

An Obligation to do One's Best

by

Dana Smessaert

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Director of Thesis: Angela Wells

Major Department: School of Art and Design

An Obligation to do One's Best is an exploration of myth and reality at home in a small southern town. The artist is calling into question whose history we are referencing when it comes to art, economics, and culture. In these liminal landscapes, the viewer/spectator becomes a collaborator in the mythos of racism in the Southern narrative—the denial of not only its racist past but also the strides of the Civil Rights protests. The research explores the agency of history and cultural capital through a site-specific installation with images, video, sculpture, and sound. Creating a liminal landscape of the American South through physical and metaphysical readings of its trauma, history, and understanding the “...south as a noun that behaves like a verb.”¹ The South is entwined with history, politics, economics, and racism, a link that can never be severed, this paper consorts with classic literature, history, cinema, demographics, and philosophy. The American South, the house, the name, and the family's history are complicated and seemingly transparent to those on the outside. However, the stories of those who live here still exist in the space between myth and reality.

¹ Romine, Scott. *The Real South: Southern Narrative in the Age of Cultural Reproduction*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008.

An Obligation to do One's Best

A Thesis

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Master of Fine Arts

by

Dana Smessaert

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Dana Smessaert

APPROVED BY:

DIRECTOR OF THESIS:

Angela Wells, MFA

COMMITTEE MEMBER:

Linda Adele Goodine, MFA

COMMITTEE MEMBER:

Beth Blake, MFA

COMMITTEE MEMBER:

Josh Raftery, MFA

DIRECTOR OF THE
SCHOOL OF ART AND DESIGN:

Kate Bukoski, PhD

DEAN OF GRADUATE SCHOOL:

Paul J Gemperline, PhD

This work is dedicated to my Grandmother Katherine.

I wish you could be here to see me come home.

Also, in dedication to my two fur babies, Hot Pocket and Digidy.

For being unwavering in friendship and solace.

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INTRODUCTION

Do you see me? Are you just hearing me? Are you listening to the words I have chosen so carefully through gritted teeth to perform the perfect midwestern nice accent?² It is not seen nor heard just like when you say bless your heart to unwitting outsiders, a regional language - no outsiders allowed. My language is labeled, a blunt 'awk' above crossed out sentences on my character development paper for Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in high school. I learned to change the way I performed during these high school years, and it was also at this time, I was introduced to Richard Avedon's *American West* series. Changing the way I process material culture, images, and what it means to create images.

I learned to distance myself from those who could not read that language, who prioritized things as 'this is just the way it is,' and the people who did not rationalize the world were the outcasts. The language I speak of consists of two things, things seen, the visuals, noticing how and maybe why the white couple came over to the black man to ask for his seats while waiting for their flight, small visual cues that are out of place. The second is that of mutual emotional experience through suffering, labor, or family. So, I began to surround myself with those who saw what I saw, who did not merely state, that is the way it is.

I often found myself after my undergraduate studies asking what good is having this language if the majority of people who see it are in disenfranchised positions? People who have given up hope that someone sees their world as they do. All I could do is watch a co-worker quit because the early shift consisted of old racist grungy white men who called him the N-word instead of his name, Webster. Was it all I could do to watch as he quit when the bosses refused to

² Kix, Paul. "Midwestern Nice: A Tribute to a Sincere and Suffocating Way of Life." Thrillist. Thrillist, October 22, 2015. <https://www.thrillist.com/lifestyle/nation/my-life-living-midwestern-nice>

take action? No, it was not all I could do. Why is this language and the action of this language regularly rendered 'awk' in institutions? Does art have any agency to help the misunderstood and the disenfranchised? Who holds the authority? Can it shift, or better yet, do I believe I can change things? In moving to the American South, it has brought to light my questioning of the authority of academia and how institutions change the narratives of history and people to bottleneck the other out. Forever stuck in the Us versus Them.³ I ask a lot of questions, and I always have. I never got the answers that felt quite right to me. It is time now to not ask for the answers but to seek, take, and proclaim them.

³ Mead, Nicole, and Jon Maner. "When Me versus You Becomes Us versus Them: How Intergroup Competition Shapes Ingroup Psychology." *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 6, no. 8 (2012): 566–74. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9004.2012.00447.x>.

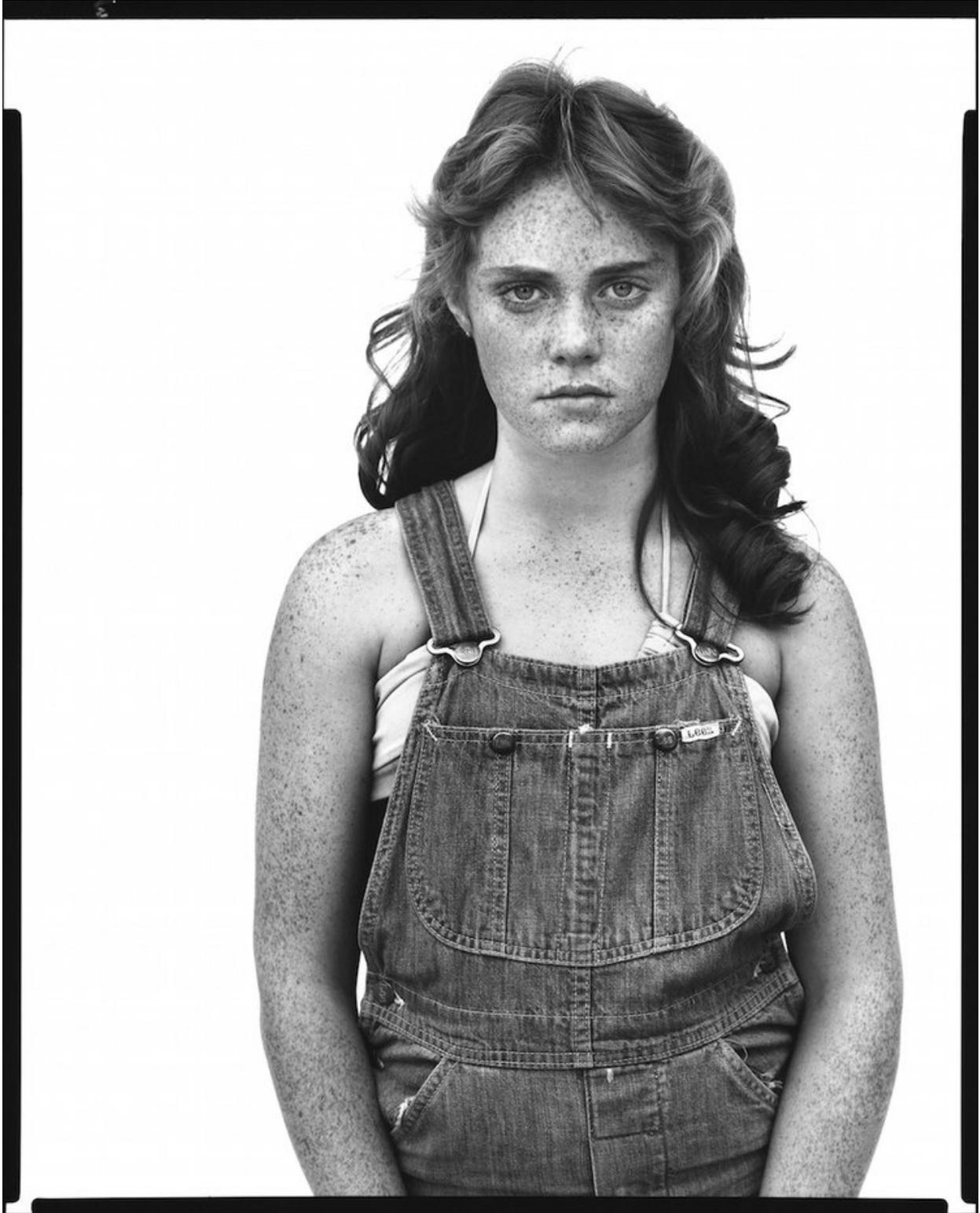


Figure 1: Richard Avedon, *Sandra Bennett, twelve-year-old, Rocky Ford, Colorado, August 23, 1980*, <https://www.avedonfoundation.org/the-work>

RELATIONSHIPS TO THE SOUTH

Living in the North, we learn only four things about the American South that anyone remembers past high school: Slavery, Thirteen Colonies, The Louisiana Purchase, The Trail of Tears. Now some might remember Andrew Jackson's insane party after getting elected, or the stories of Rip VanWinkle. Then there are the things we learn outside of public education, the Blue Collar TV show, Deliverance, and Elvis. These pop-culture definitions of the American South can all be chalked up to bad public education that does not teach anything about the American South after the Civil War. It is precisely that in which I have been trying to catch up on since I have become an active piece in this landscape. Through this searching, I have found there is nothing untouched by antebellum era or plantation era (late 18th century till 1861) southern ways, gestures, speech, architecture, systematic structures, landscape cultivation, all of these things bore witness and scarred over the blood spilled. The only thing that does not seem to hold any remembrance is the people. If there is a scar, it is buried beneath slighted gestures of a Jim Crow Era training, beginning at the end of Reconstruction 1877 until the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement in 1950.

I am a white woman from the North, and when I ask my students if they know who Emmett Till is, only three or maybe four hands go up in a class of 16. I am shocked, and I often ask myself, why am I the one telling them? How can they be in an art program and not be taught the power of media, media that Till's mother wielded like a great conquer? How can they be from the South and not feel the scars? Here again, you can blame public education. To understand this a little further, we need to think about access, access that is standard for most middle-class families.

Racism, The Quick Version

The middle class is not just one class, and it is not just an upper or lower middle class, those terms are nicer subsidies for the entrepreneurial middle class and the bureaucratic middle class. Artisans, independent professionals, small manufacturing proprietors, service proprietors, and storekeepers make up the entrepreneurial middle class. Whereas, the bureaucratic middle class is made up of clerks, white-collar employees, military, government officials, salespeople, and quasi-professionals (Teachers, nurses, journalists, etc.).⁴ These types of jobs come from an established urbanized market, projected to occur once capitalism starts to form. The South consisted of mostly rural landowners, slaves, and some smaller businesses, the middle class lived in “community-based social histories...institutions that were supportive of the development of a petit-bourgeois consciousness.”⁵ Class structures existed in the South as Milton Clapp wrote in the *Southern Quarterly Review*, “The line is marked. On one side lies the planter class, on the other the poor. Individuals may pass over the line, but the transition is abrupt. There are no intermediate resting-places.”⁶ The southern economic structures were more reflective of the feudal era of Europe rather than the capitalist structures we live in today. To give a more statistical visual of this difference between 1850 and 1900 the South was behind in urban population (defined by more than twenty-five hundred inhabitants living in settlements) by 20% compared to the industrialized Northeast, Midwest, and Western Frontier. 40 percent of Midwestern and Western populations were urban by 1900.⁷

⁴ Ruef, Martin. *Between Slavery and Capitalism The Legacy of Emancipation in the American South*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017.

⁵ Ruef, Martin. *Between Slavery and Capitalism The Legacy of Emancipation in the American South*. Pg. 77

⁶ Clapp, Milton. “The Prospects and Policy of the South, as They Appear to the Eyes of a Planter.” *Southern Quarterly Review* 20, no. 431 (1854).

⁷ Ruef, Martin. *Between Slavery and Capitalism The Legacy of Emancipation in the American South*. Pg. 80

Table 1: African American Lynching Victims by Southern State, 1877-1950

Alabama	361
Arkansas	492
Florida	311
Georgia	589
Kentucky	168
Louisiana	549
Mississippi	654
North Carolina	123
South Carolina	185
Tennessee	233
Texas	335
Virginia	84
Total	4084

Figure 2: Equal Justice Initiative, *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror*, pg 40, <https://eji.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/lynching-in-america-3d-ed-080219.pdf>

In the Reconstruction years after the Civil War agriculture profits began to drop, between the years of 1882 to 1930 lynching became more frequent in the years when the price of cotton was declining, and inflation was increasing. To give a raw number of the number of human lives lost in the period between, emancipation and the Great Depression, also can be known as the blank pages of U.S. history, around 3,000 African Americans were lynched in the American South alone.⁸ There are many theories that the mob violence conjured in the South was rooted in whites wanting to keep a superiority to African Americans despite there being very little difference in their economic well being. It is in *The Tragedy of Lynching*, by Authur Raper (1933) evidence between mob violence and the fluctuation in cotton crop pricing. "...periods of

⁸ Beck, E. M., and Stewart E. Tolnay. "The Killing Fields of the Deep South: The Market for Cotton and the Lynching of Blacks, 1882-1930." *American Sociological Review* 55, no. 4 (August 1990): 526. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2095805>.

relative prosperity bring reductions in lynching and periods of depression cause an increase. Mathematically, this relationship is shown by the correlation of -0.532.”⁹ This mob violence was not spurred on by the general public; this effort was led by more affluent white men aiming to replace African American workers with unemployed poor white workers.¹⁰ Creating a cycle of intimidation during highs and lows in the southern economy. Not only do our history books leave out these critical details of how rooted oppression is in a capitalistic society, but they also leave out moments of harrowing togetherness. The New York Conspiracy of 1741 is something I had not heard about until I visited the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., in 2017. This conspiracy is still written into history as a “supposed” scheme plotted by Caribbean slaves and the proletariat white class to take over New York City.¹¹ The uprising led to ten fires set in the city between March and April, leading to the paranoia of white officials causing New England to point out similarities to the witch trials in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692. Due to the interrogation methods used to get confessions of both slaves and the white working class.¹²

There is lots of speculation around the New York Conspiracy of 1741, lack of matching reports, and of the paranoia that took hold of the “reputable” sources. How can we expect the families of those who were burned, hung, and beaten to be open honest sources of what happened? When their honesty would be likely met with the same fate. Our history structure has set us up for false information concerning the disenfranchised. Notably put by Dubois, “We

⁹ Raper, Arthur Franklin. *THE TRAGEDY OF LYNCHING*. NEW YORK: NEGRO UNIV. PR., 1969.

¹⁰ Beck, E. M., and Stewart E. Tolnay. “The Killing Fields of the Deep South: The Market for Cotton and the Lynching of Blacks, 1882-1930.” pg. 1

¹¹ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. “New York Slave Rebellion of 1741.” Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., February 1, 2018. <https://www.britannica.com/event/New-York-slave-rebellion-of-1741>.

¹² Sutherland, Claudia. “New York Slave Conspiracy (1741).” Welcome to Blackpast, February 1, 2019. <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/new-york-slave-conspiracy-1741/>.

seldom study the condition of the Negro to-day honestly and carefully. It is so much easier to assume that we know it all. Or perhaps, having already reached conclusions in our own mind, we loath to have them disturbed by facts.”¹³

¹³ Dubois, W.E.B., Randall Bois W. E. Kenan, and Cheryl Bois W. E. Gilkes. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Signet Classics, 2012.

LANGUAGE AS THE LOST TOOL

We all know the story one version or another, the tale of The Tower of Babel, where we all spoke the same language in ancient times. Humans had reached too high, and the gods became threatened, and as our punishment, the gods struck down the tower and stole our common language. The lack of commonality leads us to nationalism and war. Now entrapped in a state of disillusionment, we search for something more. Paulo Coelho in *The Alchemist* calls an awakening back the soul of the universe, a universal language.¹⁴ It is a language of the body, common understandings, intuition, omens, and coincidences. These things are all immeasurable in western science, filled with the connotation of the feminine - a language-based in visual cues, emotional experience, labor, or family.

In a state of disillusionment, "...there may not have been an illusion as such; rather, there was some overall effective-enough, taken-for-granted coherence, an experience of the world and being that now comes into view and seems broken precisely because it no longer holds together."¹⁵ Once in this state of uncertainty, the populations begin to create either religious or academic notions of thinking, hearing, and seeing the world; these philosophies are formed and written by the ruling patriarchal society.

The most notorious of these is the Christian dogma. The church had created a reactionary response to an influx of Arabic and Greek texts containing ceremonial magic translated around the twelfth century. To battle these texts, the church created an understanding of the Devil as we know him today. The devil was not depicted in texts or art until the middle ages, and the Devil's

¹⁴ Coelho, Paulo. *The Alchemist*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers., n.d.

¹⁵ Margulies, Alfred. "Illusionment and Disillusionment: Foundational Illusions and the Loss of a World." *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 66, no. 2 (April 30, 2018): 289–303. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003065118770332>.

physical description was not described in the bible at this point. These new texts threaten the religious towers of understanding because of their appeal to an intellectual class. Pope John XXII declared officially in 1326 magic was an act of heresy, and so the church sent friars to locations around Europe to proclaim the devil is afoot. In the 1420s, satanic witchcraft accusations and executions were beginning to take place, many of the first records of these executions are traceable to the locations the friars originally traveled.¹⁶ The medical university was also using similar tactics to disarm the monopoly of midwifery by changing the narrative of the midwife.¹⁷

The midwife became the witch. Now witches are those who deal with unwanted pregnancies and other women's health needs. The witch is a fascinating archetype; she is neither a hero nor a villain, nor is she even a she, the scariest thing about the witch is her agency. She is always a marginalized character that receives minimal backstory, and the notion of a good witch did not exist until L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*. Glenda is based on Baum's mother-in-law Matilda Joslyn Gage, a suffragist, and equal rights pioneer. *The Wizard of Oz* is what some call the first American fairy tale, a staple in the mythos of how we understand good versus evil. The good witches are fighting the Wicked Witch of the West for her enslavement of the Winkies. It is here the witch has seemingly redeemed herself but is also a leader in fighting against the injustices of the world - an abolitionist.¹⁸

Tangential as it may seem, it is vital to state and possibly re-remember that words, texts, thoughts all have the same power to create and destroy. I bring these older references to light again because of the state of communication today. The written word is used to control when elements of abstract thought or texts surface to dispose of 'rational' thought. If we are not aware

¹⁶ Grossman, Pam. *WAKING THE WITCH: Reflections on Women, Magic, and Power*. S.l.: Gallery Books, 2020.

¹⁷ Lister, Lisa. *Witch: Unleashed, Untamed, Unapologetic*. Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, 2017.

¹⁸ Grossman, Pam. *WAKING THE WITCH: Reflections on Women, Magic, and Power*. Pg. 22-25

of these more minor histories deemed by the victor as unimportant, then there is no hope for a resurgence.

The South and the White Woman

White women have been the face of the mainstream feminist movement since the suffragist movement in the early 1900s. All movements toward women's rights have appeared segregated in terms of issues, women of color fought for rights still denied them based on racial prejudices, and white women fought for rights they assumed encompassed all women issues. This underlying tension was brought to light during the 2017 Women's March on D.C. after the election of Donald J. Trump to the presidency. There seemed to be a split in the party of women, an un-united front in the fight for women's health. In a recent study, "women in Iraq and the Gaza Strip have a better chance of surviving childbirth than women in 33 Indiana counties where inpatient delivery services simply do not exist."¹⁹ This issue affects many, but in high proportions, it affects women of color in redlined neighborhoods where the facilities do not exist close to their neighborhoods. Two of Indianapolis's significant hospitals IU Health and Eskenazi Health, both reside in the old African American district of Indiana Ave, where black businesses and residents were pushed out due to the University and city construction.²⁰ Indianapolis is the 14th largest city (by population) in America, just below San Francisco, California, home to IU medical campuses, Eli Lilly, Riley's Children's Hospital, and yet mothers are dying. This issue

¹⁹ Gibson, London. "Hoosier Mothers Die in Child Birth at Same Rate as Women in the Gaza Strip: Help Us Find out Why." Indianapolis Star. IndyStar, October 30, 2019. <https://www.indystar.com/story/news/health/2019/10/28/maternal-mortality-indiana-childbirth-death-rate/3899877002/>.

²⁰ Paschall, Wildstyle. "The Ethnic Cleansing of Black Indianapolis." New America, February 4, 2020. <https://www.newamerica.org/indianapolis/blog/indiana-avenue-ethnic-cleansing-black-indianapolis/?fbclid=IwAR2Ay-kXU3a1Tx7fytBZFJJK9YuFhwSI4CUeOYMSy5tWKZQUBqItg7cgtd4>.

rarely affects affluent white women leading the feminist movements, and thus it is not on most agendas, isolating women of color to fend for themselves.

The history between white women and women of color is a long one, and the role of the Southern white women was especially crucial to the KKK agenda, as seen in their 1912 film *Birth of a Nation*²¹, lynchings, and the dismembering of African American families. As a white woman who grew up in a rather lily-white immigrant settled midwestern town, this history was unbeknownst to me. In the South, one will notice the lack of eye contact, the crossing of the street of black men, the suspicious eye of a black woman. A white woman is a potential threat to the safety of a community. The lynching that trapped African American communities in fear and silence provided the opposite to the white population it created a sense of community—affirming white men to protect southern women and thus saving their manhood. For black men who tried to defend black womanhood, they were met with violence and death, creating betrayal amongst families and communities.²² Children were not innocent of these brutalities, often young white boys were the ones to provide wood and tend a burning and to actively engaged in lynching until they were old enough to take direct action in the torture. The idea of lynching was so engrained in the next generation that it was often a play game for young boys named “Salisbury” after the lynching in Salisbury, North Carolina, in 1902.²³ White women were groomed to be the accusers.

Adolescent white women made more than half of accusations of rape; even when evidence disproved their accusations, they often experienced no social or judicial repercussions.²⁴ The grooming of white women to be accusers exists in pop culture, one of the

²¹ *The Birth of a Nation*. Epoch Production Corporation, 1915.

²² Equal Justice Initiative . *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror*. IIIed. Montgomery, Alabama: Equal Justice Initiative, 2017.

²³ Equal Justice Initiative . *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror*. pg. 70

²⁴ Equal Justice Initiative . *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror*. pg.71

most famous southern women a Blanche Deveraux of *The Golden Girls* talks about her accusation of a horse thief on her Granddaddy's plantation,

"...Well, I screamed for help. My Granddaddy jumped on his stallion and rode that horse thief down. And then, to teach me about the justice system, Granddaddy dragged that horse thief into court, with me as the star witness. I had to testify in front of a packed courtroom."

Rose: "You must have been terrified."

Blanche: "Oh, honey, I was. I did not know what to wear! I only had two dresses with me. One bright one, suitable for weddings or a cotillion, and one darker one, more suitable for funerals or a hanging."

Dorothy: "See, my folks were poor. I just had one of those, you know, reversible hanging/cotillion dresses."

Blanche: "Well, I picked the bright one. Now, when I took the stand, a hush fell over that courtroom. I told the judge exactly what I had seen, and after my testimony, that horse thief's fate was sealed. Justice won the day!"²⁵

While the ethnicity of the horse thief is never stated it was left to the assumption of the audience, Blanche grew up in the Jim Crow era of the South, the show states she was 17 in 1949 in season 3 episode 25 *Mother's Day*.²⁶ All shows have their plot, and continuity holes, the content and the narrative of the characters always reflect a condensed vision of what a region, gender, sexual orientations, and ethnicity is comprised of, a stereotype. Projecting reaffirmed truths of the current collective psyche of the population.

This accuser stance of the white woman is not limited to Jim Crow era politics; it has lived on and publicly resurfaced through 911 calls to police; some lead to the slaying of innocent black men. In the case of "BBQ Becky," an African American family who was grilling out in Oakland, California, did not meet this fate, thankfully. The woman "BBQ Becky" demanded the

²⁵ "Dorothy's Prized Pupil." *Golden Girls*, March 14, 1987.

²⁶ "Mother's Day." *Golden Girls*, May 7, 1988.

police come and that she felt unsafe and scared, the police luckily saw her accusations in response to the African American family as unreputable.²⁷

The accusations toward African American men for impeding the gaze of white women are many. Some lead to the destruction and abandonment of towns like the black town of Rosewood in central Florida in 1923.²⁸ They live in literary history with Harper Lee's Atticus Finch and Tom Robinson in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The names of these men call to be remembered Emmett Till, Sam Hose, and those of today's police brutality Rodney King, Trayvon Martin, and Arianne McCree. It is our duty as white women to become educated about our history when it comes to accusations of people of color. It is a power that has seeped into the judicial systems that are supposed to protect all Americans. We need to recognize the role white women have played in history and understand that the issues third-wave feminism fought for did not affect women of color equally. That fourth-wave feminism must obtain earlier rights as a unit for all identifying women in order to combat the larger evils of the world.

Institutions That Make It So

After moving to the South, I thought I understood the apathetic nature of a forgotten place in America. Being from the rust belt, in a city in the shadows of Gary, Indiana and Detroit, Michigan. Deindustrialization of my hometown was just a fact of life and the attitude of 'there is no one who cares about us' while also having a great sense of pride in things that do not exist

²⁷ Zhao, Christina. "“BBQ Becky,” White Woman Who Called Cops on Black BBQ, 911 Tapes Released: ‘I’m Really Scared! Come Quick!’.” *Newsweek*. *Newsweek*, October 12, 2018. <https://www.newsweek.com/bbq-becky-white-woman-who-called-cops-black-bbq-911-audio-released-im-really-1103057>.

²⁸ Goodloe, Trevor. “Rosewood Massacre (1923).” *Welcome to Blackpast* •, January 6, 2020. <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/rosewood-massacre-1923/>.

anymore. A relishing in neighborhoods that only have ruins of immigrants clustering and the idea the American dream is for everyone. In the South, that energy is overwhelming. Southern history is painful, even forgotten in some places, yet the conversations of racism are taboo. This region's most unresolved part of history is so widely unmentioned and unattainable in certain places. Using Emmett Till's story because of its infamous weight and lack thereof between the two sides of the Mason-Dixon line. In the last decade, there had been a memorial sign placed where the young boy was recovered after being beaten and drowned with an industrial cotton gin fan. In 2019 this sign was riddled with bullet holes by 3 fraternity brothers of the University of Mississippi, who then proceeded to take a photo with it like it was a freshly killed buck.²⁹ The article that covered this tragedy brought up a point that is great but I think needs to be reworded,

"The University of Mississippi fraternity brothers who posed with guns at the bullet-pocked marker were suspended by the Kappa Alpha Order, an organization that glorifies the Confederate South. The fraternity declined to comment to NPR. Nevertheless, the local chapter president has reached out to Memorial Commission Executive Director Patrick Weems, who welcomes a dialogue." and it is not just about replacing the sign, but it is what do they teach there? What do they teach their fraternity members? What is their social impact to their community?" Weems says.³⁰

"What do they teach there?" A valid question yes but the better question is, what is *not* being taught there? My grandmother spent her early years in Kentucky. In this different world, mothers-in-laws posted about community-wide teas to introduce her son's wife and children in the daily paper, a world where the school systems do not teach the Civil War. If that considerable

²⁹ Elliott, Debbie. "Why Don't Y'all Let That Die?' Telling The Emmett Till Story In Mississippi." NPR. NPR, August 28, 2019. <https://www.npr.org/2019/08/28/755024458/why-don-t-y-all-let-that-die-telling-the-emmett-till-story-in-mississippi>.

³⁰ Elliott, Debbie. "Why Don't Y'all Let That Die?' Telling The Emmett Till Story In Mississippi."

part of the history of not only the American South but also The United States is not taught, how can we expect reconstruction to be taught or Jim Crow era politics?



Figure 3: Three College students posted in front of the Emmett Till memorial sign, Tallahatchie County, MS, <https://www.npr.org/2019/08/28/755024458/why-don-t-y-all-let-that-die-telling-the-emmett-till-story-in-mississippi>

Many people hope that time will heal these wounds, that prayer will heal those they have wronged, but if the words do not exist that tell the truth, then how can anyone truly heal? That negativity and hate do not go anywhere. When it is left alone it festers, we see it growing over in these last couple years with police brutality. This energy needs to be transformed. In the new age philosophies, this is called perpetual transmutation of energy, where once cleansed, the energy can be changed back into a positive force in the world. Energy is always in motion, and it will eventually manifest into a physical form.



Plate 1: *An Obligation to do One's Best Installation*, Burroughs Wellcome Gallery, photograph by Dana Smessaert



Plate 2: *An Obligation to do One's Best Installation*, Burroughs Wellcome Gallery, photograph by Dana Smessaert



Plate 3: *An Obligation to do One's Best Installation*, Burroughs Wellcome Gallery, photograph by Dana Smessaert



Plate 4: *Kudzu: A History of Art* detail, photograph by Dana Smessaert



Plate 5: *An Obligation to do One's Best Installation*, Burroughs Wellcome Gallery, photograph by Dana Smessaert



Plate 6: *An Obligation to do One's Best Installation*, Burroughs Wellcome Gallery, photograph by Dana Smessaert

THINGS THAT ARE NOT MINE

One of the essential parts of this work is to understand everything I bring forward is not mine to give. That everything in this installation is taken from its home and place. The whole installation of *An Obligation to do One's Best* plays on repetition and difference, "focus(ing) on the interplay of repetition and difference alive in all creative processes includes the use of language and thus in any attempt to know or become educated."³¹ Understanding the creation of a dynamic through differential moments equaling a positive repetition is key to any artist's practice when working in an area of any kind they are not at home with. Gilles Deleuze's, a French philosopher, repetition refers to different levels in time that repetition can occur, there is no time but the present and all else we know, past and future fall into these levels of repetition. That these repetitive structures "...refer back to a single concept, which leaves only an external difference between the ordinary instances of a figure; the other is the repetition of an internal difference which it incorporates in each of its moments, and carries from one distinctive point to another."³²

Through this concept, the method of photography becomes a vital resource for making. Through the technique of reciprocity failure the image creates the illusion of there being no sense of time. As with all photographs, they never carry what the subject actually is. They are composed of the choice of framing, the control over contrast, and the initial thought of the photographer. This process of understanding can be seen on the backs of Lewis Hine's images.³³

³¹ Martusewicz, Rebecca A. *Seeking Passage: Post-Structuralism, Pedagogy, Ethics*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2001.

³² Deleuze, Gilles, and Paul Patton. *Difference and Repetition*. London, UK: Bloomsbury, 2014.

³³ Sampsell-Willmann, Kate. "Student-Centered Reading of Lewis Hine's Photographs." *American University of Central Asia* 47, no. 3 (May 2014). http://www.societyforhistoryeducation.org/pdfs/M14_Sampsell-Willmann.pdf.

The images are never just a girl in a factory well lit, she is constructed by the artist as a painter constructs a landscape. Becoming an embodiment of Deleuze's paradoxical dynamic, what the intentions were, what knowledge and thought were put into the creation is, in fact, not about how they were received; they are not simple representations. More so translations of translations, of texts, of art and of life.



Figure 4: "One of the spinners in Whitnel Cotton Mill. She was 51 inches high. Has been in the mill one year. Sometimes works at night. Runs 4 sides -48 [cents] a day. When asked how old she was, she hesitated, then said, 'i don't remember,' then confidentially, 'I'm not old enough to work, but do just the same.' Out of 50 employees, ten children about her size. Whitnel, n.C., 12/22/1908." National Archives Identifier 523145, <http://research.archives.gov/description/523145>.

Translations of Home

If we think of all art this way, not just photography, let us ask ourselves what our role as translators is? One of the most important things that any artist of any discipline needs to be able to understand how to use their autobiography as a method of translation for detachment. As educators, this is of the utmost importance, once students or any human learns to translate their autobiography past me versus you. Then us versus them; in other words, how does one combat nostalgia of home. Thinking of an autobiography as translation, we can be open with ourselves to translate one's life conceiving this process as a performative act of generating sensitivities to the experiences of others and yourself.³⁴ It is important to remember that nostalgia is not that far from being nationalistic. Simone Weil talks about the dangers of romanticizing "home" that the idea of home or an organized "us" has been used by academic and political discourses to organize people believe they want to be segregated or even to kill the "them."³⁵ As artists who travel to places for education or work, we enter a new place and a new possible home. Here the world gets messy and gray, and that is okay, here we find ourselves in the throes of a culture war, of appropriation, of PC-ness, and the many other hot words being thrown around in art journals and the news cycles. Artists enter spaces with fresh eyes, and that is valid.

When an artist creates work about a place or the people who occupy it all attempts to question or say something about said territory, the lines begin to shift—having to become redefined once again. This again goes back to difference being at play always, it's never a simple transaction of information.³⁶ A Deterritorialization and reterritorialization of the idea of place

³⁴ Martusewicz, Rebecca A. *Seeking Passage: Post-Structuralism, Pedagogy, Ethics*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2001.

³⁵ Martusewicz, Rebecca A. *Seeking Passage: Post-Structuralism, Pedagogy, Ethics*. Pg. 33

³⁶ Martusewicz, Rebecca A. *Seeking Passage: Post-Structuralism, Pedagogy, Ethics*. Pg. 33

and space.³⁷ This questioning can all be simmered to the statement that the artist just critiques never accomplishes change. However, there will always be change, in many times, this change cannot be accounted for because it will reside internally until the process of an autobiographical detachment of experience happens once again, and it is this that is the goal of an artist. To create a moment for people to be present and to listen. Not necessarily to the words of the artist but of the actions, the artwork has on the community.

An Obligation to do One's Best

I am drawn to houses the most out of all the material objects humans create. My father was a home builder, I have seen the empty fields, the basement being dug, the foundation being poured, and my small handprints reside in some of these places as well. My whole family built my childhood house. There is a video of my mother walking on the first floor, looking out the hole where a window will go, there is joy and excitement throughout the whole family as the house is almost complete and then at the end, there is a slow zoom in on a sunset. Driving to the South, I had always heard of the big plantation homes and the verandas, but that is not what I saw first. First, I saw the bare wood boards behind the tree lines engrossed by the forest and kudzu. As we drove closer to our destination the houses buried became less ancient, stories began to form in my mind as to why they were left and where did the people go, why was it not for sale, why was it left. When my parents visited for the first time, my father said, "to think that was once someone's pride and joy, a major accomplishment in their lives..." Ownership, this idea is one of the foundations of being an American and "free." The ownership of land granted one the right to vote denied both slaves and women at the inception of the United States. Once

³⁷ Deleuze, Gilles, and Guattari Félix. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by B. Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

this was achievable to the freedmen to own land, they started to build their first houses. A feat that was inconceivable to not only to enslaved, the freed (before emancipation), and white people. So, what does it mean to leave a house and possibly a home?



Plate 7: *The Spinsters*, An Obligation to do One's Best series, photograph by Dana Smessaert

When one passes through the South, they might start to form their stories of what had happened to these houses, if they noticed. The passersby cannot see the whole story, the town. They cannot understand the idea that someone from the South amid all the houses can also not see the whole story. Their birds-eye view blinds them, and their subjective cultural view blinds them. The

outsider is missing mythologies, whereas the insider has only the taught mythologies, but where is the truth the reality? Is the reality buried within the myths, or is the myth buried in reality?³⁸

The truth is it is a little of both.



Figure 5: Mebane and Hyers, *Houses Series*, 2009, <https://www.williammebane.com/houses>

Martin Hyers and Will Mebane's *Houses* series, the homes are straightforward. There is a blowout of all the forms with the atomic flash he uses at night. They are the reality. The myth is the people that occupy the spaces, those residing behind blackened windows. So, what of the residents? In the photographic series with the namesake of the exhibition, *An Obligation to do*

³⁸ Lash, Miranda, and Trevor Schoonmaker. *Southern Accent. Seeking the American South in Contemporary Art*. Durham: Duke University Museum of Art, U.S., 2016.

One's Best, I was struggling to feel a part of my community, I was white and a Yankee. To escape, I went on walks with my dog, we went everywhere, to the point people would wave just because our routine was enough that we became that person in town, the walker. Some houses I stopped walking by due to uncomfortableness I felt by the residents; this was always concerning my sex. When I began shooting these houses at night, I became hyper-aware of my sex and the color of my skin. The names of accused African American men flooded my head, knowing some of these houses were home to African American families, I became more uncomfortable and would flee if it seemed as though I would get caught. All these homes belonged to my neighbors and were on my regular walking routes, and yet, I felt unsafe and dangerous at the same time. I posed a threat, as my action of shooting these homes became doubly violent. I wait out my two-minute timer for the exposures; I am vulnerable, but I am also a hostile figure. Suddenly in those two minutes, I was betwixt both the reality of my situation and the myths that made it so.



Plate 8: *Lang House*, An Obligation to do One's Best series, photograph by Dana Smessaert

Shizuka Yokomizo's project *Dear Strangers* explores the realm between the photographer as a voyeur through her anonymity, signing her invitation letter as faithfully, artist. The residents, in this case, are more important than the facades of Mebane's Houses. The interiors tell little in comparison to their willingness and their postures. This unknown visitor has taken an interest in their life—an interest in the illusion of knowing someone. The most curious part about Yokomizo's project is the chance and acceptance of failure that the work might not exist because the artist is not the one in control. Similarly, the potential failure of this series was not driven by

the subject, but fear of imposing and the repercussions. A fear that prevented lingering, where is one "supposed to be" verse "not supposed to be."

When the images are placed next to each other, they defy their original boundaries. Houses that lie south of the segregation line in town are now able to be next to a house north of that line and vice versa. Sitting next to each other in a time that doesn't make sense. In the most literal sense, due to the reciprocity failure of the film. The image is between time, created by the long exposure of the color film. Allowing the houses to be situated in a space that doesn't have a segregation line. That two families of different financial backgrounds can exist next to each other in this space. These laws have hindered both sides of that line, "A Negro slum may be in dangerous proximity to a white residence quarter, while it is quite common to find a white slum planted in the heart of respectable Negro district...leading to the best of the best to never meet."³⁹ Dubois writes of the American South at one of its lowest points economically in the 1930s in his book *The Souls of Black Folk*. When these spaces become broken into sections based on color, residents must confront their physical differences first, then the connotations of what that color is "supposed" to be/do. This pause that takes place is enough to stop conversations between people who may or may not be all that different. It is now 2020, and these old segregation lines are not the law any more the lines in the heads of that community are. They live on through the community's collective culture, varying from town to town. So, what does one do when the conversation is stopped because of the ideals left behind? This is the power that strangers wield. They do not share this collective culture; thus, a stranger question the obvious like a child would, like an artist should.

³⁹ Dubois, W.E.B., Randall Bois W. E. Kenan, and Cheryl Bois W. E. Gilkes. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Signet Classics, 2012.



Figure 6: Shizuka Yokomizo, *Strangers*, 1998-2000, <http://www.shizukayokomizo.com/6/459295879>

Dear Stranger,

I am an artist currently working on a photographic project which involves people I do not know. I would be delighted if you could get involved in this project. The project may be exhibited in some exhibitions next year.

I would like to take a photograph of you standing in your front room from the street in the evening. A camera will be set outside the window on the street. If you do not mind being photographed, please stand in the room and look into the camera through the window for 10 minutes on __/__/__:__ pm . I will have come before __/__/__:__ pm and set up my camera. I will take your picture for 10 minutes and then leave.

* Instructions *

It has to be only you, one person in the room alone. Please turn all the lights on and stand at least 1~1.5m away from the window. If you are too close to the window, you will become just a shadow in the picture. I would like you to wear something you always wear at home. Please do keep reasonably still and calmly look into the camera. 10 minutes is a very long time to keep still. Please try it as much as possible but you can relax from time to time. If you do not want to get involved, please simply draw the curtains to show your refusal.

I will NOT knock on your door to meet you. We will remain strangers to each other. However, I will send you a small print later on with my name, address and telephone number. If you do not want your photograph to be exhibited, you can then let me know.

I really hope to see you from the window.

Faithfully,

Artist

Figure 7: Shizuka Yokomizo, *Strangers*, 1998-2000, <http://www.shizukayokomizo.com/6/4592958791>

Here and Now



Plate 9: *Here and Now* film still, photograph by Dana Smessaert

Video work has the most baggage to work around when presented to a broader audience. Its location rarely matters, whether on a screen in a backyard or an art gallery. There will always be the baggage of being entertained and the idea of a linear narrative. The narrative expectation makes it one of the hardest mediums to access even though it is as easy to put out in the world as sound. Hence one of the reasons for Steve Reinke's 100 Videos, it was fast, and it was cheap. Primarily this is due to the fact that video and sound art is still reserved as "other" ; they exist in a separate art history course and often get the labels of weird and too conceptual. When in reality video art is generally very straightforward and the funniest of all mediums, in the sense that sculpture is the most masculine. Video art never paints a picture of the world, in some cases it gives you just the paint you have to find the pictures when looking at the phenomenological work of Stan Brakhage. Alternatively, some cases are very straightforward, like Paul Stephen

Benjamin's *Let Freedom Ring*. Here Benjamin has presented Marian Anderson's documentation of the 1939 performance in front of the Lincoln memorial. Where she finally can sing *Let Freedom Ring* on a national stage—a freedom Anderson was denied by the Daughters of the American Revolution. In the gallery, the audience hears her echoing down into the foyer as they approach her beginning to see all the T.V.s. Stacked in a pyramid, all with her image and the flag overlaid. Calling out to let freedom ring. Now this work could not function without the T.V.s. It is about seeing an African American woman holding the spectators' attention. Anderson holds the power of the gaze.



Figure 8: Paul Stephen Benjamin, *Let Freedom Ring Detail View*, 2017
http://www.paulsbenjamin.com/pb/wp_9c2317c4/wp_9c2317c4.html

The video, however, can hand the audience two things at once something no other medium can do. Tony Cokes' text-based videos present a very straightforward thing- text. So one thinks as this paper has pointed out. Cokes' work grabs the viewer by the shoulders and shakes them by the use of text, popular music, video, and audio clips. Here is where video loses people

where it becomes weird. It becomes weird because audiences do not necessarily want to understand the relationships between Public Enemy's 1988 song "Show 'Em Whatcha Got" and Frederick Douglass as seen and heard in Cokes' *Fade to Black* (1990). While they hear the voices of prominent Black figures, they are still watching classic American films with only white people being represented. It can make one uncomfortable to confront their consumption of Black culture and yet the starch whiteness of what their eyes consume is a harsh reality to many. Rough juxtaposition is the trouble with the video; sometimes, it is too painful; this does not mean the work should not be done. That it is easier for the audience to avert their eyes and cover their ears if the viewer feels they can make the smallest connection to the work, not to feel isolated.

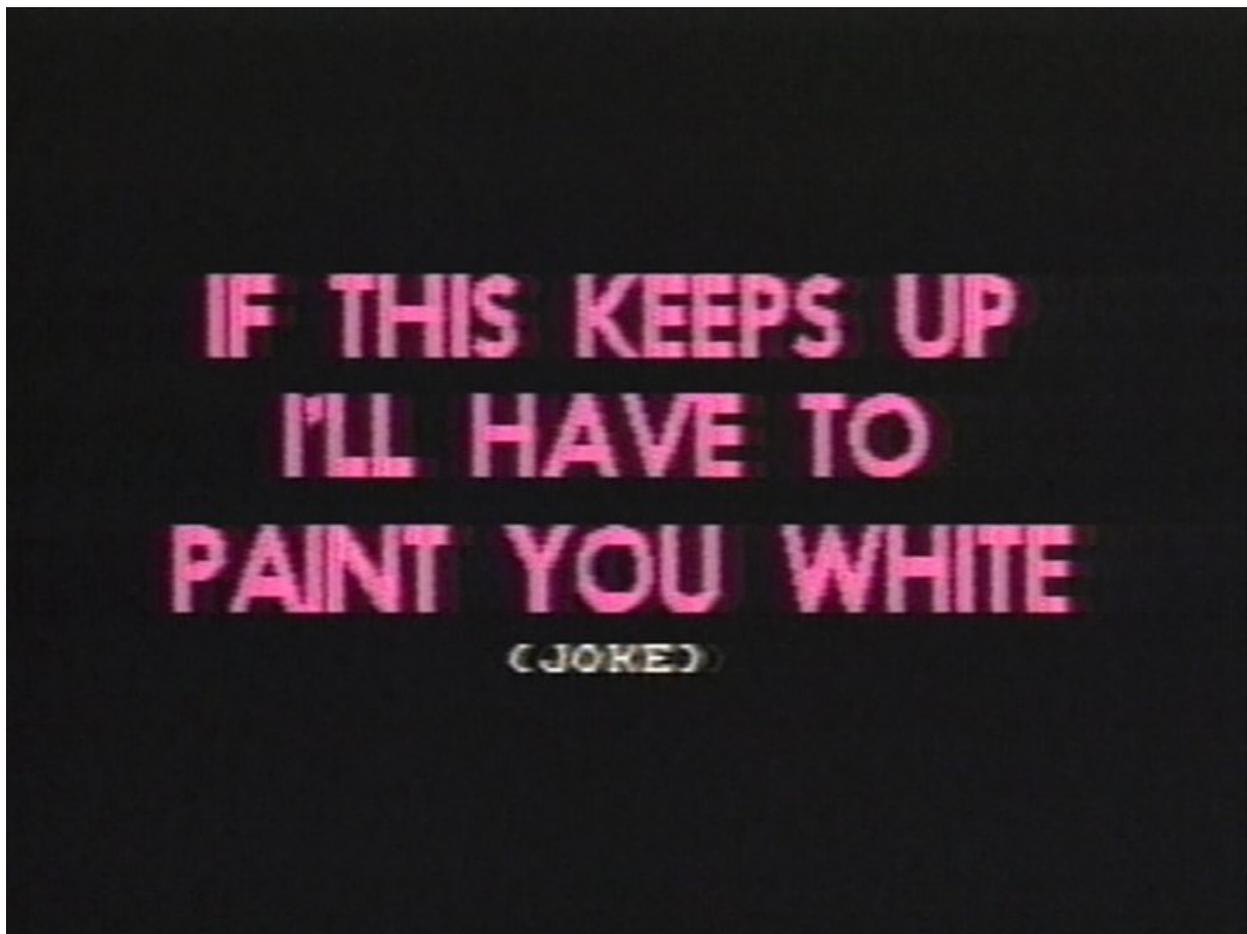


Figure 9: Tony Cokes, *FADE TO BLACK*, 1990, Film Still, <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/film/tony-cokes-sound-systems/tony-cokes-fade-black>

Here and Now, the video is simple and straightforward at first glance. As the video plays over and over on its loop, it begins to function more like a memory. I always shoot video in an amateur camcorder style with quick cuts and inclusion of mechanical errors if they exist. This free handed video offers the allusive second-person narrative that is often difficult to achieve in mainstream films. By doing this, the video lends itself more to creating a sense of memory. The imagery of the video consists of more houses, three altogether. There are houses for sale and rent on the dead-end of a street by the railroad tracks.

Sill shots of the world moving by the lens, unwavering stillness. The rest of the shots are of the Bellamy Estate in Wilmington, NC. First, inside the classic Southern architecture, gilded frames, and windows that drop to the floor and onto the veranda.



Plate 10: *Here and Now* film still, photograph by Dana Smessaert

The front door moves into the frame and zooming in to the etched glass grapevines, there is a hole with cracks seeping out. Possibly a bullet hole since the house's veranda would protect it from any falling objects or hail. The hole is not mentioned in the audio-guided tour, but it was a

moment of defiance. Everything is different as the camera switches to two chairs with hand-woven seats, the walls are concrete, and the room is dark with a single light source. Now the video has entered the slave house: the laundry room and kitchen. The house was quiet, nails still in the wall above the fireplace, rusted. The audio tour tells us that while this was nicest slave quarters in all of Wilmington, due to its matching rounded window tops, some still found the environment oppressive. We did a playback as that could not have been the words that just came out of our device, and yet, they were. The words filled the small rooms upstairs echoing down the hall, down the stairs that rivaled the angle of the stairs to the attic Anne Frank hid in. We left the quarters, but through every window of the big house we could see into that room, and it looked back. As we left my friend turned to me and said, "I want to appreciate the architecture just as it is, but I just can't," I turned to her and said, "I know it hurts too much."



Figure 10: The Bellamy Mansion in 1873, <https://www.bellamymansion.org/the-mansion.html>

Front Porch Solo

Through the course of this thesis process, the notion of happiness had been on my mind, to the point where during my first year, I had said to myself, 'I will no longer make sad work.' Well, this didn't end up happening; in fact, this experience has been one of the loneliest and saddest parts of my life thus far. Often when people ask how I would describe graduate school, I say in return, it is equivalent to an emotionally abusive relationship. While some might not find this valuable in a document, I think it is the most important thing to be said, because without it being in the document during the "relationship" anything said hereafter is a reflection of years past. By stating it here, it will have to be confronted by a multitude of higher up powers. In the same sense, I have to confront the soundscape and monologue created for this thesis work. *Front Porch Solo* is an entanglement of the lies we tell ourselves as artists, and as people, it is solely about being completely and utterly alone. The speaker is drifting in and out of what feels to be a stupor—leading the listener down tales of art, land, the present, and the past. The speaker drifts on and on to themselves as if the audiences' presence is not necessary. As though even without an audience, the words will still permeate the air and drift. This monologue is never a soliloquy for the speaker, it is not paying attention to but reflecting for the audience.

This piece was made during my research of the films that became incredibly influential during my time here, one of them being, Elem Klimov's *Come and See*.⁴⁰ This film gets a mention throughout *Front Porch Solo*. Near the end of the film the two characters, a boy, Florya, and a girl, Glasha, are together again; after getting separated in Byelorussia. The camera is a single shot facing them shoulders up; they stare back at the camera, they are aged, tried, and distressed. Glasha approaches with a flute in her mouth, blood coming down her legs from her

⁴⁰ *Come and See*. Belarusfilm, 1985.

skirt, her hair is mangled. Florya has been sheared from lice, his eyes cracked and puffed, tears form. The girl looks at him, and he replies with the same words she said in the green thicket at the base camp before the air raid - "to love, to have babies." Seeing them, then remembering them as fresh young kids in the woods talking about grown things, then nothing. The bombs drop the high-pitched ring fills the viewer's ears, after, it rings as the camera passes the massacred village people thrown into a pile of naked flesh it rings, then they are grown in a time of 3 days. It is one of the best uses of sound ever in a war movie that does not rely on a musical score utilizing a Shepard tone, notably used in Christopher Nolan's *Dunkirk*.⁴¹

⁴¹ *Dunkirk*. Warner Bros., 2017.



Figure 11: Elem Klimov, *Come and See*, 1985, Film Still,
<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0091251/mediaviewer/rm138362112>

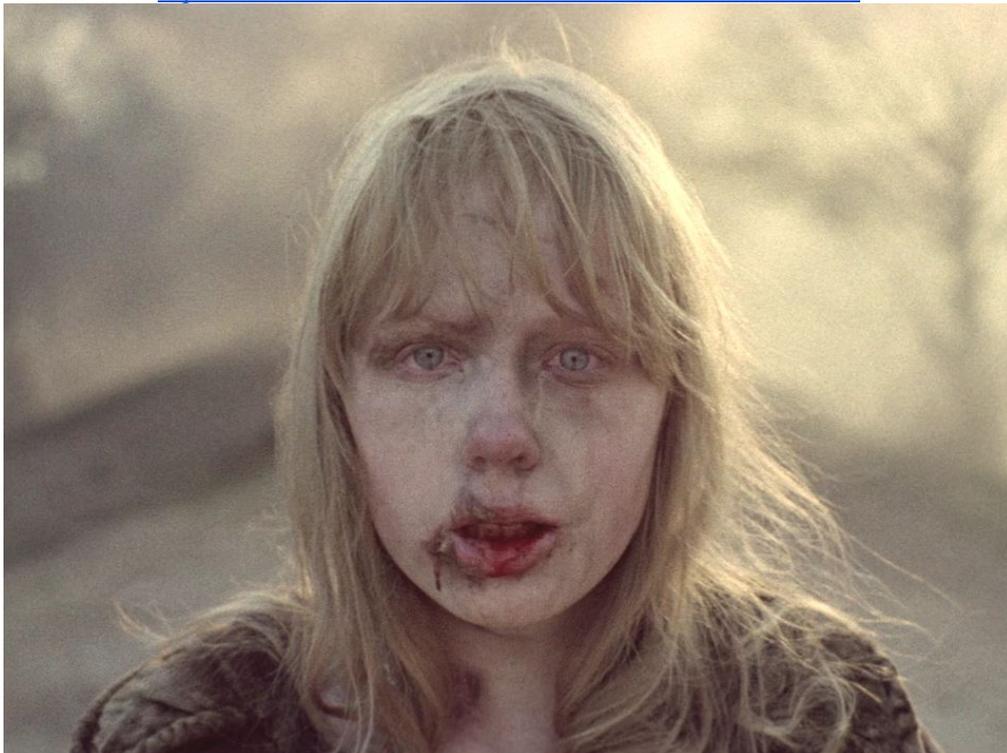


Figure 12: Elem Klimov, *Come and See*, 1985, Film Still,
<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0091251/mediaviewer/rm171916544>

Harmony Korine's *Gummo*,⁴² the first time I saw this film it was extremely painful, it takes place in the Midwest (Xenia, Ohio) the landscape of the film, the people all felt familiar. The main narrator is a boy named Solomon; he starts off his monologue of the event - the tornado that came down and destroyed the town. The tornado was so strong it picked up the school and tossed it aside. The narration is low and grime-ly, ragged, and yet all-knowing. He speaks of the people as they sit, they sit on their lawns surrounded by broken things, they go inside surrounded by more material possessions. It is the unforgiving close up of white poverty in the Midwest. Solomon weaves together strangers' lives in this abstract narrative, and it is through this weaving and narration that toward the end of the film, understanding he is the one trying to understand his surroundings. Solomon's words are the paint, memorizing brush strokes of phonics he tells the story of the town. However, the visuals of the film show the truth of it, the huffing of paint, the killing of cats for money, the hyper sexualization the youth feel is demanded of them, the homophobia, the rage and pain of those surrounding him. Many people find the bathtub scene to be the hardest to watch, where Solomon is bathed in dirty water as his mother brings him spaghetti to eat in the tub. While it is a jarring image, the hardest scene for me to watch is the one with everybody in the kitchen at night drinking beer. One could almost feel the humidity, the smell of the kitchen, and body odors. The men and women are arm wrestling, and it is all in good humor. Until an extremely drunk man challenges the African American Midget to a match, the Midget beats the larger white man. The man picks up the hotel-like banquet chair and smashes it and the table. This scene is the hardest because it is the most real scene of the

⁴² *Gummo*. Fine Line Features, 1997.

whole movie. In terms of effects, breaking down the chair took effort. The emotions are high. His masculinity is at stake if he cannot destroy this chair, then what is his worth?



Figure 13: Harmony Korine, *Gummo*, 1997, Film Still,
<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0119237/mediaviewer/rm3804200961>



Figure 14: Harmony Korine, *Gummo*, 1997, Film Still,
<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0119237/mediaviewer/rm3382665216>

Kudzu: A History of Art



Plate 11: *Kudzu: A History of Art* detail shot, photograph by Dana Smessaert

It has become my standard practice to give my students their final project on the first day of class. To demonstrate that an idea must be able to grow, expand, and contract in the same rhythm that we breathe. This growth pattern is the same relationship I had at the beginning of the piece *Kudzu: A History of Art*. It started in an extraordinarily abstract way, it then moved into an expansive literal beast of pages, then finally, the piece breathed out. The pages of art history torn from their context bindings glued in a long strip of non-linear history to then be cut down, cut into kudzu vines, to be glued back together again. This process was labor-intensive, and I had to look at a lot of Miro for some reason, but when I imagined these vines, I had been picturing lots of color and line and abstraction on the leaves themselves. However, what I got was a lot of

white, text, a whole lot of not art, but the language that controls art. In thinking about my expectations of art history books and the actuality of them, I had managed to manifest my opinions and thoughts of the history of art without spelling it out or throwing a stressed graduate student tantrum (though there were plenty of those). That in the end, history does not care about the art objects themselves but how they use those objects to formulate a history of our practice. To wield them for political, social, economic, and aesthetic purposes, to control how students see, but more so how well we memorize the 'correct' interpretations of art. That art, like all history, is linear, masculine, and white.



Plate 12: *Kudzu: A History of Art* detail, photograph by Dana Smessaert

One could argue at this point that conceptual art is the most important art based on the notion that art objects do not matter. The problem with that statement is that historians have to operate in the instructions the artist has left behind. Similar to that of Sol LeWitt. These instructions create a conundrum for historians who fabricate what is and is not essential based on their Ph.D. studies. Do they incorporate the art that has a toe tag of instructions of what it is, how it lives, and why it lives? Or does that art need to exist in some 'other' adjacent type of history course, how does one draw a perfect line between Rothko and Vito Acconci with nothing in between them?

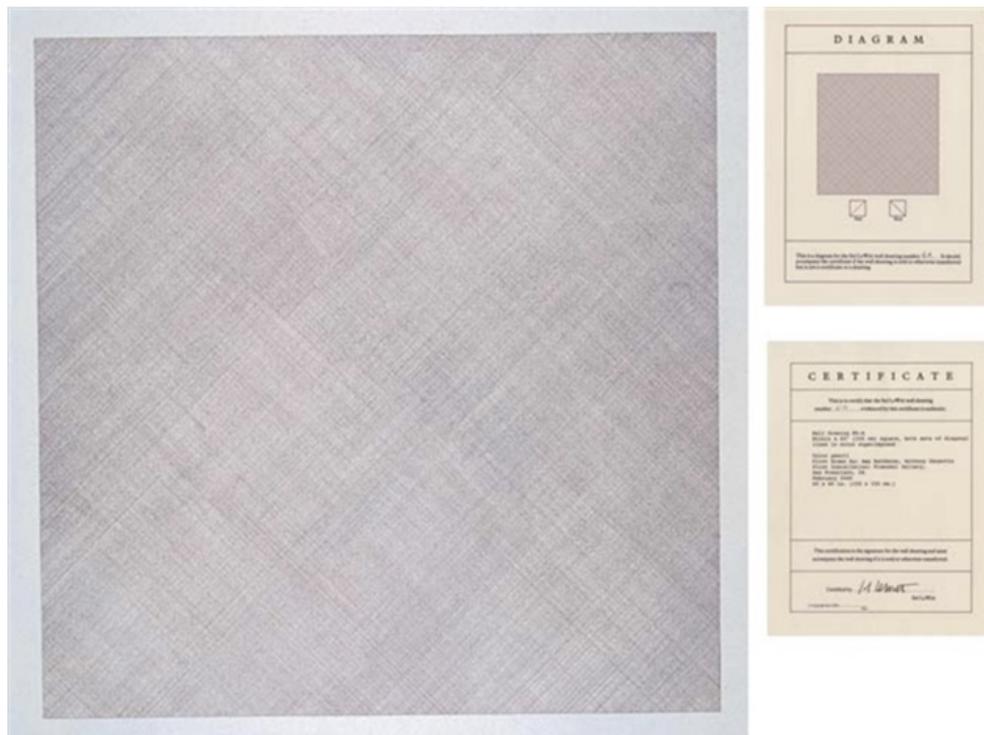


Figure 15: Sol LeWitt, Wall drawing #6A , 2000, 152.4 x 152.4 cm. (60 x 60 in.), http://www.artnet.com/artists/sol-lewitt/wall-drawing-6a-s_wOfYoXpFFPMD1CqolqiQ2

Kudzu is predominant in the south and has managed to be a marker of when one has stretched past the Mason-Dixon line. The three-pointed leaves, a climbing vine that was native to Asia. Making its first appearance in the United States at the 1876 World's Fair Centennial

Exhibition in Philadelphia, being offered up as an alternative food source for grazing animals. This is because of its rapid growth and relatively cheap cost. This was not the reason behind its arrival, however, that was strictly an aesthetic venture for the terraces and trellises for its fast growth and purple blooms. A cheaper version of Blue Moon Wisteria. Its second significant import was kick-started by the U.S. government to stop soil erosion that had been sweeping the nation in the 1930s. Offering up this plant cheaply to get farmers on board finally being broadcasted with statements such as, "waiting for the healing touch of the miracle vine."⁴³ From this point on, the kudzu crept and climbed through the Southern landscape until it became one with it. Strangling the forgotten and the unkempt. It was not until the 1970s that kudzu became an invasive species in the United States officially. "In a 1973 article about Mississippi, Alice Walker, author of *The Color Purple*, wrote that "racism is like that local creeping kudzu vine that swallows whole forests and abandoned houses; if you don't keep pulling up the roots it will grow back faster than you can destroy it."⁴⁴

The kudzu was the first thing I noticed when I moved here, the heartache I felt for those homes. Homes that were once a family's pride and joy possibly made with the hands of that family. Some are so buried behind tree lines and vines, they look so small, I question the age, I question if any of these were any of the freedmen (an emancipated slave) homes. My heart breaks more at this thought. That their history was left for nature to gobble up as they were in Africa. In the article regarding the defacing of Emmett Till's memorial placard, the author starts to talk about the original Bryant's Grocery in Money, Mississippi, where Till whistled at a white

⁴³ Finch, Bill. "The True Story of Kudzu, the Vine That Never Truly Ate the South." Smithsonian.com. Smithsonian Institution, September 1, 2015. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/true-story-kudzu-vine-ate-south-180956325/>.

⁴⁴ Finch, Bill. "The True Story of Kudzu, the Vine That Never Truly Ate the South." Smithsonian.com. Smithsonian Institution, September 1, 2015. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/true-story-kudzu-vine-ate-south-180956325/>.

woman. Below there is the photo of the store consumed by kudzu. The structure is still there buried with an obscure private property sign peeking through the vines.⁴⁵ Staring at this image, I became overwhelmed. I began to cry at the airport, waiting for my flight. This historical turning point for millions of lives, this place, this place became consumed, but it is also an unwillingness to be remembered.



Figure 16: Debbie Elliott, NPR, The Bryant’s Grocery building in ruins, overtaken by trees and vines. A “private property” sign posted out front barely visible, <https://www.npr.org/2019/08/28/755024458/why-don-t-y-all-let-that-die-telling-the-emmett-till-story-in-mississippi>

⁴⁵ Elliott, Debbie. “Why Don’t Y’all Let That Die?’ Telling The Emmett Till Story In Mississippi.” NPR. NPR, August 28, 2019. <https://www.npr.org/2019/08/28/755024458/why-don-t-y-all-let-that-die-telling-the-emmett-till-story-in-mississippi>.

FACING ONE'S SELF

Installation art, the thing everyone wants but is not willing to open their doors to it. It is a curious thing happening; those who get the chance for installation shows frequently turn into solo shows of big-name artists. The lack of opportunity is an issue because it alludes that an installation is not a medium but a show in itself, a collective. If the installation is a medium in the same sense painting and photography are, there would be fewer expectations of it. So what exactly is an installation? Installation is an artwork through its plays on submersion and rendering a phenomenological experience in the audiences' mind. Another philosophical issue with installation art is that when looking at photographs, sculpture, or painting, they are read through the understanding of the elements and principles of design because they are tangible things. Whereas an installation uses color theory more than anything, it is more difficult to pinpoint this in space. A sculpture comes close, but it is still an object, and objects have clearly defined endings. An installation that works with light or sounds or projection video has no conceivable end to it, and the sound lingers, light diffuses, and the video reflects. The definition of installation does not refer to a physical space because not all space can be accounted for when looking at all the components.



Plate 13: *An Obligation to do One's Best Installation*, Burroughs Wellcome Gallery, photograph by Dana Smessaert

The issue with installation is that it takes time and requires being an active participant in the world the artist has created. There was a piece at the VCU Institute for Contemporary Art that challenged this dialog more than any other sound artist I have seen, Robert Pruitt's *Rearview Mirror*, a contemplative piece just through the namesake of it. The audience was provided a bench, Bluetooth headset, and a view at the charcoal, Conte, and coffee-stained paper in the center was the smallest image of Earth; the headset played a low-fi instrumental hip-hop soundtrack. I sat there, and my whole field of vision was black. I stared at the Earth seemingly drifting farther from it and into the Afrofuturism of the blackness on the paper, the mark-making became apparent as I stared, there was a comfort almost to the piece a distant hope far far away. This piece is so successful because of its understanding of controlling the visual field; the bench is a force; the viewer sits because the headphones were placed on the bench, feeling tethered

even when no cord is present. You must confront the blackness, and it must overcome your vision. “We inhabit sound because it happens to us. We do not inhabit the world of vision because our acts of looking are constantly doing things to that world. Looking, as Merleau-Ponty has remarked, is a kind of having. Listening can only approximate to this appropriative hand-eye coordination.”⁴⁶ Pruitt’s piece, while a piece of paper and sound, is an installation because of its ability to submerge the audience.



Figure 17: Robert Pruitt, *Rearview Mirror*, 2018, photograph by Dana Smessaert

An Obligation to do One’s Best installation has brought the idea that meaning is not inherent in art, text, or given by the author, the historian, or the docent. Rather any all

⁴⁶ Connor, Steven. “Ears Have Walls: On Hearing Art.” In *Sound: Documents of Contemporary Art*, edited by Caleb Kelly, 129–39. Cambridge, MA: Whitechapel Gallery The MIT Press, 2011.

interpretations of any medium lie within the audience.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, with the critic, historian, docent, and academia, these are all institutions that can supposedly translate art and what it is and is not about on their terms. Precisely how the audio tour at the Bellamy estate functioned. With an installation, this is very difficult because of all the combinations of seeing. A painting has boundaries. With installation, the viewer is submerged, unable to see all of it at once. How does that affect interpretations if the visual combinations are endless? The audience then must confront their biases and develop an understanding of what these symbols and objects mean together based on their cultural experiences.

“Thinking engages us with the work sensually.”⁴⁸ This type of engagement is uncomfortable. Stemming from the beginning seeds of self-detachment, the audience in the face of confronting what *they* see in the work subjects them to process their identity analytically and thus distancing themselves.⁴⁹ The most interesting thing early on showing the work was the implication people would put on the houses. At this point, I was not great at talking about the work, but this struck me as a curiosity and held me back from talking about the work. These would be implications of class and race; there was never comment about the larger structures at hand that lead to those labels. This reaction and facing one’s interior cultures is the education of self, and with education, one is willing to confront suffering.

Conclusion in Hope and Aesthetics

One of the main issues artists no matter the level in their career faced with questions of social justice, there is a sticky point of fear before one takes action. This point usually entraps

⁴⁷ Martusewicz, Rebecca A. *Seeking Passage: Post-Structuralism, Pedagogy, Ethics*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2001.

⁴⁸ Martusewicz, Rebecca A. *Seeking Passage: Post-Structuralism, Pedagogy, Ethics*. Pg. 13

⁴⁹ Martusewicz, Rebecca A. *Seeking Passage: Post-Structuralism, Pedagogy, Ethics*. Pg. 20

younger artists, not wanting to offend or project the wrong ideas. This state of mind is named the postmodern condition by Jean Francois Lyotard. That while recognizing the errors in the Western master narrative, the idea of what would come after is too large and abstract, rendering one paralyzed.⁵⁰ The idea of becoming disillusioned willingly is a giant feat for a single person. Let alone the solo artist drifting in the ocean of conscious art movements and internet critics. For there to be hope, new questions, answers, history, and beauty. “One must resolutely open a new epistemological spectrum and read the colors that our prejudices had previously erased.”⁵¹ Art, I believe, holds this at heart. That by our questions and creations, we can illustrate these future paths to everyone. There is power in creating something beautiful in conjunction with meaning.

My grandmother was in a nursing home during the last year of her life. She shared a room with another person in a coma; she did say she wanted a room to herself. My grandmother was very frustrated. She wanted salt on her food and the ability to continue to do the things she loved. Toward the end, these things were not possible. I had given a piece of work for my parents to give to her. The piece was abstract from my first year at school, and it was beautiful. They had called me asking me what it was because my grandmother wanted to know if she was right, and she was, it was a house. I told her the story behind the house being one of two made identical for this man’s wives in the town I was living. She found that quite appalling. She had hung it across from her bed to look at it making her feel less alone; while I had created that piece to illustrate my isolation. “(Serres) argues there are no universal models to guide us toward understanding. There are only diverse and multiple islands of possible thought and meaning in a noisy sea, whose connections must be searched for or invented, and may exist or may not, but

⁵⁰ Martusewicz, Rebecca A. *Seeking Passage: Post-Structuralism, Pedagogy, Ethics*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2001.

⁵¹ Serres, Michel, Harari Josué V., and David F. Bell. *Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983.

must not be assumed.”⁵² That we must not discredit connections because there is no apparent narrative between the two, that the possibility of this connection lies in our ability to imagine a different world outside of the master narrative.



Plate 14: *I Just Don't Completely Know You*, 2017, photograph by Dana Smessaert

Moving to the American South brings one closest to moments of self-detachment through visuals alone. Due to the entrenched imagery of the South being projected through history books and pop-culture. Illustrating what the South is supposed to be. The South is defined as an object, but once one moves, settles, and stays, it is less of an object. It becomes that of a subversive phenomenological experience where the master narrative shows its true colors. If a person is

⁵² Martusewicz, Rebecca A. *Seeking Passage: Post-Structuralism, Pedagogy, Ethics*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2001.

brave enough to look into themselves and to others to become educated and willing to confront the suffering of the world, they will look out and feel the hardness of the human struggle or the sadness of history among those ruins. That it makes one feel an obligation to do one's best.⁵³

⁵³ Cather, Willa, and Sharon O'Brien. *The Song of the Lark*. New York: Signet Classic, 1991.

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APPENDIX

African American History and Legislation from 1801-1900

1802	The Ohio Constitution outlaws slavery. It also prohibits free blacks from voting.	Antebellum Slavery
1831	North Carolina enacts a statute that bans teaching slaves to read and write.	Antebellum Slavery
1831	Alabama makes it illegal for enslaved or free blacks to preach.	Antebellum Slavery
1834	South Carolina bans the teaching of blacks, enslaved or free, in its borders.	Antebellum Slavery
1836	Texas declares its independence from Mexico. In its Constitution as an independent nation, Texas recognizes slavery and makes it difficult for free blacks to remain there.	Antebellum Slavery
1845	Texas is annexed to the United States.	Antebellum Slavery
1847	Missouri bans the education of free blacks.	Antebellum Slavery
1858	Arkansas enslaves free blacks who refuse to leave the state.	Antebellum Slavery

1810	The U.S. Congress prohibits African Americans from carrying mail for the U.S. Postal Service.	Free Blacks in Antebellum America
1830	African American delegates from New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware and Virginia meet in Philadelphia in the first of a series of National Negro Conventions to devise ways to challenge slavery in the South and racial discrimination in the North.	Free Blacks in Antebellum America
1844	On June 25, the Legislative Committee of the Provisional Government of Oregon enacts the first of a series of black exclusion laws.	Free Blacks in Antebellum America
1849	The California Gold Rush begins. Eventually four thousand African Americans will migrate to California during this period.	Free Blacks in Antebellum America
1852	Martin R. Delany publishes The Condition, Elevation, Emigration and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States.	Free Blacks in Antebellum America

1810	By 1810, 75 percent of the African Americans in Delaware are free. This is the largest percentage of free blacks in a slave state.	Emancipation
1862	On April 16, Congress abolishes slavery in the District of Columbia.	Emancipation
1862	On September 22, President Abraham Lincoln issues the Emancipation Proclamation and announces that it will go into effect on July 1, 1863 if the states then in rebellion have not by that point returned to the Union.	Emancipation
1863	Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation takes effect on January 1, legally freeing slaves in areas of the South still in rebellion against the United States.	Emancipation
1865	On June 19, enslaved African Americans in Texas finally receive news of their emancipation. From that point they commemorate that day as Juneteenth.	Emancipation

1865	On March 3, Congress established the Freedmen's Bureau to provide health care, education, and technical assistance to emancipated slaves. Congress also charters the Freedman's Bank to promote savings and thrift among the ex-slaves.	African Americans and Reconstruction
1865	The Ku Klux Klan is formed on December 24th in Pulaski, Tennessee by six educated, middle class former Confederate veterans. The Klan soon adopts terror tactics to thwart the aspirations of the formerly enslaved and their supporters.	African Americans and Reconstruction
1866	On April 9, Congress overrides President Andrew Johnson's veto to enact the Civil Rights Act of 1866. The act confers citizenship upon black Americans and guarantees equal rights with whites.	African Americans and Reconstruction

1866	On June 13, Congress approves the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution, guaranteeing due process and equal protection under the law to all citizens. The amendment also grants citizenship to African Americans.	African Americans and Reconstruction
1867	On January 8, overriding President Andrew Johnson's veto, Congress grants the black citizens of the District of Columbia the right to vote. Two days later it passes the Territorial Suffrage Act which allows African Americans in the western territories to vote.	African Americans and Reconstruction
1867	The Reconstruction Acts are passed by Congress on March 2. Congress divides ten of the eleven ex-Confederate states into military districts. These acts also reorganize post-war Southern governments, disfranchising former high ranking Confederates and enfranchising former slaves in the South.	African Americans and Reconstruction
1875	Federal troops are sent to Vicksburg, Mississippi in January to protect African Americans attempting to vote and to allow the safe return of the African American sheriff who had been forced to flee the city.	African Americans and Reconstruction

1865	On February 1, 1865, Abraham Lincoln signs the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution outlawing slavery throughout the United States.	Reconstruction Amendments
1865	With the approval of the Georgia Legislature on December 6, the 13th Amendment took effect and outlawed slavery throughout the United States and its possessions.	Reconstruction Amendments
1868	On July 21, the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution is ratified, granting citizenship to any person born or naturalized in the United States.	Reconstruction Amendments
1870	The Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution is ratified on March 30.	Reconstruction Amendments

1880	The U.S. Supreme Court in <i>Strauder v. West Virginia</i> rules that African Americans cannot be excluded from juries solely on the basis of race.	Civil Rights
1898	The U.S. Supreme Court in <i>Williams v. Mississippi</i> upholds the provisions of the Mississippi Constitution of 1890 which effectively disfranchises virtually all of the black voters in the state.	Civil Rights
1869	On February 26, Congress sends the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution to the states for approval. The amendment guarantees African American males the right to vote.	Civil Rights Legislation
1871	In February Congress passes the Civil Rights Act of 1871 popularly known as the Ku Klux Klan Act.	Civil Rights Legislation
1875	Congress enacts the Civil Rights Act of 1875 on March 1, guaranteeing equal rights to black Americans in public accommodations and jury duty.	Civil Rights Legislation

1865	Between September and November, a number of ex-Confederate states pass so called Black Codes.	Jim Crow Legislation
1875	On February 23rd Jim Crow laws are enacted in Tennessee. Similar statutes had existed in the North before the Civil War.	Jim Crow Legislation
1881	In January the Tennessee State Legislature votes to segregate railroad passenger cars. Tennessee's action is followed by Florida (1887), Mississippi (1888), Texas (1889), Louisiana (1890), Alabama, Kentucky, Arkansas, and Georgia (1891), South Carolina (1898), North Carolina (1899), Virginia (1900), Maryland (1904), and Oklahoma (1907).	Jim Crow Legislation
1890	On November 1, the Mississippi Legislature approves a new state Constitution that disenfranchises virtually all of the state's African American voters. The Mississippi Plan used literacy and understanding tests to prevent African Americans from casting ballots. Similar statutes were adopted by South Carolina (1895), Louisiana (1898), North Carolina (1900), Alabama (1901), Virginia (1901), Georgia (1908), and Oklahoma (1910).	Jim Crow Legislation
1898	In January the Louisiana Legislature introduces the Grandfather Clause into the state's constitution. Only males whose fathers or grandfathers were qualified to vote on January 1, 1867, are automatically registered. Others (African Americans) must comply with educational or property requirements.	Jim Crow Legislation

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Definitions

Phenomenology: the study of “phenomena”: appearances of things, or things as they appear in our experience, or the ways we experience things, thus the meanings things have in our experience.

Phenomenology studies conscious experience as experienced from the subjective or first person point of view.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ BlackPast. “African American History Timeline.” Welcome to Blackpast •, February 6, 2020. <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history-timeline/>.

⁵⁵ Smith, David Woodruff. “Phenomenology.” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Stanford University, December 16, 2013. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology/>.

