

N O M O R E P O T L U C K S

Rest / Repeat: An Interview with Erika DeFreitas – Crystal Mowry

all the women.

in me.

are tired.[i]

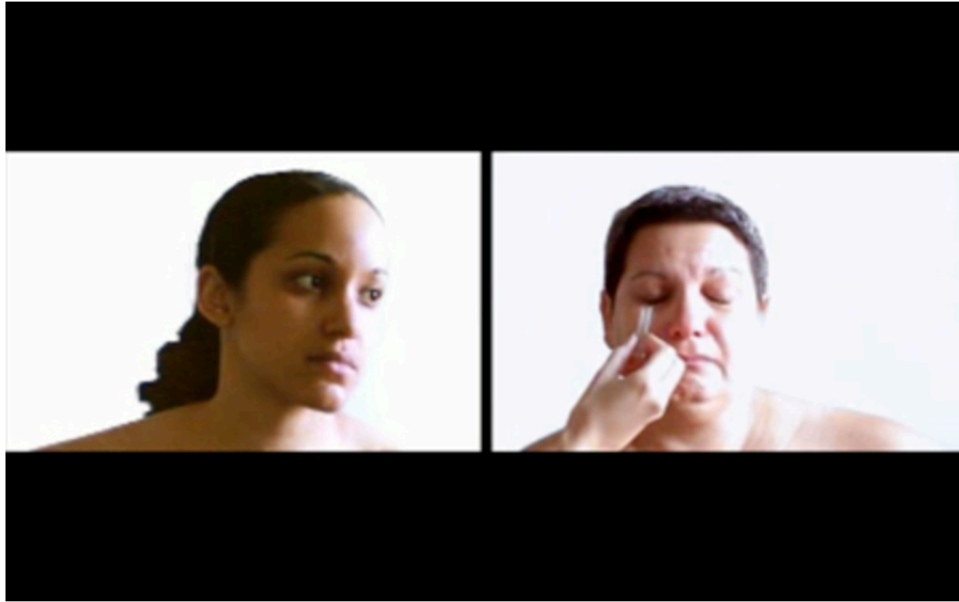
I came across this poem by nayirah waheed recently, and I immediately wanted to send it to Erika DeFreitas. We had met for the first time a few months earlier, and the poem reminded me of the meandering, but familiar nature of that initial conversation. Inheritance and habitual grieving were shared preoccupations, and so we spent hours discussing the complicated ways in which those two subjects overlap within Erika's work. That day she told me of a realization that had come about through reviewing works in which both she and her mother appear. Using an index finger, she pointed out the subtle similarities that were accruing with age. We laughed the kind of hesitant adult laugh that comes in moments when one finally recognizes the truth in something their parents have been telling them for years. A laugh that is both concessional and confessional.

Reading waheed's short poem made me wonder about the disruption of familial patterns that can be found in gestures, attitudes or physical characteristics. The following email correspondence springs from these thoughts.

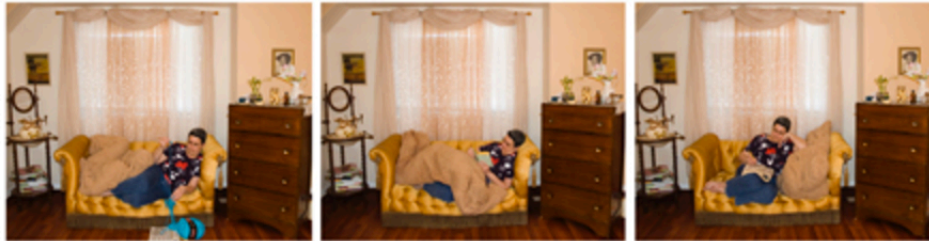
Crystal Mowry: I want to ask you about *The Truth of Lineage*, an early two-channel video from 2007. In this work we see you and your mother on separate screens next to one another. You take turns weeping while the other's hand reaches from beyond the frame to collect the tears in vials. Each 'harvest' concludes with the ingestion of the other's tears. It's a poetic exchange with mildly Sisyphean undertones. *The Truth of Lineage* is one of several works from this period where we see you and your mother in close physical proximity, with little or no exchange of words. It marks an important shift in your work. What thoughts precipitated that shift?

Erika DeFreitas: There were so many thoughts happening at that time! I was in the first couple of weeks working on my Master's degree in the Visual Studies program at the University of Toronto. I entered the program proposing to research and create a body of work about the mixed-race being as 'cyborg'. I was really fascinated by our depiction in science fiction films and literature. It was during the early stages of research and initial discussions with my colleagues and professors when I realized that this line of exploration wasn't challenging me or inspiring me in the ways that I needed. I felt like I needed to talk about race in a different way. In a way that wasn't so literal. I also came to the realization that this was a time where I could dive into a territory that was new for me and that made me uncomfortable. Once I came to terms with this, I immediately thought about the fear of impending loss that has been with me since I was a child.

Deaths/Memorials/Births (2006-2007) was the work where I started to dip my toes into working through forms of loss and creating work in the studio. It was then that I was introduced to Derrida's text, *The Work of Mourning*. I was reading a lot about loss—an intimate loss. I always knew that it was a fear of losing my mother that ruminated in my bones. I guess I just didn't want to admit to it or face it. The first work transitioning to this stage in my practice was, *right there, between here and over there*. I wrote an invitation to my mother asking her to create something of comfort for me and I would then become something of comfort for her. That is how we started. When I think back to *The Work of Lineage* and the other works created during that time, having my mother present in my work occurred so seamlessly. I think that's because she didn't know what she was getting herself into! Despite us being so physically close in most of those works, I always felt a lingering distance. The little-to-no exchange of words was reflective of our relationship and how we communicated on a regular basis, but it was and is also a way for our gestures and actions to be highlighted; to allow them to do the speaking without saying too much.



Video still from *The Truth of Lineage*, two-channel video, 4:00 minutes, 2007.



right there, between here and over there, Digital print, 2007.

CM: Your experience of grad school sounds familiar, especially the part about wanting to find a way to talk about race differently. I remember longing for conversations that made room for idiosyncrasy and wanting everyone to read Octavia E. Butler’s *Kindred*. The first line of the prologue (“I lost an arm on my last trip home”^[ii]) sticks in my memory as a powerful introduction to both genetic trauma and how loss and persistence will play out in the rest of the narrative...

ED: You know what, this is embarrassing, but it wasn’t until a few years ago that I read anything written by Octavia Butler, and *Kindred* was the perfect introduction. Not only did that first line capture the loss and persistence that is ever present in the novel, but also it highlighted the body—and in this case the female body—as a site of trauma. A trauma that we see throughout the novel being repeatedly imposed on Black bodies as the protagonist travels into the past, and it never ceases as it follows her into her present time—reflective of how such trauma reoccurs into our present. Loss and persistence. Perhaps those two go hand in hand in a way. The inevitability of loss presumes a persistence, one that is unpredictable, immeasurable, and unyielding.

CM: Your description of Dana (the narrator and protagonist in *Kindred*) makes me think of how reading and writing—often considered solitary acts—are crucial to how trauma reverberates in our lives. Black bodies have been expected to endure, physically and emotionally, regardless of how hostile the context may be, and educate while grieving nonetheless. And what does it mean to refuse the role of the educator? Saying “my loss is not your lesson” can be met with such consternation. What may look like complacency may really be exhaustion. Anyone who reads the news will know what that feels like.

ED: Reading and writing are often solitary acts, but that is also an assumption—and maybe an expectation—about the process of grieving in many communities. Reverberates. Yes. I can distinctly remember a moment in 2001 when I was listening to the news on the radio. I stopped what I was doing when I realized that it was a recording of a young man pleading for his life. His name was Segun Farquharson. In the last moments of his life, he used his cellphone to record the voices of the men who murdered him. I have never forgotten his voice. I have never forgotten his name. I didn’t know Mr. Farquharson, but I grieve for him every single day. His words and his voice live with me. The feeling I had that day, listening to him on the radio, was unlike any feeling I had ever felt up until that time. That feeling tends to be what drives a lot of my work and, yes, it is tiring for me, and I’m just a member of our community. I can only imagine the depths of grief experienced by those close to these individuals no longer with us.

CM: I definitely see that in your work. In *Deaths/Memorials/Births* the information published in the obituary section of the newspaper (*Toronto Star*) guides your creation of concrete poetry. The obituary itself is already a distillation of a life; origin and influence are reduced to mere column inches. The perspective from which most obituaries are written rarely mirrors the voice of the one who has been lost. And intentionally so, as most obituaries are written to serve the memories of those who have been left behind. “Memory is,” as Susan Sontag wrote in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, “the only relation we can have with the dead.”^[iii]

ED: Yes, but we all know how unreliable memories can be. The thought of Sontag being correct, conjures a very personal, visceral response. One way that I see the work I make with my mother is as a way of creating an archive of us, using our relationship to work through concepts or theories of loss, mourning, identity, and so forth. In the event that my memory fails, I have these objects to reference this relationship. Perhaps it’s an alternate way of attempting to manage this fear of loss.

I think of the obituary section of the physical newspaper as an ephemeral memorial or a fleeting archive. After reading this section of the newspaper over a long period of time, there were entries that didn’t feel personal, but more like a way of temporarily marking time in a space that may or may not be read. I just thought of how people carve their name into surfaces, like a tree or desk. And I agree with you, so often what is written isn’t in the voice of the one who has passed, which really makes me consider the ways that we speak for, or of the dead. How do we give them agency? In *The Work of Mourning*, Derrida does this through repetition. He uses the words of his friends who have passed—specifically what they may have written or said about death itself—as a means of “survival.”^[iv]



Deaths/Memorials/Births (Saturday, November 11, 2006),
Digital print on Kozuke Paper, 25" x 27", 2006-2007; 2013

CM: Perhaps that is one of the functions of memory, especially when we deal in specificities. Your intervention in the obituary content is two-fold; the generalities that repeat across the notices— dates, lineage, and accomplishments—have been excised from the pages, but you have let personalized, subjective phrases remain. In the ongoing series of embroidered works, *so buried in it that we only see them when pulled out in abstraction* (2014), you once again revisit the newspaper as a catalyst for remembrance and translation.

ED: I find the newspaper to be such an interesting everyday object that is used to document and communicate, but then gets discarded or re-purposed. There is no permanence to this thing that is a record—whether reliable or not—of events happening all around the world. In many ways it speaks to 'time' and private and public space, but as a material it can refer to the body. With *Deaths/Memorials/Births*, I was taken aback by the skeletal form that the newspaper took on once the obituaries were removed, and how delicate the paper became, almost like a thin skin.

With *so buried in it that we only see them when pulled out in abstractions*, my relationship with the newspaper changed from focusing on the written to the visual, pictorial information. This happened when I saw an image of a dead body under an orange blanket, but the person's shoe was sticking out from underneath. I was so desensitized to horrific imagery that I was perplexed as to why it took seeing an image like this to invoke such a change in perception. I spent time with the image and felt a need to recreate it in a space different to that of the newspaper; a space where it could be reflected upon, questioned, interpreted. I started scanning the newspaper and the internet for similar images. Sontag talks about how photographs are used as a means of remembering, and she also says something along the lines that photographs in media make the things we want to ignore real. This image made death that much more real and present to me.



so buried in it that we only see them when pulled out in abstractions (No. 1), cotton and embroidery thread, 24" x 36," 2014. Documentation by: Toni Hafkenscheid.

CM: And what of re-enactment? *A Visual Vocabulary for Hands in Mourning* (2013) comes to mind as an example of a work wherein you collapse the representation of grief, both in journalism and art history. In this work your hands do the re-enacting, forming a complicated taxonomy of the body in mourning. It makes me think of Carrie Mae Weems and her *Kitchen Table Series* photographs. So much of what we, as viewers, understand about the complexities of her fictional subject's life can be gleaned from scrutinizing the hands.

ED: *A Visual Vocabulary for Hands in Mourning* became a practice in the gesture of re-enactment and a lesson of what can be learned from it. Re-enactment became a way of rehearsing. It's a lot like memory. In one way we learn to memorize things, commit things to memory through rote—repeat, repeat, repeat to the point where it is easily regurgitated word for word. However, in another sense, every time you remember something or repeat something it will never be *exactly* what came before. It may be similar, but never the same. With each repetition, with each remembering, something new is produced. I think that because of this, what is produced doesn't become redundant, which is why even the slightest difference fascinates me. In my practice, the act of re-enacting is a way of embodying and studying *through* something. *A Visual Vocabulary for Hands in Mourning* came about because I started to realize that not all is told by one's eyes. So much is said with our hands. Our hands tell on us. They translate in ways that seep through barriers and they speak to what isn't necessarily on the lines, but to all that lives in the in-between, in those spaces that can be so easily overlooked. I've been working on a series that is a re-reading of art history through hands—a mining, a cataloguing, a re-framing of sorts...



Installation shot, Art Gallery of Mississauga, 2015.

Documentation by: Toni Hafkenscheid.

CM: I wondered if that might have been the process behind another photographic work, *she said anything once it is made has its own existence* (2016). There it seems as though you are using the living body—your body—as the scaffolding for its own likeness. It’s a gesture that alludes to an out-of-body experience. Not exactly channelling, but still a form of reanimation...

ED: In that work, my living body is interacting with a ‘failed’ cast of my right hand—you’ll notice that there are three fingers that didn’t take the plaster. At the time of making this photographic series, I was starting to really get curious about our relationship with objects and how through performance I can animate these objects. At this time, I was also working on the series *I too question the flowers*. I was questioning ‘real’, living flowers as objects in comparison to the flowers that are made to appear ‘real’ through fabrication. In both versions of these flowers, there exists a knowledge of absence, creating a desire for more. In a way, there is a collapsing that happens in these photographs; a merging of these two versions of the ‘real’ with the presence of my body. Since then I’ve been learning about Object Oriented Ontology, so I now think, maybe these objects don’t need to be animated, they already are? In hindsight when I think back to actually doing this photoshoot, the photos didn’t seem right until I stopped trying to interact with my third hand and just intuitively let the movements happen. You have me thinking, is it possible to channel the self while the self is still present? A way of channelling, like muscle memory? Anyhow, there was something bizarre for me in the gesture of collaborating with a surrogate part of my body, and add to it that it was ‘lacking’ in more ways than one, well, it was weird enough for me to spend time with.

CM: That combination of weirdness and intuition led to a seismic outcome in the work that was included in *Rehearsal for Objects Lie on a Table* last spring. I’m thinking about *and now to begin as if to begin begin of beginning again and again and again (in the continuous present with Gertrude Stein)* (2016). I see Lacan’s notion of ‘lack’ informing how you chose to isolate and rework specific parts of *Objects Lie on a Table*, a play by Gertrude Stein. In the play there are directives that playfully engage in speculative realism: “imitate the cheese” and “question the cabbage”. What was it like to ‘collaborate’ with Stein?

ED: Emotional. In the past I’ve worked with my friend and psychic medium, Kate Sitka, when I was collaborating with Jean-Michel Basquiat. Kate helped me make my initial connection with Gertrude and it was through her that we started to discuss the play, *Objects Lie on a Table*. I had completed parts one through three of this work prior to talking with Gertrude. The selection of the lines in the play that I focused on was really based on intuition or a questioning that I had about the content that I felt could only be worked through by writing through. I was obviously intimidated to even try to have a conversation with her and when I told her that, she laughed at me. There are times when we can have a normal back and forth conversation about say, time-sense, and there are times when it’s more one-sided and she’s teaching me through sharing anecdotes of her experiences. When things get heavy she has a way of saying something... she has this witty, maybe even dark, sense of humour that comes out. It can also be frustrating because I’m still learning to trust that feeling in my gut when she’s with me. I’m learning to not question myself all the time and to let things just be. When I do get to that point, collaborating with her is very liberating. She has encouraged me to be confident with the way that I am comfortable with writing; to be true to my sensibilities and to not fall into that place of fearing that my writing or my work isn’t conventional or ‘academic’ enough, and therefore shouldn’t be made. If I had any reservations about the work we were writing, they were put aside by Gertrude’s urging on. She kicked my ass when I needed it.

CM: Gertrude Stein – educating and ass-kicking in the afterlife. Sounds right.

ED: You know, she's probably listening in on this with hands folded and a mischievous grin.



*and now to begin as if to begin begin of beginning again and again and again
(in the continuous present with Gertrude Stein), detail of Part II, Artist book, 2016.*

Documentation by: Daniel Ehrenworth.

Footnotes

[i] Nayirah waheed. Twitter post. July 19, 2016, 10:36 AM. <https://twitter.com/nayyirahwaheed/status/755456335118938112>

[ii] Octavia E. Butler, *Kindred* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), 9.

[iii] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 115.

[iv] Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, edited by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 23.

Erika DeFreitas is a Toronto-based multidisciplinary conceptual artist. She explores the influence of language, loss, and culture on the formation of identity through public interventions, textile-based works, and performative actions that are photographed, placing an emphasis on process, gesture, and documentation. DeFreitas is a recipient of the Toronto Friends of Visual Arts Finalist Award Prize (2016). She is a graduate of the Masters of Visual Studies Program at the University of Toronto (2008). Exhibition sites have included Project Row Houses (Houston, TX), Aljira: A Centre for Contemporary Art (Newark, NJ), The Art Museum at the University of Toronto (Toronto, ON), Gallery 44 (Toronto, ON), The Art Gallery of Windsor (Windsor, ON), Platform Centre for Photographic & Digital Arts (Winnipeg, MB), Centre [3] for Print and Media Arts (Hamilton, ON), The Art Gallery of Mississauga (Mississauga, ON), the Pollock Gallery at the Southern Methodist University (Dallas, TX), the Houston Museum of African American Culture (Houston, TX), performances with the 7a*11d International Festival of Performance Art (Toronto, ON), and a residency at Mentoring Artists for Women's Art (Winnipeg, MB). Her work can be seen at: www.erikadefreitas.com.

Crystal Mowry is Senior Curator at the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery (KWAG). She earned her MFA from NSCAD University following her undergraduate studies at the Ontario College of Art and Design University. During her time at KWAG she has curated and organized numerous exhibitions, including *The Limits* (2011), *Imitation of Life* (2015) and *Ernest Daetwyler: Barn Raising [Reality in Reverse]*, which received an Ontario Association of Art Galleries Award for Exhibition of the Year. Together with Ivan Jurakic, Mowry curated the *Romancing the Anthropocene* portion of *Scotiabank Nuit Blanche* in Toronto, 2013. She is based in Cambridge, Ontario.

<http://nomorepotlucks.org/site/rest-repeat-an-interview-with-erika-defreitas-crystal-mowry/>