

*De nos archives se créeront nos histoires*

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## **SOMMAIRE**

### ***De nos archives se créeront nos histoires***

Ce mémoire de recherches création du même titre que l'exposition qui l'accompagne porte sur les archives de la Union United Church, pilier des communautés noires montréalaises et sur les archives de ma famille ayant migré en 2002 pour s'installer au Québec. Ce rassemblement d'images, d'enregistrements et de souvenirs tend à laisser une trace de ces différents parcours ayant un objectif commun, celui de se construire dans un nouvel espace géographique.

De manière croisée, ce mémoire s'intéresse aux images anciennes des communautés noires montréalaises et à la transmission de l'histoire dans les familles afrodescendantes établies à Montréal depuis plusieurs générations. L'exposition s'inscrit dans un processus de recherche complexe et de longue haleine dans la mesure où les sources écrites et visuelles dont elle s'inspire ne font pas partie du cursus scolaire québécois. Au-delà d'apporter un regard critique quant aux omissions au sein de l'histoire de Montréal et du Québec, ce mémoire et cette exposition permettent surtout et avant tout de rendre hommage à plusieurs générations de personnes ayant contribué à nous construire.

## **ABSTRACT**

### ***De nos archives se créeront nos histoires***

This creative research thesis, which bears the title of the accompanying exhibition, focuses on the archives of the Union United Church, a pillar of Montreal's black communities, and on the archives of my family who migrated in 2002 to settle in Quebec. This collection of images, recordings and memories tends to leave a trace of these different histories that have a common objective, that of building themselves in a new geographical space.

In a cross-disciplinary manner, this thesis is interested in the historical images of Montreal's Black communities and the transmission of history in Afrodescendant families established in Montreal for several generations. The exhibition is part of a complex and lengthy research process, as the written and visual sources from which it draws are not part of the Quebec school curriculum. Beyond bringing a critical look at the omissions in the history of Montreal

and Quebec, this thesis and exhibition allow us to pay tribute to several generations of people who have contributed to build us.

Michaëlle Sergile

## **REMERCIEMENTS**

Je tiens à remercier Nancy Oliver-MacKenzie pour avoir été une mentore pour moi durant ces deux dernières années et pour m'avoir permis de comprendre et de connaître les archives et les histoires des différent.e.s actrices ayant contribué à construire la Union United Church, l'Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League (UNIA), le Negro Community Centre (NCC) et le collectif du Coloured Women's Club. Je veux également remercier les membres du conseil d'administration de la Union United Church pour leur soutien et leur ouverture à travers mes recherches. Je remercie ma famille sans qui je ne serais pas ici et qui a su me soutenir dans ma compréhension de nos histoires et archives familiales. Je remercie Geneviève Moisan pour ses conseils et le précieux apprentissage du tissage au jacquard. Je remercie Moridja Kitenge Banza pour ses conseils judicieux en tant qu'artiste professionnel. Enfin, je remercie ma directrice de maîtrise Deanna Bowen pour son soutien constant à la continuation de ma maîtrise et à toujours me permettre de rêver plus grand.

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I would like to thank Nancy Oliver-MacKenzie for mentoring me over the past two years and allowing me to understand and learn about the records and stories of the many actors who helped build Union United Church, the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League (UNIA), the Negro Community Centre (NCC), and the Coloured Women's Club collective. I also want to thank the board members of Union United Church for their support and openness through my research. I thank my family without whom I would not be here and who have supported me in my understanding of our family histories and archives. I thank Geneviève Moisan for the invaluable instruction in jacquard weaving. I thank Moridja Kitenge Banza for his wise guidance as a professional artist. Finally, I thank my master's supervisor Deanna Bowen for her constant support in continuing my master's degree and always allowing me to dream bigger.

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## INTRODUCTION

### *De nos archives se créeront nos histoires*

This creative research thesis, which bears the title of the accompanying exhibition, focuses on the archives of the Union United Church, a pillar of Montreal's black communities, and on the archives of my family who migrated in 2002 to settle in Quebec. This collection of images, recordings and memories tends to leave a trace of these different histories that have a common objective, that of building themselves in a new geographical space.

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## **RUPTURES AND DISCONTINUITY**

Stuart Hall, sociologist and theorist, defines identity as inherently unstable and non-fixed. Following this same line of thought, the French anthropologist, geographer and teacher Christine Chivallon, in her analysis *Black Atlantic Revisited*, explains that a hybrid [and therefore anti-essentialist] cultural identity takes into account ruptures, discontinuities and difference. Although the notion of identity has been revisited by different theorists, it is from Hall and Chivallon's definition that I will deepen my research. The analysis of my archives as a model of a migrant family, as well as the archives of the Union United Church as an example of uprooting by omission, leads to questioning two things; first, the different fractures that can mark an identity, but also the various means used to heal these same fractures.

### **Haiti**

There were several waves of migration from Haiti to the United States and Canada from the late 1950s to the late 1980s. Many writers, politicians and artists went into exile fleeing the rise of François Duvalier, former Haitian president. In the case of my family, we migrated to Quebec in the early 2000s. While not necessarily fleeing what many were fleeing during the Duvalier dictatorship, we left to ensure new educational opportunities for my generation. Although the dictatorship ended in 1986, the remnants of an unstable economy and corruption still remained. A fact that can also be associated with Haiti's early independence and the way the country had to quickly try to build itself up. “[At the time of its independence], the reign of liberty prevailed [in the country]. Now, this immediacy could only lead to a specific type of political power, one that was individualized in the will and caprice of the leaders<sup>1</sup>.”

These vestiges are also felt in the silences and omissions. They are felt through the unspoken and the lack of conversation about this part of our histories. For many families of Haitian origin, is either not discussed or very rarely addressed. Consciously, it is an avoidance that attempts to protect the new generations from the traumas of the older ones. Nevertheless, this avoidance in addition to migration can create what Chivallon referred to as a discontinuity in the cultural identity of a younger generation.

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<sup>1</sup> Voltaire, Frantz. *La tentation de la tyrannie*. Chemins Critiques, p.15.

Migrating to a new country while carrying one's own history and cultural identity inherently creates a rupture and a loss of reference points. A loss of habits, climate, language and customs. To counter this, one tries to form a community and seek common ground with others who, like themselves, find themselves in a country from which they do not originally come from. For generations that have migrated at a very young age, the history of their country is sometimes not taught or, on the contrary, is approached in the school curriculum from a perspective that perpetuates a colonial discourse.

Considering that these generations are migrating to a new geographical space with a fragmented awareness of their histories, their ability to understand their memories becomes more difficult. Furthermore, just as identity is evolving, memory can also be a tool that is shaped over time. The critic, philosopher, and art historian Walter Benjamin defined memory not as an instrument for exploring the past, but as a medium<sup>2</sup>.

Memory is not an instrument for surveying the past but its theater. It is the medium of past experience, just as the earth is the medium in which dead cities lie buried. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging<sup>3</sup>.

In this quote, Walter Benjamin emphasizes the concept of memory as more than just a tool for remembering historical events or personal experiences. He compares memory to a theater, a dynamic and active medium in which the past comes to life.

By comparing memory to the earth that contains buried cities, Benjamin suggests that our past experiences are hidden beneath the surface, waiting to be excavated and explored. He uses the metaphor of a man digging to describe the process of engaging with our own buried past. This implies that diving into our memories requires effort, active exploration and a willingness to confront what lies beneath.

Just as Chivallon and Hall define identity as unstable and therefore in constant motion, these three theorists share an understanding of the dynamic and transformative nature of their

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<sup>2</sup> Pinho, Ana Catarina (2020) *ALBUMS OF A DICTATORSHIP, photographs*, p.115.

<sup>3</sup> W.Benjamin.



concepts. They recognize that our understanding of ourselves and our histories is shaped by a multiplicity of factors, and that these understandings are not static but in constant evolution.

The concept of hybrid cultural identity also applies to those who originate from a country but whose roots have been silenced or erased. Although they are not the same, communities of African-descendants in Canada are equally caught up in ruptures and discontinuities.

### **Canada**

June Bertley explained in her memoir, *The Education of Montreal's Black Communities*, that Montreal's Black communities truly appropriated their history by creating spaces for sharing and learning. Among these spaces, the Union Congregational Church, founded in 1907 and now known as the Union United Church, served as a home for the many Black families living in Little Burgundy. By welcoming people of diverse backgrounds, they emphasized the word “union”. Without needing to belong to any specific religion or adhere to any particular beliefs, the Union Congregational Church was a space for transmission.

One important thing to note, which Bertley took the time to specify, is that the word “education” used in her thesis should be understood in a broader sense than the traditional interpretation of the term<sup>4</sup>.

It must be pointed out that education as defined in this study must be understood in a much broader sense than the traditional interpretation of the term. This is necessary because Black institutions provided a variety of learning situations which were extremely important for its members during this period in their history.

I want to emphasize that when I talk about learning, I mean the discussions between generations and the multiple activities that took place at the church (discussed further below). However, as I will come back to, it is these same intangible forms of learning that make it difficult today to trace the different contributors from that time.

It was in the 1900's that Montreal's Black communities truly solidified. Several organizations and spaces were created one after the other. What very few people know is that before this

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<sup>4</sup> Bertley, J. (1982). *The role of the black community in educating blacks in Montreal, from 1910 to 1940, with special reference to Reverend Dr. Charles Humphrey Este*. p. 2-3.

pillar that is the Union United Church, there was a group of Black women called the Coloured Women's Club (CWC). In 1902, several women from different fields came together to form the CWC. They founded the club to meet the needs of newly migrating families by helping them find housing and financing. They also helped found the Union United Church a few years later, some with their spouses and others with family members.

The Union United Church hosted and still hosts many activities for families and children. In the 1910's to 1940's there were church services, Sunday school with choirs, various sports and music lessons. One of the church's most famous figures, Mr. Oliver Jones, now a great Montreal pianist, learned to play in the basement of the UUC with his sister Daisy. It was a place that also facilitated the learning of its communities. UUC offered educational opportunities that were not found in the school curriculum at the time. Among the many roles the church carried, it operated in the “fields of education, social welfare, employment, civil rights, migration, to name a few.”<sup>5</sup>.

The omission of the contributions of Black communities in Quebec, and indeed in Canada, deepened the division between Black and White communities in the 1990s. Although some families had been in Quebec for several generations, none of their contributions were addressed in the teaching of Quebec and Canadian history and none of their archives were found in municipal or provincial institutions. Dorothy Williams, author and historian, explained in an interview for the 1994 documentary "Tropique Nord: Une tache noire dans la neige blanche" (Tropique Nord: A Black Stain in the White Snow) that instead of acknowledging the past, the myth of White Canada was created. A myth claiming that no Black population actually lived in the country and that there had never been a period of slavery under Louis XIV<sup>6</sup>.

I asked the teacher why he didn't teach anything about the presence of Blacks in Montreal? Nothing about the role of the Black community in the economic history of Quebec? Nothing about its importance at various moments in the city's development? They were not embarrassed to exclude the historical presence of blacks from their teaching, because they had not been taught that, nor had it been taught before them. For them, as for others, their reality in

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<sup>5</sup> Livret de la UUC, 1976, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Trudel, Marcel (2004) *Deux siècles d'esclavage au Québec*. Collection Cahier du Québec. p.405.

Quebec was a reality without Blacks. They could not imagine that Blacks were part of yesterday's Quebec before they were part of today's Quebec.

### **Responsibility of remembrance**

Finally, this creative research thesis also reflects on the transmission of knowledge from one generation to another. Although there are many images and archival texts in the church's basement, many intergenerational transmissions were and still are oral. The challenge, as well as the strength of orality, is its vulnerability to loss or alteration over time. Without active documentation, there is always a risk that these stories will be forgotten or not passed on to future generations.

Dorothy Williams explained in her interview for the documentary *Tropique Nord : Une tache noire dans la neige blanche*<sup>7</sup> that the contributions of Black communities were not taught during her studies in Quebec, just as they were not taught to the previous generation. This failure tends to recognize the need to value and preserve oral histories as well as written archives as integral parts of the documentation and contributions of Black communities.

One last aspect that, although very present in Michel Lafond's documentary, was not addressed, is the language barrier. Many of the archives of the Union United Church and studies by historians on Montreal's Black communities are not translated into French. On the one hand, this is simply the reality of the time when many Black individuals worked in railway networks as porters or housekeepers. On the other hand, this lack of bilingualism makes accessibility to the archives more difficult for French-speaking Black migrant communities interested in these stories.

In conclusion, the duality between oral history and written archives highlights the challenges and importance of documenting and preserving our stories. Playing a central role in understanding the past, efforts must be made to value and integrate diverse historical narratives into the dominant discourse.

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<sup>7</sup> Lafond, Jean-Daniel. (1994) *Tropique Nord : Une tache noire dans la neige blanche*. Length of 52:31.

**TEXTS AND LIST OF WORKS**



*Sunday School* is a woven reproduction of a large-scale image of several children attending Sunday School at Union United Church. This photograph, taken in 1941, is a central piece in the exhibition. Several members of the church, along with Nancy Oliver-MacKenzie, took the initiative to create a numbered display to invite church regulars to write down the names of children they recognized. This image, which is over 80 years old, leads to several reflections on the need to pass on knowledge from one generation to the next. As most of the people in the picture are unfortunately no longer with us, how can we ensure that their experiences are not forgotten?

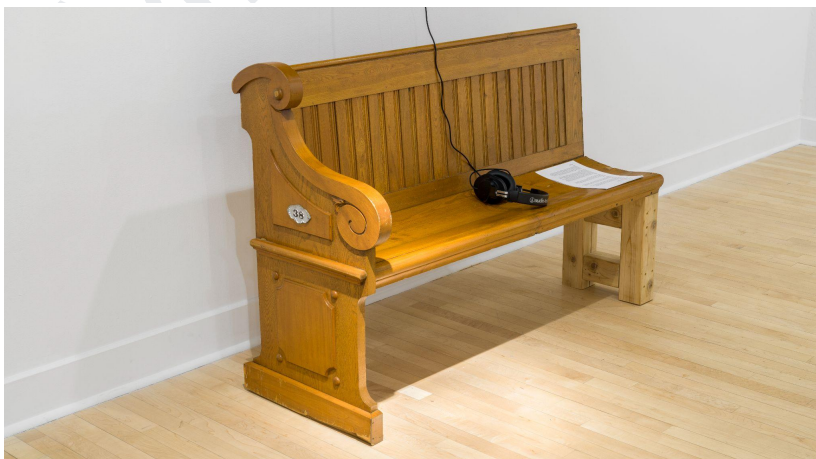
One of the strengths of Union United Church since its inception has been the desire to transmit knowledge and education to our communities about our communities. This transmission, very naturally, often occurred orally. Without diminishing the strength and necessity of oral transmissions, it is sometimes difficult to keep track of those who have gone before us.





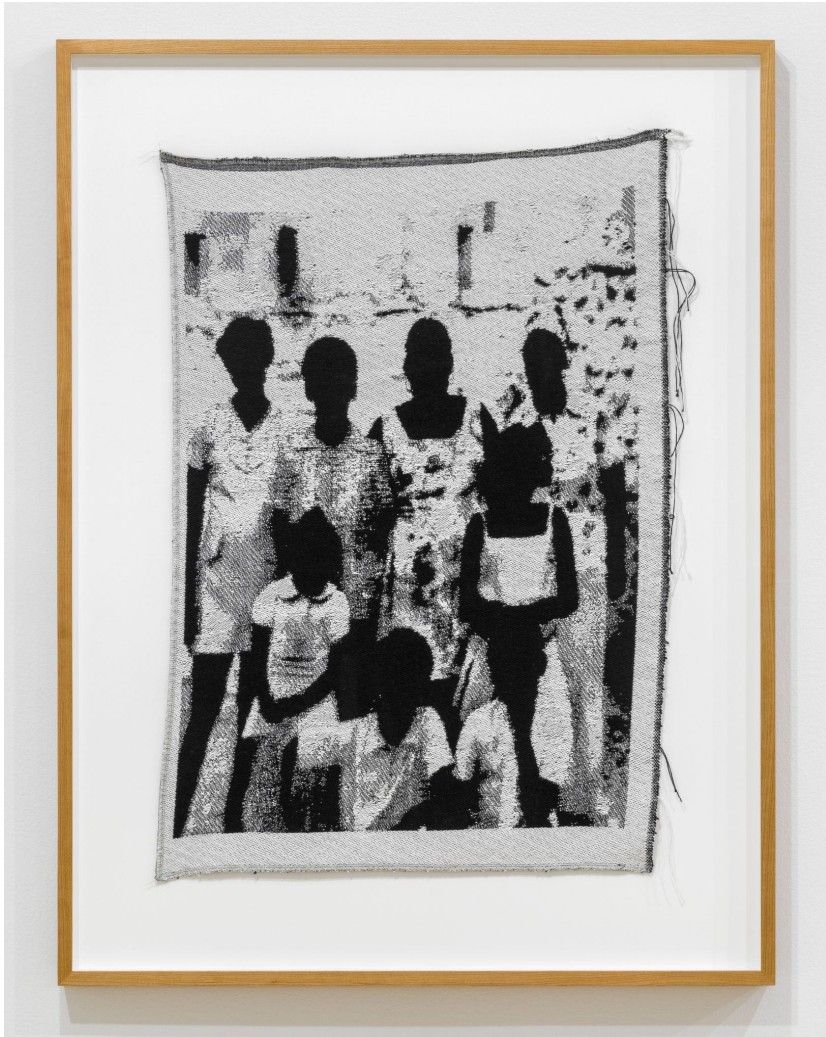
*Coloured Women's Club* is named after the first collective of Black women to be formed in Montreal. In 1902, several women came together to create a collective to address the needs of migrant families. They were all involved in the creation of the Union United Church a few years later along with their spouses and other family members. Although they played a role in solidifying Montreal's Black communities, we have very little information on some of them. The few archival images and texts that can be found in the church are very pixelated and for some of them we only have a sentence or two introducing them.

This artwork is still in progress as I have initiated correspondence with some people from their families to find more archival images that honor the contributions of these women and also understand their experiences in early 1900's Quebec.



*From a generation to another* is a sound piece in which Nancy Oliver-MacKenzie and I can be heard discussing Nancy's early interactions at Union United Church. It is an artwork that, accompanied by a church pew, forces one to take time, to sit and listen. Without revealing too much, this sound piece allows us to understand, by listening to our voices, the relationship that was built and established between our two generations.





The artworks *Ombre Portrait #4* and *#5* (*Shadow Portraits #4* and *#5*) are two pieces that use archival family images from my parents' generation in Haiti. Reflecting on the concepts of cultural identity and memory, the darkness of these intensely opaque bodies resembles an abyss. These immense voids do not serve to erase their identities but rather to represent the vastness of stories and the numerous layers of memories.







*To the light we see today* is a photo installation of recent images from the Union United Church. In dialogue with the artwork *Sunday School*, this photographic piece takes up exactly the space where the children of the church stood over 80 years ago.

## **ARTWORKS**

01 *Sunday School (concert 1941)* , 2021-2023

Single weft jacquard weave, cotton, wooden frame.

Details: Archival image just before a 1941 Sunday School concert at Union United Church.

Courtesy of Union United Church and Nancy Oliver-MacKenzie.

02 *Coloured Women's Club*, 2022-2023 (work in progress)

Single weft jacquard weaving, cotton threads, wooden stands, 3min23 sound piece.

Details: Archival image of the first black women's collective to be formed in Montreal in 1902. Courtesy of Union United Church and Nancy Oliver-Mackenzie.

03 *From a generation to another*, 2023

Sound piece diffused on headphones with wooden bench. Sound piece of 22min20.

04 *Ombre 4 & Ombre 5*, 2023

Jacquard weaving with two weft, cotton threads, wooden frames.

05 *To the light we see today*, 2023

Photo installation on matte enhanced paper, wooden frame.

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