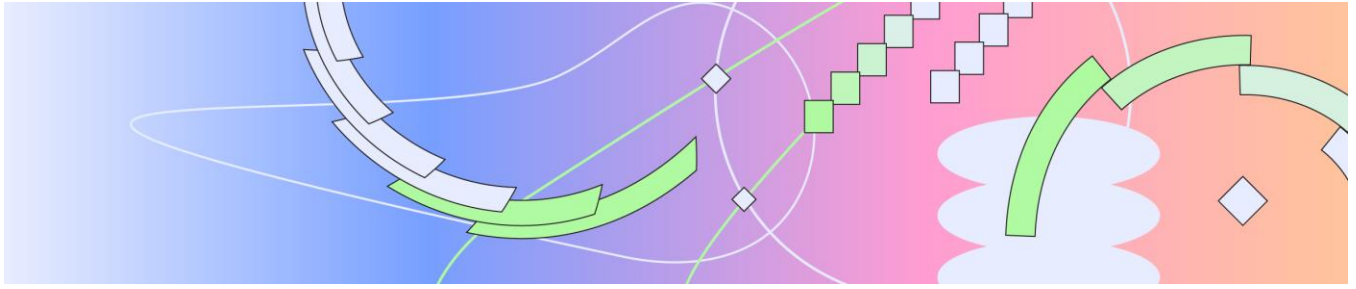
We can also type that into the notes later too, skincare. (*Laughs*)

Alyssa Fearon 21:56

(*Laughs*) I think just being very aware of my positionality and my appearance, I had a lot of uncertainty around, Am I what a leader looks like? I started to internalize a lot of these notions, these images of what leadership, perhaps in Canada, the West, even maybe globally, of what a leader is supposed to look like: authoritative, white, male—all these identity markers that we tend to associate with leadership. I'm very aware that I'm not that, physically, and my approach to leadership is much more collaborative, it is observant, it's contemplative. Still strategic, don't get me wrong. Of course. There's some logistics.

Geneviève Wallen 23:00

Of course, of course.



Alyssa Fearon 23:03

I'm quite deliberate about being clear with my staff, especially around my vision and how I want the place to operate.

But it's different from what we've come to understand leadership is supposed to look like. I had to grapple with that when I was taking on this position. And [before that, during] that transition, it was also a really difficult time for me personally. I had spent the previous year going through a really difficult time; one of my family members had been diagnosed with cancer.

Geneviève Wallen 24:05

I'm so sorry to hear that.

Alyssa Fearon 24:07

It's a journey. I don't know if you or anybody who's listening has ever dealt with a loved one with a cancer diagnosis, but it's a marathon, not a sprint. And it's a long journey.

Geneviève Wallen 24:23

Yes.

Alyssa Fearon 24:24

At that time, when I was about to start this new position at Dunlop, I was feeling quite emotionally spent already.

Geneviève Wallen 24:37

Also, it was the pandemic.

Alyssa Fearon 24:40

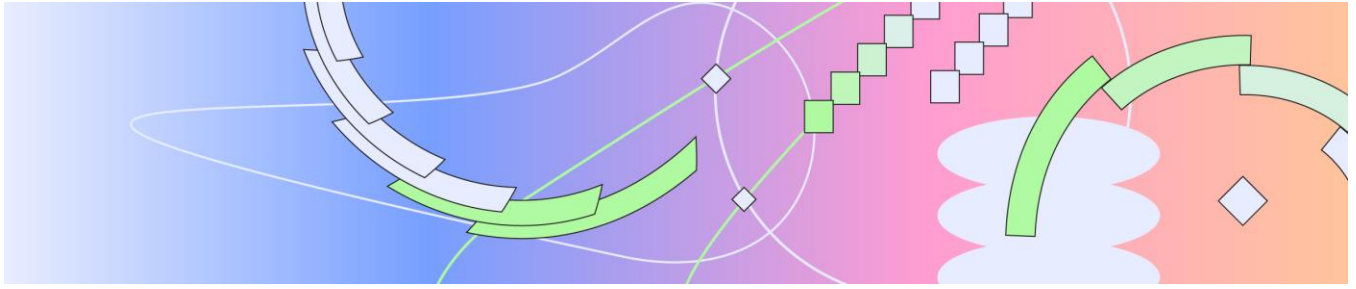
And it was also a pandemic!

Geneviève Wallen 24:45

Exactly. You were starting this big role in a pandemic.

Alyssa Fearon 24:51

And at that time, the pandemic was raging. I think it was July or August 2020. It was still very much the time in the pandemic where nobody knew what was going on. And everybody was just totally isolated, because it was a very legitimately scary time. I was just feeling really spent, quite exhausted, having spent a lot of time in hospitals, having



spent a lot of time just advocating for my family member's health and navigating the healthcare system, which, as a Black woman, there's layers to this.

Geneviève Wallen 25:45

Absolutely, absolutely.

Alyssa Fearon 25:48

So, I was personally dealing with all these things privately because I'm not very open about my personal life.

Geneviève Wallen 25:55

Thank you so much for sharing this difficult time of your life with us at this moment.

Alyssa Fearon 26:04

I wanted to give context, because when we see the announcements, when we see news releases, social media, whatever, it can be misleading, because people will assume that there's just all these fantastic moments that happen. And while there are moments of amazingness and awesomeness—

Geneviève Wallen 26:34

It's not all shooting stars and rainbows.

Alyssa Fearon 26:37

It's not! People's lives are complicated. My life is complicated and it's not easy. I think all of these things were going through my head and my heart while I was transitioning into the role at the Dunlop. And my support network had been completely strained at that time, too, because of personal ordeals. It was a challenging time. But at the same time, I had people in my corner who were like; "You can do this, you've got to do this."

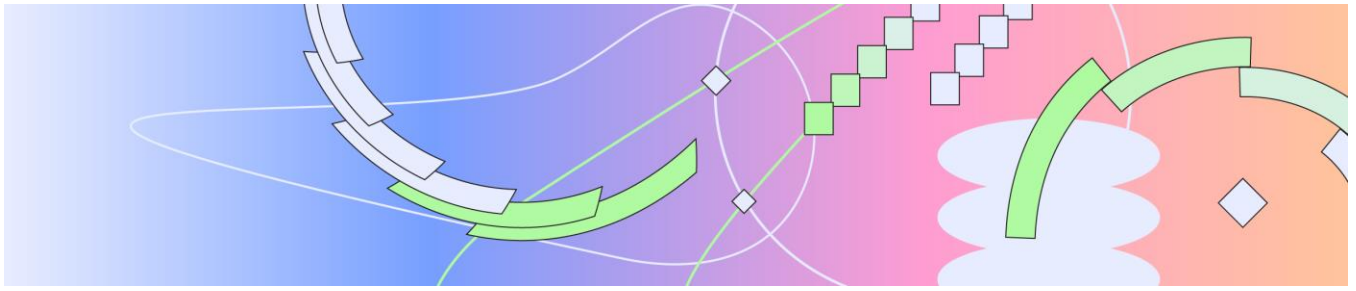
Geneviève Wallen 27:20

You have the experience.

Alyssa Fearon 27:21

I decided to take the position, even if with a bit of trepidation (*laughs*).

Geneviève Wallen 27:31



Yes, yes.

Alyssa Fearon 27:36

But I'm quite grateful to the people who motivated me to take it because it's been such a rewarding journey so far. I work with an awesome team of people.

Geneviève Wallen 27:51

Amazing.

Alyssa Fearon 27:52

Yes, I'm quite fortunate. It's been a good place for me in unexpected ways.

Geneviève Wallen 28:02

I'm so happy to hear that. Thank you, Alyssa so much for providing the context in which you are transitioning and taking this new position, which, exactly as you said, there are these announcements, but it doesn't portray the whole situation that you're navigating and the spirit within which you are receiving these acknowledgements of your success. And I wanted to transition from that, because you have been working in different settings and you also did this international residency. I wanted to put it out there that you're a person who has been taking risks of practicing elsewhere more than once. Can you talk a little bit about the striking differences that you have seen between working in Toronto, Brandon and Regina, and talk about your international fellowship in Vienna — if I remember [well].

Alyssa Fearon 29:07

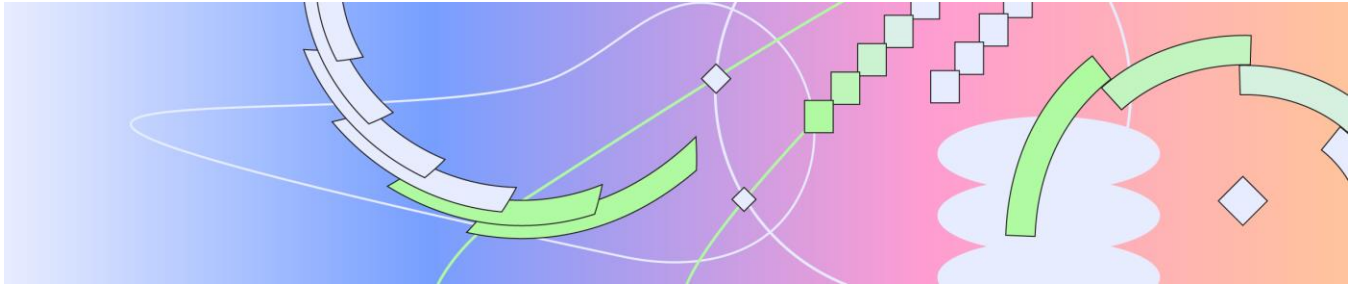
Salzburg.

Geneviève Wallen 29:08

Where is Salzburg?

Alyssa Fearon 29:10

It's close to Vienna; you have to go through Vienna to get to Salzburg. So, a lot was happening back-to-back in a very close period of time. 2018 was pivotal in many ways.



Geneviève Wallen 29:28

Right, right.

Alyssa Fearon 29:29

Because when I did the fellowship in Salzburg, I just remember feeling exhausted (*laughs*), just doing Nuit Blanche where I didn't really sleep.

Geneviève Wallen 29:46

(*Laughs*) Right. You arrive there, and you're like; "I'm here."

Alyssa Fearon 29:51

I was just running on fumes at that point. And I was also having to pack for my move to Brandon. I don't know how I did it. I mean, I did. I guess I did, obviously—

Geneviève Wallen 30:03

Omg, that is WILD! I mean, you did it all, [it] happened and we're here—

Alyssa Fearon 30:10

And we're here talking about it. But at the time, I was just like, "Oh my God" hahah!

Geneviève Wallen 30:21

Wow. This is wild, definitely.

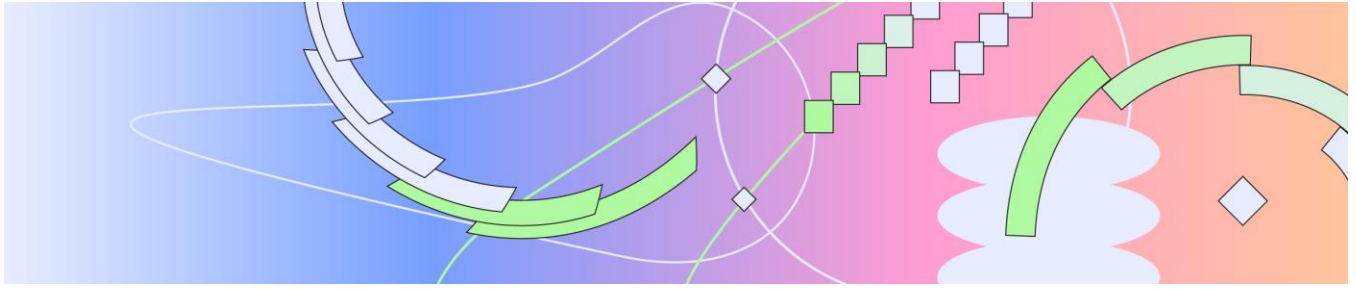
Alyssa Fearon 30:26

Although I will say Salzburg was a great experience. I met some amazing, brilliant people who I admire so much and I'm still in touch with them today.

Geneviève Wallen 30:39

Yes, because those are global networks. Can you name the residency? And then we'll put in the show notes. Any references?

Alyssa Fearon 30:55



Sure. My goodness, I have to recall the name, Young Cultural Innovators⁶. It's a program that was offered through the Canada Council, almost like an exchange-ish program of sorts, where I think maybe four or five Canadians were invited to go to this week-long residency or academy. I'm not sure how to describe it. And there were different contingents from all over the world. It was really cool and exciting to meet other like-minded folks from various places. It was just an exciting time.

Geneviève Wallen 31:53

Oh my god, while moving.

Alyssa Fearon 31:56

I know. It's just the timing because Nuit Blanche happened, and it had to happen when it happened, and then the Salzburg thing had to happen when that happened, and then Brandon. I tried to negotiate a little bit of time before my start date, but they needed a curator. I'm doing all these things back-to-back to back, in terms of Toronto, Brandon, Regina. And then I suppose, globally as well. Of course, Brandon and Regina are much different places from Toronto. Regina is different from Brandon. Although, to me, Regina's more similar to Brandon than it is to Toronto. And, primarily, there's differences on the surface, which look like, the demographics: it's predominantly white, Regina and Brandon. I mean, it's predominant. There are parts of Toronto where it's predominantly white, but I grew up in the part of Toronto where it's predominantly not white (*laughs*).

Geneviève Wallen 32:01

It *is* a different experience.

Alyssa Fearon 33:00

It's a different experience, depending on where you are and where you go in Toronto.

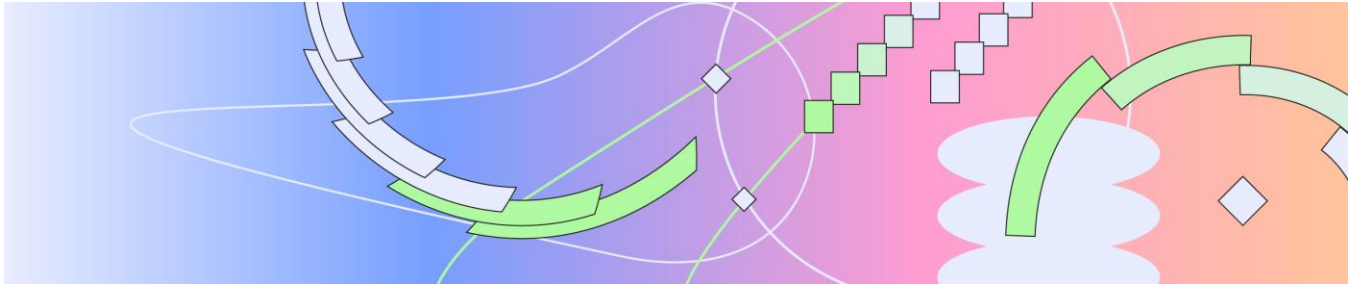
Geneviève Wallen 33:04

Definitely.

Alyssa Fearon 33:05

There are differences on the surface. But then there are other differences that I started to notice as I stayed longer, in each place, like some of the conversations around race,

⁶ <https://canadacouncil.ca/initiatives/salzburg>



which especially around 2020, with the George Floyd uprising, that became more apparent. I think the conversation out west, or the Prairies, specifically, seems to focus on a binary of settler versus Indigenous. Whereas I noticed, in Toronto, the conversation around race is more nuanced. Probably just because the demographics require it to be that way. When I came here, or rather, when I left Toronto, and I came to the Prairies, it was like; “Okay, well, how do we discuss Black people in these conversations in these spaces? How do we speak to this with more nuance, with the complexity that it demands, that it needs?” I found myself thinking through that a lot, and just thinking through and understanding more issues around Indigenous communities, particularly in the Prairies. The population of Indigenous peoples in Brandon and in Regina is way larger than in Toronto, and that's just how it is in the Prairies. That shifted my thinking, just in terms of working as a director and institution out here, there's a different way of relating to people. In Toronto, there's definitely competitiveness in the city, because there's so few opportunities and there's so many fish in the pond. Whereas I think out here, people appreciate that you're out here. And they want you to stay, they want you to be here. People want me to be there in Toronto, too.

Geneviève Wallen 35:31

No, but *it's* different. But also in Toronto, there's just a “hustle” mindset. Well, I'm saying that not knowing living costs in Regina. But it's expensive in Toronto, and there's fewer opportunities, and a lot of the opportunities are unsustainable. And there's also the scarcity mindset that is very much entrenched, that also pushes people to really participate in this competitiveness for things.

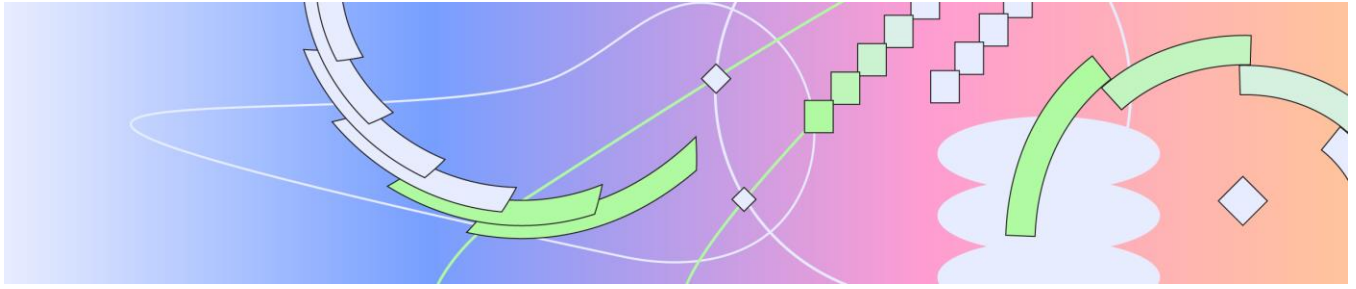
Alyssa Fearon 35:56

Yes, exactly. Those are some differences that I noticed and, it's been interesting for me to also see other parts of Canada, see what the contemporary art scenes are like, in places other than Toronto. When I was living in Toronto, my focus was just on Toronto, because why look elsewhere, in a Toronto-centered universe.

Geneviève Wallen 36:38

I know, it's very Toronto-centric, but I'm in Montreal, and it's very easy to be Montreal-centric as well.

Alyssa Fearon 36:48



[It gave me] that feeling, that push to do my homework here. I've got to really do my research and due diligence to see, what else is happening outside of Toronto? What's happening in Western Canada, specifically the Prairies? And that's been a really generative place for me to be in because I've gotten to meet some incredible artists and curators who are doing important work.

Geneviève Wallen 37:14

And that definitely also connects to my question about: how does place influence your curatorial practice? You already touched upon it a little bit, but I want to hear more about some of the due diligence you have been doing, and what kind of curatorial themes came out for you, as you're working [t]here? How did that shift or broaden your perception in terms of the relationships that we have with the land, with our positionalities as Black women, and also with the Indigenous communities surrounding us? And mapping blackness across that, it's a big question. Let's start with bite size answers.

Alyssa Fearon 38:26

Yes, it is a big question and one that I'm still—

Geneviève Wallen 38:31

I don't think it's finite. It's ongoing.

Alyssa Fearon 38:36

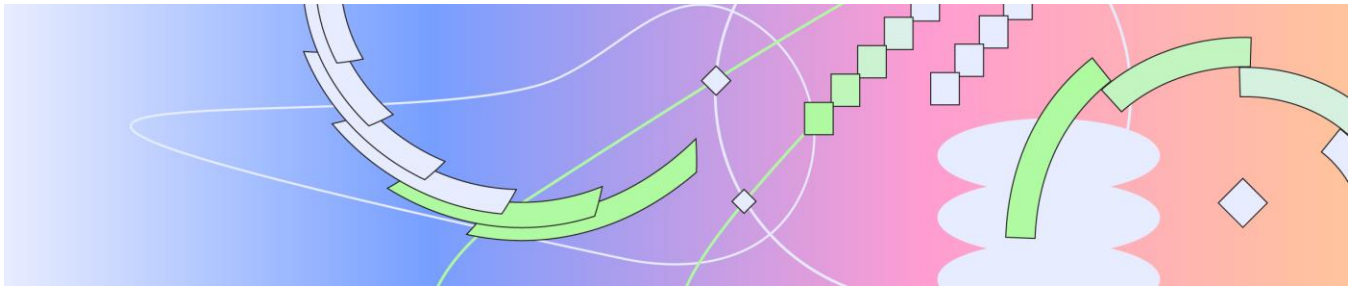
It's definitely ongoing, even at this very moment. When I moved to Brandon, I moved at the beginning of winter. It was the end of October, beginning of November.

Geneviève Wallen 39:01

Because you didn't want any of this journey, from 2018 to be easy haha, any bits of it.

Alyssa Fearon 39:09

That was something. Because the winter there is very long as we said, and it's very cold. I moved right at the beginning of this long winter. And I think that it informed the way that I approached my practice because I had to become quite insular and focused. I didn't know anybody, couldn't really go outside because it's minus 40 degrees outside.



Geneviève Wallen 39:45

We have some of those in Quebec but—

Alyssa Fearon 39:48

Well, it's next level.

Geneviève Wallen 39:52

Yes, it's next level. You've been wintering basically, maybe more of a contemplative mindset.

Alyssa Fearon 40:05

I started with just doing a lot of research around historically Black settlements in the Prairies, because I had an interest in those communities even before I went to Brandon. Of course, we know about the work of artists like Deanna Bowen⁷. We know about work that Charmaine Nelson⁸ is doing in terms of making visible Black historiographies, or Karina Vernon⁹, etc. A lot of those scholars and artists were already in front of mind for me, I started to do research around historically Black settlements in and around Manitoba. I think I was also just searching for a sense of groundedness, or grounding.

Geneviève Wallen 41:00

Yes.

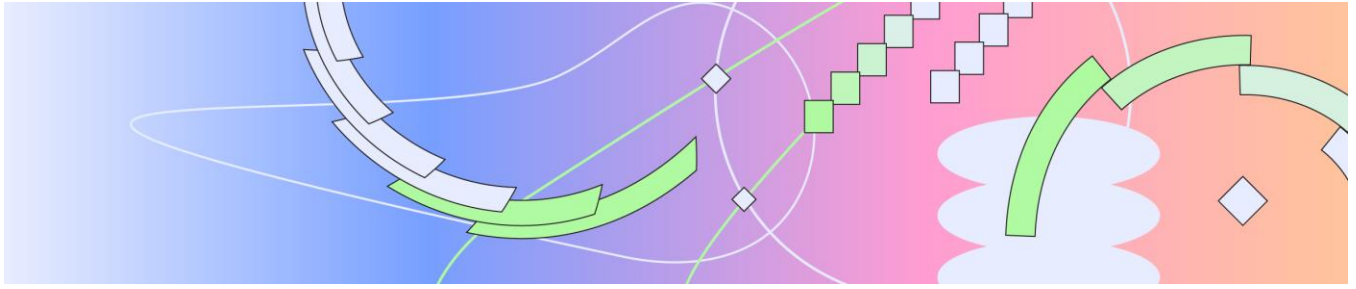
Alyssa Fearon 41:01

Moving around, that feeling of isolation, being uprooted from a sense of place that you're familiar with, that you have your community, and that was more destabilizing for me than I initially understood at that time. I think a lot of that research was maybe even unconsciously or consciously being motivated by that sense of placelessness and that searching, that seeking for a grounding, and I wanted to situate myself in this new environment, or this new landscape. I started doing my research and that led me to

⁷ Find more about Deanna Bowen's practice: <http://www.deannabowen.ca/>

⁸ For more information about Charmaine Nelson's work visit Black Maple Magazine. <https://blackmaplemagazine.com/charmaines-zone/>

⁹ Find more information about Karina Vernon, <https://www.utoronto.ca/engdept/person/karina-vernon>



stumble upon the work of an artist named William Billy Beal¹⁰, who I've been continuing research on for the past several years, and I will be doing even more thorough research in the near future. So glad you brought that research up because it's so interesting. Thank you. It's been a journey. Doing that initial research led me to stumble upon his work. For those listening who may not be aware, Billy Beal was a Black Manitoban photographer, who practiced in the early 1900s, that he was quite committed to documenting the people, places, and events of his community in the Swan River Valley region, which is located in a small township in western Manitoba. When I stumbled upon his work, it really resonated with me. I just immediately connected with his work and who this man was, or who he might have been, who I'm still learning about, which is exciting for me. I just connected to that. And I thought, here's this man, with whose journey I saw some likenesses or similarities to my own, because he also moved, he left his home, which at the time was in Minnesota, in the United States. He left in 1906. And he moved on his own to this small rural township in the middle of Manitoba. We can only guess what his motivations might have been. I mean, we know at least it was for job opportunities.

Geneviève Wallen 43:55

Also owning land, that's something that was so hard to get for Black men in general.

Alyssa Fearon 44:04

For sure, and access to these various opportunities that were not accessible to him where he came from.

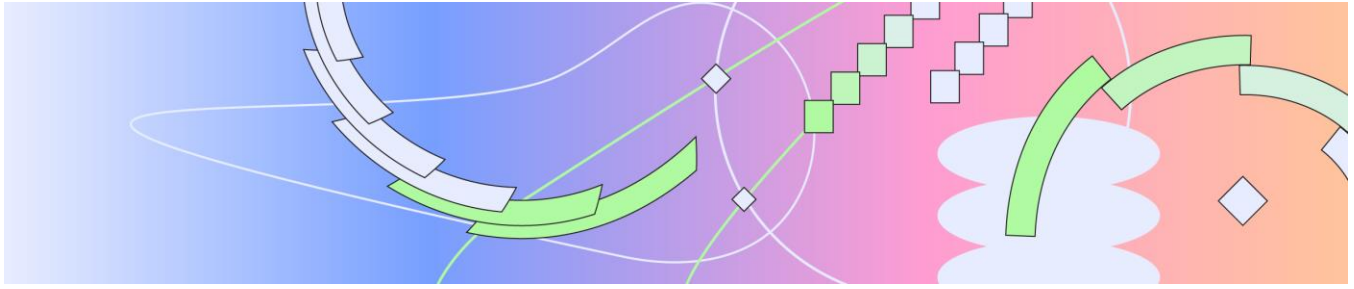
Geneviève Wallen 44:17

And present in terms of [you] being in conversation with each other.

Alyssa Fearon 46:31

Well, yes, exactly. And the more time I've spent here the more time I've gotten to meet other Black culture producers in the Prairies, which is exciting. But I needed to do that. I'm grateful that I stumbled upon his work, or maybe his work found me. I don't know.

¹⁰ For more information, read Alyssa Fearon's article for CBC [Why you need to know about Billy Beal, the great unsung Black photographer of early 1900s Manitoba.](#)



Geneviève Wallen 46:53

Maybe it's both. I feel like it's both.

Alyssa Fearon 46:56

Yeah, but either way, it's been a really generative space for me to be in.

Geneviève Wallen 47:06

I love it. I also want to know more about the projects that are exciting you at the moment. I think it's an amazing segue for wrapping up our little talk. I mean, our little talk—

Alyssa Fearon 47:22

Our big talk.

Geneviève Wallen 47:24

Our big talk, our meaningful conversation. I don't know why I belittled this moment right now. It's pretty, amazing. And I'm actually very grateful for your generosity and the conversation that we're having. It's not our little talk. It's our big talk. But I am happy that you were talking about your research and how you grounded yourself in space, because I also want to have the opportunity to hear about what excites you right now. Who are the people you have been meeting? What are the collaborations that you're doing right now in Regina, but also elsewhere? What are you doing? What excites you? What makes you smile? *(laughs)*

Alyssa Fearon 47:24

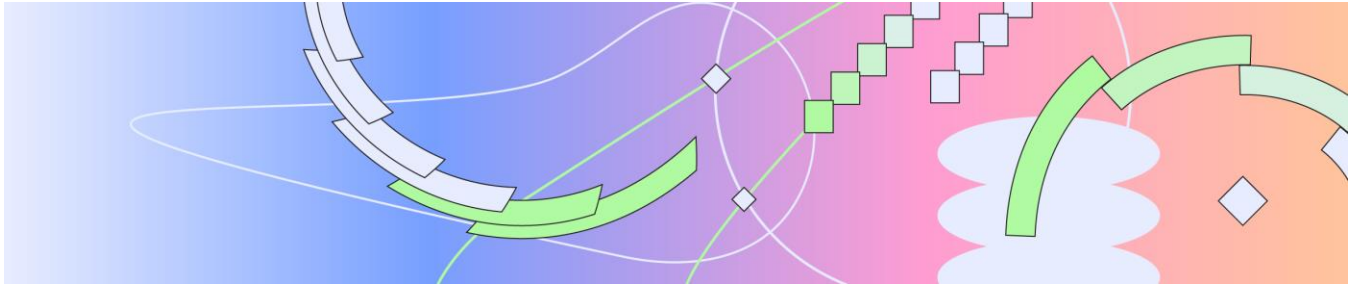
We're working on a few different projects right now.

Geneviève Wallen 48:19

Of course, because no one can work on only one project! That would just be too reasonable!

Alyssa Fearon 48:27

I know, right? Reason—what's that?



Geneviève Wallen 48:33

Let's just always have too many projects on the go.

Alyssa Fearon 48:36

For real. The gallery's working on a number of different things. But I'll focus a bit more on what specifically I'm working on which intersects with what the gallery's doing as well, of course. Coming up in October, I'm curating an exhibition by Ekow Nimaco¹¹ who is an artist based in Toronto, a Ghanaian Canadian artist. He works primarily with Lego bricks as his medium. I first worked with him at Nuit Blanche in Scarborough.

Geneviève Wallen 49:23

It was really impressive!

Alyssa Fearon 49:25

Yes, people really loved that one. We commissioned Ekow Nimaco to do a project for Nuit Blanche, where he worked with Director X. And then I decided I really wanted to work with Ekow again, so I'll be curating a solo show of his work, all brand-new work, which is really exciting.

Geneviève Wallen 49:46

Awesome, so exciting! Yes!

Alyssa Fearon 49:51

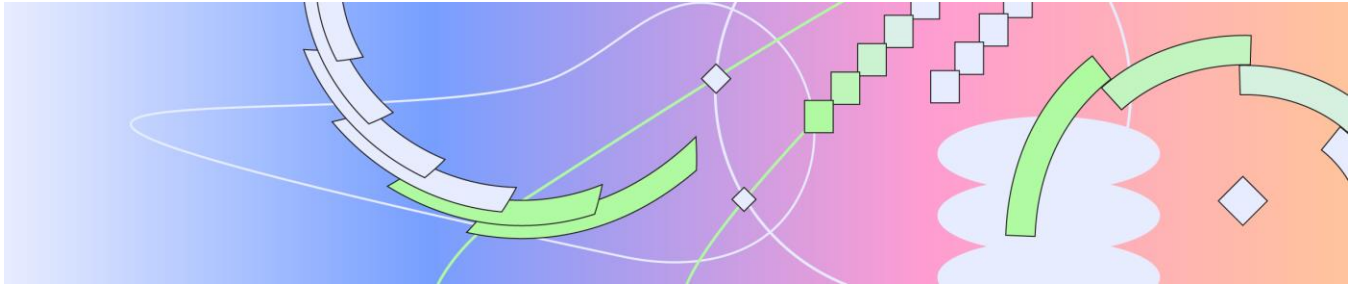
Yes, his first in the Prairies, his debut in Regina. And then I'm also working on a project related to Black historiographies and Black geographies, which I'm hoping will be ready for some time next year—fall 2023, I hope.

Geneviève Wallen 50:10

Okay, and what's the format? Ah! I'm excited!

Alyssa Fearon 50:13

¹¹ Find more information about Ekow's exhibition at the Dunlop Gallery, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aoZwJ41RfSM&ab_channel=DunlopArtGallery



There'll be an exhibition, of course, some of Billy Beal's original glass plates. I've gotten access to some of the plates—it's challenging work, I'm not going to lie for a long time the plates were not properly cared for. A lot have disappeared, been destroyed, just through improper conservation efforts. There are very few plates left, which is unfortunate, and especially as a curator, we're so invested in the care of artists.

Geneviève Wallen 50:12

Thinking about that stewardship, and maintenance.

Alyssa Fearon 50:22

Exactly. As a curator, it's quite heartbreaking, but even just as a person who's interested in thinking about the past, it's heartbreaking, in a way. Also, I am feeling quite honored that I'll have the opportunity to present at least what is left that we have access to. Presenting some of his work, which will be presented alongside works by contemporary and emerging African Canadian artists of the Prairies, especially focused on lens-based artists. We also commissioned work by a filmmaker named Cheryl Foggo¹². Cheryl Foggo is a Calgary-based artist, filmmaker, director and she's going to be creating a short film about the unmarked graves at the historical Black church in Maidstone, Saskatchewan. Maidstone, Saskatchewan was the site of the first Black settlement in Saskatchewan, which Black migrants moved to in 1908. And Cheryl Foggo is a direct descendant of the Black migrant communities. They call themselves Shiloh people.

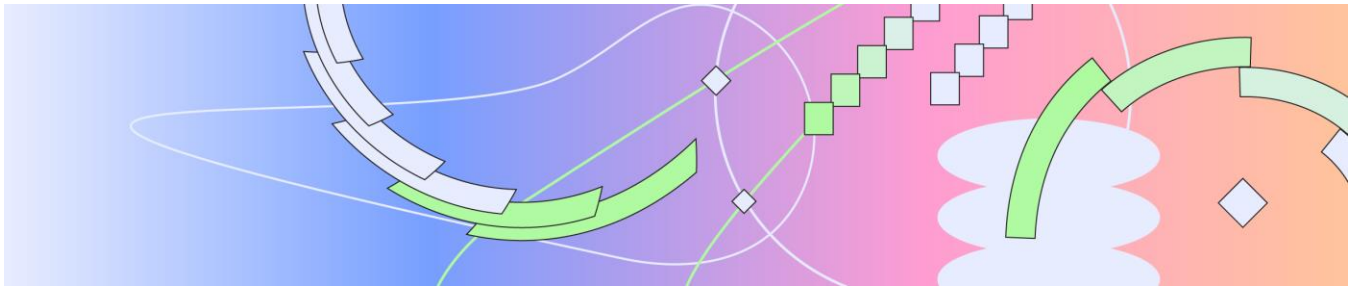
Geneviève Wallen 52:29

Oh, okay.

Alyssa Fearon 52:30

She'll be doing a short film about the unmarked graves. There was a historical Black church in the area, which is still standing. There have been a lot of advocacy efforts around supporting that structure. And there will also be other contemporary artists who I haven't confirmed yet. So, I won't make those announcements quite yet. But in terms of Black artists who are here in the Prairies, whose work excites me, there's a Winnipeg contingent. There's a group of students who are connected to the University of

¹² To know more about Cheryl Foggo's practice: <https://calgaryguardian.com/calgary-artist-cheryl-foggo>



Manitoba. So of course, Luther Konadu¹³, who I think is the most visible at the moment. There are also people like Chukwudubem [Ukaigwe],¹⁴ Iyuna j¹⁵, Mahlet Cuff.¹⁶

Geneviève Wallen 53:26

Oh, yes, I met with Mahlet Cuff.

Alyssa Fearon 53:29

Yes, and probably some others that I'm forgetting in Saskatchewan. There's shimby [Hagere Selam "shimby" Zegeye-Gebrehiwot]¹⁷ who is a good friend of mine, and they're based here in Regina, currently executive director of Saskatchewan Film Pool¹⁸, and an artist in their own right, which is initially how I came to know shimby. Now also, we work in this arts leadership capacity in Saskatchewan. And then Alberta, I'm still getting to know the Alberta scene, but I've gotten to know people like Braxton Garneau¹⁹. Also, I'm forgetting so many names. This is the hard part about—

Geneviève Wallen 54:13

Oh, don't worry, you've named a few. And it's more about highlighting that there is a network, one that you are involved in, one that is active and then I'm sure it's going to incite a lot of interest in looking up people you have named, but also the people that these people know. I think in this day and age, it's easier to understand one's social context by only looking up their Instagram profile, or website.

Alyssa Fearon 55:00

One thing I should say about the project about Billy Beal. So tentatively, the title is *Black Prairies*. Also, there will be a publication.

Geneviève Wallen 55:13

¹³ Read about Luther Konadu <https://news.umanitoba.ca/making-an-impression-luther-konadu>

¹⁴ Learn about Chukwudubem <https://akimbo.ca/akimblog/chukwudubem-ukaigwe-artist-winnipeg>.

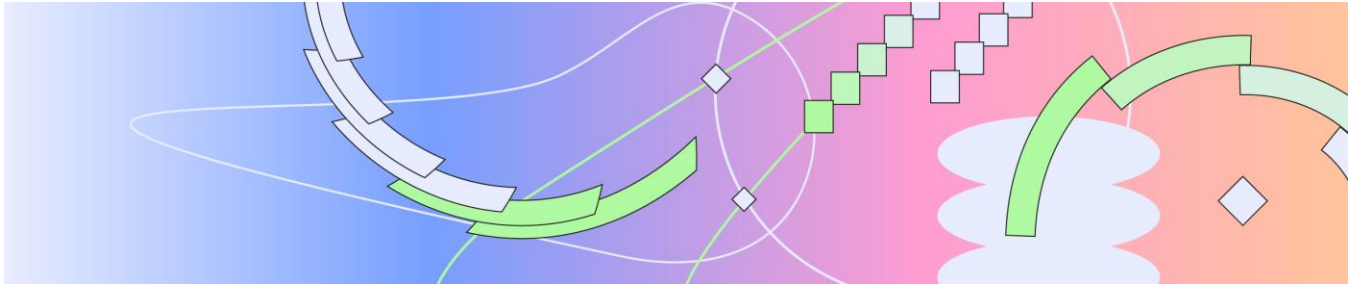
¹⁵ Find more about Iyuna j <https://www.instagram.com/iyuna.j>

¹⁶ See more on Mahlet Cuff's work <https://blackflash.ca/tag/mahlet-cuff>

¹⁷ More on shimby's work <https://blackflash.ca/2020/06/29/spectres-of-loss-diaspora-and-yearning-in-the-work-of-hagere-selam-shimby-zegeye-gebrehiwot/>

¹⁸ <https://www.filmpool.ca/>

¹⁹ Read about Braxton Garneau <https://braxtongarneau.com/about-1>



Oh, yes. That was actually a question I had. I would love to see a publication and read more.

Alyssa Fearon 55:19

There will be a publication. No news yet on when that will happen, it still exists only in my head. But there will be an exhibition catalog for sure. And possibly other publications to go along with that. Within the next year or so, that's going to be happening, and I'm very excited for it.

Geneviève Wallen 55:48

Very thrilled. There are so many catalogues I want. Right now, I have this never-ending list of exhibition catalogues I would like to own as well as other books.

Alyssa Fearon 56:03

You'll want this one.

Geneviève Wallen 56:05

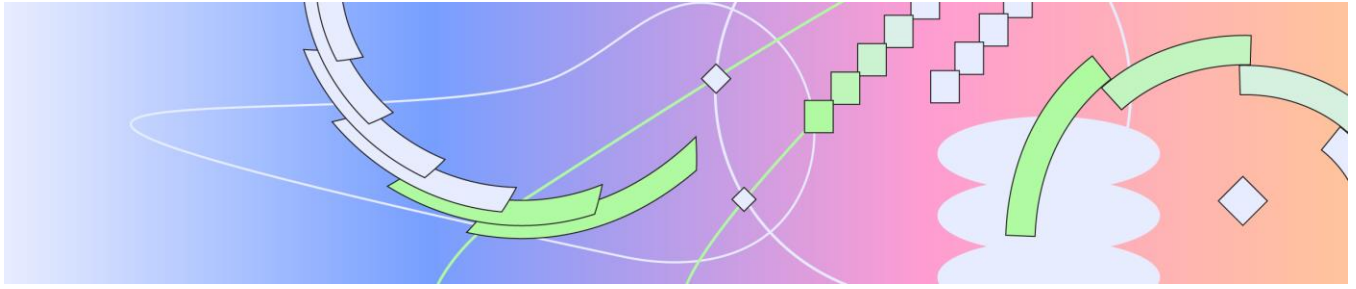
I will! I'm sure I will. If it was already a question of, is there a catalogue? I want it. I just love the intergenerational dialogue that you're creating through the exhibition, that's something very salient.

Alyssa Fearon 56:25

Yes! Thank you. So of course, Billy Beal's historical work from the 1900s. I'm planning to also work with a lot of emerging artists and potentially even emerging curators to be involved in the project. Cheryl Foggo is more of an established filmmaker. She's been working for at least the past 30 years, winning a bunch of awards for her films. She has existed more so within the filmmaking and documentary making world, not so much in the contemporary art world. But, if we think about Black communities and the ways that Black movies have been excluded, as I was saying, from the contemporary art world, if we think about people like Sylvia Hamilton²⁰ or Claire Prieto²¹, and these are very much filmmakers and documentary makers that crossover between the contemporary or visual art worlds, and I place Cheryl's practice in that same vein, as well. She may not

²⁰ Find more about Sylvia Hamilton's practice <https://www.dal.ca/about-dal/dalhousie-originals/sylvia-hamilton>

²¹ Learn more about Claire Pietro-Fuller https://www.creatorsofcolour.com/dt_team/claire-prieto-fuller



be as familiar to some contemporary art audiences, although I do know she has been very influential for Deanna Bowen's work, and they're good friends and collaborators. But I'm really excited to work with her because I think her perspective is just going to be so rich to have as part of this project.

Geneviève Wallen 57:56

Oh my god, I'm thrilled. I'm thrilled. We need cheaper flights to go across Canada and see shows.

Alyssa Fearon 58:05

I know.

Geneviève Wallen 58:07

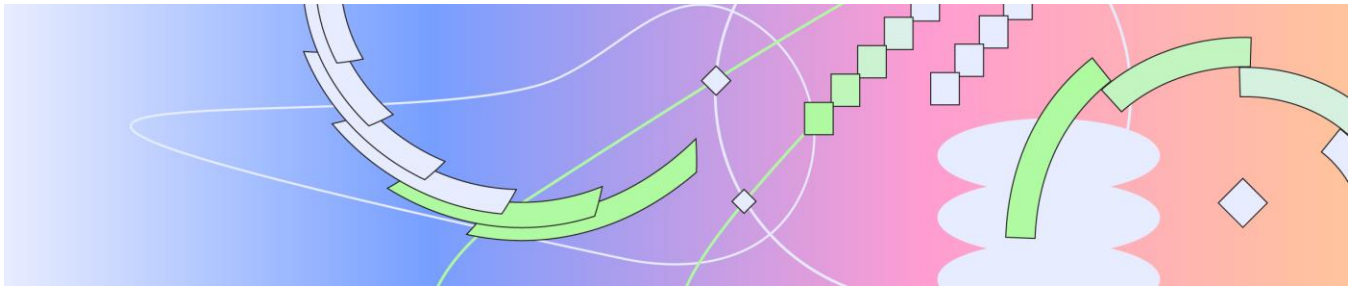
We should have an art-curatorial package that allows us to travel easily to other provinces and just soak in all the beautiful, incredible work that everybody is doing through and through, from west to east, east to west. There's so much happening. And I feel like I'm missing out on so much, because of how big is this place?! (*Laughs*) It's so big! I'm thrilled I'll get the catalogue. I'll get a piece of the exhibition, of the experience at home.

Alyssa Fearon 58:47

Hopefully I can send it on tour, we'll see. I'm still working on that. But I'd love to send it to other parts because even though it's specific to the geographies of the Prairies, obviously, these are perspectives and work that I think is totally relevant for other parts of Canada and more broadly because we don't talk enough about Black visual culture in Canada, especially the history of that.

Geneviève Wallen 59:19

Of settlement as well. And now you're just giving me this nugget of a golden idea. Because how I told you, I would love to do a season two if all goes well with this first season? And I'm like, yes, let's talk about touring exhibitions. How does one go about organizing that, applying for that, suggesting that? It's an idea that I find personally intimidating, but I have a friend who [told me] you should do that, you should try to get your shows touring and stuff. Anyway, so thank you for this golden idea. This is why I love being in conversation and brainstorming. There's always so much good coming out



of it, and I get so energized. Anything you would like the listeners to know before we continue about our days?

Alyssa Fearon 1:00:27

So, we started this discussion talking about taking risks and moving to unfamiliar places. It's not for me to tell people, "Oh, yeah, just do it, it's easy," because it's not. It's important to have a solid support network. It's important to thoroughly research these decisions before deciding if it's right for you.

Geneviève Wallen 1:01:00

And what do you mean by thoroughly researched? What would be an example of that?

Alyssa Fearon 1:01:06

Before going to Brandon, I made sure I knew about the institution and the leadership. I knew that there was also a university, so there was also a university town. I knew that I'd be able to also get some adjunct teaching opportunities there. I knew a few of the movers and shakers there because my uncle had lived there just before I moved there. But I knew that it would be a place that I could grow in.

Geneviève Wallen 1:01:46

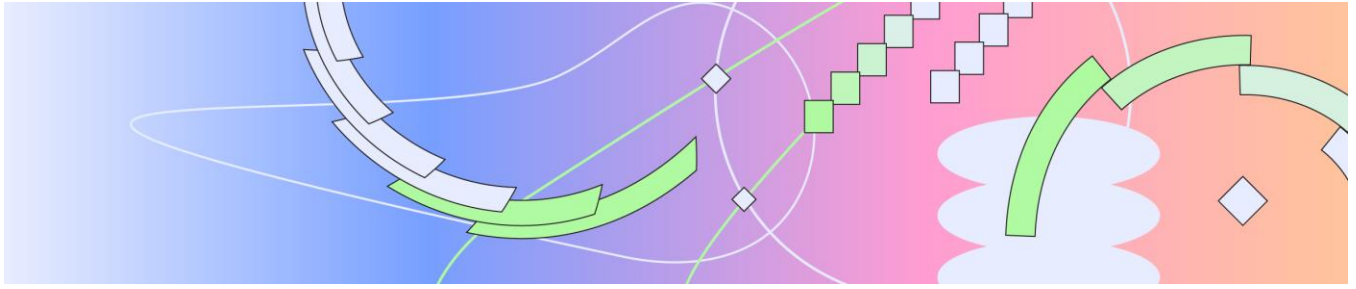
Okay.

Alyssa Fearon 1:01:47

And I knew that because of the level of research that I put in before I made that leap. It was a risk, a very calculated risk. But I would advise people to put in that level of research as well. But at the same time, even if you're scared, you can still do it. And there is no magic moment where you'll be ready. Or at least there wasn't for me. And then, even if there's not, that can still be okay, and you can still go.

Geneviève Wallen 1:02:30

I think one of the things that scares most [people] is the feeling of isolation. So, what's your advice about connecting with people? And I think there's this realistic thing to say that it takes at least two to three years to feel rooted in a space. What is a little advice about connecting and creating community?



Alyssa Fearon 1:03:12

I've had to learn how to do that, to connect and create community, because in Brandon, I don't think I was as intentional about that. And that was a mistake. Coming here to Regina, it's [been about] meeting people as much as possible, even though it's a pandemic.

Geneviève Wallen 1:03:31

I mean, Zoom coffees can be a thing.

Alyssa Fearon 1:03:34

But even beyond that. So, one of the things that I started when I came here to Regina was this little group called Brown Girl Outdoor World. Basically, it's a group of women of color. Well, specifically Black women, trans, queer, femme—totally inclusive. And we get together once a month, and we do some kind of outdoor adventure.

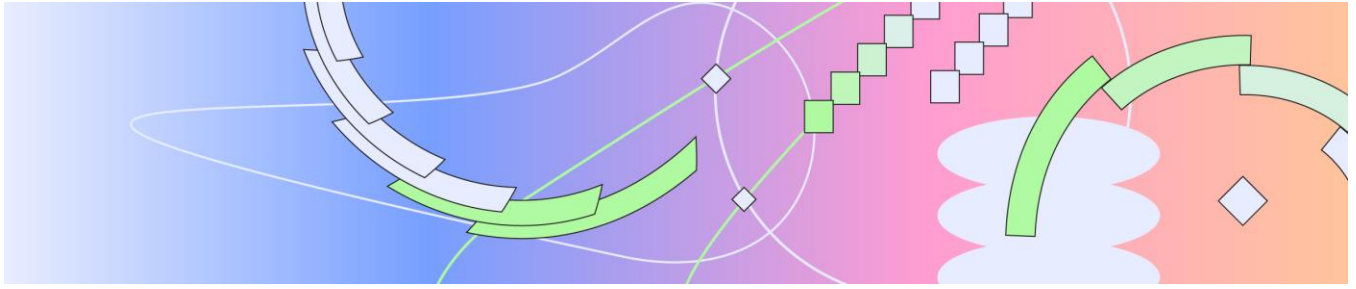
Geneviève Wallen 1:03:59

Look at you! I love that. I asked you what is the last bit that you would like to share, and you're like: "Hello, I'm also having this completely rad outdoor initiative".

Alyssa Fearon 1:04:13

It is pretty rad. I will also say the name of the group and the format of the group was inspired by a group of the same name, Brown Girl Outdoor World in Toronto²², which was started by this really awesome Black woman named Demiesha. Her group was just getting started in Toronto as I was leaving Toronto and I was like: "Oh, my goodness, this sucks! I'm so disappointed because they sound so rad, and I won't get to be part of it because I'm moving." But then when I came here to Regina, I said; "Oh, maybe I could start my own little informal de facto chapter." I got the blessings from Demiesha, which is so great. And then I told a friend who told a friend who told another friend, and so on, so forth, and now we're at about 20 members strong. [It's important to] carve out these spaces to remind yourself that this is a place where I belong. I

²² <https://browngirloutdoorworld.com/>



belong here. And affirming for others that they, too, belong here. There are not many spaces in Regina, Saskatchewan, in the Prairies, for Black people, especially Black women. And of course, with COVID and the pandemic, it made a lot of sense for us to be doing stuff outdoors. So, you should see us when a bunch of Black women in the middle of Saskatchewan roll up to go hiking or we roll up and we go skiing, or we go to the pumpkin patch, like whatever—we've done so many kinds of activities.

Geneviève Wallen 1:05:23

You belong here, yeah!

Alyssa Fearon 1:05:24

I love it so much. But also, let's expand, in practice, [who can do] these activities in Canada, which is so plural.

Geneviève Wallen 1:06:26

It's many types of interests.

Alyssa Fearon 1:06:30

For sure.

Geneviève Wallen 1:06:31

It's alive, it's thriving. It's doing things like going to pumpkin patches.

Alyssa Fearon 1:06:36

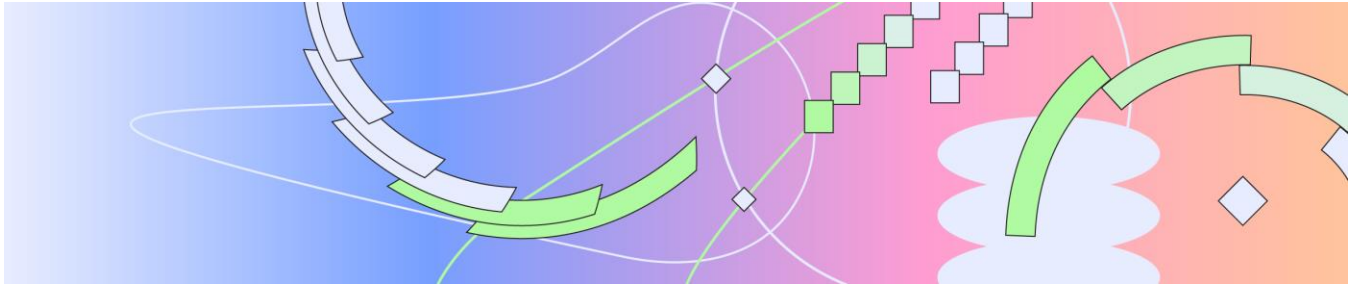
It's going fishing, it's going into these predominantly white settings and showing up and having an amazing time. And, going to the beach and playing Zook music or playing Dancehall really loud.

Geneviève Wallen 1:06:57

Mhmm, yes, yes.

Alyssa Fearon 1:06:58

In a predominantly white space, and just vibing and being Black and enjoying that. And, against the odds sometimes, but still.



Geneviève Wallen 1:07:10

But still, there's always been joy. Otherwise, we will not be here.

Alyssa Fearon 1:07:15

Exactly.

Geneviève Wallen 1:07:16

There's always been joy. Oh my god, aaaahhh, my heart is screaming right now. Oh, my insides are screaming. This is such a beautiful way to wrap up this episode. Oh my god, thank you so much.

Outro 1:07:40

This episode was made possible through the support of the Canada Arts Council and The Centre for the Study of Black Canadian Diaspora. I send my deepest gratitude to my collaborators and invited guests. I am grateful for your presence, labour, and for embarking on this adventure with me. I recorded this episode in Tiohtiá:ke, which is situated on the traditional territory of the Kanien'kehà:ka, and long served [and still] as a site of meeting and exchange amongst many First Nations among them the Kanien'kehà:ka of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, Huron-Wendat, Abenaki, Anishinaabeg. The theme music is Raindrops Unearthed by Chanteclair.