

# experimentations with the archive: a roundtable conversation

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La Vaughn Belle, Zayaan Khan, Holly A. Smith  
and Julietta Singh

This roundtable took place via Google Hangouts in October 2019 and was moderated by Julietta Singh. The conversation was initiated to think through how artists, academics, seed librarians and archivists engage the notion of 'archive' across geographies and temporalities. This form of virtual engagement left space for multiple levels of conversation on the archive and archival practice. The purpose of the discussion was to think through the politics of collection, preservation and the embodiment of the archive.

Without making the notion of the archive appear banal, the discussion provides insight into the uses and manifestations of the archive for each of the participants. The conversation traverses questions of archival practice in South Africa, the Virgin Islands and the Black American South, thereby offering a wide scope of geographic engagement with how lingering remainders of slavery and colonialism become part of the soil and landscape. In this experimental dialogue, the participants subvert linear situated notions of archives and archival practice through providing insight into seeds and seed libraries as a form of survival; the visual and material archives of dirt, ruins and abandoned buildings; leaky body archives as experimentation; and collaborative 'memory work'. The participants in this roundtable bring together new connections, ways of reading, seeing and experiencing praxis, theory and the embodiment of the archive from a feminist, queer and decolonial perspective.

*Transcription note: The conversation has been slightly edited to allow for the multiple engagements and responses of the panelists to exist alongside each other. Side comments, responses and suggestions have been left in the text and appear in smaller font aligned to the right. Above various sections in the text, we have added key words that function as an index of the conversation.*

**JULIETTA:** It's such a pleasure to be in conversation with all of you! I've been inspired by reading your work, watching videos online, and looking at amazing art images in anticipation of this conversation. So, let me begin with a thank you for all of the energy and enthusiasm you've produced for me!

I wanted to begin with a short passage from Holly's keynote address, titled 'Radical love: documenting underrepresented communities using principles of radical empathy' (Smith, 2018). She writes that:

Archivists are not apolitical, passive keepers of dead records of the elite. Archivists actively shape history and memory by what we choose or do not choose to collect, and the meaning and context of archives can shift with time and memory. We should see ourselves as one of many stewards of records in collaboration with many stakeholders. (*ibid.*)

*I wonder, as archivists, artists, activists, and workers, how you see yourselves 'shaping history and memory by what you choose or do not choose to collect'?*

## **archives | visibility | seeds | whole selves**

**LA VAUGHN:** I went to two conferences last week that were directed around the theme of archives. One thing that struck me in many of the presentations was the visuality of the archive. Presentation after presentation was full of sepia-toned lists. They corralled peoples and cultures into numbers and data for colonial purposes. So much is lost in that process. My work is about finding an alternative visuality. I also start with the materiality that is not often found in museums or libraries. I look at fragments of pottery in the dirt, coral stones in the ruins and abandoned buildings.

**ZAYAAN:** I would love to see your archiving @La Vaughn!

I feel as if the shape and memory of the collecting I do is so multifold and multitudinous that it becomes another node or swelling with infinite ways to unfold. Of course, perhaps because the collecting I do—with seeds and naturalist items for various pantry uses—are ancient practices, close to the lines of our evolution too, that I merely stand on the shoulders of giants. But it works according to what we call ancient futures, particularly with the seeds, a future beyond our lives. In this way it is very much shaped but in a movable vessel or form. 'Ancient futures' is how we began to understand the work we do as a collective, myself and two friends from Mexico and India, working towards sovereignty from an ancient understanding, through food, to tease out the way colonialism has hacked and crushed our cultures—towards a future liveable with deep joy.

**LA VAUGHN:** I like the concept of 'ancient futures' very much. It speaks to how archives are about the pastpresentfuture. They affect all temporalities.

**HOLLY:** I truly think of collection development policies as inherently political. We as archivists and ‘memory workers’ (a phrase I love, from my comrade colleagues Skyla Hearn and Jarrett Drake) make decisions on what we choose to collect based on our institutional goals, missions and a variety of other things. We also cannot possibly collect everything in one repository, nor should we. I just always want to be sure I don’t let my own personal biases or ideas dictate a particular narrative for the Spelman Archives. I also think it’s a bonus to my training that I can bring my perspective as a Southern black woman and be my ‘whole’ self in this position, and ensure to tell diverse stories of diverse women at Spelman, and any community I work with. I love what you all are saying about the ‘visuality’ of archives.

**ZAYAAN:** (Love memory workers! Thank you for that)

**JULIETTA:** La Vaughn, I love how you describe yourself as ‘making visible the unremembered’ ... One of the provocations of that statement is a question about what has been seen as ‘worth’ remembering. So here, the fragments of pottery in the dirt, or the ‘naturalist items for pantry uses’, as Zayaan says, become reinvented not so much at the level of what they are, but at the level of what we see as of-value ...

**HOLLY:** My pleasure Zayaan!  
I wish we were all in a room together LOL

I really love that too La Vaughn

**ZAYAAN:** Me too :')

**LA VAUGHN:** Yes, I agree. First and foremost, archive work is about what we (me, she, he, we) deem as valuable.

**HOLLY:** It makes me think of the embodied archives, as my sister friend and dance prof at Spelman Julie Johnson would say. I think about the ways historically marginalised communities are not often present in written archives, from benign neglect to intentional erasure. So, our ancestors often had to sing, dance, create our stories, even allowing their physical bodies to be the archives of their memory. That’s what the Spelman Archives seeks to acknowledge—not just the more traditional, written records we have, but the ways black women have embodied our stories, and those of the communities we live in.

**JULIETTA:** Yes! I love this idea of embodied archives! I recently wrote an experimental (failed, mutinous, leaky) body archive, one that tries to re-member those aspects of the body that we’ve been trained to disavow. I wanted not only to think about the logics that produce some bodies as valuable and others as discardable, but also to invite into the archival frame those aspects of our bodies that we have learned to ignore, conceal, or banish from the archive, from what constitutes

history. Holly, can you say a bit more about this tension between “bringing your own biases” to the archives and being your ‘whole self’?

**LA VAUGHN:** I was curious, Holly, how could your work not be subjective? For me part of the power in archive and memory work is the subjective. It is ferally stating this is mine (too). It’s upending the objectivity that the archive often presents itself to operate from. It’s thinking about the archive as a collection of subjectivities.

**HOLLY:** Luckily, being at Spelman, I feel gratified not having to justify why documenting black women is important. My life and experiences (personal and professional) can be an asset in working with different communities. But I also know as ‘woke’, as I like to think I am, I also have to examine any preconceived notions I might have around gender, class, etc. ... and just to be self-aware as possible so I don’t replicate systems of oppression on the very communities I want to support. Does that make sense?

**ZAYAAN:** Yes Holly, it is very much a constant check-in and experiential work

**JULIETTA:** I love this notion of a ‘collection of subjectivities’!! And yes, Holly, absolutely. I find this haunting notion of what is always elided by and through our political practices crucially important ...

**LA VAUGHN:** I am curious about challenge. What kinds of preconceived notions?

**HOLLY:** Thanks La Vaughn, I guess my main thing is to be self-aware enough to realise I can still carry unconscious bias or ideas that can be challenged. In this ‘woke’ culture we can all be lovingly called out and learn from each other in a constructive way.

**ZAYAAN:** Where I’m from, disparities are so stark that one can never ever be woke enough. Privilege entrenches us to our very DNA, so it’s a constant packing and unpacking but a beautiful learning and hopefully towards a self-betterment.

**LA VAUGHN:** It makes me think about what kinds of preconceived notions, Holly. For example, I work a lot around archives with slavery and colonialism. Once I had the opportunity to go into an unnamed museum basement and see some of the archives from the Virgin Islands that had never been put on display anywhere. I of course expected to see a whip. I saw chains, some instruments of torture. But what surprised and affected me the most were the intimate objects, a hand-braided hammock, an intricately carved gourd, those things made me realise that I had never considered those experiences of the enslaved. I have never thought: What did they sleep on? What did they drink with? I had a preconceived notion as labourer, sufferer, fighter, survivor, but not someone who slept and drank like me.

**HOLLY:** That's a great point La Vaughn, and that captures the kinds of things I'm thinking about.

## intimacy | unremembered | living | touch

**JULIETTA:** 'The archive' is typically thought of as a collection of artifacts, and as a space somewhat removed from everyday life. A body that is bounded and preserved, kept away from the chaos of the world ... But the archive for many folks who engage it is often also a deeply intimate space ... *As I've combed through your work, I've kept wanting to ask each of you over your own intimacies with the archive ... which is another way of asking over how your engagement with archives, or the alter-creation of your archives, might shape or shift the feelings and practices of your everyday lives.*

La Vaughn, you already begin to answer this question by the way that the museum basement brought you to questions you had never asked before ... And I often think about how the archive—however we define this term—can produce new desires, alternate questions, other ways of seeing and living ...

**LA VAUGHN:** I thought a lot about your question of the intimacies in working with the archive. There are so many ways to approach it. First, I live in a place that has a lot of symbolic violence all around us. I can see out my window right now a remnant of a sugar mill where people worked pushing cane stalks through. There was someone's job to stand with a machete as the other person did this so that when (not if) their hand got stuck you would be able to cut it off quickly. These mills are everywhere among our beautiful landscape. What does it take to live in this? It takes a lot of unremembering.

**JULIETTA:** I love how you frame your work as 'making visible the unremembered ...'. *Can you say more about this? To me, it seems profoundly intimate ...*

**HOLLY:** That is a very powerful visual La Vaughn. And an excellent point about unremembering ... It makes me think of the need to expand what we mean about archives ... not just the physical written records, but landscapes, bodies, memories. ... How do we support communities and tell stories in equitable ways?

**JULIETTA:** I want to return to this question of what we mean when we say 'archives'. ... But let's stay for a minute on the question of intimacy ... Partly, I'm thinking about Zayaan's amazing experiments with the natural world around her. Can you reflect a bit on your particular archival objects and practices, Zayaan?

**ZAYAAN:** Here I'm thinking on the Seed Biblioteek, a place for sharing stories of seed both inside and outside of cultivation. In these times, seed has become synonymous with farmers and

gardeners and of course these huge oligarchical multinational organisations ... but seed is for everyone, seed is everywhere and so closely enraptured with our very evolution that it becomes invisible. So, I began archiving specific practices with seed—seed as music in instruments, seed as play, seed as fashion in jewelry and beading, seed as art and so on. Also creating media content using these objects and practices, sounds pieces, artworks, recipes and so on. When it comes to food practice, I think in terms of the macro and micro, supermicro. To work with food, with bacteria and yeasts, this is really a multispecies practice. Creating a pantry becomes the archive for all these microorganisms to be viewed and smelled and tasted, shared with others. It's an unfolding story that starts with the producers who grow these products or fishers who harvest these products, and so on.

I am so curious because the archiving I do is more collective and alive than what I am assuming everyone else does. It is movable and seasonal and living, basically. It is very intimate on many layers as there is hyper care against temperature flux, against fungi, against invisible insect eggs. There is a lot of spiritual practice to create ash through smoke and fire to protect seeds in ancient ways. Intimate also because yes it does funnel through me and I am careful which seeds I share, which stories I share, and where the seeds go. All based on a strict political endeavour to break laws preventing us from sharing seeds and that regard Africa as a country and to be careful to not engage and 'entertain' whiteness or patriarchy, particularly in the urban centres. The intimacy is also about curation and research and of course the fact that they are homed within my home, private and sacred yet also strangely public.

Selection of particular items is also very intimate, almost a coded intimacy. Sometimes I will collect say, kelp, for ash, but also for instruments or a storage element or tool of some kind. Maybe really just because of its beauty and it leaves the beach and becomes a story unto itself outside of its traditional home. Sometimes it's seed that others would not regard as necessary to save or care for, seed to be used crushed to make dye or as sounds inside an instrument.

**JULIETTA:** Yes! The living archive is very clear in your work, and very powerful! Part of what is so compelling about Holly and La Vaughn's work, too, is that it also emerges as so profoundly alive. Each of you culls from what has been deemed dead, and lifts it up (from the basement or the soil) to offer us forms of life that have been stamped out from on high. I see so many connections among what you each do.

**ZAYAAN:** Yes, I can see that. There is a lot of work around slavery here, a lot of archiving, a lot of healing that's needed and a lot lot lot of unknown and unseen and unfelt burial grounds beneath the city. The Cape is the seat of colonialism in South Africa, and from its earliest days slavery was a part of that. On top of that, indigenous peoples were cruelly hunted, a silent genocide occurred that is not part of the collective consciousness of the city, as well as European diseases wreaking catastrophic havoc on local populations, particularly smallpox. Still to this day graves are uncovered buried under pavements in the city, unknown or unlisted skeletons exposed, often mass graves. Sometimes it was because farmers uncovered graves on their land, dug them up and





A pantry becomes the archive  
Source: Courtesy of Zayaan Khan

dumped them in one area, other times it was due to finding quick ways to dump bodies. This legacy was simply buried, the city grew and grew and we still don't have effective means of handling these situations when they arise.

**LA VAUGHN:** Yes, I think first it's about positionality. It is not only the coloniser who has unremembered. The colonised have too. Sometimes this is a part of the process of dealing with trauma. It's not a unilateral process, so I try to make visible that process. What happens when you look for what they want you to forget sometimes leads you to things you too want to forget. I think one of my works that best illustrates this is my *Cuts and Burns* series.

**ZAYAAN:** Yes, looking at it now ...

**LA VAUGHN:** In that series I was trying to make visibility around resistance. Using the cuts and burns in paper as a way to thinking about resistance tools that were used in every major rebellion. However, when I first showed that work, someone put their hand on me and asked if I was okay. They were commenting on the fact that people cut and burn themselves when they experience pain, and here I was making whole walls of that experience. It was not the intellectual framework I had imagined, but it came out in other ways. That taught me something for sure. The work captured my intellectual framing, but accessed a very intimate space as well. In addition to of course the psychological pain of being a colonised being, my mother was dying during that time. I normally don't think of my work as expressive in that way. But there it was.

**JULIETTA:** I love that this prompted a gesture of touch, and a question: *are you okay?* Because, of course, the colonial cuts and burns are also deeply resonant in the body, in your body, in our bodies, whether or not we are ourselves cutting and burning ...

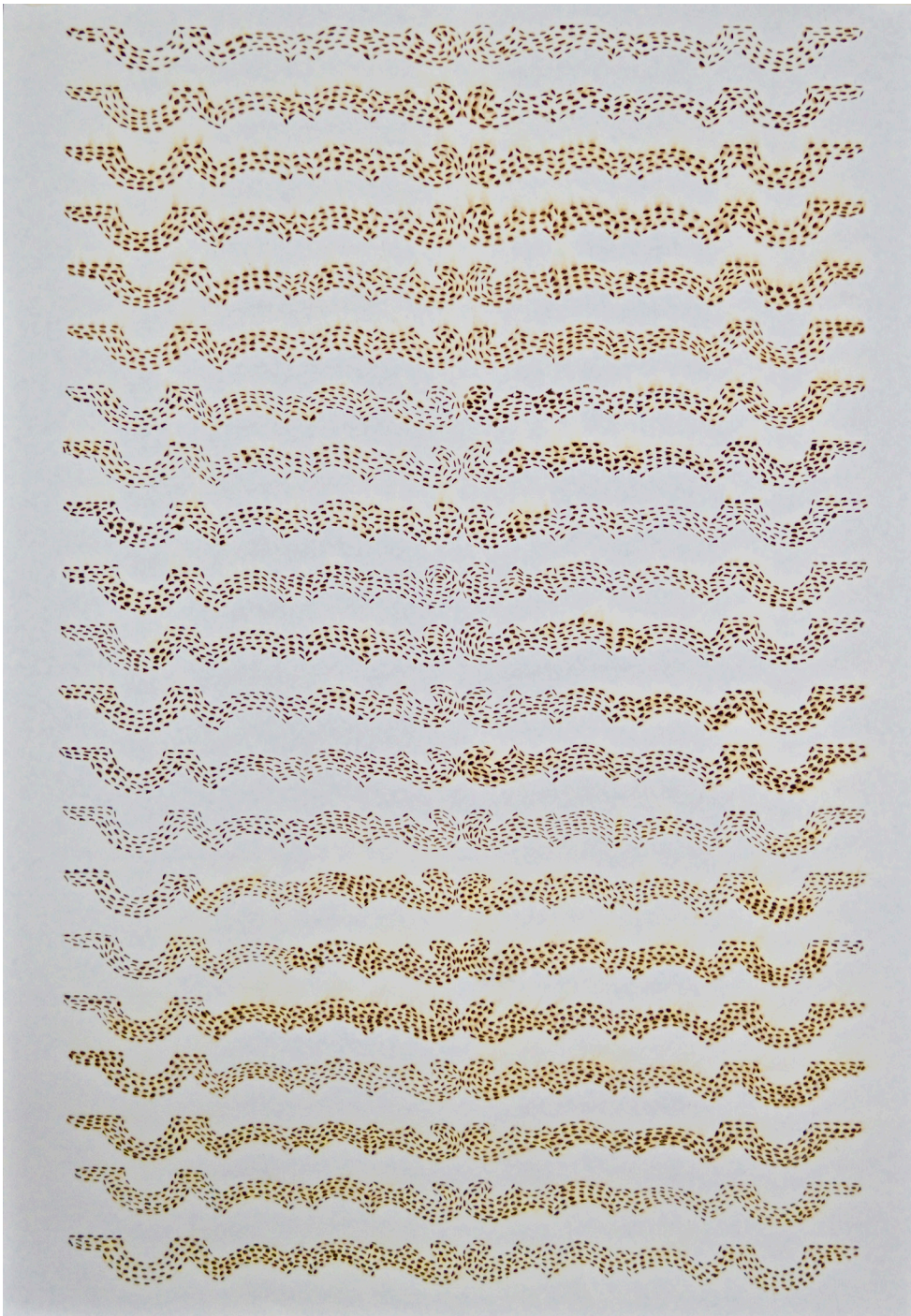
**LA VAUGHN:** I'm curious if you all think that accessing that and finding ways to archive interiority is a part of what you do?

Perhaps even as a way to decolonise the archive, which often focuses on the exterior body for capital value—at least in the colonial context. One of the ways to decolonise the archive is by first understanding the value system that created it, understand why certain documents were made, what myths were being crafted in what is being framed inside the photograph. And then look outside the frame, sometimes you are confronted with an emptiness, huge gaps and silences. There is a pain in that. But I think that decolonising the archive is about reconstruction, speculative fiction, it's a little conjuring, a little witchy, it's about possession.

**JULIETTA:** YES! This is a perfect way to return to Holly's question about what constitutes an archive ...

I've sensed a lot of tension within archival studies from archivists who do not necessarily approve of the more capacious modes of invoking archives.





*Cuts and Burns (ledgers series\_003)*, 2018, La Vaughn Belle  
Source: Courtesy of the artist

**HOLLY:** Yes to both of you!!

**LA VAUGHN:** Like when Zayaan talked about care of seeds, I never thought of that. However, anyone who has ever tried to grow anything will know care is very important in that process.

### **mothering | gardens | libraries | coloniality**

**JULIETTA:** I wrote a book called *No Archive Will Restore You* (Singh, 2018), which began as a kind of reflection on the drive toward the archive that was so much a part of my formal training as an academic. As La Vaughn suggests above, the notion of the archive that I inherited was very much linked to capitalism, to extraction, to upward mobility. And I was not only skeptical of the archive, I also feared it. I set out to make an experimental archive of my body, which has very little ‘value’. I wanted to write about the blood, shit, detritus of the body ... To gather the things that leak from it, or have been deposited in it, or that pass through it. When a friend read an early version of the book, she said: ‘This isn’t really about archives at all’. And this left me wondering over how archives, and the very notion of the archive, might still (always, constitutively?) exist under capture ...

What is an archive? What constitutes the archive? I think what unites us all here is a profound investment in something we can collectively call decolonial archives.

**HOLLY:** I would LOVE to read that

**ZAYAAN:** Can we read that Julietta??

**LA VAUGHN:** I read it. It was amazing!

**HOLLY:** Not to derail us, but I’d love for us to do this in person sometime soon just putting a pin in that for now

**JULIETTA:** Oh, thank you all!! And thanks for reading, La Vaughn! I’m using this illustration not to pump my work, but to ask what it means to pervert these notions of the archive, to re-make, or re-craft them ... To invent them, and to experiment with them ...

**ZAYAAN:** Yes I will seek it out, I am intrigued to read :)

Pinning too Holly! Just to answer from before: My learning and understanding of archives is also nostalgic, my mother was a librarian at the school I attended as a child, I haven’t been taught it but it emerged through necessity.

The way I work is from a precolonial ideology—without romanticising—but working with colonialism as apocalypse, working through it to emerge with solution or defiance but specifically through healing and recognition of trauma. It's very much an activism that is severely lacking and when working through and with and from indigenous knowledge (which has become super trendy), this is vital. And so, as an example, the seeds are in a library and not the colonial or capitalised seed BANK—and even though library is in itself a child of modernity, the notions and understandings and nostalgia embedded within 'library' allows it to be something much more approachable, decentralised, tangible, amenable, accessible. These are notions we have to constantly navigate in South Africa where apartheid is still so alive.

**LA VAUGHN:** There were a lot of things that it made me think about. When you talked about the body as an archive through motherhood, I often think about that as the mother of three children. I'm looking at repositories all around me. And I also catch glimpses of my own mother, her voice, her smile, just a gesture she would do.

**HOLLY:** Julietta that sounds exactly like the type of conversations that need to be had in archival circles and our professional organisations. ... I feel like archival training/theory (at least in the US, which is where I've been trained) can be very traditional and colonial in intentional/unintentional ways ... it makes me go back to our conversations about unremembering/unlearning/re learning new ways of thinking and conceptualising ... I work in archives with physical documents, but as a black women who grew up in the south my grandparents—their homes, memories, food, bodies—are archives, sites of memories that deserve the same respect and reverence. That is beautiful La Vaughn.

**LA VAUGHN:** Colonialism as apocalypse makes me think of all the shows like *The Walking Dead* (2010–present) and how there was a need to tap into another kind of knowledge.

**HOLLY:** It makes me think again about these concepts of radical empathy and the work and frameworks you all are talking about here. Outside of 'traditional' archival spaces and learning. I recently lost my aunt, so these memories are also fresh in my mind.

**JULIETTA:** La Vaughn, we should work on maternal archives!!

**JULIETTA:** Zayaan, I love this vital distinction between library versus bank. SO crucial to global food politics and to the ways we think, and name, and practice everyday acts of living. The library is really interesting to me ... I used to live down the street from the Cornish Library in Winnipeg, Canada, where I grew up. I loved the smell of that place, the atmosphere ... But I was afraid of the vastness of the knowledge that it contained. I used to check out piles of books and leave them by my bedside, never reading them, just having them near. I always thought this desire and restraint was a fear of not being able to know enough ... And now, suddenly, I wonder if it was an early resistance to what was left out of that vast collection ...

**ZAYAAN:** Julietta I have this feeling about the library too, this beautiful intimacy but also strange idea of foreign. Maternal archives 😊

**JULIETTA:** Thank you for the affirmation! With a mother as a librarian, you may have had greater ease into the world of 'knowledge' ...?

**LA VAUGHN:** It makes me think about a project for a memorial I recently did that contrasted a garden that the enslaved might have kept with a colonial revival garden that was about collecting 'exotic' plants from the places of the 'other' and ordering them. Curious what you think of different kinds of gardens as archives. I'm thinking for example of my mother's and grandmother's gardens that didn't have this linearity and ordering. It was okay to have haphazardness, meaning gardens that evolve based on what we eat and spit out. What we use to heal with, what we spice our food with.

**LA VAUGHN:** I'm down for working on maternal archives!

**JULIETTA:** I'm thinking of Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983) and Jamaica Kincaid's provocations in *My Garden (Book)* (1999), where she plants a garden and finds that she has unwittingly planted the shape of her homeland, Antigua ...

**ZAYAAN:** Hoooo yes, gardens we can unpack and unpack, they are hyper political sites. There are many stories in the South African context where apartheid created global trade embargoes but not funnily enough for botany and our national botanical gardens. So many people (and non-humans) were forcibly removed to create these picturesque spaces of utopian ideals, rolling, expansive lawns and beds of indigenous beauties, basically plants stolen and exported for shows and global trade, creating such hype and hyper wealth, but only for white men and with zero acknowledgment of where the knowledge actually came from. The system is still very much based on this. I digress, however, here a lot of the gardens are based on this imperial notion of care, it's strange but so many of the 'granny gardens' and 'granny plants'—all from women of the global majority—are of this idea of an ideal, a strange colonial ideal. Still today.

**JULIETTA:** Zayaan, didn't you work at a colonial garden?????

**ZAYAAN:** I did Julietta, what a trip it was. Incredible beauty, incredible wealth. Much enforcing invisibility.

**LA VAUGHN:** I feel that the entire Caribbean landscape is this. So much of what people imagine in our landscape is not from here. The colonialists burned the forests and bush when they came. They brought so many plants from elsewhere. I would love to know more about the granny garden please.

**ZAYAAN:** One example about this idea of granny garden is that in 2012 the farmworker strikes followed swiftly on from

the Marikana Mineworker massacre, a prelude to the Fees Must Fall student movement (as many other springs around the world), and we went and did follow up research to record how these farmworker strikes happened. We went to an area called De Doorns, 'The Thorns' in the grape country in a big valley with mountains surrounding us. Many of the farmworkers stayed in new developed land, new as in razed land with tin houses quickly erected or brick houses done in the cheapest fashion as social housing. No roads and minimal infrastructure of water and electricity (not fully installed). But there were gardens, tiny of course, plants planted and propped up against rickety makeshift gates, sides of houses—yet all plants from Europe. De Doorns is in a beautiful valley, bulbs and indigenous plants—many endemic. Even this landscape in general—hyper endemism and such beauty that doesn't exist anywhere else. But there were all the geraniums, bright coral and typical indoor plants. What was amazing was how these gardens popped up, women sharing cuttings and creating different palettes from the same plants. Small, just a start but inherited from an imperial way of knowing garden. Even as indigenous peoples.

Now back to Hollys q 😊

### liveable future | collaboration | ancestors | pantries

**LA VAUGHN:** I was curious about a question that Julietta asked in our prompt that we haven't quite touched on yet. The concept of collaboration. How do we see collaboration in our practice working with the archives? Sorry if I jumped the gun!!!

**JULIETTA:** Yes! Let me pose it here by returning again to the resonances of Holly's opening quote: *What is the importance of collaboration for your practice, and for the creation of decolonial archives? And who do you see as the 'stakeholders' of this critical and loving these archives?*

**LA VAUGHN:** For me, I have developed relationships with historians and archivists that help me think through things. They help provide historical context to things I'm wondering or curious about. Oftentimes it is difficult to ask these questions of the archives themselves. You need to think through things with someone who has a certain level of expertise and has spent more time in them as well. Because colonial archives are often indexed in their logic, it's almost necessary to have those kinds of relationships. Those kinds of garden make me think of the figurines that we collect on living-room tables depicting European leisure, gentleman in top hats, women strolling, a particular kind of seduction of colonial desire.



**JULIETTA:** I'm thinking also of Saidiya Hartman's work, and her practice of 'critical fabulation' ... She's mining the archives for traces of lost black girls, and in finding fleeting references to them, she creates their stories and brings them into history. But this is not solitary work; she is summoning them, working with them, these girls that were forced out of history. This, too, is a kind of collaboration.

**HOLLY:** I always want to be sure to collaborate and not co-opt relationships or stories! I think this goes back to convictions of personal accountability and equitable partnerships. In the radical empathy framework there are many stakeholders—not just the researchers using the archives, but the communities represented in records, communities impacted, even the ancestors. I want to personally be an ethical, equitable archivist and also build genuine relationships with diverse partners. I love the work you all are doing, and I think the term 'memory work' is what unites us. You don't have to be a trained archivist to care and be a steward of archives.

**ZAYAAN:** Collaboration is hyper important—seeds and pantry are towards a liveable future through a liveable present, unlocking and evoking ancient knowledge that is extinct, forgotten, reclaimed. It would not exist without collaboration. People travel far and wide with their seeds, they leave their home and donate their entire collection. They inherited an instrument or jewelry made of seed and pass it on to the library. It also depends on others to perpetuate seed, to collect seed, to test seed. Farmers, gardeners, fishers, curios folk, artists, scientists, sometimes government, organisations ...

Decolonial is difficult because it is so embedded in who we are, in the very landscape. We come from a particular neoliberal context and to unhinge from that is unstructuring our very cultures. So we work through coloniality. For some seeds to leave their home and meet me all the way down at the south south south, this is a result of coloniality. But I digress, I would say that these archives qualify as decolonial, especially if our purpose initially is against what government and corporations deem as legal and right. It is to challenge but also overthrow this notion, to defiantly make visible that which they have deemed invisible and unvaluable—towards invaluable.

**HOLLY:** side note—I also found *Dispossessed Lives* (Fuentes, 2016) a very powerful book on archival silences, Julietta

**LA VAUGHN:** But on another note, I feel that I am in collaboration with ancestors and spirits. I've never stated it this way before, but that is what the people in the archives are. I feel that I am in conversation with them, examining the clues they have left behind, maybe imagining they left them for me to find and unravel, tell their story. Sometimes the only way to access this is through embodiment, being in the spaces they were, re-enacting their labour. When I was renovating my studio, a house whose first registered owner is from 1777, it made me think a lot about what these houses meant to them. The beadwork done by hand in the rafters, that kind of labour and care





Collaboration is hyper important—seeds and pantry are towards a liveable future through a liveable present  
*Source: Courtesy of Zayaan Khan*

demonstrated a love and pride in their homes that was a stark contrast to the abandonment that is often associated with the vernacular houses.

**ZAYAAN:** Yes to Saidiya Hartman's work, it is, speaks to the idea of spiritual collaboration through practice which I touched on earlier.

**HOLLY:** Not to be too hokey—but this conversation is an example of the power of collaboration, the strength of interdisciplinary work, art, critical thinking.

**LA VAUGHN:** Zayaan, I love this concept 'we work through colonialism'. I sometimes don't like the term 'decolonial'. It feels like an unraveling. Although I do think that the process of the 'un' and the 'de' are important one to embark upon you are ultimately forced to ask questions like: How can I take the freckles off my face? How can I take away my desire? These questions are a reckoning with the fact that coloniality is part of our DNA not just a social conditioning. Yet and still, the process is necessary. It is only through our attempts can we hope to arrive at an alternative.

**ZAYAAN:** How can I take the freckles off my face? Exactly, I love that. To decolonise seems like there is a lot of unworking to do before we can even begin to do the work we wish to do, freely. To uncolonise is impossible as it is so embedded in our cultures and it really is a unravelling on our dependency with neoliberalism—not to say that capitalism is equated with colonialism, so much trade occurred before colonialism especially on the African continent I mean—it's more this understanding of accepting where we are now and working to unhinge ourselves from the inheritance that colonialism has become. In South Africa it's navigating through colonial oppressions, both Dutch and the violence of British Imperialism then through apartheid. It feels seemingly impossible but a lot has become exposed in the last years. I work through this concept of ancient futures, carefully combing through traditional aspects of inheritance combined with navigating the current global conformism paradigms and looking towards where our sovereignty has been completely capitalised upon—our food, medicine, our basic survivorship. And then looking at how those spaces of knowing were carried out before colonialism came into play. What of that inherent knowledge still survives, still can survive or can be reclaimed (and in some cases, revived)? What does an ideal future look like? This of course is all on a personal level but the work and being within families and communities gently builds this beyond the self. I guess the debate around Post-Capitalism and Post-Colonialism may come closest to what it is I feel is a safe space to engage these concepts but it still falls short.

**HOLLY:** Yes, Zayaan. I love that idea of spiritual collaboration. And I love the concept of an archive(s) of feeling again not to go on a side note or tangent!

**JULIETTA:** I also share this skepticism with the now very popular and ubiquitous term 'decolonial' ... Not so much because of its linguistic valence (which I remain critically invested in, this 'de' of decolonial), but because a lot of what seems to me to be leftist politics and activism

calls itself decolonial while keeping colonial structures and practices firmly in place. I'm just beginning to embark on a new project to think this through, and I'm now secretly plotting to visit each of you to help think/feel/elaborate its complexities.

**LA VAUGHN:** You will love St. Croix!!!

**JULIETTA:** Thank you! I'll take you up!

**HOLLY:** La Vaughn I have to come back to St. Croix at some point to visit a donor so I will visit too 😊

### experimentation | reclamation | tension | futures

**JULIETTA:** I want to ask about experimentation ... Not in the scientific sense, but in the sense of not knowing the answer, maybe not even being able to guess at it, but trying for something anyway ... *Is experimentation part of your practice?*

I laughed when I saw Zayaan give an online talk where she talked about using local plants and accidentally poisoning herself ...

**ZAYAAN:** Heeeee, too many times!

**JULIETTA:** But nevertheless still needing to experiment, to try things out, in order to discover alternatives. And not unrelatedly, I also wanted to ask about 'simplicity'. We tend to think about experimentation as something that happens in laboratories, with decades of scientific training behind the experimenter, who holds an authority in the production and distribution of knowledge. I have no such training, but somehow remain totally compelled by the small, simple practices of experimentation that might change our lives, our communities, the way we live ...

**ZAYAAN:** Particularly when dealing with lifting knowledge out from genocide, reviving but more importantly, reclaiming.

**JULIETTA:** The act of lifting (from genocide and slavery) is a gorgeous rendering of the work you are all doing.

La Vaughn, in your work *Planter's Chair* (2011), the materials used are simply 'planter's chair, participants, polaroid camera'—so simple, and yet something stunning emerges ...





*The Planter's Chair*, performance, 2011, La Vaughn Belle  
Source: Courtesy of the artist

**LA VAUGHN:** Thanks. That was an experimentation. I know it seems so obvious now, but I hadn't realised how gendered the chair was until I and other women and girls tried to sit in it. I also was confounded when people wanted to pose with their partners, friends and children. I was like—okay? Why not? This was such an intervention into this patriarchal narrative of the chair.

**JULIETTA:** I keep returning to a tension I have with the archive ... For me, it feels both like a 'site' to which we need to add, to bring more into its fold, yet also as site from which we need to lift away what has been captured by it ... Is this a shared tension? Does it speak at all to what we might envision for a future-archive?

**HOLLY:** Julietta—it is. There was actually an unconference entitled 'Liberated Archives' after the main society of American Archivists meeting in Portland in 2017. Trying to bring large diverse groups of people for discussion on this very issue.

**HOLLY:** here's a link to the programme and recordings.<sup>1</sup>

**LA VAUGHN:** Yes, I describe my practice as counter-archive in that I am looking at creating different visualities, values, subjectivities. However, there is still value in a book, a collection of documents. But in a culture like ours in which so much is oral, memory is often not housed in those things. They are in song, in our gardens as we discussed earlier, they are in our smile, freckles, gesture.

But for our case in the Virgin Islands where there was a theft of our written archives, it's also very important for us to be there, to have access to them and engage with them. They often fill in the gaps of the oral archives and vice versa.

**JULIETTA:** I'm going to stay up all night tonight wondering over the future-archive, what it looks like, feels like, smells like ... What can and will we do there together?

**LA VAUGHN:** I suppose there is a need for sensorial archives that expand beyond the visual and written.

**HOLLY:** Along with what you were saying about experimentation Julietta, it makes me think again of just challenging our ideas of what 'records' or archives really are ... that includes reading/problematising even written documents as evidence of 'absolute' truth ... particular in relation to colonial archives.

**JULIETTA:** yessssss

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<sup>1</sup> Archives 2017, <https://archives2017.sched.com/overview/type/Education+Session/The+Liberated+Archive> [last accessed 11 June 2020].

**HOLLY:** We do a lot of exercises with students where they read and do content analysis to come up with their own thoughts and methods, but also looking at artifacts, art, oral histories.

**LA VAUGHN:** That is so important Holly.

**JULIETTA:** That's really cool

**HOLLY:** Okay y'all when is the in-person meeting????

**JULIETTA:** I think we need to wrap here soon ... **YES TO MEETING:** we need to make this happen. It has been really amazing to connect with all of you! First through exploring your work, and now through this virtual extravaganza!

**LA VAUGHN:** I have this piece called *Errata* that is about problematising the creation of archives. It's a response to a person who wrote about me and my work in her book and wrote the most amazing things, a lot of it wasn't true, just projections. Even with an interview, she translated me into her imaginary. So much of that is what we read in the archives. Even what I do is a translation. It's what we all do in some ways. Thanks for the dialogue.

**ZAYAAN:** The archives I work with are minimally written or documented in what is now considered traditional, but the tensions exist between adding and liberation—purely because they are living and need to be planted or used in food or art or process, before they degrade and become archival in their weight—which eventually will disintegrate. Having said that, we were donated twenty-year-old seeds which produced one plant, still alive and well. 😊

**HOLLY:** I am just inspired and excited by you all and the incredible work you are doing! I am looking forward to delving more into these amazing readings and resources.



## author biographies

La Vaughn Belle makes visible the unremembered. She is a visual artist working in a variety of disciplines that include: video, performance, painting, installation and public art. She explores the material culture of coloniality and her art presents countervisualities and narratives that challenge colonial hierarchies and invisibility. She has exhibited in the Caribbean, the USA and Europe. Her work has been featured in a wide range of media including: *The New York Times*, *Politiken*, *VICE*, *The Guardian*, *Caribbean Beat*, the *BBC* and *Le Monde*. She holds an MFA from the Instituto Superior de Arte in Havana, Cuba, and an MA and BA from Columbia University in New York, USA. Her studio is based in the Virgin Islands.

Zayaan Khan works as an artist, consultant, food transformer, ceramicist, writer and researcher. She is intrigued by the local urban and ecological environments and their interchangeable relationship in order to understand the elements that build ecosystems. Through curiosity, research, experimentation and engagement, her work found a resting place through food as a means of understanding the world, particularly land and our collective heritage. She is influenced by traditions, both inherited and the creation of new ones, reclaiming culture and reviving tradition through progressive interpretation in order to enact a listening of the future and a steady present survivalism. She continues to build the Seed Biblioteek, a seed library highlighting the story of seed.

Holly A. Smith is currently the College Archivist at Spelman College. She received her BA in History and Black Studies from The College of William and Mary, an MA in History from Yale University and her MS in Library and Information Science, with a concentration in Archival Management, from Simmons College. Her publications include 'This [Black] woman's work: exploring archival projects that embrace the identity of the memory worker' in the *KULA Journal*, and 'Radical love: documenting underrepresented communities using principles of radical empathy' in the 2018 *Journal of the Society of North Carolina Archivists*.

Julietta Singh is Associate Professor of English and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Richmond. She writes and teaches at the intersections of postcolonial studies, feminist and queer theory, and the environmental humanities. She is the author of *No Archive Will Restore You* (Goleta: Punctum, 2018) and *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018). She is currently completing a new forthcoming book, *The Breaks*, that centres on race and mothering at the end of the world.

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