# An Insufficient Record//
## *the photo-ethics of preserving Black vancouver*

NANYAMKA LEWIS
*introduction by Vanessa Kwan, Dan Pon*

TO  BLACK BC

# curator//
AUTHOR

Nya Lewis,MFA is an independent curator whose hybrid practice is rooted in the culmination of centuries of resistance, love, questions, actions, and study concerning diasporic cultural production. Her work reflects the diversity of intersectional, inter-generational, global indigenous, Queer critical discourse and its many forms of expression. Working across the disciplines of art-making, programming, research, curating, and writing, her work across Canadian institutions (Vancouver Queer Film Festival, Capture, Vancouver Public library, Center for the study of Black Canadian Diaspora, UBC Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver Art Gallery, Grunt Gallery, and Ref. (formerly Black Art Gastown), AfroQueer, Femme Art Review, Polygon, SFU Contemporary Art faculty, and UBC Equity and Inclusion), is driven by the possibilities of historical recovery, and the reimagining of community.
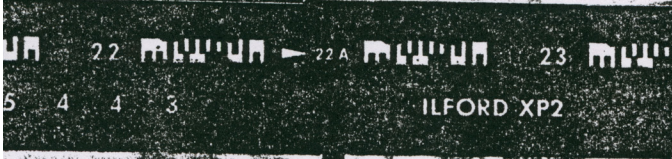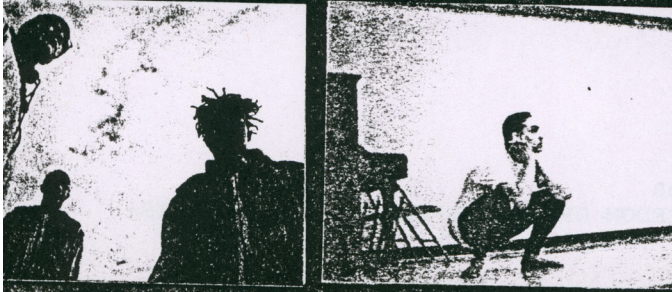
# introduction//
## VANESSA KWAN & DAN PON

Grunts relationship to artist-initiated archival collections has been an evolving one. Founded almost 40 years ago, grunt has always been an unusual, if steady, institutional entity. Our archive materialized in the 90s, when documentation, ephemera and the odd sculpture from those early years began to take on a presence of its own. Led by artists and curators such as Brice Canyon, Venge Dixon and founding Program Director Glenn Alteen, the archive became a core value of the institution as it grew. By the later 2000s, grunt began organizing, digitizing and activating the archive as such in earnest.

Over time, grunt has been a community gathering place as much as a presentation venue. The archive, in many ways, grew as an extension of an impulse to foster dialogue and memory making, and to share resources. Care for our programming archive honors and continues the gallery's relationships with its artist community in continually evolving ways and grunt regularly extends our space, labour, and equipment to assist in the development of artists' personal and project archives//

This trajectory includes long term relationships with artists such as Rebecca Belmore and support for her web presence from the early digital age to the gathering of a comprehensive collection of documentation for Wordless (2019), a retrospective publication focusing on her performance practice. The Al Neil Project (2005) took a new media approach to compiling and remixing interdisciplinary work by its avante garde namesake,

eventually forming the narrative backbone to a massive endeavour to rescue, restore, and remount Neil's historic cabin as a floating artist residency with international reach. Ghostkeeper (2012) dug into the archive of the late artist, curator, and writer Ahasiw Maskêgon-Iskwêw and his visionary exploration of Queer and Indigenous identity in the nascent digital landscape that opened and held doors for so many, remounting original work with new writing and performance, and creating web resources in regular use by artists and educators today//

More recently, this work asks focused questions on the role of artist-run centres in the platforming of (counter) archives that critically engage with the racism, exclusions and erasures that pervade our institutional and cultural records. Journey to Kaho'olawe (2017) paired the research and embodied knowledge of artists Hans Winkler and Cease Wyss to draw intricate connections between Native Hawaiian sacred geography and land sovereignty movements, trans-Pacific labour migration, and the deep roots of Wyss' mixed Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and Hawaiian family tree//

For Jacqueline Hoang Nguyen's The Making of an Archive (2018) grunt supported an artist-driven family photo collection seeking alternative representations to state definitions of 'multiculturalism with a specific desire to clarify activist solidarity networks across immigrant communities in Canada. Syrus Marcus Ware's 2018 project 2068: Touch Change fused research on historic Black communities in BC and Black Trans activists with the Afrofuturistic vision of Octavia Butler to create a speculative archive of Black joy and resistance//

Working with Nya Lewis on An Insufficient Record: The Photo Ethics of Preserving Black Vancouver is both an extension of and a challenge to these existing practices.

Our archival approach is a critical component of our organization and as such may follow a similar path of institutionalization with growth, but what is gained by linear thinking here? In a piece detailing the community archive project A People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland, archivist Melissa Hubbard offers a more distributed understanding. I propose that when we think about archival custody and stewardship, we move away from the binary construction of institutional or community ownership and control toward thinking about an ecosystem of individuals, communities, and institutions that care for and use these materials. Each member of the system is connected to each other member, and all members of the system co-evolve.

Might we consider An Insufficient Record a node in this web-like ecology? Thinking through the delineations between institution and individual (or community) or even between "archive" and "artist project", perhaps what's needed is another understanding entirely, one that takes into account process, connection, intervention and tension over time. Outside of more traditional assumptions about keeping and holding histories, can this be an invitation for audiences to place themselves in connection with subjects, photographers, collections, and fellow viewers to lay primer for inquiry and dialogue?

Our ways of thinking about meaning-making as it is understood in the photograph (more specifically the portrait) are in regular danger of becoming formalized, concluded in their potential. To collaborate with Nya, herself navigating the institution of academia as a Black curator, is an opportunity to question our own assumptions about representation, marginality, consent, and the shared experiences of Black Communities so often written out and dehumanized by the archive as well

as the impulse to define a community archive reductively as one outside of (or at a lesser level of) institution. In his discussion of the long running case of Lannier v. Harvard, Jerrett Martin Drake suggests that a decision to include or exclude is but one of a set of key archival dynamics and should be considered along with the powers to possess or dispossess, to inherit or disinherit, and to embody or disembody//

The spectrum of all of these dynamics affects the long term impact of the act of collecting as well as the agency of subjects themselves, their descendents, and intervening researchers and artists with restorative or liberatory goals. Following the above we also question the actual and perceived power of an exhibition to meaningfully counter that narrative. If we are to move towards a richer culture of representation, one that acknowledges its inability to hold the complexities of Black life, connection, presence and strife in this region, then ideas, networks and resources necessarily shift. Sitting alongside An Insufficient Record is an opportunity to expand our thinking around the importance of art/curatorial practices that envision futures (and pasts) beyond accepted modes of presentation and preservation – and to make room for new and unrecognized collaborative possibilities, speculations and resistances. The gallery and the archive look on.

Melissa Hubbard, "Archival Resistance to Structural Racism," in Digital Community Engagement: Partnering Communities with the Academy, ed. Rebecca Wingo, Jason Heppler, and Paul Schadewald (Cincinnati, OH: University of Cincinnati Press, 2020), 63.

Jerrett Martin Drake, "Blood at the Root," Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies vol. 8, article 6 (2021) https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/

# a visual interposition//
ABSTRACT

*An Insufficient Record: The Photo Ethics of preserving Black Vancouver theorizes the afterlife of the City of Vancouver photographic archive, concerning the history of insufficient representation of Black Vancouverites and their lives in public space. A conduit for dialogical and collaborative collecting methodologies, the exhibit intervenes with the archive, outlining a curatorial approach that identifies, contextualizes, and makes accessible reflections of the multiplicity of Blackness in Vancouver. Re-presenting and re-positioning 17 gelatin mugshots acquired from the City of Vancouver archive, An Insufficient Record malleablizes the varying vital relationship between the image and its object of representation, assessing the photographic constructions of race, the politics of human rights, identity formations, national narratives, and cultural memory.*

*An Insufficient Record* interrupts institutional images by exhibiting them in direct conversation with contemporary artists, underrepresented histories, alternative historical voices, and perspectives, re-charging the mugshots in question through genealogical and historical research.

The exhibit also considers the contrasting lives of Black people by proposing a shift in archival structure and operating principles to modes of generative knowledge keeping. At its core, the exhibit will function as an anti-racism project that presents an analysis of the ethics of collecting and displaying visualities of Blackness within a system of public archives while critically engaging the assumptions such databases create surrounding Black life. In a city where a distinct Black presence is ongoing and questioning, *An Insufficient Record* bridges the social construction of Black identity, race, class, authority, surveillance, and the dissolution of Black communities in Vancouver within a colonial photographic archetype//

Juxtaposed within a new and speculatively valuable resource, the mugshots are presented with 50 portraits of Black and African self-identifying people, taken with clear subject autonomy. The archival images are assembled from official municipal holdings, provincial holdings, public arts and culture organizations, and special collections.
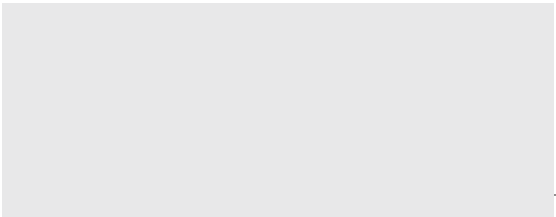
Challenging the insufficient depository of knowledge contributing to the historical trajectory of restricting representations of Blackness to caricature, ethnographic object, or criminal, the proposed exhibit takes on a kind of cultural translation, examining the possibilities and structural limitations of transforming penal spectatorship to a participatory re-shaping and reading of the carceral images. *An Insufficient Record* exposes

the strategic erasure of nuanced Black representation, which enables the City of Vancouver's insufficient fonds to exist without question or complication.

Speculating the role of curation and documentation in supporting collective movements beyond the public archive, the proposed exhibit visualizes and reinforces Black personal, political, and social presence. The curatorial space-making gesture imagines a system of photographic presentation and organization that engages Black Vancouver communities in the re-representation of their histories, and responds to demands to participate in national discourses of belonging to Canada's past and present, readdressing historiographical challenges and their impact on archival record.

Though these interventions enact a kind of cultural negotiation between "othered" peoples and the realities of historical colonialism and neo-colonialism, I make the case that, particular to Black diasporic communities, a strategic response to disparate imagery, perforated documentation, violence, and dehumanization in mainstream repositories must exist to directly confront anti-Black racism in archiving practices.

Beyond permission for viewers, archivists or researchers to intervene, archival projects like *An Insufficient Record* re-imagine the relationship between vernacular photography made and circulated in the public sphere and the public consumption of Blackness. Creating a counter-archive that authorizes a refusal to the practices of objectification that underpin colonialism and its logics of capture, containment, and stasis.

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# race & the archive//
## METHODS OF INTERVENTION

At the center of my inquiry, vernacular Black portraiture in public record, particularly images representing Black agency on both sides of the camera. The lack of findings raised additional questions concerning Black subjectivity, and forced me to ground this research in the social, political, economic realities of anti-Black racism post emancipation//

*I consider the act of protection, maintenance, care, safeguarding, preservation as a justifiable response to the strategic erasure of Black histories and communities in Vancouver facing certain marginalization.*

In the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd, I was particularly interested in how a city steeped in anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism might continue to plead ignorance during a global call for accountability, and what Vancouver's historical engagement with Blackness and Black people might reveal. *An Insufficient Record* invites viewers to collaboratively examine the ways we make and re-make meanings from images. Malleablizing the varying vital relationship between the image and its object of representation, the exhibit proposes a different story of Blackness, containing a multiplicity of dimensions of human representation, beginning the process of collectively marking absent historical narratives, and together revealing the conditions of Black cultural life in the aftermath of colonial displacement//

An insufficient Record interrogates the essentialization of Black representation by consciously reviewing placement, contents, and accessibility—collectively shaping the narrative of the histories documented. It is imperative to note what the proposed exhibition can and cannot do. It is not the position of the exhibit to enact a form of exorcism of mugshots to sanitize the histories of Black Canadians in BC

Nor will it create an immediate salve of healing, upending the harm caused by publicly displaying mugshots of marginalized people. The exhibit does not attempt to restore wholeness to the colonial archival project. Still, it works to complicate the use of public images within a racial conflict, offering the safety of an alternative approach to memory recovery.The structural and systemic problems of under-representation cannot be addressed in their entirety through a project such as this//

*While the exhibit provides insight into a particular demographic, it may never truly reflect the entire cross-section of Black communities in Vancouver; however, we may begin to carefully contend with images intended to degrade Black bodies in pursuit of a curatorial approach that contextualizes, identifies, and makes accessible reflections of the multiplicity of Blackness in Vancouver*

I also must clarify my intentions for mining and collecting from public archives. To illustrate the ways that Blackness in the Canadian imagination proliferates, I map existing public collections as sites of widespread conceptualization and dissemination, challenging the fetishistic perpetuation of Black suppression. As it exists, the insufficient depository of knowledge continues the historical trajectory of restricting representations of Blackness to caricature, ethnographic object or, in this case, criminal//

In practice, I consider the importance of the ethics of manipulating archives within my own curatorial vision or benefit. I believe it is my responsibility to approach archiving as an extension of my curatorial gesture and to question the material, making visible the correlation between the portrayal of history and the assumptions that surround the documentation and presentation of Black histories//

My hope is to contribute to the evolving dicourse concerning classification, moving towards an activity that functions like a continuous writing of personal living, deconfining curatorial engagement of the Black subject. For communities in flux—from Black Canadian Pioneers and settlers of the mid-1800s through to the artistically, academically, and politically engaged communities of American, Caribbean, and British migrants in the late 1970s—scarce are the representations of Black existence//

*Limiting images to predominantly criminal documentation undermines Black peoples' impact and contributions in Vancouver and British Columbia. Images produced, maintained, and distributed by non-confidential holdings reinforce incontestable enactments of surveillance, white supremacist gaze, and—within the archive—an archival gaze, birthed within an observational power dynamic, intending to document, make permanent, and mediate history*

Though the exhibition assembles archival yields from official municipal holding records, public arts and culture organizations, as well as special collections (please see exhibition contributors' listings), it does not attempt to represent the complete spectrum of images available in British Columbia. Staged in presentation, the images are gathered to speculate the possibilities and structural limitations of transforming penal spectatorship[1] to a participatory re-shaping and reading of the carceral images.

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Penal Spectatorship was coined by author Michelle Brown in 2009. It refers to citizens who have no necessity to address the problem of hyper-incarceration, or criminalization, developing cultural meanings and understandings about punishment by way of what is available in popular discourse, including dominant representations.

Here, I imagine a system of photographic collection and organization that engages Black Vancouver communities in the re-representation of their histories, ever-expanding the definition of Black life, and forging new meaningful connections to our histories.

In effect, the public archive fails to uphold the ethical responsibilities of a democratic collection, further illustrating cultural inscription that inherently normalizes cultural assumptions, posturing as an unspoken universal language based on empirical truths. Enforcing seemingly concrete ideas, normative conventions, expectations, or signifying practices of cultural bodies of knowledge and its people directly correlates to the implications of record-keeping used on marginalized communities, rooted in the criticisms of ethnographic and colonial anthropological documentation. In favor of excavating formally undesirable Black histories, how does curatorial practice make a concerted effort to situate blackness and Black history? And where existent, how do these dissemination methods inform how we read or redeem oppressive images?
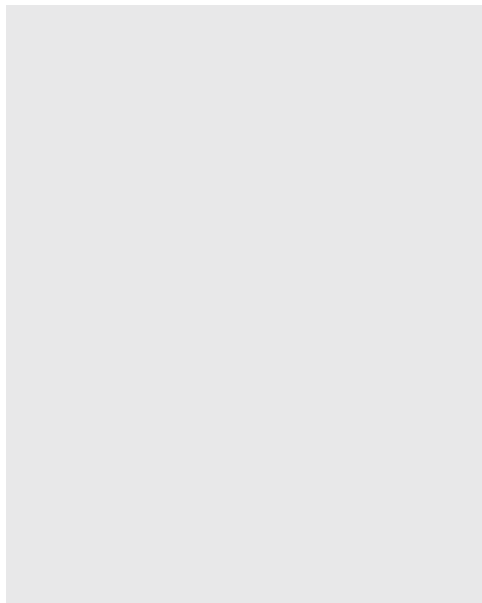
*Using installation and scale,both instructively and aesthetically, how many images does it take before you stop seeing the mugshots as a defining iconography or presence?*

IMAGES COURTESY OF CITY OF VANCOUVER ARCHIVE
B.H CHANDLER. VIRGIL THURMAN, FRANCIS KENNEDY,
ED MOSLEY,
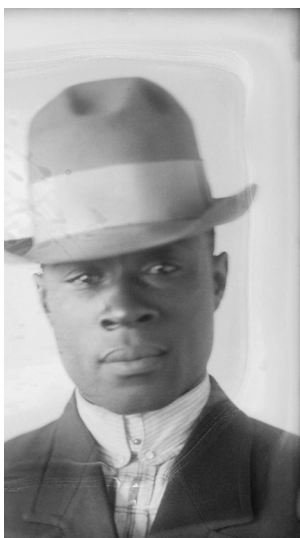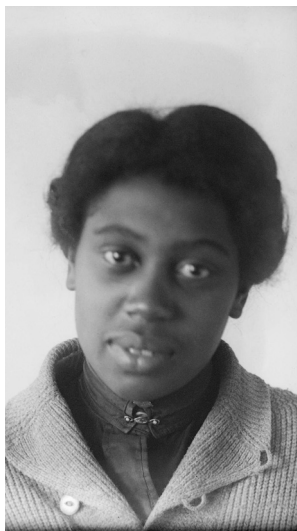
IMAGES COURTESY OF CITY OF VANCOUVER ARCHIVE
GERTRUDE LANDERWAY, MARY SMITH, ROY DENNY,
JENNIE WILLIAMS

IMAGES COURTESY OF CITY OF VANCOUVER ARCHIVE
REBECCA CAMPBELL, MRS LOTTIE MILES, MRS.
DAVIDSON, UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN

*How do we build an Afrodiasporic*
*visual archive that asserts*
*our collective will to*
*participate in a*
*curatorial process that*
*creates oppositional*
*standards of  evaluation,*
*without essentializing our*
*sense of  self  and identity?*

# mugshots as portraiture//
## THE VIOLENCE OF THE IMAGE

Photography has a long-standing relationship to policing. In the early 19th century, technology was introduced to police for identification and surveillance purposes. Police departments in the United States started photographing arrestees as early as the 1850s and displayed their portraits for public viewing in rogue galleries. In Canada, the Toronto Police Service began collecting photographs of criminalized suspects beginning in 1874. Public dissemination of mug shots dates to 1840, deploying photography to locate serial offenders, instructing, and engaging dominant populations in societal inspection, creating a veil of mystery and terror within white upper-class society—the dangerous anonymous stranger or outsider.//

Mugshots positioned as a strategy for policing and punitive systems transformed predatory policing. Carceral photography has long functioned as much more than pure documentation. The history of these photos is based on pseudo-scientific theories that photography could be a tool for helping to classify criminal types, often ethnic, racial, and religious minorities of the dominant society//

To adequately address the insufficient reflection of Black life within the City of Vancouver Archives and to address the innapropriately placed Black persons (mugshots) as portraits--the legacies of Canadian slavery, segregation, travelers, homesteads, and Black settler communities must be substantially addressed. Archives shallowly punctuated

with the communities' social and economic realities inadequately frame institutional memory, practices, and the notion of what may constitute a comprehensive Black Vancouver archive. Critical to any analyses of the photographs are the social circumstances under which they were commissioned, consumed, and collected. Therefore, images were taken by arresting officers of the Vancouver Police Department, subject to the analysis of the colonial judicial system, the impact of anti-Black racism, and issues of unequal power and authority over Black persons//

I note that although the arrest book and information on the sentencing of these subjects are not made available, the images are cross tagged as "Incarcerated Persons" in the City of Vancouver Archive. What photography insinuates is an evidentiary, visceral response where the observer linked to the decontextualized subject, assumes power or expertise over what is presented. Mugshot images stigmatize, dehumanize, criminalize, and are often consumed for entertainment, regardless of a criminal conviction, creating an illusory correlation for viewers that fosters bias//

The exhibit refuses the pop culture spectacle or fascination with criminalityi n exchange for an approach that employs mediation and cultural translation. At risk of eroticism or voyeurism, it challenges the intersectional relationships between the use of photography in policing and the long-term impacts on reading criminality, anti-racism dialogue, cultural and gender bias tropes, and public safety.

## acknowledgements//