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## The Name is a Guest of the Substance

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**The Name is a Guest of the Substance**

A Thesis Presented

By

Jessica Scott

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts in

partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2022

Department of Art

**The Name is a Guest of the Substance**

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## **ABSTRACT**

THE NAME IS A GUEST OF THE SUBSTANCE

MAY 2022

JESSICA ANTONIA CASILLAS SCOTT, B.A., NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

M.F.A, UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Susan Jahoda

*The Name is a Guest of the Substance* brings together works of video, installation, live performance, sculpture, and print to investigate the constructions of kinship that organize us into the world as historical, ecological, and political subjects. Herter Gallery's 1600 sq. ft space is utilized in full for this project. The work in both galleries evaluates systems of categorization in light of their power to foster or discourage kinship within overlapping local, global and ecological communities. While the West Gallery uses my own multi-racial American genealogy to challenge the authority of historical and autobiographical origins, the East gallery uses manipulations of scale to emphasize the overlooked and ungovernable ways non-human forms of life frustrate our constant attempts at establishing a stable hierarchy of biological relations.

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## INTRODUCTION

“I want to consider loss, or what goes missing in the translation between one language and the next, as a possibility or opportunity. There is some beauty in saying honestly “we aren’t attempting an equivalence but rather sifting a transition of form so that one material (thought, story, utterance, feeling) might serve different purposes. What remains behind in the sieve is not simply discard. It has its own intelligence.”  
Chloe Bass, “Accessibility Caption: Death,”.

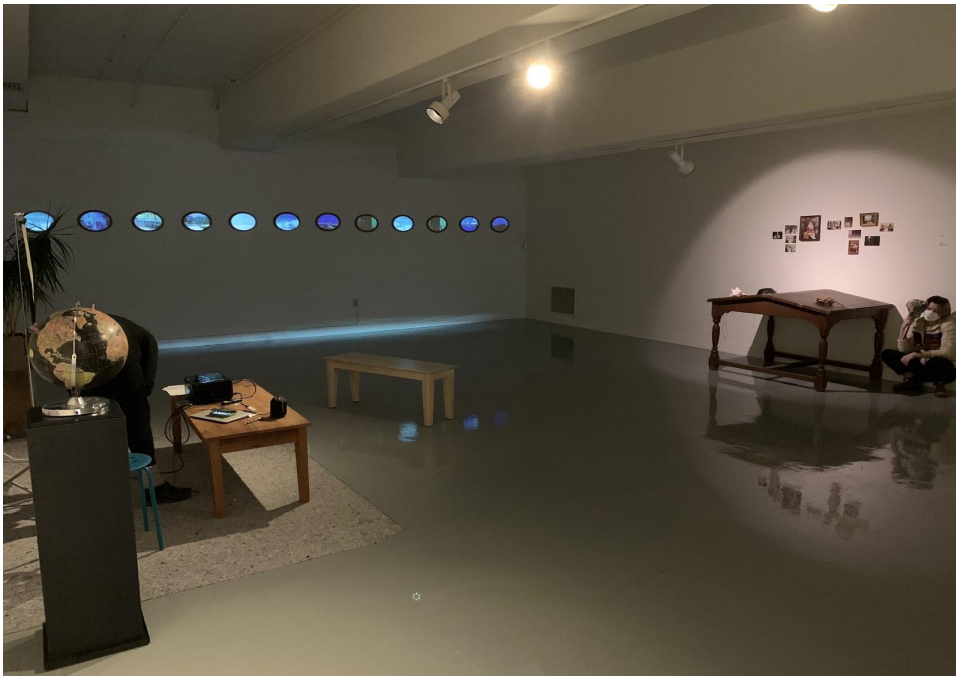
*The Name is a Guest of the Substance* brings together works of video, installation, live performance, sculpture, and print to investigate the constructions of kinship that organize us into the world as historical, ecological, and political subjects. Herter Gallery’s 1600 sq. ft space is utilized in full for this project. The work in both galleries evaluates systems of categorization in light of their power to foster or discourage kinship within overlapping local, global and ecological communities. While the West Gallery uses my own multi-racial American genealogy to challenge the authority of historical and autobiographical origins, the East gallery uses manipulations of scale to emphasize the overlooked and ungovernable ways non-human forms of life frustrate our constant attempts at establishing a stable hierarchy of biological relations.

The works in both rooms of this exhibit are small samples of what I loosely call my terroir, a word borrowed from winemaking to describe the various conditions which determine the identity and qualities of a certain vintage. In the world of wine-making, the entities which contribute to a terroir can be accounted for, if not controlled, and perhaps even measured, which is where the accuracy of the metaphor for the purpose of person or world-making ceases. But I still enjoy a certain mileage out of the concept, even as it is undermined by the unpredictable convergences I highlight as a through-line

in my work, the likes of which could destroy the reputation or livelihood of anyone trying to provide a consistent product.



*The Name is a Guest of the Substance, East Gallery, Herter Art Gallery, April 2022*



*The Name is a Guest of the Substance, West Gallery, Herter Art Gallery, April 2022*

I didn't develop this materially-bound, auto-theoretical practice of investigation as an intentional strategy. It's a reaction emerging purely out of a longstanding and still driving psychic need to poke at the static models which supposedly delineate my place in the world as if the ground on which these models stand isn't constantly in hostile renegotiation. This approach is useful in opening closed or established biographical, historical and biological scripts, perforating them to make room for an improvisation that values living through a catastrophic present without denial, over-reliance on myths of progress, toxic positivity, or positivism. I open these scripts, challenging their "complete" narratives, to foster a greater awareness of our reciprocating entanglements, entanglements that cross temporal, racial, and specied boundaries and result in a productive ambivalence of encounter, collaboration, and contamination with the unknown, unforeseen or uninvited.

Works in the West Gallery address the military occupation and nuclear testing program in the Marshall Islands when my grandfather was stationed as a navy medic. Using super 8 footage he took during that period, combined with spoken-text sound installations and multi-media sculpture representing complex multiracial familial histories, the project weaves together personal and national narratives by voicing contradictions brought to life by generations of overlapping conquered and conquering identities obscured by the label "American". My intention is to reveal nationalist fictions created when personal stories are disrupted by historical events. The large format video installation acts as a contextualizing frame for the performance which is a live interview I conducted with my mother who appeared in the Kwajalein footage as a child. This interview provides the audience with a necessary historical background

about an occupation which most Americans are never taught about in school and it acts as a platform for my mother to speak about her first-person experience of the occupation through the intimacy of a mother-daughter conversation about family lore. The juxtaposition of image, text and performance seeks to unsettle the established visual archive of pre-Cold War America as a prompt to rethink our roles as citizens in a time of rapidly shifting global priorities.

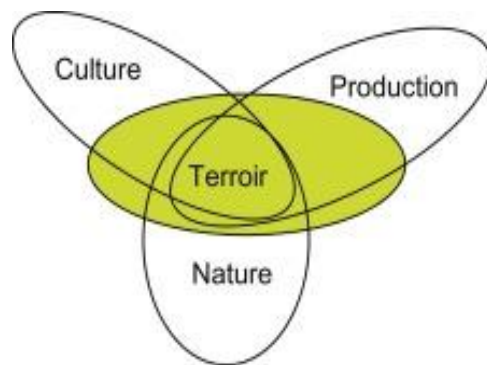
The work in the East Gallery takes a broader view of biological taxonomy and ecological affinities as an exploration of humanity's inextricable connection to and self-imposed alienation from the non-human world. I present familiar things out of context, exposing the particular mechanics of meaning production involving the specific subjects depicted in this newly decontextualized encounter. Large-format prints act as topological studies of fungal spore formations native to Clark Hall where my studio is located on campus. The prints are a documentation of my interactions with the fungus as both a neighbor, neurotoxin, artistic collaborator and as a manifestation of a rarely seen microbiological world that powerfully influences our own. On three side-by-side monitors, I impersonate a sunflower in a sunflower field. As the footage loops, the proximity between my performance as a nature lover and as an uninvited interloper becomes uncomfortable. Smaller wax, silicone, and glass sculptural works meant to be handled invite the viewer into tactile consideration of the role of evolutionary hybridity in exposing the positivist fictions we rely on to delineate types of biological life. Here the audience is invited to consider their various placements vis a vis the "natural world" as that term is both specifically defined through interspecies relationships on campus and abstractly in our personal ideologies.

The hallway between the two galleries is used as a pedagogical resource room for audience members eager to learn more about the various topics in the exhibition. During the exhibition, I stationed myself at an information desk in the resource room as an additional opportunity for community members to discuss and demystify the work with the artist herself. I took residence in the space as part of the dialogue about the work and the relationships it draws from and will speak later in this paper about the results of this residence in this first chapter at Herter Gallery.

The research in each of the three spaces in Herter Gallery is concerned with ongoing histories of encounter, genealogical inheritance, unstable categories of identity and webs of kinships, tracking the world-building or world-destroying potential of these systems of knowledge by the types of relationships they produce and the politics they enforce. The title of this exhibit speaks to my desire to demote alienating taxonomies and depose catastrophic progress narratives in favor of imagining other ways to acknowledge and live with the ever-moving complexities formerly so named.

The theoretical framework of the pieces in the West gallery is largely auto-ethnographic, with support from the work of Clare Hemmings, Lauren Berlant, Michel Foucault and Sarah Ahmed. I also consider the work in the East Gallery to be auto-ethnographic as they rely so much on my discrete, situated and local encounters with other species or communities nearby, with each work being the product of such an encounter or exchange as an outcome of the relationship and measure of its impact. The liberties I'm taking with the definition of autoethnography in the East Gallery are supported by the writings of Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing who both influenced my understanding of encounter, kinship, and exchange with the non-human world.

I'm not a wine nor is there an authority like a vintner overseeing my recipe, but I return to the term "terroir" to discuss the complex interplay of forensics, ingredients, histories, tenses and territories cited in the exhibit which build an experience that is layered, embodied, disorienting, reflexive and dialogical with occasional fruity undertones. In this temporary slice of terroir, I hope to provide evidence of mutual co-constitution between me and my sisters, me and my family's history, me and my bacteria, the spores that cross the blood-brain barrier, the memories that cross the blood-brain barrier, and in the space of the exhibit, the co-constitution of the audience and myself. This co-constitution does not mean complete overlap, I am \*not\* my sisters nor do I claim to move through the world like anyone but myself, just as I don't believe I am a photosynthesizing sunflower just because I sat in a field for several days or an immortal spore even though I certainly inhaled them; differentiation between co-constituents is key in appreciating and speculating the degree of imbrication and sovereignty in each.



<sup>1</sup> Diagram source: left: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/agricultural-and-biological-sciences/terroir> , right: <https://winefolly.com/tips/terroir-definition-for-wine/>



## CHAPTER 1

### WEST GALLERY: HISTORY GENEALOGY AND KINSHIP

“It [Genealogy] opposes itself to the search for “origins” Michel Foucault, *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*.

My focus on genealogy begins in agreement with Foucault, and in the essay of his which I cite he is agreeing with Nietzsche (who I have never read) in the idea that an account for origins is not only impossible but deluded. Foucault’s definition of genealogy is not an attempt to find origins, rather it’s an embodied notation of the interventions, accidents and collisions which have changed a thing, a subject, over time, through many converging, sometimes conflicting lines of descent. This concept of genealogy allows one to pursue the history of a subject without the search for ultimate origins. Genealogy is the body, not only chronologically or iteratively produced, but historically, materially and affectively produced through highly provisional encounters, with room for mutations, accepting of a lack of chronological continuity, providing for contingencies, and unpredictable emergences without some guiding principle of automatic improvement like natural selection. The processes of genealogy are open-ended, occurring even if individual reproduction within the species does not take place because it does not take an exchange of DNA for the body to nonetheless be inscribed by change. Something was always there before we were. Something will always be there after. They just might not be subjects like us and not recognizable as such.

This definition of genealogy, as Foucault uses it, rejects the essentialist notion of a definitive beginning, source or original identity immune to accidental collisions of forces which populate what he calls History. To search deeper for the source is to

eventually confront that “there is something altogether different behind things: not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms” (Foucault 78) . This framework for history and genealogy is appealing to me given my reservations towards the trendy invocation of “ancestors” as a universally available source of benevolent wisdom. I understand the importance of feeling connected to one’s ancestors for people who were denied that connection by colonization or structural violence. I understand the impulse to reclaim one’s ancestry as part of connecting to a heritage that offers solutions to dilemmas of personhood that American consumerism and capitalism cannot. But I argue with Leah, my Miwuk sister now in charge of developing the K-8 ethnic studies curriculum for the Oakland Unified School District, about whether \*my\* ancestors exist as anything more than wishful thinking or abstraction. She insists they do. I imagine them like a version of Chuck E Cheese’s animatronic band Rock-a-fire Explosion: glitched, out of sync, jerky gestures vaguely threatening, with absolutely no idea who I am or what I want from them. Jennifer, my adopted Iu-Mien sister, told me she doesn’t think about her ancestors or the history of Iu-Mien people in terms of imperialism, genocide, or any kind of historical sweep. I know she misses her mom. Different strokes.

As my mother stated in the interview-performance *Spooky Action at a Distance*, you can only go back so far in our family tree before you encounter abandonment, adoptions, old-fashioned switcheroos and poor record-keeping. There simply isn’t more that can be known beyond a very recent point. On my biological fathers side of the tree, I run up against a different kind of severed limb: the refusal of my paternal grandparents to participate in my life at some point after I turned 10 amidst long silences from my bio-

dad spanning chapters of his addictions. The grandparents who died loving me died in desperate circumstances, expressions of pathologies that dogged their adult lives. The other ones died in Imperial Beach, San Diego and I wasn't invited to their funerals. It is difficult for me to imagine these wise, benevolent ancestors Leah feels with such certainty. When Foucault wrote "The origin lies at a place of inevitable loss" (Foucault 76), stating the impossibility of locating the source, the phrase lands for me in ways he did not intend.



Excerpts from *The Smallest Unit is Each Other*, Family Photo Collages, April 2022.

I fantasize that I would feel more genuinely Mexican if my grandmother had offered herself as a cultural through-line in my father's necessary absence. In a sibling line-up, I'm obviously the White sister, an awkward and accurate moniker that places me in relationship to my sisters by way of one of our important differences. But I become uncomfortable when I am labeled White, or asked to account for Whiteness, as a general qualifier on paperwork or in discussion. My instinctive response is, "White compared to who?" I grew up with an idea of Whiteness as something that existed in degrees, even itself as a basis of comparison: "Cousin Lissy isn't as White as her mom but she's definitely Whiter than her kids" etc. Whatever portion of me that is *Not* White is not by default Mexican. Depending on who I ask, being Mexican does or does not inherently imply a degree of Non-Whiteness or Indigeneity<sup>2</sup>. Feeling my claim to this heritage already constrained, I simply don't know where to plant my little Off-White flag. At the risk of sounding like Steve Martin's character in *The Jerk*, the degree to which I feel Off-White has more to do with who I grew up with: the cultures, experiences and concerns we shared and still share. As an adult, the world beyond my family has treated me like a White, middle class woman, certainly conferring a considerable amount of generalized Whiteness upon me. But this Whiteness does not erase my upbringing, developmental attachments and ongoing identifications. Lived in one body, these experiences do not designate a clear logic of racial interpellation. The academic and activist discussions I've participated in on campus about Whiteness have very little in common with the ones I have with my family and I struggle to reconcile each version to the other.

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<sup>2</sup> In Mexico, being Mexican is a nationality specific to the formation of the colonialist nation-state of Mexico independent of any Mexican citizen's ethnic background and many Pre-Columbian indigenous groups in Mexico refuse the nation-state descriptor all-together.

The title of the various family photo collages in *The Smallest Unit is Each other* is a truncation of Haraway's statement in *Companion Species Manifesto* that "the relation is the smallest unit of analysis and the relation is about significant otherness at every scale" (Haraway 25) as a refusal of the idea that we can reduce racial/familial identity to discrete units of measurement like mathematical fractions or blood quantum. I return time and time again to "the proof": pictures of the family I grew up with, many who share no blood relation to me. Pictures of my own face, how it changed from looking like Mexican and Puerto Rican relatives I barely know as an adult and now more closely resembling my mother as my hair lightens and the roundness leaves my cheeks in midlife. But the "proof", whatever hard copies I have access to, is misleading on its own, incomplete and incompletable. Foucault says that's to be expected. Flipping through family photos and finding the same stranger in 10 pictures over the course of 10 years, their body language relaxed and intimate, arms around everyone, maybe holding one of us as toddlers. Me and my sisters/cousins/aunties laughing, "Who the \*@&~ IS that?! Probably your Real Dad".



*Portals/Portholes*, Video Installation, April 2022

I've been working with my grandfather's super 8 footage for over a year, treating it as the subject of my artistic inquiry: the footage, the occupation, the evidence of it here in the form of salvaged home videos with a particular time-stamp and coordinates. When

describing the project early on I constantly quoted my mother's accounts of that time, a move which collapsed the distinction between history, memory, narrative and sentiment, creating false equivalencies between me and my mother's relationships to the footage. My mom haunted the project, setting the stage but never setting foot upon it. This secondhand verbal citation of what my mother said, as the only family member alive with any intact memory of that time, automatically made her a historical authority, shielding me from taking narrative responsibility of my own in the transmission of that history. It became obvious I had to let my mother speak openly for herself so I could contend with that speech, with clear boundaries around the power and obligations of her authorship and my own. The 40-minute interview with my mother occurred as the opening event of the thesis, with her appearing via zoom from California while I spoke to her through a computer screen projected behind me before a live audience of 20 in the West Gallery of UMass Amherst. It was recorded and projected in the gallery for the remaining duration of the exhibit.

The piece is titled *Spooky Action at a Distance* as a nod to the nuclear family, the nuclear bomb, and the non-Newtonian phenomenon "by which one particle can effectively 'know' something about another particle instantaneously even if those two particles are separated by a great distance" (Calla Cofield, *600-Year-Old Starlight Bolsters Einstein's Spooky Action at a Distance*, [space.com](http://space.com)). Observing this phenomenon caused Einstein to coin the phrase "Spooky Action at a Distance" in 1935 to describe the quantum weirdness which defied the principles of locality that had governed our understanding of subatomic causality up to that point. If quantum physics is about the unobservable world, the reality of things that you can't see, then Newtonian physics is

about what you can observe in fixed relationships and categories to then make rules about. Categories rarely adhere on the subatomic level and that reality seems to both support and defy my lived experience of Newtonian physics. The incongruity between these two venerated scientific genealogies, both which I barely comprehend on a technical level, feels familiar and comforts me.

In Sara Ahmed's Introduction to *Living a Feminist Life* titled "Bringing Feminist Theory Home", she opens the first page with the statement that living a feminist life might mean learning how to "come up against histories that have become concrete, histories that have become as solid as walls" (Ahmed 1). In the pages following she asks "From whom did I find feminism?" (Ahmed 4) and suggests "that feminist theory is something we do at home" (Ahmed 7). My mom, my mom, my mom. On page ten she states, "We use our particulars to challenge the universal " (Ahmed 7) and slightly before that, "Think of the kinds of experiences you have when you are not expected to be here" (Ahmed 7). I had been circling so often around my mother's story of how her time in Kwajalein changed her, treating it as a method of my research, until a trail began to appear delineating its shape clearly as the object of my research. We inherit ideologies from home in the form of family lore, and if you pepper into those stories that of a woman's liberation, perhaps you have a feminist family fable. That my mother's feminist family fable begins on a tropical island in the south pacific against a backdrop of the most catastrophic and long-term imperialist nuclear occupation of a foreign territory by the United States makes it so particular that it's easy to get stuck in the horrific novelty and miss the universal. But the particulars being so particular makes them a potent challenge to the universal sentimentality and assumption of

authority I had been attaching to my mother's origin myth as a concrete history with me as its recipient and keeper. So I treat this narrative like magazine paper for a collage, spreading it out on the table so I can go to work with scissors, inserting myself where I am not expected, between it and meaning, between it and history, between the narrative and whatever feeling it creates as an equivalency for truth. It is a sweaty, sweaty concept and very close to the skin. The conceptual work begins narratively, and her narrative descriptions register as a verbal-visual performance that the audience first accepts as the total of my mother's story, then structure of the interview changes, transforms my mother's story as an object for analysis, shifting the audience's orientation to it as historical, affective and political. My project is a world-building and world-deconstructing project, one which takes a world my mother handed me and uses it for parts I may need for my own. For Ahmed, a feminist life is a fundamentally genealogical project assembled through narrative time, and my "re-assembling of histories by putting them into words" (Ahmed 6) is salvage-work which performatively troubles the power dynamics within narrative and genealogy.

It's not that I don't believe my mother. It's that I think she's drawing conclusions about her experience in Kwajalein that can't be proven one way or another in service of a narrative impulse we all share to locate an origin of our difference. I'm less interested in the impossible proof and more interested in the shared impulse, a narrative reflex I also perform with similar contradictions, inconsistencies, and culpability. Her story about herself in Kwajalein is similar to an overarching guilty ache at the center of many of her stories: a survivor's guilt and an "inevitable loss" Foucault describes as the consequence of trying to definitely locate *\*any\** origin. Where my



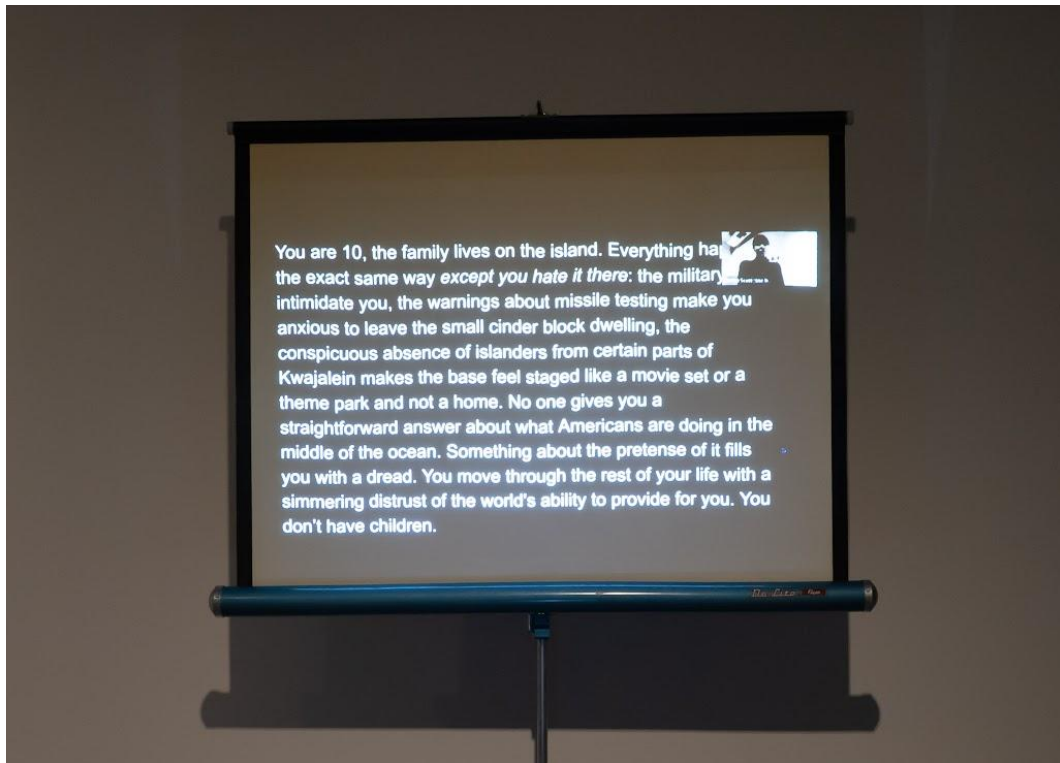
mother finds links on a chain, I see scientific, historical and political collisions to which she was an incidental by-stander who felt the proximity and shock of these impacts over the course of her lifetime as a great responsibility to make them meaningful. Swept up in the orchestration of highly provisional forces, she is a subject produced both historically and materially by the meeting of these forces who then uses the circumstances of her production as the basis of a lasting personal ontology. As one does! But my mind can't stop picking at the tidy equation at the heart of her version to unravel its purpose.

“Given their intimate appeal to a particular subject of feminist history, it is not surprising that both progress and loss narratives are also powerful in affective terms. They both construct a heroine that inhabits a positive affective state or negative affective state in progress or loss narratives respectively. Both require emotional attachment to the tale told in order to remain its subject and continue to safeguard or transform feminist meaning into heroic mode” Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*.

My inability to offer a definitive interpretation of my mother's story is owed perhaps to our unique relationships to time. My mom's need to trace her difference to a source, and her conviction which anchors that source in Kwajalein during the occupation, protagonizes her past self on a continuum which firmly centers her as an arbiter of the value of the present. I do not mean this unkindly, because as Hemmings writes it, this isn't a character flaw unique to her but a fundamental attribute of Western Feminist storytelling, a lineage my mother proudly passed down having raised us on *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, *Ms. Magazine* and *Mother Jones*. Most importantly, this narrative reflex offers a dramaturgical pay off due to the ontological role played by “*the future*” in each of her tellings. In the progress-oriented narrative, her daughters live in

improved conditions than she had growing up because her time in Kwajalein made her dare to better herself for her children, and we live to multiply and diversify those offerings. In the loss narrative, there was a sense of possibility and agency available to her on Kwajalein that valorizes that brave little girl and the choices she made from that point on, crystallized there in that moment of her first freedom. That time stands as an idealized time-and perhaps the extent to which it can be idealized points to how terrible things were for her before and after it until she could leave her father's house. This idealization becomes more irretrievable in the face of what we now know happened to the Marshallese then and since. This loss narrative also runs parallel to Anglo-European conceptions of a pre-colonial island paradise which can be affectively instrumentalized into what American cultural anthropologist Renato Rosaldo calls an imperialism nostalgia that laments that which it has destroyed and thus searches for it in other cultures. I am implicated in the return narrative, in my salvage mission through my mother's feminist family fable, to build from it a place for myself within a feminist fable of my own. But all of these narratives derive their payoff and punch from there being a future protagonist, which is the fundamental assumption that propels my mother's story and the exact point at which I balk. If I live with serious doubts about the ethical and actual viability of the next 50 human years on earth, how much use are these genealogical narratives? We are so swiftly altering the material conditions which produced people like me and my mother that I suspect that whoever, or whatever, comes next may not be very much like us. And perhaps they should not be if we want them to thrive in the ways we plainly do not. Maybe I'm trying to tell the story differently, trying to incohere its bonds as a story and devalue narratives wholesale

while throwing a millennial doomsday fit all at the same time. If we resist the temptation to recuperate the story's morals by tethering it to a recognizable future protagonist that reflects value back upon us, what can we find out about it? My interview attempts to stay in the present and look at what the story does as a site of gentle tug of war between a mother and daughter, between two storytellers and their audience, not as a torch being passed but as a fire (a campfire, a house fire, a controlled burn?) throwing light on anyone who turns to face it. This is a genealogical negotiation which blurs the boundaries between familial, political and temporal concerns as issues of contemporaneous, overlapping presence.



*Spooky Action at a Distance* Live Interview Performance from *The Name is a Guest of the Substance*, Herter Art Gallery April 2022

“The question is how fantasies of world-making agency are different from projects of world-changing agency, and what it means that those two different registers can point to really different conceptions of the political—as an imaginary, a conventional domain of contestation, or the scene of reproduction of life itself.” Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint*.

In her book *The Female Complaint* Lauren Berlant argues that most women are bargaining with inequitable power structures while fundamentally accepting them as they are. I think most of us are bargaining. Not just women, not just my mother or me. Berlant describes this bargaining process, formalized in *the complaint*, as central to how intimate publics are created which mobilize women affectively, historically and politically to leverage and justify these bargains. In *Spooky Action at a Distance*, I expand this theory to include members of my own audience regardless of gender or sex. It is difficult to experience the affective/historical/political categories discreetly since our personal lives are rarely separate from the political histories that shape the ways we see ourselves in the world. I try to make those distinctions possible to identify in my interview performance either as a felt sense or a recognizable structural shift for my audience by isolating the style of the inquiries and prompts to certain subject positions as indicated by textual and visual cues. My interview attempts to be an enactment of Berlant’s quote that “historical wounds always remain available for opening” (Berlant 9) so that by making such an opening in the performance I can denaturalize some of the narratively produced identities that pass through. In the performance-interview, an impossible moment is held under tension as an experiment with Berlant’s theory that “the politico-sentimental therefore exists paradoxically: it seeks out the monumental time of emotional recognition, a sphere of dreaming and memory, and translates that sense into an imaginary realm of possible acting, where agency is somehow

unconstrained by the normative conventions of the real as it presents itself; and it holds the real accountable to what affective justice fantasy has constructed” (Berlant 21). I’m not certain how to hold the “real accountable” in the creation of a temporary intimate public for my audience through the mobilization of my mom’s narrative, perhaps by making them aware of the shared, though unique to each, bargain that led to our being able to consider such dynamics in a gallery on campus. I can locate the “affective justice fantasy has constructed” clearly enough in my mother’s story. The shift in tone which takes place in Part Four of the interview is a declaration of my overall misgivings about historical and ontological teleologies, genealogical origin myths and the subjects they construct.

Now that the performance is over, I can tell what the performance did: it allowed me and my mother a misdirected reason to speak and keep speaking. It also allowed many of the members of the Studio Arts Department to gather for the first time in 2 years as a community, and it created a space for people outside of that community to overlap and meet. It allowed me to share something vulnerable and unfinished in a way that felt capacious enough to go through with. It was a venue to introduce my mother as someone I am actively proud of, even amidst our disagreements. It brought attention to an important and unattended history albeit on a small scale, to the only audience I have at this time. None of these accomplishments makes disproportionate (or any) promises about the future and that does not diminish them. Using Foucault’s notion of genealogy as a method of feminist inquiry allowed me to, in Ahmed’s words, “come up against histories that have become concrete, as solid as walls” (Ahmed 1) as “something that we do at home” (Ahmed 7), in this case my home on campus and in the

home I grew up in. And I finally know what Zoom is good for: making tesseracts, however temporary.

I did not intend to create an echo chamber with the history of the US empire in the Marshall Islands, the nuclear occupation which credibly marks the beginning of the Cold War, and the now-war of Russia's invasion of Ukraine with the imminent global destabilization such aggression risks. In the wake of World War 2, while attempting his own flight from fascist-controlled Europe, Walter Benjamin wrote of "the current amazement that the things we are experiencing are 'still' possible in the twentieth century" (Benjamin 257). According to Benjamin, this shock occurs when traumatic world events upend the popular belief that the arc of history bends naturally toward justice, that we are players in a theater of progress.<sup>3</sup> I think the fallacy of linear progress narratives has helped to drive us blindly closer to the brink. The writing *Who Am I to Feel so Free* in the sound installation *TransEchoLocations* asks how to think about justice without the progress narratives that got us in trouble in the first place. How do we think about justice without attaching to a future which denies the catastrophic loss predicted by the recent UN climate reports? How much will we need to forget and remember to continue living in a drastically altered life-world? Can scrambling these inherited relations in my artwork produce useful perspective shifts? What ethical configurations might temporarily surface if we think about justice and collaboration without relying on fixed histories and assumed futures as a way of keeping score? I end this chapter with a string of several people's thoughts:

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<sup>3</sup> Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, 1940. He said this before Martin Luther King Jr would popularize a similar-sounding, pre-existing aphorism in 1958, "the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice."

<sup>4</sup> "And the murdered strangers who fell under my flag, whose grandchildren are still falling, does the end of the world satisfy that debt?"

“In the After Times, there will be a temptation to forget that not everyone was saved. That there are many possible timelines, and we might still not be living in the best one. It will be painful and shameful to remember what we have collectively been through—but avoiding that shame and pain is precisely how we got here in the first place...The usual ways we understand time and come to terms with change are too flimsy to withstand the avalanche of possible futures collapsing all around us.”--Laurie Penny

“Ethical natural/cultural relations involve grappling with complex identities and histories rather than disavowing them”-Donna Haraway, *Companion Species Manifesto*

“Is there anything of value to be learned by living in the catastrophe of the given?” -C. A. Rich.

This internet stranger:



## CHAPTER 2

Remembering is a sensory experience, and the materials which call to and disrupt memories matter. The surface sheen of a photograph taken in the 90's, the diffuse amber glow of picture film developed in the 70's. The heft of a dolphin skull, requiring both hands to lift close to one's face. The presence of my actual speaking voice, intimate even through a tinny \$7 speaker. The oversaturated blue flicker of the super 8 footage, hand sanded and waxed oval plywood portal frames which make us see the squareness of the gallery wall as our vessel. The attempt to silently mouth Spanish words which only appear in print. Dark wooden tables from another decade. A Soviet Era globe.



## CHAPTER 3:

### EAST GALLERY: BIOLOGY, TAXONOMY AND KINSHIP



*Known and Unknown  
Terrains of 251 Stockbridge.*  
103” by 30” each.  
Archival digital print. 2022.  
The center print, a panorama  
of my studio floor, with  
accumulated marks presented  
as a record of the tenants  
listed here in reverse  
chronological order: Jessica  
Scott, Bibiana Medkova,  
Leah Burke, Nathanael  
Kooperkamp, Brendan  
McCauley.

“Over the past few decades, all kinds of scholars have shown that allowing only human protagonists in our stories is not just ordinary human bias; it is a cultural agenda tied to dreams of progress through modernization. There are other ways of making worlds.”  
Anna Tsing, *Mushroom at the End of the World*.

Most of the pieces in the East Gallery were developed as a different body of work to that in the West Gallery. The decision to display each collection alongside the other as one thesis was made as a way to de-emphasize some of the anthropocentric pain and confusion on display in the West Gallery in favor of a more *terrestrial* perspective on the same themes in exhibition title. I moved the human world off-center, but not out of view, and shifted the scale away from the historical or generational to point to different ways of

measuring presence and time. These pieces, too, are about my relations, in some ways more immediate due to their locality. If the West Gallery is about “over there”, the distance from a far-flung place on the globe to an artificial American living room, or the remoteness of the past brought forth into personal space, then the East Gallery is about tenancies, materials, strangeness and affinities already present, found right underfoot in the biomes of Amherst. These works take on the emotional charge of a fantasy or day dream, a kind of role play, even though the encounters and cohabitations are sincere, and in that sense, very real. But neither room is an escape from consequence, neither offered as a solution to the conundrums of the other. Each room is present in the other, sharing materials and representations, and both are motivated by a desire to survive in relationship with the world in step with our changing locations. Each work in the East Gallery offers a new location, a new set of physical relations, metaphors, and power

dynamics from which to imagine these encounters and their potential outcomes.

I haven't actually read much Haraway yet besides her *Companion Species Manifesto*. I read Anna Tsing's book *Mushroom at the End of the World* at the beginning of the pandemic when most of us here in Western Massachusetts were compelled outside of our homes to cope with new paranoias about indoor air. Two years after leaving NYC I'd finally



begun mushroom foraging, achieving a Western Massachusetts cliché and a Pioneer Valley developmental milestone that has no big-city equivalent. I wasn't only foraging at this time. I was also driven into bogs where I discovered thermogenic Skunk Cabbages and picked up lots of ticks. I crept into fields spied from the turn off to Highway 116 on my way to a favorite liquor store. I kept trying what somatic therapists on Instagram recommended when deprived of co-regulation opportunities in quarantine. Plunge my hands and feet into muck. Wallow like a pig, not a depressive. I got more ticks.

If these encounters had any positive effects then these effects registered as a source of new stimulation, not a substitution for human touch and casual classroom collegiality. My sensitivities were already heightened as part of my own portion of the global panic and I absorbed the richness of my immediate surroundings more than had been possible before, yet this one-sided eco-cruising did little to quell the overwhelming tics and pangs of mammalian withdrawal. I did not feel any reciprocation. What if I don't have the sensory organs to detect these reciprocities? What if I haven't been culturally predisposed to feel this kind of connection? I'm certain these connections and reciprocities exist. More and more science writing substantiates them. But personal proof of them may not come in the form of a feeling, and \*feeling\* something is a way I have been conditioned to register meaning. This alienation from the non-human world, an inability to feel my entanglement with it in ways that I can recognize, challenges my deep desires to feel at home while alive. The art-making processes and results on display in the East Gallery explore thresholds of this alienation, projection and enmeshment, using play and roleplay to foster curiosity about the space between these states without the threat of

failure which clings to romanticized or politicized notions of being unnatural in an idealized natural world.



*Armed & Asymmetrical*, multi-channel video installation, April 2022

It takes new viewers about 2 minutes to notice that my thick, pale human arm is not a sunflower stem in the three 6-minute video loops of *Armed & Asymmetrical*. Words that audience members used to describe this moment of sudden recognition include “jarring”, “weird” and “uncanny”. Once seen, the arm can’t be unseen and the viewer wonders at how they were ever able to overlook it at first, so front and center and out of place as it is. This insight into the limits of one’s own perception is useful and has become central to the piece, though it wasn’t an effect I sought when I took the footage. I walked into the field those days thinking about previous forced attempts to feel a part of the outdoor landscape, to claim a place among it, with outcomes that only displaced what was already there. I stood for hours face-to-face with human height flowers, thinking about how many metaphors projected onto non-human life fail to capture or actively obscure the reality of the organic subject serving in the metaphor. For example: my decapitation of the flowers in the videos has been read as violent, but I came to that act as

an imitation of what I thought other animals had done before me, judging by the half-eaten sunflower faces I saw strewn all over the field. Hunting blinds in trees facing the field made me suspect deer were the culprit. Would we describe the deer's actions in eating the flower as violent? Would we even describe the hunter as specifically violent? To the flower, this eating might signal success as an effective method of seed distribution, the result of thousands of years spent developing such an appetizing and well-advertised calorie bank as its defining feature. Regardless, the metaphor does nothing to help me understand the actual effects of my actions on the other organisms, and instead creates an anthropocentric moral blur. I explore that blur in my other actions which interrupt the imposter loops in the field. As I rehearsed absurd choreographies for how a person is said to become more embodied and more embedded, I felt the futility, arrogance and humor in my own gestures. I chewed and chewed and could not break down the fibers, let alone swallow. I thought about how there could be nothing more horribly embodied than eating something alive or thinking of oneself as nutrient dense flesh for another heterotroph, but I have yet to find that discourse in popular embodiment circles. I did relish the many unexpected sensations and reversals in the experience and I feel the video captures those well for my viewers. For much of each loop the horizon line spans over 3 monitors, interrupted by first person POV interstitials, each abrupt transition a forced ejection from the language of landscape into the inhabited gaze of the faceless interloper.

The empty space of the East Gallery is interrupted by 3 industrial-sized spools made of rough-hewn plywood. I spent the winter driving around urban junkyards in Western Mass and redemption centers in rural Vermont til I found the size I was looking

for at the right price: free. Standing at roughly three feet tall, each spool top hosts material studies at various stages of completion for tactile engagement. The spools were chosen as display surfaces as a foil to the traditional pedestal. Their popular use as backyard furniture invites an informal kind of close inspection of their contents as opposed to the detached loftiness of a pedestal which is code for Do Not Touch. Some things can only be learned through touch, some ideas only become real against the skin or in the palm of your hand. Each spool presents a glimpse into a different material world and its history for consideration. Clear glass chemistry vessels collected from a decommissioned lab on campus have been distorted through torch fire and the force of my breath then installed into the very surface of the table, highlighting the malleability of scientific instruments and inquiry over institutionalized dogma. On some of the vessels the hard shine of the clean glass is contrasted by a soot flocking, a soft matte of carbonized ash clinging to the surface of the glass tempting the transfer of the soot from glass to fingertip. On another spool, 3 vintage viewfinders and 3 custom reels rest in circular formation. As children we are taught to hold these objects to our eyes for a peek into minute backlit worlds and in the gallery that same score of instructions is implied by the very presence of the view masters and reels. The reels cycle through close ups of the alien jello and mold landscapes as snapshots of the process which produced the wall sized prints across the room. The third and final spool features a haphazard menagerie of mushroom casts in gummy silicone, amber beeswax and hard translucent resin. This spool corresponds to a nearby wall display of two progenitor mushroom molds flanked on each side by their various phallic offspring. Each mushroom has been cast in each material, the iterations offering comparison and contrast to each of its siblings. These

funky fungi and their arrangements suggest kinky reproduction, genealogical drift, and taxonomical ruckus. In these modest spool studies the act of touching, more so the *desire* to touch, is employed to disarm detached intellects and onboard the bored; touch as a functional interface between bodies and the ideas in my work.

The large hut structure of *Companion Piece* draws the eye further into the East Gallery, and the search for a door draws the body deeper into the room. The door is tucked counter-intuitively to the side, withheld from immediate view, requiring one to travel to the further corner of the gallery to understand the intended use of the piece. This feature contributes to an overall activation of the space as a setting for some kind of interaction. The speckled gray felt underlayment that forms the pillowy walls of the hut is a material used under wood flooring to muffle sound—it's made of recycled fibers as a way to recoup all possible profit from the scraps of other products, not unlike jello. Felt brings me to sediment, accrual, geological epochs: accretions of materials bound to each other through time and pressure under friction, layers forming a skin made of visible and separate strands. The roof of the hut is a combination of cheap landscaping bamboo and local forsythia branches harvested at night from the many bushes on campus. I welded the steel framing and scavenged most of the structural materials for the floor, ceiling and walls. A sign resting on a borrowed birdbath next to the door reads “there is room inside for you and a companion”.

The interior of the hut is dark, lush, plush and richly draped. A synthesizer tune by Vangelis, rife with nostalgic tones of the future-past, plays on a loop while a projection of my feet walking through 3” of black jello on a glass table plays on the silk ceiling. Viewers know to sit down on the inflatable provided, then lie back and let the

strange physics of this environment take hold. I often listened outside the hut. Installation companions actively confabulate about what they are watching. It confuses them and there are lots of giggles. The mysterious playfulness of the atmosphere invites connection through a somatic shift. I've felt it; the result of some kind of combination of lying on your back, feeling enclosed by curtains, tucked underneath a giant's walkway, while enveloped in a familiar tune (the original 1982 Blade Runner's "Love Theme" which registers as *something* most people have heard before but can't put a finger on), the heat of the projector making the air slightly thick like in a greenhouse. I don't mean to suggest that everyone finds these sensations universally pleasant. But enough people did for me to suspect that *\*something\** very specific was happening in that funny little room. I think of it as a reset of the somatic script for bodies in a gallery: watching, detached, eyes passing quickly over each wall, skimming labels. In that hut you are held in one place while the room fills in with unexpected sensory stimulus, meeting you where you lay. Whether or not anyone is making connections to the various "natural" and "unnatural" constructions of the hut and its theoretical breadcrumbs, my real goal in *Companion Piece* is to both soften and resensitize gallerygoers to each other through a disarming visit to a little corner of playful otherness.





The interior of the installation *Companion Piece* captured by a 360 camera, 2022.

## CHAPTER 4 RESOURCE ROOM

*The Name is a Guest of the Substance* also has pedagogical ambitions as a project concerned with where things come from, the historical, material and cultural conditions of their production, and how one might learn to see these complex influences in such a way that contributes to an ethics of care, adaptability and collaboration in survival. I felt that I could not casually mention genocides, colonial conquests and certain historical events in my project without giving my audience further context for those mentions and a place to direct their own learning afterwards. Nor did I want my very personal family art-work project to exclusively become an impossible history project, beholden to the methodologies, ethics and baggage of a totally different disciplinary inquiry in which I have not been trained. To these ends, the Resource Room was included in my thesis out of a sense of responsibility to the people I talk about in the art work, to the people I am talking to in my audience and out of a healthy respect for what Art can and cannot teach. I also had a personal need to stuff additional content which had influenced my artistic decisions or illuminated quirkier aspects of my practice \*somewhere\* in the thesis as a process potpourri. The Resource Room content included journalism on the current political climate and activism taking place in the Marshall Islands, a more thorough history of the atomic testing in the islands, a map of native territories and languages in California, an article on the recent creation of a written Iu Mien alphabet as a collaboration between a retired academic and the local Iu Mien community, DNA sequencing of the mold featured in my large prints, the military applications of dolphin

intelligence and the impact of Russian cultivation of our own native species of Sunflower.

The Resource Room is a curated snapshot of research-as-materials in the artwork, also gesturing at the literal sourcing behind it as well. Most of the physical objects in the West Gallery were borrowed: from my own house, studio or that of a friend's. The "made objects" were mostly found (as in the case of the organic bodies in *TransEchoLocations*) or made 50/50 from scrap/purchased plywood for *Portals/Portholes*. The tech was a mixture of purchased and borrowed. The East Gallery features more **stuff** and presented me with different ethical and practical challenges for sourcing said stuff. The industrial, social, and ecological processes which produce my often salvaged or recycled materials, along with the histories of the sites where my works occur, are frequently highlighted in my labeling or in my conversations about the work. By featuring the local UMass terroir<sup>5</sup> which helped produce the stuff, I hope to demystify my thrifty methods and invite my audience to deepen their experience of familiar materials, shared geographies, or overlooked relationships as new sites of investment into already available resources.

I sat in that Resource Room each of the 6 days that the gallery was open as its most dubious resource alongside other materials featured in the art. I originally planned this sit-in residency as a method for engagement borrowed from social practice, but funding for the gallery's work-study students had been drastically reduced over the past fiscal year so if I wanted the gallery to be open long enough for people to actually see the work I would have to shore-up the lack of available labor myself. In this way, my

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<sup>5</sup> garbage dumps, local flora, retiring staff who surrendered their own material hordes to me, decommissioned chemistry labs full of glass vessels, abandoned engineering trailers with unlocked doors, large foam core signs recycled from the UMCA and \*some\* Home Depot.

presence in the gallery was not purely performative or symbolic. Each morning before opening I would do small notes on the artwork: check air pressures, adjust volumes, and fix anything that had shifted over the past 18 hours. I loved being alone with the work in the space. It strikes me that this is an unusual opportunity in the visual arts where the expectation is to walk away after opening and to rely on someone else's housekeeping till de-install. My previous career producing my own low-budget theatrical work, work where I was on hand for every show to do something I couldn't get someone else to do, made staying in the gallery each day, only leaving to teach, feel homey to me. I sat at a narrow table in the back of the Resource Room, a highly visible staging I hoped was not intrusive. I didn't post any signage indicating I was the author of the thesis work though I did cheerfully point out the artist statement to anyone who walked in.

I thought I would get writing done during this week. I didn't. People talked to me a lot, including the work-study students, the gallery director, walk-ins from on and off campus, old friends from NYC who made the trek. They asked questions. I explained the art to a degree I thought was useful but not overly prescriptive. People volunteered their own experience with the questions I was asking in the work. It was a pleasure. I received a lot of useful and encouraging feedback I never would have heard otherwise. Once shared, art works take on their own lives in people's heads. The learning was an exchange and seem to happen with ease as long as the doors remained open<sup>6</sup>. I heard "It's a lot" a lot.

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<sup>6</sup> Someone known to lurk in UMass spaces also used the doors being open this particular week as an opportunity to be a nuisance resulting in a work-study student feeling harassed and calling the police. Now the gallery policy is for the doors to remain locked regardless of operating hours. That reaction, which rightly prioritizes the safety of our student staff in one of the few ways the gallery can afford to, makes me think of who the *community* is for, the many ways we do or do not people that word on campus and how the gallery is nonetheless further marginalized by becoming more private and exclusive.

## CONCLUSION

*It is a lot.*

Because it's a lot, my goal is for the work to be accessible in multiple registers for a critical academic audience, for an audience unfamiliar with the relevant theories or histories who nonetheless enjoys the immediate physical engagement of many of the works, to the novelty seeker off the street who may only be able to offer 7 minutes of casual focus. While I do think the entire project rewards close attention and repeated viewings, there are several types of sensory, intellectual and narrative entry points to choose from in the exhibit that each ask for different commitments of time within the space.

This work is concerned with presence in the present, offering an account of the present moment not only as a marker of time but as shared *time-in-space* with certain histories, artifacts and bodies as objects of direct experience. To do this, I blend reconstructive memory practices such as archiving, forensics, genealogy, natural history taxonomies, and their accompanying aesthetics, into materially-anchored sensory investigations of overlooked histories. *The Name is a Guest of the Substance* utilizes varied conceptions of kinship to challenge systems of knowledge production built on rigid, discrete categories, thereby asking the viewer to experiment with new ways of identification. The practical and intellectual interdisciplinarity of my practice brings together seemingly unrelated topics, such as post-colonial identity within mixed raced families and humanity's contradiction-laden ties to the non-human world into a somatic

and discursive practice. My artistic inquiries are embodied, immersive world-making pursuits which prioritize multivalent affinities and shifting subjectivities over any reliance on a definitive historical location or essentialist site of origin as a claim to narrative authority. The title of the exhibit lays out an approach for confronting the construction of divisions that do violence to humans, non-humans, cultures, and environments, while still acknowledging that these divisions and the categories they enforce have personal and strategic meaning. They structure our thoughts and behaviors in ways it can be quite fruitful to disorganize. My goal is to frustrate the dominant narratives which organize us into strict power relationships, and through this frustration thereby enhance our ability to recognize and navigate the potentials of a turbulent and emergent present.

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**PHOTOGRAPH OF THE ARTIST**



Jessica Scott in the East Gallery of *The Name is a Guest of the Substance*. Photo by Adam Salberg.