DOUGLASS, SUSAN ANDREA ELGIE, M.F.A. Hidden In Plain View. (2021)

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My work is based in my desire to embody a critical relationship with whiteness as I create work that reflects my political and relational values. As a white prison abolitionist, I look to the work of anti-slavery abolitionists, contemporary artists and abolitionists, family members and members of my various communities in order to discover and better understand my role as an artist and activist. Process-based relational work is vital in the deeply interconnected realms of my art practice and my community-based activist work. I am interested in the capacity of art to create non-linear sites of meaning-making that can challenge and support a complexity of vision and perception. I believe that this capacity can support deeper complexity and nuance within contemporary movements toward abolition.

HIDDEN IN PLAIN VIEW

by

Susan Andrea Elgie Douglass

A THESIS

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Approved by

Dr. Sunny Spillane

Committee Chair

DEDICATION

I would like to thank my mother, Margaret Nagi, for her ongoing support and collaboration. I am grateful to my grandmother, Ruth Elgie, for her collaboration through time. I am grateful to my thesis committee, Sunny Spillane, Barbara Campbell Thomas, Mariam Stephan, and Nicole Scalissi for their guidance, generosity and insight. I am grateful to my graduate student cohort for their ongoing support and care, and to my neighbors, friends, and family members for teaching me about relationship. I would also like to thank the land where I live in North Durham for teaching me about time.

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by Susan Andrea Elgie Douglass has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair	Dr. Sunny Spillane
Committee Members	Dr. Nicole Scalissi
	Barbara Campbell Thomas
	Mariam Stephan

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Date of Acceptance by Committee

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Date of Final Oral Examination

PREFACE

Please note that although my legal name "Susan Andrea Elgie Douglass" appears on the title page of this thesis, my name is Billy Dee. Although I am frustrated by the inability to include my preferred name on the cover page, there is a strange kind of poetry in seeing a name that I associate so completely with my childhood on the face of this document. Throughout the creation of my work, I have looked back to my childhood to examine some of the harmful values that were present in my environment. Transphobia is one of those harmful values. It is my hope that UNCG will continue to adapt bureaucratic structures in order to fit the lives and experiences of its diverse range of students by examining the systems of values that are embodied by something as simple as a naming convention.

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In my final weeks of preparation for my thesis exhibition, something strange started to happen to my ears. I woke up with a kind of ringing and pressure which turned to a blockage and left me almost completely unable to hear out of my right ear. I felt off balance and nauseous. I headed to a nearby cooperative grocery store to seek out some kind of natural remedy. A staff person at the shop noted a peculiar phenomenon- a large number of shoppers had been coming in complaining of vertigo and other related problems with the ears. She wondered aloud if this could be a manifestation of collective stress.

I have spent the past year listening to an endless stream of troubling news updates and an ongoing rotation of podcasts in which hosts attempt to make meaning of the pandemic, the election, the siege on the capital, and our current cultural moment. Only now does it occur to me that my ears may have been launching their own kind of protest.

I think my ears had simply had enough, which is to say that my body has been trying to tell me something.

This week, I have been literally unable to listen to the news. It is not just an issue of the ears. My whole body lights up with electric panic as testimony in the trial of Derek Chauvin, the police officer who murdered George Floyd, streams from my radio. And yet, I find that am stopped in my tracks by the testimony of a teenage girl recounting what it feels like to watch a man being

killed in front of her, wanting to run but instead holding out a phone to record the tragedy, everyday haunted by the feeling that she could have done more.

Just writing about this my whole body is alight with a kind of panic and devastation. Knowing I live in a country where this is routine. Where the murder of Black people by police is such a frequent occurrence that it only occasionally makes the news.

But sometimes it does. Sometimes pressure and pain build up to such a degree that a whole nation lights up with devastation and rage. Sometimes there are protests calling for racial justice over the course of an entire summer, even in the middle of a pandemic. In the summer of 2020, these protests led to a phenomenon that few could foresee. The airwaves and streets filled with public conversation about movements to defund the police, about prison abolition and about what it might actually take to reimagine and remake our violent systems of "justice."

I say all of this because this is the context in which I have created my thesis work.

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CHAPTER I: BEGIN WITH THE BODY

SEEING WHITE

I applied to the MFA program at UNCG with the hope that this program would offer a generative context in which I could think critically about whiteness. In a 2019 essay, contemporary Black artist Xaviera Simmons addresses the need for a such a criticality:

> We need to see, hear and feel a transformative push towards a self examining white radicality in contemporary art, built on a vision beyond the normal confines of art production and criticism—not just in writing but in works of art, in collecting and through constructive language that comprehends radicality when black or brown artists choose to work with it in a material form (Simmons).

Simmons compels white artists to contextualize our work within a larger narrative:

> Understand the historical American narrative and see yourselves within that framework; do the cultural autopsy, name what whiteness is and the centuries of harm it has done; show yourselves to each other and wrestle with the implications of whiteness on canvas, in performance, in front of the camera and definitely in writing; and, most importantly, stop oppressing us through dismissive and condescending words and deeds (Simmons).

It is my intention that this written thesis operate as a critical companion to the body of artwork I have created for my thesis exhibition. In reflecting on my evolution as an artist within the context of the MFA program, I see this growth as inseparably connected to my parallel education within the relational work of community organizing. I would like to honor and offer gratitude for the multiple forms of mentorship, guidance, and support I have received both within and outside of this academic context throughout my degree. It is my intention to look to the radical Black feminist citation practices modeled by poet, scholar, and self-described "Queer Black Troublemaker and Black Feminist Love Evangelist" Alexis Pauline Gumbs who frequently cites ancestors alongside academics in her work. In my writing, I intend to reflect on my social position and contextualize my work though an examination of my own family history. I will also examine my relationship with art and activism in order to gain insight into my own attempts to "wrestle" with whiteness.

Over the past two decades, my art practice has been deeply connected with my engagement in community organizing and activism. While living in Chicago from 2010 to 2014, I collaborated frequently with a community organization called Project NIA, founded by Prison Industrial Complex (P.I.C.) Abolitionist, community organizer and author, Mariame Kaba. I created popular education materials such as posters and illustrated pamphlets which examined the ongoing harm and history of the P.I.C., and which explored alternatives to incarceration based in frameworks of transformative justice. In my attempts to create images which addressed the legacies of racialized violence embodied by our current systems of law enforcement, I frequently created images and portraits of Black, Indigenous, and People of color (B.I.P.O.C.). Over the past several years, I have become preoccupied with questions about the ethics of representation, particularly in regards to race. As a white artist, I have wondered if these stories of B.I.P.O.C. people were "mine" to represent, even in the context of this community-based collaborative work. Now, in describing this work, I find myself concerned with language. Does the acronym B.I.P.O.C. offer an adequate "shorthand" for me to describe the racialized identities of the people whom I represented through my work as an illustrator? I feel that questions about the ethics of representation also arise in this act of description. For this reason I will avoid the use of this shorthand in my writing, opting for more contextually specific language.

In 2017, Monica Trinidad, a Chicago-based Latinx artist and activist posted an article on her blog which addresses these issues of representation. She uplifts the need for artists who are most directly impacted by systems of harm to create visual narratives that speak to their authentic on-the-ground experiences. In the article, Trinidad interviews Palestinian artist Leila Abdelrazaq who states: "The fact is that in this political moment, the artist matters. Not just the visual representation, but who the artist is. Every single thing about an art piece has political implications" (Trinidad).

I entered the MFA program at UNCG with a desire to think about those implications.

In my first studio class, I noticed immediately that my impulse toward more didactic work was challenged. I was encouraged to explore the potential gravity and resonance of formal choices, encouraged to explore experimentation with scale and process. Initially, however, my interests remained in the realm of public facing political artworks. In the wake of the recent toppling of

"Silent Sam," the confederate monument formerly located on the campus of UNC Chapel Hill, I became interested in the work of "Monument Lab", a Philadelphia-based project founded by Ken Lum and Paul Farber that creates space for critical conversation on the role of public monuments. Although my interest in the notion of monumentality has returned in my thesis work, in my first semester I intuitively began to understand that I would need to explore more personal terrain in order to address my desire to think critically about whiteness. I started to wonder about my own impulse to "hide" in the kind of anonymity offered by more didactic work. Where was I located in my own work? Was I avoiding the challenge of a real critical engagement with whiteness?

Around this time, I listened to the documentary podcast series "Seeing White" created by John Biewen and featuring Chenjerai Kumanyika. As the series title implies, the podcast examines the origins and impact of whiteness as a racial category. In her book *The History of White People*, historian and frequent podcast guest Nell Irvin Painter writes: "What we can see depends heavily on what our culture has trained us to look for" (Painter 16). As I studied the origins of whiteness, and the impact of systemic white supremacy throughout American history, I became increasingly aware that although much of my artwork has addressed forms of racialized violence, the act of making work "about whiteness" was more difficult than I realized. I began to see whiteness as a manifestation of systemic power dynamics versus a specific cultural identity. I began to think of whiteness itself as a kind of negative space, defined not so much by its own positive identity, but by the implication of its presence on everything (and everyone) around it. If I could not see whiteness by looking at it "head-on," how else might I be able to see it?

With the encouragement of faculty to engage in deeper experimentation, I moved away from my focus on public facing political work and toward experimental performative gestures. I invented 3 characters, Lilly, Janet, and Lillian, whom I embodied in a series of performances, most of which I did not share publicly. I imagined these characters to be a daughter, mother, and grandmother in the same family line. I created wardrobes for each character, utilizing accessories inherited from my own grandmother and great aunt, and created photographic portraits of each woman, using my own genderqueer body to perform these characters. In my daily commute to and from school, I would frequently place my phone on the dashboard and record myself in "dialogue" as two of the characters. In reflecting on this series of experimental works, I see now

that this was an early sign of my interest in addressing family histories and relationships. I was "playing out" a process of relationship building and dialogue that would prove to be relevant in the creation of work for "Hidden In Plain View." Through non-linear experimentation, my desire for connection and dialogue began to emerge.

Through these private performative gestures, I inadvertently confronted myself with my own body. In photographing these women (embodied by me) I became more aware of myself as a body with my own story and questions. Without intending to, I created an entry point into what would become a challenging personal and emotional exploration.

At this point in my studies, a dear friend who was aware of my desire to confront whiteness in my artwork introduced me to Resmaa Menakem's book *My Grandmothers' Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*. This text was a revelation to me in that it offers a trauma-informed exploration of how systemic white supremacy impacts people in the United States. Menakem addresses the specific experiences of people who have "Black Bodies" or "African American bodies, terms he uses to describe "the bodies of people of African descent who live in America, who have largely shaped its culture, and who have adapted to it", those have "white bodies", language he uses to describe the "bodies of people of European descent who live in America, who have largely shaped and adapted to its culture, and who don't have dark skin" (Menakem 16), and people with other "dark" bodies (Menakem xiii).

Menakem offers physical exercises and reflective practices intended to address ongoing harms connected to systemic white supremacy. I found the book more tangible and direct than other texts on the topic of race I had encountered. In the book, Menakem questions the concept of "white fragility":

> *Whiteness does not equal fragility.* That's a dodge created by white fragility itself—a way for white Americans to avoid the responsibility of soothing themselves, metabolizing their own ancient historical and secondary trauma, accepting and moving through clean pain, and growing up. I urge white readers to recognize this myth for what it is, to hold it up to the light, and to call bullshit on it (Menachem 105).

This text affirmed my sense that any meaningful work to address whiteness would necessarily include, for me, a deep examination of the harmful behaviors I have inherited through my own

family. Engagement with this text encouraged me to become more present in my body. And what I found when I became more present was a great deal of shame.

For the next several months, I focused on my own experience of embodiment. As a genderqueer person who grew up within a homophobic and transphobic culture, I noticed ways in which I had unconsciously cultivated my own disembodiment as a kind of coping mechanism. I dipped back into memories of my childhood and considered the impact of my class position and upbringing. I grew up in a homogenously wealthy white suburb in Southeastern Michigan in which there was almost no sense of community or mutual care. Every household had more material wealth than they needed and didn't seem to need anyone else (except, of course, for the small armies of landscapers, nannies, housecleaners and other paid "help"). My neighbors were rich and suspicious of outsiders, particularly of Black people. As a child I adopted some of these behaviors and fears. I was extraordinarily isolated and, when I look back, quite depressed. Menakem's book highlighted for me that, as a white person, I would need to deal with the way systemic white supremacy has impacted my ability to build healthy and loving connections with (to use Menakem's shorthand) people with "Black bodies" and other "dark" bodies as well as people with "white bodies." As a self-identified anti-racist white person, this realization was quite humbling. As I sat with the discomfort of my embodied experience, I noticed that my passion for social justice and anti-racist work comes as much from a desire for meaningful human connection as it does from a deep sense of belief in specific ideological goals. I noticed that I have looked to activism and community work as a pathway through which I could build the emotional and interpersonal skills that were so deeply lacking in my own family and in the culture of the suburbs where I grew up.

THE LAND

I moved to Durham North Carolina in 2014. After years of living in large cities in Canada and in the American Midwest, I was astonished by the red clay, the tall and plentiful trees, and the variety of birds. In 2018, my dear friend Lewis and I purchased a home and a parcel of land on the north edge of Durham (each of us drawing on the support of our wealthy fathers). Our house is located less than 6 miles from the Stagville historic site, the former site of the Cameron Plantation which once spanned thousands of acres. Before moving to the area, I was aware of the former plantation, but had little knowledge of the surrounding neighborhood. In an effort to avoid contributing to the gentrification of lower income neighborhoods closer to Downtown Durham, we purchased a house just outside of the city limits in an area which didn't seem to be a "hotbed" of gentrification.

Within a few months of our move, I became aware of a massive proposed development project near our house. A real estate company intended to clear cut 150 acres of forest to build an expensive subdivision. I was horrified. I became even more upset as I learned that this area is part of a bio-diverse watershed, home to multiple endangered indigenous plant species and a wide variety of animals. Around this time, I also met the chairperson of the local neighborhood association. The chairperson, a middle-aged Black woman who was born and raised in the neighborhood and whose parents had been community leaders, created the association in order to help care for her neighborhood through her efforts to improve the park and library and to establish a community garden. She explained to me that this neighborhood, once an unannexed Black town, was founded by free and formerly enslaved Black people soon after emancipation. She shared that many of these community founders had literally walked off the plantation and along the now-abandoned railroad track (that runs through the woods near my house) in order to find a place to call home.

Upon learning more about this historically Black neighborhood, I felt a great urgency to connect with the neighborhood association in the hopes that there might be hope of stopping the destructive development. Throughout my brief residence in Durham, I had noticed the rapid and devastating impact of gentrification on historically Black neighborhoods all over the city. During my time as a crew member on the construction team with Habitat for Humanity, I saw average

home prices in a low-income area rise from approximately $50,000 to $150,000 in a single year resulting in the displacement of countless residents.

With the proposed development looming, it seemed obvious that the area where I live would soon be slammed by a wave of development. The neighborhood, located within a 10 minute drive of downtown, is located directly between the real estate boom exploding outward from the downtown area, and multiple expensive new subdivisions just beyond the city limits. Throughout the neighborhood, there were signs everywhere advertising buyers who would pay "cash for houses" alongside sale signs for "diabetic test strips," familiar signals of the combination of poverty and gentrification.

In my urgent desire to get out ahead of this looming development, I was not attentive to relationships. At community meetings with neighbors, I was overly eager to share what I knew about the proposed development. I was eager to convince neighbors to attend public hearings and inadequately curious about their lives, their relationships with the land itself, and perhaps most notably, inadequately curious or mindful about my own relationship with this place and these people.

RELATIONSHIP

My impulse to enter community meetings with a set of solutions in mind versus an openness toward relationship and connection soon came to a head. In my desire to encourage community leaders to pay attention to this issue, I inadvertently undermined trust with the chairperson of the group by asking the vice chairperson for her input about an upcoming public hearing. I received a ferociously angry phone call from the chairperson and was told, in no uncertain terms, to stay in my lane. If I wanted to work with this group, I needed to respect the culture of the organization. Suddenly I could see myself very clearly. I was a white gentrifier who was meddling in the affairs of the predominantly Black neighborhood association and who had disrespected the authority of an important community leader.

Somewhat miraculously, I was able to slowly rebuild trust with the leadership of the group. My obsession with the proposed development had some value in that I was able to learn about and share the processes of city planning and decision making with the group so that community members could have some opportunity to share input in this process. I researched the history of inequitable real estate development in the city and was able to help identify ways in which this development could massively increase housing costs, property taxes, and displacement of longtime Black residents. I began to collaborate more deeply with members of the community association. We secured delays on the public hearing for the proposed development due to issues of racial inequity in the process and launched a public petition that called for a stop to this development. The petition outlined a set of community wants and needs such as affordable housing and adequate public transportation which we derived from responses shared by community members at neighborhood meetings and through surveys. The process was messy and imperfect. And yet somehow, in the middle of a pandemic, a small group of neighbors were able to halt a multi-million dollar development project.

Given that we are living through a seemingly unstoppable real estate boom, however, our work has surely just begun.

REPAIR

This neighborhood-based community work has been the counterpoint to my experience of graduate school. I have found myself weaving back and forth between the world of academia where I sit in my studio looking down at the campus below, and this neighborhood work which pulls me right back down to the earth. When I have felt torn between these 2 "lives", I have reminded myself that I came to school for the opportunity to build an art practice that is not only in line with my political values, but for the opportunity to challenge and expand my own understanding of what an art practice can be.

Inspired by my experience of relationship building with the chairperson in the wake of our conflict, I became fascinated with the concept of repair. How could I, a white person who owns land in the Southeastern United States, reckon with what it would mean to have a truly reparative relationship with the place I now call home? What aspects of myself might need repair? Could repair be the basis of an art practice? I researched the etymology of the word itself. Although repair is commonly understood to mean "to mend" or "to fix," it can also mean "to return home." As an artist, as a human, and as a white person, what could it mean for me to "return home"? How might my art practice support my ability to be more deeply present in relational work with community as well as in deeper relationship with my own family or even my own body?

I set out to find a "generative container" through which I could explore my questions. Initially, my desire to explore a uniquely personal art practice which also centers relationship and collaboration seemed to be a paradox. How might I be the "prism" through which a unique perspective and creative offering could be refracted if my desire was to focus on relationship? Again, I asked the question, where would *I* be in the work? If I hoped to create work that somehow addresses whiteness (and, by extension, systemic white supremacy) how could I do that without reifying the concept of whiteness itself? How could I create work that could meaningfully engage my own relationship with culture as a white person without engaging in practices of exploitative appropriation? If I was interested in addressing the harms of systemic white supremacy in my own life and in the larger world, I intuitively understood that my work would need to be based in relationship and perhaps even in some form of healing.

RITUAL

Beginning in mid-March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic took hold in the United States, I was suddenly home all the time. The school was shuttered, in-person classes had ended, and the context of my work for a site-specific sculpture class had shifted to my home. At this point, I turned to meditative process-based works which used materials present in my environment. Overwhelmed by the crisis, I stopped attempting to think my way through the process and just started making. I began working experimentally with paper, creating solutions of salt-water in which I would soak the material. I was fascinated by the crystalline structures that would form as the paper dried. I used turmeric to dye the paper and India ink to make marks that responded to the salty surfaces by creating surprising blooms of color. I returned to a repetitive practice familiar from my childhood, the practice of sewing. I soaked, dyed, painted, and dried sheets of paper outside in the springtime sun and brought them to my sewing machine to create small "salt-quilts." Due to the presence of salt, these "quilts" were hydrophilic-- attracting moisture from the air and slowly "sweating," pools of water forming on my studio floor on humid days. These objects felt alive to me and as if they were a manifestation of collaboration with the materials themselves. This felt like a process of "re-membering" as in a process of putting a body back together. A part of my younger self that had been absent for several years was able to return. Process-based works required a different kind of focus and offered a kind of surprise that had been lacking in my art practice for many years.

I noticed that these meditative works also allowed me to have a deeper and more expansive relationship with time due to my sense of embodiment and physical presence in the act of making. Working on these pieces felt like an important form of ritual, perhaps even a kind of cleansing practice to complete an internal cycle that had started with my earlier performative works. I began to research artists who pursued process-based practices and was intrigued by the crystallized books created by Alexis Arnold. I found her exploration of "geological" time through material practices particularly moving. I later encountered sculptor Nooshin Hakim Javadi's work "11,000 KM of Hope," a sculptural installation consisting of worn and tattered sneakers encrusted in blue crystals. At first glance, the viewer encounters what appears to be a display of jewels. Upon closer inspection, however, one is confronted with the more complex dimensions of the work. The worn sneakers seem to have been abandoned, the cracked and

weathered soles seeming to offer an embodied memory of endless labor and use. Although perhaps not immediately obvious to the viewer, the crystals themselves have been created using toxic materials, transforming the superficial impression of opulence into a record of potential harm. I am interested in the ways Javadi uses an oblique set of signals to create work which explores the arduous experiences of immigrants. Her non-linear approach to representing a complex human experience draws the viewer in by creating objects that not only signal labor and potential harm, but also signal a peculiar relationship with time. The shoes seem to have been abandoned to a mysterious geological process, the crystals growing slowly over time. The installation destabilizes the viewer's relationship with seemingly familiar objects and opens up the potential of a greater complexity of perception.

CHAPTER II: THE QUILT

Through my experimentation with the "salt-quilts" I realized that the form of the quilt could be a vitally generative container for my many questions. The form of the quilt offered a space to explore questions about my own family and culture. The accessibility and immediacy of this art form also felt vital to me. I believe that all art is, in some way, a manifestation of a system of values. My longstanding dedication to widely accessible and collaborative art forms with strong vernacular traditions (ranging from printmaking to street theater) is closely tied with my anti-capitalist values. My interest in quilts comes, in no small part, from my interest in the collective labor of women and of artisans and craftspeople who have not traditionally received recognition in the canon of Western art history, a history which has so frequently celebrated the role of the "individual genius" (who also generally happens to be a white man).

Quilts are of great interest to me because they are made with the body in mind. Unlike clothing, however, the quilt does not privilege a specific kind of body. The quilt can be a site of warmth, protection, and comfort. The quilt can also be a site of memory. The labor of a grandmother who has long since passed is visible and tactile in the piecing and stitching of the object. My research on histories of quilting within a North American context over the past two centuries has revealed that practices of quilt making are often closely tied to necessity. In order to provide warmth and protection for the body, poor and working-class people (mostly women) have long utilized this cheap and accessible form. Because quilts have so often been made from fabric scraps cut from tattered and otherwise unusable garments, they also hold the embodied memory of these objects. Although the making of a quilt requires only the most basic knowledge of sewing and piecing, the form offers space for virtuosic engagement with the elements of color, composition, texture. The vernacular and collaborative nature of quilting traditions defies the type of individual authorship that is a hallmark of most artwork celebrated within the Eurocentric art canon (notwithstanding the fact that "individual" artists throughout Western art histories have depended on teams of skilled artisans to create their work). In our current moment, however, this form and its multiple histories seem to be having a notable resonance in the realm of contemporary art.

Although quilts had long been considered outside of the "art world," a 2002 exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art entitled "The Quilts of Gee's Bend" brought quilts by a group

of Black women from rural Alabama, most of whom are descendants of formerly enslaved people (Beardsley 23), into conversation with modern art. In a review of the exhibition for *The New York Times*, Michael Kimmelman describes the stylistically unique and highly improvisational quilts as "…some of the most miraculous works of modern art America has produced." These quilts, many of which employ a unique strategy of magnifying a single quilt block design to the full scale of the quilt surface, demonstrate vibrant experimentation in color, composition and scale. These quilts, created by craftspeople who do not necessarily identify as artists, celebrate the hand of the maker, lines of stitching and knotting operating as important tactile and compositional elements. The enthusiastic reception of the exhibition and the ongoing art world fascination with the Gee's Bend Quilters may indeed be connected to the increasing prevalence of the quilt in contemporary art.

Sanford Biggers, a multidisciplinary contemporary Black American artist, engages with the quilt as a site through which to address cultural and historical memory and histories of racialized violence. In an interview with Yasi Alipour for the *Brooklyn Rail*, Biggers addresses the gravity of the exhibition:

> When the Whitney had the exhibition The Quilts of Gee's Bend (2002), it really moved me. In my opinion, they were on par if not superior to several paintings in the collection. And what it meant, having an all-women's art show—disenfranchised women from Alabama. What are the political and the museological ramifications there?

Indeed, how is a conventional understanding of "modern art" put into question when this group of women, who so completely defy the notion of the individual genius, is heralded as having created "the most miraculous works of modern art America has produced"? How does this exhibition trouble the binaristic division of "art" and "craft," still prevalent in many American art institutions? Might these works give us a meaningful opportunity to question whose values are uplifted and who benefits from such a binary?

I began my own research into quilts by reaching out to family members, many of whom live in a farming community in Southwestern Ontario, asking for images of any and all quilts created by my grandmother, Ruth Elgie, an impressively prolific quilter. I was fortunate to receive photos of her work alongside documentation of much older quilts. I soon became aware of an extensive family tradition of quilting. I was astonished to see images of heavy woolen quilts over a century

old which were made to cover riders in horse drawn wagons, once a primary mode of transportation on the family farm. The quilt which most captured my attention, however, was the "Underground Railroad Sampler." This quilt, created by my grandmother in 2006-2007, showcases specific quilt blocks which are considered by some to be directly correlated with a system of codes utilized as a communication strategy throughout the Underground Railroad.

Artist Sanford Biggers has addressed this history through his "Codex" series, exhibited at the Bronx Museum in 2020. In regard to his own interest and engagement with this history, Biggers states:

> After reading additional Underground Railroad lore that posited quilts may have been embedded with code and used as maps, I began to search out quilts from the 1800's and add new layers of code through mark-making, painting, cutting, collaging and reconstruction. These quilts are an archive of an ongoing material conversation that acquires new meanings over time and transgenerational palimpsests for a future ethnography. I'm also interested in the tension of working on these objects that hold so much cultural and artistic weight, like embellishing or perhaps defacing history (Bronx Museum).

Biggers' interventions on the surfaces of these quilts trouble the form. The quilt as site of comfort and even nostalgia is disrupted in pieces such as "Chorus for Paul Mooney" (Andersson, 3) in which Biggers intervenes on the textile surface of an antique quilt top with stenciled imagery applied with spray paint and vivid brush strokes of acrylic paint, transforming the orderly pattern of the quilt surface with this neon and gold layering. Biggers interventions into quilts made over a century prior to his engagement with the objects necessarily pulls objects associated with "the past" into "the present". The artist directly addresses this non-linear relationship with time which he is able to access through the work. Biggers states: "I like to think that we're somewhere in the midst of a simultaneity. Past, present, and future are not in vacuums. They're all in relation to each other" (Alipour).

In seeking out other contemporary artists who have engaged with the form of the quilt, I felt deep intuitive resonance with a series of quilts made from decommissioned prison uniforms by artist Hank Willis Thomas. A quilt from this series entitled "We The People" (Lewis 168) appears at first glance to be an abstract almost labyrinthian design created with alternating bars of off-white and orange fabric. The bold asymmetrical design seems to reference the commonly used

"Housetop" pattern employed with great improvisational variety by various Gee's Bend Quilters (Beardsley 113). Upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that the fabric actually spells out the title phrase of the work, the preamble to the United States Constitution. This forces the viewer to question the relationship between material and text. Indeed, are prisoners considered part of "We the People"? Are they granted full rights under the Constitution? In an artist talk for "Visualizing Abolition," an online series which accompanies the 2021 contemporary art exhibition "Barring Freedom" organized at U.C. Santa Cruz, Thomas describes the complexity of emotion he felt in making these quilts. Thomas States:

> When I look at the work, I still feel very uncomfortable. I feel uncomfortable because I don't know if anyone should have the right to be making "art" literally with someone else's sweat. And because art functions within a commercial, commodity culture as well, I also recognize that it's not just money that's being transferred, there are ideas and there are agendas, and part of my agenda is Abolition, obviously.

I find Thomas's reflection on both the art itself and the markets within which the art may circulate utterly resonant and find the series to be both deeply moving and troubling. To me, the series is a revelation in the way that it grapples with the potential relationship between material and message, content and form. I am moved by Thomas's approach to representation which is both oblique and viscerally direct, allowing bold formal choices to be a point of entry into the piece, while the gravity of the embodied histories of the material offers a deeper and more complex level of engagement with the work.

Another piece in this series entitled "Every Act Is Political…(Buren)" consists of black and white striped decommissioned prison uniforms (Lewis 155). In this work, Thomas has appropriated the motif of vertical stripes frequently used by French conceptual artist Daniel Buren, the same artist Thomas quotes in the title of the piece (Olunkwa). In this work, sections of prison uniforms are stitched together to create a unified image of vertical black and white alternating stripes which are subtly interrupted by the recognizable curves of inseams, reminding the viewer that this cloth once covered the bodies of imprisoned people. These vertical stripes are also interrupted by a square opening in the fabric which seems to mimic the form of the small window which is a common design feature of cell doors in American prisons. In an interview with Emmanuel Olunkwa for *Artforum International*, Thomas addresses this appropriation of

Buren's "signature" stripes: "I thought by remaking popular works by canonized artists I could possibly complicate the conversation about what I believe, which is that all art is political."

For some viewers, this artwork which relies on the iconography of the vertical stripe might call to mind optical strategies used by conceptual artists. For others, this iconography might call to mind the image of prison bars. I resonate deeply with Thomas's impulse to use appropriation as a strategy by which to explore the interplay of perception and meaning. Although the gravity of the materials in this work is undeniable, the economy of formal choices creates a deceptively simple visual entry point into the work. The seeming simplicity of the work, however, is also what allows space for specific resonances of meaning to surface for each viewer. Thomas is highly sensitive to the potential circulation of meaning through the pieces he creates. The artist states:

> All of my work is about framing and context. Where you stand affects what you see. Your notion of reality is completely shaped by your perspective and what you bring to what you're looking at (Olunkwa).

For me, Thomas's words call to mind Nell Painter's statement: "What we can see depends heavily on what our culture has trained us to look for" (Painter 16). It is my hope that by creating pieces for my thesis exhibition which rely on simple and bold formal choices, there is space for the viewer to "see" their own experience of perception. I am interested in the shift or the moment of "seeing again" which can occur for a viewer when a piece they understood, upon first glance, to be an experiment in color and form suddenly comes into view as a piece which is in conversation with histories and aesthetic lineages which may not have been obvious at first glance.

CHAPTER III: THE THESIS EXHIBITION

THREE-FIFTHS

In reflecting on my desire to center relationship in my work, I invited my mother, Margaret Nagi, to collaborate with me by hosting her for a 2 week "quilt residency" in December 2020. My mother, now a prolific quilter in her own right, had become deeply interested in quilting through collaboration with her mother, assisting with projects by sourcing unique fabrics and designs. In preparation for our time together, I drew on my own research and recent preoccupation with the 2020 election which highlighted the ongoing challenges to full participation in the democratic process in the United States, particularly by Southern Black voters. I was inspired to create the piece "Three-Fifths" by a passage from *Darkly: Black History and America's Gothic Soul* by Leila Taylor. In this work, I attempted to address the grotesque "Three-Fifths Compromise"; legislation which guaranteed slave-owning Southern states control of congress by allowing them to include slaves in their population numbers by counting each as "three-fifths" of a person (without, of course, giving enslaved people access to freedom, and certainly not access to representative democracy). Taylor writes:

> Perhaps you could remove something more indicative of humanity instead of body parts. Could you take away a sense of smell and long-term memory? Maybe speech and the ability to draw? The formula requires not only the ability to see a person as a non-person (or rather to not see people at all, but as a population) but to *un-see*. Economic and politically strategic contortions aside, it suggests a creepy historical disappearing of people and a willingness to physically evaporate the body that cleans your floor, cooks your food, works your fields, and bares your children. Like Ellison's invisible man, the three fifths man walks here among us, yet not all here, not all whole (Taylor 65).

To create this quilt, I looked to documentation of my grandmother's quilts and discovered a bold and simple geometric pattern created with alternating blocks of horizontal and vertical bars. I adapted the color scheme of my grandmother's quilt to a stark and minimal palette of black and off-white fabrics. The quilt top consists of a repeating quilt block pattern created by joining 5 bars of fabric to create each square. Each square contains 3 white and 2 black bars, creating an oblique reference to the "Three-Fifths Compromise" and performing as a kind of interpretive data-visualization. The use of black and white fabric serves as an intentional reference to the racial dynamics of the compromise, without working in a didactic register of representation.

The quilt is bound with a common knotting technique that I reversed in an effort to create a quilt with a clean geometric quilt top (the surface on which knots would traditionally appear as a form of decoration) and a chaotic and seemingly unfinished underside. For the thesis exhibition, the quilt was displayed without binding, revealing the interior "body" of the quilt. The 6 by 6 foot piece was suspended diagonally in a large open room to create a sense of monumentality. Lighting was positioned to reveal the translucent quality of the quilt, the clean geometric face interrupted by the stray and unwieldy binding threads that, from a distance, appear to resemble gestural marks or even text.

This piece was the first work visitors encountered upon visiting the gallery, Greensboro Project Space. This choice was intentional as it spoke to the chronology of the process. It was through collaboration with my mother on this work that I learned to piece, stitch and assemble my first quilt. The piece signifies my preliminary attempt to create a visual language capable of holding complex conceptual ideas with an absolute economy of means. This piece also marked an important point of connection and relationship with my mother. Throughout our collaboration, we were able to engage with great depth in conversations about race, family histories, and the potential value and purpose of this type of non-linear and conceptual art making, conversations which we had never been able to access with such depth before this moment.

UNDERGROUND RAILROAD SAMPLER

The next piece a visitor to the gallery would encounter was the "Underground Railroad Sampler", a vibrant and colorful quilt created by my grandmother, Ruth Elgie. This large quilt, approximately 9 feet by 6 feet was displayed in an arched alcove, partially obscuring the top edge of the piece. In this quilt, a bold green border accents an assortment of colorful quilt blocks, each one a different style. A central block serves as the focal point of the piece. This central block, a square of fabric approximately 10 inches wide, bears the following printed text:

The Story of the Underground Railroad:

Then Monkey Wrench turns the Wagon Wheel toward Canada. With help from Jesus, the Carpenter, follow the Bears' Trail through the woods. Fill your Baskets with enough food and supplies to get you to the Crossroads. Once you get to the Crossroads dig a Log Cabin in the ground. Shoofly told us to dress up in cotton and satin Bow Ties. Follow the Flying Geese and Birds in the Air, stay on the Drunkards Path. Take the Sailboat across the Great Lakes to the North Star above Canada.

This printed text operates as a kind of "key" to the quilt block designs which may have served as forms of coded language in the context of the Underground Railroad. The text offers common names for each of these quilt block designs ("Monkey Wrench", "Wagon Wheel", etc.) and infers its associated meaning in this context.

For me, this piece is the center around which my thesis exhibition turns. In speaking with my mother about the possibility of including this piece in the show, I learned of her collaboration with my grandmother in the creation of the quilt. Her support included research through which she found a book entitled *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret History of Quilts and the Underground Railroad* which offers anecdotal accounts of the use of quilts as sites of coded language. This piece moved me to approach the form of quilt making because it offered many potentially unanswerable questions about my grandmother's connection to this history. To me, this quilt is unstable; it does not exist comfortably in a nostalgic past because it brings to bear, at least for me, a set of vitally present questions.

The wall text which appeared in the gallery outlines my own questions about the creation of this piece, and places it in relationship with my own questions about family history and whiteness.

I have included the full wall text from the thesis exhibition here:

"Underground Railroad Sampler"

(accompanying text)

When I think about my grandmother Ruth, I see her small strong hands.

I remember how it felt when she taught me to tie a knot by simply looping thread around my finger and twisting it off with my thumb. The ingenious ways she could take material into her hands and remake it, the gravity of small actions taken over and over with intention.

My grandmother was a mother of 6, a teacher, and a farmer in the rural farming community of Dresden, Ontario. As her later years afforded and eventually required her to move slowly, her undeniable work ethic remained. Always making and remaking. She made a quilt for every single one of her grandchildren. She would bring us into her sewing room and let us look through glossy quilt magazines and thick books, inviting us to choose a pattern. Approximately one year after this meeting, we would be presented with an astonishing object, a gorgeous record of her labor and care.

My mother's side of our family has worked the land of a family farm in Southwestern Ontario for 7 generations. This farm is located less than 6 miles from the historic "Dawn Settlement", a former free Black settlement now known as "Uncle Tom's Cabin Historic Site", named for abolitionist, writer, and minister Josiah Henson who worked to establish this site after escaping slavery in the US (and upon whose life story Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel is believed to be based). The settlement was home to a self-sufficient community and school created by and for Black people who had escaped slavery by way of the Underground Railroad, one important destination point amongst several in this area of Southern Ontario.

As a child, I would visit the farm every summer. I would occasionally "help" my aunt and cousins with farm chores such as hoeing tobacco. Almost everyone I saw in Dresden was white.

I didn't think about it much until years later. I grew up in a wealthy white suburb in southeast Michigan. My neighborhood and my social world was full of white people. This was so normal for me, I didn't even see it.

Sometime in my early 20s, I interviewed my grandma and asked about her life in this community. I had learned a bit about the history of the area and I suppose questions had just started to come up for me… In a rural farming community which had served as a key destination point on the Underground Railroad, what was the experience of these Black Canadians? And why were there so few Black people in the town now?

I asked if she had seen the kind of racism in Dresden that existed in American cities. She told me about a local diner where Black residents were not welcome to dine-in and were instead expected to pick up food from a window at the back. They didn't even need a "colored only" sign.

And now, as I learn more about this place, a simple and devastating fact keeps coming up... Although crossing the border to Canada meant freedom for many formerly enslaved people, getting to the Canada side of the border never meant getting away from white supremacy, from de-facto segregation.

As a child, I was under the faulty impression that Canada was some kind of unproblematic promised land. As an adult, I feel there are ghosts on all of this stolen land, and so many kinds of harm and pain buried under a kind of whitewashed nostalgia.

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Before my grandmother died, I don't remember seeing this quilt.

And now, I see it as a white person who owns land in the South, my home less than 6 miles away from the site of the former Cameron Plantation, once thousands of acres in size, in an area that is now considered to be North Durham. I see it as a resident of a neighborhood which was once an un-annexed Black town, established primarily by formerly enslaved people. Upon emancipation, many of these people left the former plantation and walked along the railroad which still runs through the area, to find a place to call home, to establish a self-sufficient community.

When I look at this quilt, I wonder how my grandmother saw it. Was she trying to look directly at the history of the place she lived, or was she covering over a question with a fabric of nostalgia? Since a binary cannot be trusted, I believe she had a third and unknowable reason which may have contained the first two.

To make something is, in some way, the act of asking a question.

I wonder about her question.

This quilt makes me think about the distance between North Carolina and Ontario. And it makes me think about the distance between a white person and the history staring them in the face. It makes me think that that person is me, that it is my mother, that it is my grandmother. And I wonder about the gravity of the repeated gesture. Over and over trying to close that gap.

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NORTH STAR

In the final room of the of the exhibition, visitors encountered 2 quilts, “North Star”, a quilt placed up on a tall square platform built for the display of the object, and “Abolition Is A Horizon”, suspended from the ceiling and occupying the majority of the space on one of the gallery walls.

The quilt “North Star” was created in response to my research into quilt iconography that is both ubiquitous in North American quilt traditions *and* associated with abolition movements. Both the quilt block and the phrase “North Star” are resonant with meaning. “North Star” is used in many contexts to describe the place toward which you are reaching. The quilt itself draws on the monumentality of the Gee’s Bend quilts by expanding the ubiquitous north star quilt block pattern to fill the space of the entire quilt. As the entire quilt surface is assembled with pieces of black fabric, a visitor must inspect the work closely to see that the largest north star pattern features a smaller north star block at its center and a smaller block again at the very center of the quilt. Through these design choices I attempt to reflect the fractal and infinite nature of the concept of “north star” itself. If a “north star” is a kind of visionary horizon toward which one is reaching, one is able to reach infinitely outward as well as inward. In an effort to draw upon Biggers’ reflections on the simultaneity of past, present, and future, I attempt to reference these conceptual ideas with simplicity and an absolute economy of means. Although scarcely visible at first glance, the quilt face also reveals a hand embroidered map. Stitched in black, dark brown, and dark blue thread, the patient observer is rewarded with a visually complex and tactile map. Signs in the gallery let visitors know that they are welcome to observe the quilt through touch. The embroidered surface of the quilt is an interpretation of a neighborhood map created by longtime neighborhood residents in the community I now call home alongside the Durham based organization Data-Works, a group which works toward data equity, particularly in the realm of housing and land ownership.

The quilt was created as a gift for the chairperson of the neighborhood association, a meditation on the generosity she has shown by inviting me to be in community and by sharing neighborhood histories.

ABOLITION IS A HORIZON

The final quilt viewers encountered is entitled “Abolition Is A Horizon”. This piece is a direct reference to a quilt described as “Log Cabin,” “Bricklayer” or “Courthouse Steps” created in 1970 by Gee’s Bend Quilter Loretta Pettway (Beardsley 77). I was first drawn to Pettway’s quilt by the title “Courthouse Steps” in combination with the stark and minimal design. “Courthouse Steps” is another monumental design which expands a single block design to the full scale of the quilt. The simple design of Pettway’s quilt creates a spatial illusion of rising steps receding into the distance, enclosed by tall dark walls. Due to the symmetrical nature of the design, the steps seem to be coming from both above and below, resolving in a narrow passageway.

By inverting the design and changing the vertical orientation of the pattern to the horizontal axis, the design appears to be the expanding line of a horizon. The use of a white horizontal passage of color which expands and widens toward the outer edge of the quilt also mimics the nature of visual perception, peripheral vision curving and expanding lines at the outer edges of vision. The quilt was displayed so that most viewers would encounter the stitching which runs along the horizon line directly at eye level. The platform on which the “North Star” quilt rested was positioned near this large quilt in such a way that visitors were forced to stand almost uncomfortably close to “Abolition Is A Horizon,” forcing the quilt to fill the viewer’s range of vision and heightening the sense of gazing toward a kind of horizon. Although machine pieced, the 12 foot wide by 6 foot tall quilt was quilted entirely by hand by myself and fellow M.F.A. students Sarah LaPonte, Taylor Allison, Leah Junquera, Neeraj Sebastian, and Ash Strazzinski. In its creation, the quilt embodies a practice of mutual aid.

The quilt is dedicated to and was created for Mariame Kaba in gratitude for the ways her mentorship and vision has impacted my sense of possibility in regard to the potential of profound transformative change to systems of oppression. The title is a quotation by Kaba herself, and a conceptual framework which informs this entire body of work as well as my ongoing practice as an artist and activist.

CHAPTER IV: THE AFTERLIFE

As I reflect on the exhibition of my thesis work, the afterlife of the exhibition is perhaps even more vital. In the vein of anti-slavery abolitionist Lydia Marie Child, who is believed to have created a quilt for sale at the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Fair in 1836 as a fundraiser for the movement (Gruner), I conceived of the quilt "Abolition Is A Horizon" with the concept of mutual aid and fundraising in mind. Amongst other skills, community organizer Mariame Kaba is a remarkably effective fundraiser and has been instrumental in fundraising efforts for large bailout campaigns and to support survivors of state harm. I will offer the quilt to Kaba as a gift, making clear that she is welcome to use the piece as a tool to support fundraising efforts for abolitionist projects. Although I created the quilt with the work of fundraising in mind, I am also curious about the ability of the quilt itself to support abolition through its presence as an art object. Might its presence in a community center or library provide a welcoming and meditative visual space, while its title provides generative questions? I am curious what the life of this quilt will be.

As for the quilt "North Star," although I will soon offer it as a gift to the chairperson of our neighborhood association, I work closely with two remarkable women, each of whom I would like to honor with a quilt. In my work with the community group, while the chairperson has taught me a great deal about local history and histories of community mapping and story sharing, the vice chairperson has been a stalwart advocate for the intersection between environmental justice and the health of Black communities. Before I offer "North Star" to the chairperson, I intend to create a companion quilt which will also employ the North Star pattern. With this companion quilt, I will create a piece which addresses the natural areas and unique plant species present in the area where we live. I would like to approach these women with abundance, and to acknowledge their specific visions regarding what they each see as central to the ongoing health and presence of this community and this land.

In regard to my own process and growth, I would like to reflect on two questions offered by my thesis committee: "What can art do that activism cannot?" and "Where is the line between your activism and your art practice?". My experience as an art student and activist over the past two years reveals an unbroken line that connects the two. Perhaps more accurately, it has revealed to

me that my political work and my art practice are inseparably interconnected aspects of the way I make meaning. A most pivotal insight that this process has offered, however, is the value and need for non-linear ways of thinking and making. My discovery of my need for process-based meditative work has illuminated new ways of being in relationship with my own body and mind while still being focused on the ongoing process of relationship building with family and community members. I believe that this newfound comfort with non-linearity can only support and strengthen my future political work. What is abolition if not the practice of envisioning a world that does not yet exist? The practice of engaging multiple ways of seeing is most vital in this work.

In closing, I would like to cite a passage by Black feminist poet Audre Lorde. I encountered this passage while in attendance at a Sunday Service at NorthStar Church of the Arts in 2019. NorthStar, a cultural institution founded by Nnenna and Phil Freelon with the vision of creating an accessible arts and culture space in the heart of Durham (where gentrification threatens to displace many communities and cultural institutions), has been home to an ongoing series of Sunday services led by Alexis Pauline Gumbs and partner Sangadore. These services are often framed around the words of Black feminist poets and writers and have honored the lives and brilliance of visionary artists and leaders such as Toni Cade Bambara and Pauli Murray. During this particular service, Gumbs led a roomful of community members through a meditation on the following words, each of us repeating the phrase, creating a chorus of voices and a complex vibration of sounds. Lorde writes: "I am who I am, doing what I came to do, acting upon you like a drug or a chisel to remind you of your me-ness, as I discover you in myself."

This experience impacted me deeply as it offered a space for deep personal and internal reflection within a shared space of community. Throughout work on my thesis show, I have cultivated a daily practice of repeating this passage, soon knowing it by heart. For me this passage is able to hold the simultaneous truth of one's unique individual vocation (seeming, to me, to speak directly to the role of artist and activist), while recognizing that this "individual" path is inseparably bound together with the web of relationship in which one exists. This brief passage offers a meditation through which I am able to move past the superficial aspects of my inquiry about how to make meaningful and critical work from the location of my own social position, toward the deeper collective and spiritual dimensions of my inquiry.

It is of note, however, that only in writing this thesis did I seek out the essay from which these words come: “Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger,” an abbreviated version of which was published in ‘Essence’ the year I was born (Lorde, 145). Only after months of reflecting on these lines did I read them in their original context, an essay in which Lorde reflects deeply on Black women’s relationships with each other in a society which has forced them to survive such violence, writing about her desire for deep closeness and connection between Black women.

In reading the essay, I understand that I am not the intended audience and yet I feel that I have a deep relationship with some small part of this text. I find myself “seeing again,” looking with new eyes at a text onto which I had mapped my own perceptions, my own experiences. The lines from the essay which I believed I had, in some way “understood” open to reveal a much larger constellation of meanings. I return to Hank Willis Thomas’s words and find myself wondering where I have been “standing” and how this has affected “what I see.” I think of my grandmother’s quilt, seemingly legible, and yet the closer I look, the more complex and unknowable it seems. And this feeling, this process, the sensation that I have stepped off solid ground and must now be present with something unknowable, the feeling that I must see both the unknowable and myself in another kind of light, this too is the work. The horizon is not only without, it is also within.

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