

# Becoming Archive *ribcage: this wide passage*

by Heather Hermant

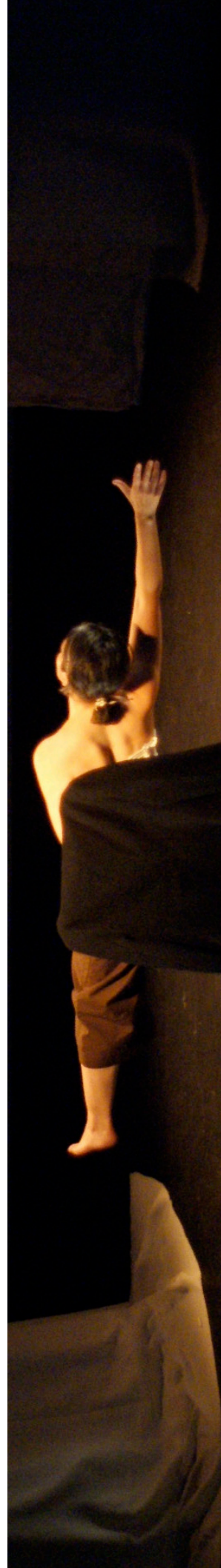
*slow undulations slipping under  
like a long-forgotten choice  
is the angle of this story  
is the angle of the midrash on the archive  
is the angle of this entire story  
the entire story, the entire story  
i will undertake*

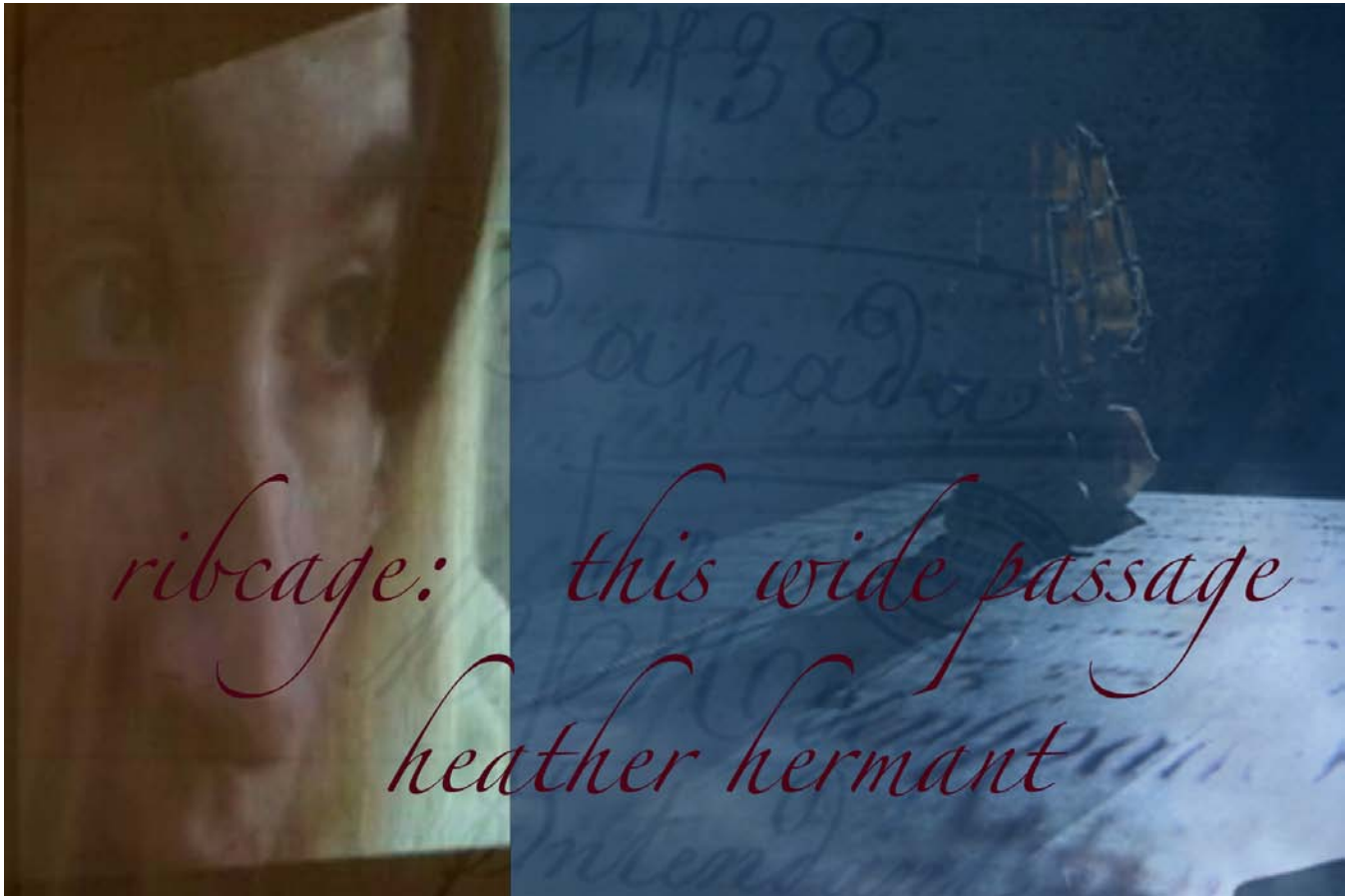
—Heather Hermant, *ribcage: this wide passage*

In 2005, as a graduate student, I took a workshop entitled “Testimony, Autobiography, and Performance” taught by Diane Roberts, now artistic director of Vancouver’s urban ink productions and director of my interdisciplinary show *ribcage: this wide passage*. Roberts asked us to choose an ancestor at least two generations removed to research and embody. This challenge was my introduction to Diane’s Personal Legacy process (Roberts). My response would map the next seven years of my life . . . and counting.

*My great-great grandmother’s name was Riva. A short form of Rebecca. Hebrew for “To Bind.” Bound. Tied. . . . Et en français, or olde English for that matter? Rivière. River. Riva.<sup>1</sup>*

I have since joined Diane in developing this process, which takes seriously the indigeneity of the place we now call Canada and interculturality as a profound commitment to co-witnessing the past in the present. *ribcage* is the first performance to move from idea to production through the Personal Legacy process. It was workshopped and presented in Vancouver as part of the 2010 Tremors Festival. The full production premiered at Le MAI in Montreal in October 2010<sup>2</sup> and is being translated to French by Nadine Desrochers for





Title image, *ribcage: this wide passage*.  
Photo by Heather Hermant

bilingual touring (watch slideshow and trailer for *ribcage* here: <http://urbanink.ca/ribcage-this-wide-passage/>). A one-to-one performance called *Aujourd'hui / This Day, 1738* was created in 2012 at the invitation of Rhubarb Festival and functions as a stand-alone work and companion piece for *ribcage*.

*In this book, my grandparents' 1926 edition of The Jew in Canada, this is where I first learned about Esther Brandeau . . . Page Three . . . A cross-dressing woman boy Jew, who passed as a Christian, came here 272 years ago? A double-crosser makes the crossing!*

I call *ribcage* a *midrash* (a Jewish interpretation or commentary on biblical text) on the archive—and I understand it as “ceremonial archival performance.”<sup>3</sup> It is a tracing of multiple crossings, a queer collision on contemporary colonial shores. It stems from a story found in a French colonial document that records an interrogation of a cross-dressed Jew at Quebec City in 1738 (Archives). I wondered why I had never heard of this “multicrosser”<sup>4</sup> who came, refused to convert, was deported, and disappeared from the historical record.<sup>5</sup> Maybe presenting a queer as “the first Jew in Canada” was too risky; maybe the outing of a Jew-to-Christian crosser challenged *pure laine* mythology. I use the term *multicrosser* to describe her/his passing as multiple, simultaneous, and interdependent: crossing boundaries of gender, religion, what we might understand today as “race,” class, geography, language, and eras.



In “Aujourd’hui,” each syllable of a remixed interrogation record is translated into a precise movement vocabulary, as I recite: “Aujourd’hui, 15e septembre, 1738 . . .”  
Photo by Simon Rossiter



A female figure crosses a landscape over and over again in "Winter: A Duet for Fiddle and VJ." The land underfoot spins into a dizzying geography.  
*Photo by Tim Matheson ([www.tmatheson.com](http://www.tmatheson.com))*



Triangulation: The archivist reaches into space and pulls the lines of a map toward her until she becomes entangled.  
*Photo by Simon Rossiter ([www.simonrossiter.com](http://www.simonrossiter.com))*



Becoming Jacques: The souls lost to the Inquisition, the child (Esther Brandeau) whose voice soars from atop the dress, the religious traditions that collide in melody and body, are woven together to allow for the emergence of Jacques La Fargue.  
*Photo by Simon Rossiter (left and top right); photo by Tim Matheson (bottom right)*



Camino: The archivist-pilgrim wanders between sheets of archival records, bathed in the crashing waves off Finisterre, Spain. Here, the Atlantic Ocean meets the westernmost point of continental Europe in a treacherous collision.

Photo by Rupinder Sidhu (left); Tim Matheson (right)

Riva stepped aside as I followed an archival labyrinth—in Ottawa, Montreal, and Quebec City, and in every place that Brandeau was purported to have worked as a young man over five years across France.<sup>6</sup> I walked the famed Camino de Santiago de Compostela, simultaneously as pilgrimage route *and* as a route of exile from Iberia, commemorating the expulsion of the Jews in 1492. *ribcage* is not a stage adaptation of Brandeau’s life; rather, it captures my search for a queer history of place compelled by the queer and *converso*<sup>7</sup> resonances I found with her/his story. It is a search for my belonging(s) as a queer and as the child of a Christian-Jewish family whose origins cross the language/culture divides of the first settler communities on Turtle Island. Maybe *ribcage* is “temporal drag,” to borrow a phrase from Elizabeth Freeman (59), as much as it is historical nonfiction embodied as autobiography. Geertje Mak argues that passing is about being silent, about *not* telling the story; to be forced to tell is a form of violence. *ribcage* refuses to “out” the passer, making her/him tell the tale.<sup>8</sup>

Early on the project told me—the spoken word artist I was then—“poetry as you know it will not do.” Thus *ribcage* became a multilingual, interdisciplinary theatre piece. It draws on spoken word poetry, archival lecture, and physical theatre and is set within a video installation with fiddle music and soundscape looping. Projection surfaces include suspended archival documents of the original interrogation record and an enormous white robe reminiscent of tunics worn by those condemned by the Inquisition. Even the tiny sails of a model ship serve as projection surfaces for archival handwriting.

The video installation creates a memory space. VJ and installation codesigner Kaija Siirala mixed lush, moving

imagescapes that blend eighteenth-century handwriting, my handwriting, site-specific reenactments, and footage I gathered from “Esther’s places” on both sides of the Atlantic. Composer Jaron Freeman-Fox performs live as insider-witness to the tale. His soaring score mixes Hebrew melodies, Carnatic classical violin, folk traditions, choral arrangement, and my Camino sound samples, with hints of his mentor, the late Oliver Schroer, to whom—along with Lorena Gale and all my relations—*ribcage* is dedicated.

*A pinch of salt a body part breathing space some water a triangulated line. Where is she? He.*

I begin with my own ancestral stories. I become the archivist. The archivist walks into the tangled documents of the tale, obsessed, and becomes the story itself. I return.

*ribcage* is a *kaddish* (mourner’s prayer) sung on Turtle Island, in which to perform a gender-crossing is not a ruse, nor a *Purim* party,<sup>9</sup> nor a violation of sacred law, but a profoundly sacred ritual. *ribcage* remembers my Riva, and on the Québécoise side—

*I think it was my other great-great grandmother who climbed the steps of Sainte-Anne de Beaupré on her hands and knees hoping to regain her ability to walk. And did.*

*—it is me as my grandfather.*

*... as a teenage boy in a suit with his hair slicked back.*

*ribcage* is the shameless joy of flirting across several centuries with you, the ladies in the front row. It is triple shadows of colonization following my every move. It is a grappling with how to tell history in the colonial present. *ribcage* is performance as archival research, is my answer to a

longing and to a teaching I arrived at walking through the fire of a Personal Legacy creation. *It is not possible to return. Only to create.* My body is the archive, with you and you and you as my witnesses.

## Notes

1. Italicized text is excerpted from *ribcage: this wide passage*, an unpublished script-score by Heather Hermant.
2. *ribcage* was created and performed by Heather Hermant and directed by Diane Roberts. Composer/live music: Jaron Freeman-Fox; Video installation: Kaija Siirala and Heather Hermant; Videography: Melina Young and Heather Hermant; Lighting design: Simon Rossiter; Costume design: Luisa Milan; Set design: Heather Hermant.
3. I thank Personal Legacy collaborator Danielle Smith (see Smith, personal communication) for helping craft this understanding.
4. This term appears in my dissertation's working title: "Esther Brandeau / Jacques La Fargue: Performing a Reading of an Eighteenth Century Multicrosser."
5. Other investigations of this story include Pierre Lasry's *Une juive en Nouvelle-France* (2000), Wendy Oberlander's *Translating Esther* (2003) installation at Toronto's Koffler Gallery, Sharon McKay's *Esther* (2004), and Susan Glickman's *The Tale-Teller* (2012).
6. My archival work continues in The Netherlands where Brandeau was sent to stay with family. The ship was, ostensibly, wrecked, catalyzing Brandeau's emergence first as Pierre Mausiette.
7. *Conversos* were Spanish or Portuguese Jews who converted to Christianity during the Inquisition to avoid persecution and expulsion.
8. There are few documented cases from early-eighteenth-century Europe of those who crossed gender and race lines, or at least where racial passing also became visible. See Burshatin on Eleno/a De Céspedes for an example found in Inquisition records.
9. *Purim* is an annual Jewish holiday commemorating a biblical event in which Queen Esther revealed her hidden Jewishness to her husband, the Persian king Ahasuerus, to avert massacre of the kingdom's Jews. Hiding and masquerading are major themes of *Purim*, a time when cross-dressing is permitted despite biblical ban. The story is ripe for queer, anticolonial, feminist reflection.

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