May: Do you want to start by introducing yourself?

Jenn: So I'm Jenn Cole. I'm from Kiji Sibi watershed territory, the Algonquins. I'm mixed ancestry. I feel really close to my grandparents the last week or so, thinking more about this, this week.

May: I want to welcome your grandparents into the room.

Jenn: Mm.

[00:00:25.07]

May: Do you want to start by talking a little bit about the memory work you do? And if you want to, you could talk about a particular project? Or you could just talk about it more generally.

Jenn: Yeah, so there's this memory work that I'm doing. Part of it started sort of quite a while ago. I had the opportunity to spend a year doing a visual arts thesis with Maralynn Cherry, who's from Wikwemikong First Nation. I got to spend an entire year trying to figure out what my relationship to the woods was. And I guess I just always miss home [laughs]. So that's one of the things that motivates my work. So I was definitely thinking about the woods back home and the Ottawa River and also about being in this new territory, in Michi Saagig territory. And trying to kind of situate myself. And at the same time I was doing work a lot about, about my Nan. And, and my Grandpa too. He gave me that year his handwritten forestry um notebook from when he went to forestry school. And that was a time where he took a bunch of knowledge that he already had about [laughs] who the trees were and what their leaves were like [laughs]. And then drew it in this really specified way, but that's a really precious, precious thing to have in my life. Cause it has hand writing.

May: Mhm.

Jenn: And these really tentative drawings of leaves. Like you can really feel how he wanted everything to be perfect. So I think the work really got a lot of nurturing at that time. And then I did an MA and a PhD on other things. [Laughs.] And now I've left those behind. And I really feel like I'm coming home to the research that I belong to. And, and that means, trying to figure out what it means to be a mixed ancestry Anishinaabekwe. And it means um, pluming these beautiful family archives and these messy family archives and trying to catch up on family stories and nest back into ceremony and build a community that's not just made of Jill Carter [laughs] or like Indigenous scholars I read. The other part of that project is to try to figure out where I'm from and I guess what I mean by that is, I like grew up swimming in the Ottawa River, and I grew up canoeing past Oiseau Rock and I grew up with all of these, with plants and rocks and shapes of the land that are so familiar to me but I didn't grow up knowing Indigenous history of the land that I was living in. Even though that's part of my family's history. And I didn't grow up receiving teachings about sacred sites on that land or... I'm so- so I'm trying to like get to know the territory again. And get to know it in a richer way, more connected with Indigenous history and that means really decolonizing my understanding of where I'm from. So I'd say that's an introduction to the project.

[00:03:56.25]

Jenn: And it means like looking at things like the Mìwàte Illumination of Chaudière Falls last summer-

May: Mhm.

Jenn: Thinking about Rebecca Belmore and her speaking to the land project. Thinking that people like spoke to the river, that is so precious to me. She really held me.

May: Mm-

Jenn: While I grew up. And held me through a lot of things in my life. So, yeah. So all of that. [Laughs]

[00:04:33.18]

May: Do you feel like this is a form of activism or resistance?

Jenn: Mm. I think that um I feel responsible to gather up everything I can into my bundle. Because there's been so much cultural loss in my family. [Pause]. There were a lot of pieces of knowledge, heart knowledge, that were passed down but then a lot of things that might fill in those gaps that maybe weren't um passed down and, so I feel like I'm trying to play decolonial catch-up and I think that, that process is really important. You know, Leanne Simpson writes so beautifully about the process of Biskaabiyang and decolonizing one's own self and recognizing that cultural loss is like part of the story of colonialism and genocide in Turtle Island and I feel partly responsible to do that because of my son. I don't want to keep teachings from him or make him white and leave him there. That would dishonour the experiences of my ancestors and also if they've like saved things like seeds for me-

May: -Mm-

Jenn: -It's really important for me to find those seeds and to nourish them and to pick them up and I guess a thread of my own relationship to this identity that I haven't really spoken about is the shame that I felt for so long about not knowing how to get home. And not knowing, like where to get sweetgrass. Everyone in my family knows how to find it except me. [Laughs] And they always just say it's really simple, you know, my great uncle Almany is like, "Well it just like grows by railroad tracks and stuff, it's not like..." [Laughs] Really like -- um. Anyway. I think I just felt a lot of shame for a long time. And I felt paralyzed by unbelonging and by feeling sorry for not knowing my way home. For not knowing things that I was supposed to know.

[00:06:58.01]

To be a good, to be a good Anishinaabekwe and so Jill Carter really helped me get over that. She's really good at pointing out that grief is part of this process of return but it's really easy to get stuck right there. It takes courage to like, take the next step out of that paralysis and luckily I'm many many steps past the first step, because goodness, that one wasn't very fun. [Laughs] It was not fun. But very important. Mhm.

[00:07:36.24]

May: Bring so much courage to your work. You've already mentioned so many relationships. With Jill, with other artists, with your grandparents, with Tom. Do you- are there- do you want to talk for another minute about relationships and how they are fostered through your project or how they foster your project.

Jenn: Mhm.

May: And maybe the intergenerational piece.

[00:08:03.24]

Jenn: Yeah. Sure. Gosh I loved my Nan... She had this thing. She, she had this thing where if she heard drumming and singing, she'd just come undone. And I had that for a long time too. I'm like working on it a little bit because it's embarrassing to just sob at pow wows [laughs]. It's better to not do that [laughing] always. Um but uh, she um... When I like went through all this shame about not knowing and shame about not knowing how to dance and um, like, thinking that I didn't even deserve to know and, it was my fault for becoming-- divorced somehow from all this um beautiful cultural experience. I always just thought, "Well my Nan should have been up dancing at the Pow Wow. She should have felt welcome." And then my mom, too, she should have felt welcome. And then there was kind of this question of well, why not me? That's odd that I feel that way. Mhm. I think my mom-- she did give me teachings that, she learned them very easily. And so she taught me how to put down tobacco and she taught me how to smudge. And um, sweetgrass was just part of our, part of our kitchen. And now she's kind of like the repository for so many family stories because my Nan and my Grandpa have passed away.

May: Mm.

[00:09:45.07]

Jenn: There's so many things I wish I could ask them and now that I, now that I'm decolonizing myself, I wish NOW I could say, "Ah Grandpa, it's amazing that you're Algonquin. That you're an Algonquin man." That's like, that's totally amazing. And, but I do feel, I do feel him. Um so presently. And I do feel like this work, it is a way of picking up a bundle for them [crying.] Yeah. I'm good.

[00:10:28.13]

May: Do you want to talk some more about Tom? I wonder if we should bring Tom into the room for a minute.

Jenn: Yeah let's bring Tom in.

[May laughs]

Jenn: When Tom smudges he says, "Then I put it on my heart like this and it makes my heart feel good." [Laughs] It's so beautiful and sometimes I feel like this return, it happens too slowly. I want to like gobble up everything that I can and also I know that to do the work honestly, it just takes the time that it takes. And so much of, so much of it is supported by relationships with people who feed me bit by bit. You know. Jill gives me strawberries on John A. MacDonald's lawn.

[May laughs]

Jenn: Bit by bit. I don't know. Yeah. Tom. It was July first and we were at my partner's parents' cottage and there were fireworks everywhere and beer everywhere and Tom and I had made a bunch of seed paper together out of an LCBO catalogue and like some racist books and that was good but um, it was July first and Tom and I were at the water and we were giving her tobacco and thanking her. Tom ran up to the cottage and got a bowl of grapes for the water [laughs] because he thought she might also be hungry [laughs] so he plopped grapes into the water sort of one by one. Yeah. Sharing, sharing with Tom is really, it's the best.

[May laughs]

Yeah. It's the best. And I think I've learned so much from him, too. You know, I've had ideas like, my Step-Mom and my Dad are Catholic. And my Step-Mom very committedly so. And she really thought that I would christen Tom. Like of course I would or something. And I remember when he was born thinking I've never seen anyone more sacred. I've never seen anyone so like, not needing to be fixed or re-marked or [laughs] like, yeah. And I really felt the knowledge that he brought with him when he came. Mhm.

May: Yeah. Yeah.

Jenn: Felt that.

May: He's a special little person.

[00:13:07.08]

May: So. Has aging informed the way you do your work. The way you practise this memory activism piece?

Jenn: Mhm. Yes. When I was a teenager, I just wanted to be a grandmother, cause they're the good ones. [Laughs] They get to do work in a different way. And I couldn't wait til I had time and my pantry was full and then people could just come and [laughs] get grandmother advice. And now I'm really into being a mother. And I love the creative work of that. Because, because that work is so full of... connection to ancestry and also like a huge flip of priorities. Yeah, there was something so relieving when I was in the middle of my PhD work, Tom came into the world. And then suddenly, Tom meant everything. And that obsessive, like the word is still obsessive and unhealthily so, but- that obsessive, desperate work that always feels like it's not gonna get done- it was just kind of something else that I did. It was like the second thing. And so it's really nice to have a first, a first thing. And I think that's helped me for sure to let go of some of the poisonous ambition that comes from the precarious labour of the academy and all of the measuring up that we try to do and having to be acknowledged and all of that. So yeah, I guess I have a deeper understanding now as a Mom about the value of like, if it isn't real to me, then I don't actually, I don't actually have time or space for it. I think that's a good place to be. It's less approval-seeking. And thank goodness I don't have to be a teenager ever again. Oh my goodness.

May: Oh yeah [laughs]. It's honour-full that you're here with us.

Jenn: Yeah. When I was a teenager I wanted to save the world. I wanted so badly to work at an orphanage. I felt like if I didn't do it then who would because I didn't really see my peers thinking about that and I lived in this like tiny bush community outside of Deep River, Ontario. And so there weren't like enough people who needed help around in the way that I imagined help looking. And it took a long time for me to take a closer look at why I needed to fix everyone's pain. And also why that pain had to be located like, away. Something so racist about that. Yeah. It didn't work out for me. Saving the world and like killing sadness. Which I thought was my mission [laughs]. It didn't work out because, well, well because I went on the internet which was the only way that I knew how to understand the world outside of rural northern Ontario [laughs].

May: At least you had the internet I guess.

Jenn: Yeah. Had the internet, looked up some NGOs, didn't really know how to search the internet yet, but they all wanted me to have a Master's degree. So Trent University, I'd seen the campus and I knew that there was a river and there were trees. So I came, I came here. [Laughs]

[May laughs]

[00:16:50.22]

May: I'm curious about the question of the archive. Whether you see the memory work you're doing to be a kind of archiving, uh intervening in the archive, or whether this concept of the archive even resonates with you.

Jenn: Mhm.

May: Or what is your archive?

Jenn: Right. Yeah I do think of archive quite a bit in the work. Of course there are like conventional archives and they do have weird information like, I did see this document that was a proposal to turn Oiseau into this Mount Rushmore with Canadian politician faces and I'm glad I know that that was on the table for that river. Like it's awful but that's from a repository of documents. But when I think about archive in my own work I definitely think much more about my person as an archive. My body as an archive for a bunch of sensations and feelings and memories that I don't always know how to give expression to. Or I don't always know how to identify them. And I totally don't know how to write about. Like intergenerational, embodied relationship in a scholarly way. But I don't think I'm really writing that way anyway. And yeah so I do think of that.

[00:18:13.04]

I think of, I think of art making as a way of archiving my own journey through family history and through re-relating to the territory I grew up in as a way of marking that process. And I hope like this book work that I have- it's a really long accordion-

May: Do you want to, do you want to talk about it a little bit?

Jenn: Yeah I can talk about it a little bit. And it's not really the main thing, it's just a place that I have to map, map the watershed, to map family histories, and to play with materials. So like this is an ink stamp of some sweet fern that I collected from behind my parents' house and this is a stamp that I made of me at the edge of the Ottawa River in friendship with a bear [laughs]. There's a bunch of stuff in here. But there's also a lot of blank space and so I hope that, I hope that Tom will draw into this later.

May: I've actually written about Tom drawing into that later.

Jenn: Oh really?

May: Yeah.

[Jenn laughs]

May: Not in any place that's public, just in my own-

Jenn: Just a little note?

May: Yeah, yeah.

Jenn: Yeah. I'm excited to be able to pass on, not just the family stories and not just information, but also what it means to sketch out this, trying to map home. Like that process is a process that many people of mixed ancestry are experiencing or are at varying levels of experiencing.

[00:19:51.22]

And I think that because of the reserve system, because of the Indian Act, because of how unsettlement played out, there are tons of Algonquin people who didn't move onto reserve and who have their own stories of course in terms of how they relate to their family, family heritage and their relationship to the land but, I do feel like it's really important- I was talking about shame and, I think it's important to like, archive the difficult- the difficulty of the return. I feel like that's the most important thing that I can give right now. I'm not a Grandma.

May: Mhm.

Jenn: Right now. Right now, I can talk about the thing that's really hard to talk about, like the pain of not knowing, and also the awkwardness of mistaking my way through this journey. So, so that's really what the work is right now. Mhm.

[00:20:55.01]

May: Is there anything else you want to add, share? [Pause] Is there anything sitting in your heart that you want to share?

Jenn: I'll probably think of twelve thousand things afterwards that I wish I'd said, but. That's fine.

May: That was beautiful.

Jenn: Yeah. That's fine.

May: Thank you.

Jenn: Thanks, May.

May: How are you feeling?

Jenn: Good.

May: Can I give you a hug?

Jenn: Yeah sure. Yeah, it's nice to be into the work.

[Pause]

Alex: I'm curious how, like, where your material is stored. Kind of curious, like, where your material is stored and how like, is there a place that you keep it, is it bound in the book. I know that it's not just all tangible material, as you've said. But I have heard, as you were speaking, that it gets sort of, it does materialize in these places even though there's so much at work, there's so much background and resonance to what these actually are and have come from.

Jenn: Mm.

[00:22:03.12]

Alex: I'm just curious- do you store it? How do you store it? Where do you keep books? Where do you keep these things?

[Jenn laughs]

Alex: Is it really funny?

Jenn: It's a bit funny because I, I am working hard to have a room of my own, but I don't. Right now the grandparents are sleeping in it. I couldn't get matches for the smudge because they're like sleeping in that room [laughs]. It's a great room. It's really tiny. And I have shelves and really the work is like, there's this book, and of course people's story drawings that they've wanted me to hold onto for them and, there's like a folder for- I keep it pretty separate, actually. There's like a folder for the research, for the print-outs, like "Now I'm gonna read about William Commanda's plan for..." Yeah so like all that stuff, it's in another folder, but same kind of place and I also have a book where I do more of the writing part of this work. Yeah and notebooks and stuff. And then also my Mom and I really like giving each other family tokens, family gifts. So there are pieces of this work that I could keep in a folder but that feels really weird. I just want my Mom to have like a nice watercolour of my Nan and her hands and stuff. I just think she should have that for a while, so, there's that. And then like the cell phone. I dunno. Like Mom texts. And like brother texts and stuff.

May: Mm. Cell phone as archive.

Jenn: Mhm. Uck. I hate that idea.

May: Yuck. [Laughs]

Audience member: Jenn I just realized I have a cookbook of yours in a locker in the department.

Jenn: Oh! That cook book. Yes.

Audience member: Do you need that back? [Laughs] The one where we ripped pages out-

Jenn: No we don't need it.

Audience member: Well then I'll keep it.

Jenn: Okay. It's not a family, it's not like a-

Audience member: It's not a family thing? I was just like very concerned-

Jenn: I wouldn't have brought it to tear up if- yeah. Yeah. I only really wanted that cock-a-leekie soup recipe. Thank you [laughs] for asking.

[00:24:23.23]

[End of tape]