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Untitled Interactions: Confronting Racism in a Rural Community

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Submitted to the faculty of the Lesley University Graduate School
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Fine Arts in Visual Arts
at Lesley University College of Art and Design. Cambridge, MA

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*Dedicated in memory of my Grandmother, Marjorie Smith Goss
and Cynthia Marie Graham Hurd, Susie Jackson, Ethel Lee Lance,
Depayne Middleton, Clementa C. Pinckney, Tywanza Sanders, Daniel Simmons,
Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, Myra Thompson*

Abstract

As an African American living in socially contentious times, I am driven to make sense of the hegemonic structure of my own rural, predominantly white community. I have increasingly become aware of the behaviors that reinforce racial stereotypes and thwart opportunities for cultural intervention. Through the collecting of memories, archives, and observations, patterns form and act as evidence of deeply entrenched biases. In my videos, actual events, or “untitled interactions” are reenacted, and focus on the complexity of bigotry. Inspired by pop culture genres, such as silent film, cinema, and music video I create a visual language that gently reveals the way people perform to maintain privilege.

Introduction

“...innocence of artefacts is just a way of letting ourselves as a culture get away with quite a lot while pretending we don’t know what we’re saying.” – Susan Hiller

In June 2015, a self-identified white supremacist entered the Emanuel African Methodist Church in Charleston, South Carolina (Fig. 1) murdering nine black people participating in a prayer meeting. As the story of the terrorist Dylan Roof’s life began to unfold, so did images of him posing with the Confederate flag. The correlation between acts of violence and the flag became all too clear to South Carolinians and over a thousand protestors marched on the Capitol imploring politicians to remove the flag from the State House (Sheinin). In July of the same year the South Carolina House of Representatives voted 94 to 20 in favor of the removal. Governor Nikki Haley signed the bill, prefacing with, “We’re a state that believes in tradition. We’re a state that believes in history. We’re a state that believes in respect, so we will bring [the Confederate flag] down with dignity, and we will make sure that it is put in its rightful place” (Brumfeld, et al.). The Confederate flag was retired to a museum where it became an archive of the past rather than a deeply troubling living symbol.

Nearly 850 miles north of Charleston, in my rural community of Delaware County, New York, some residents took the side of impassioned Southerners protesting the removal of the flag. In fact, in the months following the murders, Confederate flags began



Figure 1: Emanuel African Methodist Church in Charleston, SC. Photo taken in November 2016.

springing up throughout the region in solidarity (Fig. 2). As someone whose European descendants (maternal side) helped settle Delaware County six generations prior, I questioned why locals would celebrate southern Confederate pride when our ancestors had likely fought with Union forces in the Civil War. As an African American (paternal side), I wondered how locals could protect a symbol of racism amidst a national tragedy; the disregard for our history in favor of a racist symbol was a slap in the face.

In the same summer that nine black churchgoers were murdered, the Delaware County Fair received national attention when the organization's board of directors, when asked whether



Figure 2. Upstate Confederacy I and II. Photographs, 2015.

they would follow suit with other New York state fairs by banning vendors from selling the Confederate flag, replied “the more of them the better” and the war got over 153 years ago” (Cairns). Instead of entertaining a conversation about the racist implications of supporting the flag, board members quickly dismissed the question without consideration.

More than fifty years after author and activist James Baldwin stated, “To be a negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a constant rage almost all the time (Hentoff),” I fully recognized myself in his words. For me, I felt a Baldwinean rage most acutely following the board’s response and more-so when white friends suggested I was overreacting to

the display of the confederate flags or simplified its presences as “freedom of speech.” For the first time in my life, I was fully aware that my status as a non-white “other” limited my value as a human being. It seemed that my pleas for understanding and support were not worthy of being heard. This became the impetus for my graduate work.

To process my emotions and to better understand the local white perspective, I began researching the area’s history and collecting stories and archives related to race in Delaware County. This exploration provided evidence of the complexity of deeply entrenched biases within my community. My research findings also forced me to confront class issues, white fragility, and the ways in which non-white others will accept racialized behaviors as normal. I discovered that we are all performing parts assigned by our cultural a priori, which in the microcosm of Delaware County, casts us as local (colonizer) and other (colonized).

Untitled Interactions represents the culmination of my findings. In this documentary video, I offer a poetic interpretation that shows the way people perpetuate the myth of white superiority through their actions, which portray both dominance and subservience. In my work, I borrow stylistic elements from pop culture genres such as music video, cinema, and silent film, which provides culturally familiar elements and acts as a vehicle for buffering potentially uncomfortable conversations about race.

Building an Archive to Understand Delaware County

“People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them.” - James Baldwin

Delaware County lies in northeastern Appalachia, three hours north of New York City. This rural area is comprised of approximately 46,000 people with a 95% white population (2% black) and a median income of \$24,000 (United States Census). Throughout history, locals have

relied on farming for income, but with the increase in commercial farming, as well as changes in farming practices, small family businesses became endangered. Within that history are regular incidence of outside intervention that many locals attribute to the area's economic woes. From my perspective, this kind of mindset traps locals in a cycle that rejects others while bolstering values developed within the segregated communities. Attempts at denying a changing world, stifle opportunity and resentment of outsiders becomes the norm.

An early example of outside intervention from non-local people is exemplified in the Anti-Rent Wars of the mid-1800s between local farmers and foreign entities.

The origin of the conflict was the leasing of lands, a carryover from feudal systems in Europe. Land grants to politically well-connected individuals by the Dutch and English governments in the 17th and 18th centuries totaled tens of millions of acres in New York State. Some landowners leased their land to farmers via perpetual leases rather than selling the land outright. (Cannon)

Delaware County residents wore disguises (Fig. 3) as they revolted against the outsiders by



Figure 3: Disguises of the Anti-Renters in 1845. Image accompanied Nancy Cannon's essay "The Anti-Rent Movement: Brief Introduction," 2005.

disrupting land sales, tarring and feathering opponents, and ultimately, killing the undersheriff. (Cannon)

In another example, as home to two (of six) reservoirs that provides New York City with almost all its water, Delaware County has the most stringent

water quality regulations in the nation. In fact, the Department of Environmental Protection owns, and continues to purchase much of the undeveloped land throughout the county. While public ownership stops pollution at its sources and saves the city from filtration costs, it also limits the economic development of the depressed region, ruling out any industry that puts water at risk (F. Baldwin).

Although communities residing within the Watershed receive benefits from this relationship, outside control of local land use creates a resentment among county residents that is expressed through self-segregation from mainstream society and often denial of social norms. In one example of this rejection of norms, Delaware County officials were cited by the New York state comptroller for not following protocol during a building project, which required the county to conduct formal bids and sign agreements with contractors to avoid cronyism and mismanagement. The citation also triggered an ethics investigation, which revealed that the county had never established a required ethics committee, which is, all redundancy intended, *unethical* (Reishchel). This disregard for best practices acts as a form of resistance against outside agencies. By rejecting norms, county leaders define themselves as experts for all living within the border of Delaware County. These behaviors, which are present historically and in contemporary society, influenced me to look closer at the rebellious actions of local individuals.

One way that county locals reject norms and outside control through their disregard of



Figure 4: Untitled Video Still, 2016.

laws related to drinking and driving (Fig. 4). Such rejections include normalization of the illegal action by violators, which is often accompanied by comments like “I’ll take the back roads home.” This remark suggests that inebriated driver will take lesser traveled roads to avoid police encounters. In a related act, it is common for rural people to drink a beer (or two) on their way home from work. These after-work libations are called “road sodas,” and partakers often toss the spent beer cans from their cars to remove any evidence in the event they are pulled over by police.

I am attracted to the remnants of road sodas abandoned in the ditches of the rural landscape, as the juxtaposition of the idyllic setting and polluting trash provides a narrative that illustrates the culture of my community. In fact, my interest prompted me to travel back roads and photograph dozens of these cans in their “natural habitat” (Fig. 5). On those roads, the cans are the most prominent trash and show evidence of the rituals of rural blue collar workers. Each represents an individual’s act of rebellion and likely helps the perpetrator feel as though they possess some semblance of control over life.



Figure 5. Details of Rural Archives, Photographs, 2016-17. Remnants of “road sodas” on the back roads of Delaware County. Dimensions variable.

Considering the ways that Delaware County people shun social norms in favor of independence from outsiders, it becomes easier to understand how white people in Delaware County would be willing to protest with jilted southerners over the removal of the Confederate flag. It is as though they recognize their own circumstances, in which outsiders try to

dictate how the community operates. They reject progressive and inclusive ideas and romanticize a past rooted in oppression, hence the popularity of white Nationalist politicians like Donald Trump who claim they'll "Make America Great Again." Confederate flags, pro-Trump signs, and a system designed to reject outsiders serve to segregate locals further within their myth of superiority.

The desire to understand my community inspired me to scrutinize my closest friends and family members, asking, "What is your relationship to race?" I collected interviews, archives, and objects that I considered relevant to my research. I gravitated toward mundane objects such

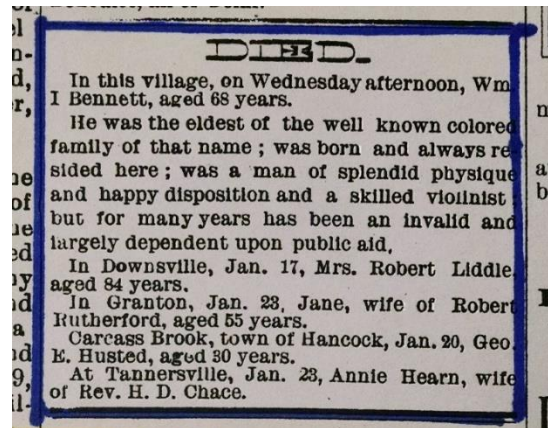


Figure 6: Obituary of William Bennett, a black resident of Delaware County. *Delaware Republican*, 1898.



Figure 7. Robert Wyer. Vintage photograph and notice about the "Bloomville Women in Minstrel Show" from the *Stamford Mirror-Recorder*. 1941. My grandmother, Marjorie Smith Goss wears the gingham dress on the right.

as beer cans, obituaries (Fig. 6), flags, and stories about first encounters and high school cliques. I also sifted through items left in my deceased maternal grandparents' home to find objects from their personal archive to add to my own. By identifying significance and assigning meaning to these items, I formed the foundation for my work. Perhaps the most significant item was a photograph of my grandmother smiling proudly beside a group of women in blackface (circa 1941). By reaching out to the local historical association, I was able to determine that the photograph commemorated the success of a fundraiser hosted by a church-related women's group ("Bloomville Women in Minstrel Show") (Fig. 7). This kind of normalized bigotry mimics the way confederate flags are acceptable by local standards presently and throughout history; it provides unmistakable evidence of Delaware County's racialized roots. Through my research, I was able to find many, often subtle instances in which language, symbols, and actions serve to maintain the white racial hegemony.

White Fragility and Cultural Intervention

"The worst injury is feeling you don't belong so much to you." – Claudia Rankine

In my artwork, I avoided conversations about identity because it felt that I was solving *something* by focusing on the universality of the human experience, such as shared emotions. My painted figures were depicted with no physical indications of ethnicity or race. Denying identity was a mistake, however, as the only thing I accomplished was protecting white audiences from facing their lack of empathy for people of color, an attitude that is prevalent in American culture. Following the terrorist attack in Charleston, South Carolina, I recognized that my silence implicated me in the perpetuation of white supremacy. While I was troubled by this realization, I

was more disturbed by the way “white fragility” played a crucial role in this silencing. According to Dr. Robin DiAngelo, white fragility is

a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves...[including] the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behavior such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium.

In relation to the Confederate flag, white fragility has played a key role in sustaining the popularity of the racist symbol. Following the Civil War, the flag fell out of popularity, but in 1948 it was reintroduced into popular culture by the Dixiecrats, or Southern Democrats in defiance of northern colleagues and African Americans in their midst. During the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s, there was another increase in popularity of the Confederate flag. In fact, in 1956, the state of Georgia redesigned their state flag using the Confederate imagery and in 1962, at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, South Carolina made the decision to fly the Confederate flag on their State House (Little). Moving into the 21st century America, under the leadership of a black President, Barack Obama, the Confederate flag had yet another rise in popularity. The correlation between the Confederate flag and white fragility is undeniable.

In the course of my research, I began reflecting on my own racialized experiences as one of the few non-white



Figure 8. *Untitled Figure Study*, 2016. Oil on Canvas. 36"x48" .

locals in Delaware County, New York. I have been complimented for being articulate (“You’re so well spoken”), confused for the help (“We’ll need more paper towels in here when you get a sec”), treated like an exotic plaything by male admirers (“You know, I’ve always wanted to be with a black woman”), reprimanded for managing subordinates at work (“She said she was scared of you”), and often been compared with urban black people on TV rather than with other locals like me (“You’re different than most black people”). My inner monologue would retort, “Here we go again,” as these kinds of comments, which are commonly referred to as micro-aggressions, were nothing new. To maintain harmony with community members, I knew I must not discuss race unless I was asked to and even then, I was often met with dismissal or denial of the pervasiveness of racism.

In Delaware County, white fragility is not only the reason friends dismissed my negative feelings about the Confederate flag, but also why the county fair board of directors responded dismissively to requests to ban the sale of flags at the fair. These kinds of responses show how acts of white fragility shut down opportunities for racial equality in favor of the status quo. Ultimately, this protects white privilege under the guise of innocence and perpetuates the myth of white superiority. For those living within this paradigm, however narrow their perspective, denial of racial hegemony and acceptance of white superiority is their “truth.”

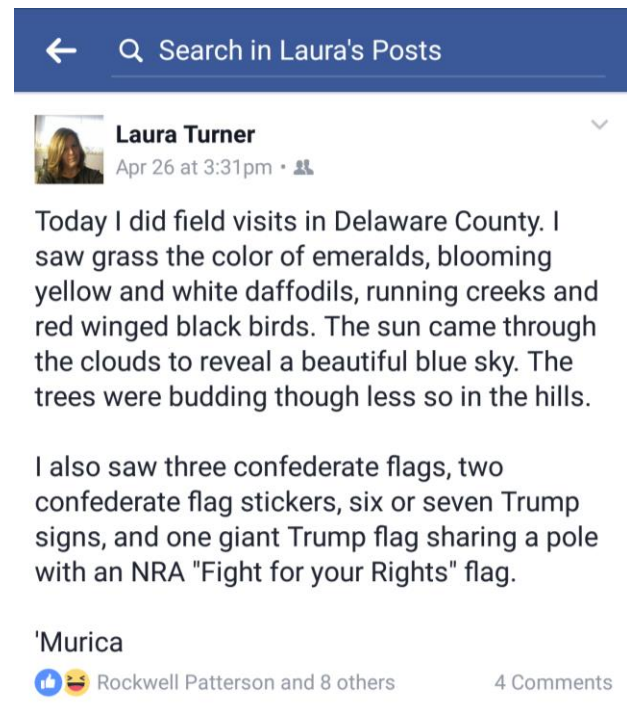


Figure 9. Unsolicited Facebook post from Laura Turner (Schenectady County, NY) illustrates the way symbols like the Confederate flag are used within Delaware County to repel non-locals from the region.

In “Race and Representation,” Maurice Berger quotes Foucault, “[Truth is] bound in a circular relation to systems of power which produce and sustain it” (82). He continues that truth is designed to exist within a political system that defines it, and is often endorsed by the majority and used to justify racial oppression. This idea is exemplified in the case of Serena Williams, an elite athlete functioning within the predominantly white institution of tennis. Throughout her career, Williams has been subjected to racially charged mockery, as well as a slew of unfair calls by officials – something not happening to her white peers. Although she kept her composure for years and outperformed other players, the one time that she objected to a bad call in 2009, she was punished. Her actions resulted in a point penalty, monetary fine, and two years of probation. For a black person to demand equal and fair treatment within a white institution was apparently a punishable offense. (Rankine, 25-36)

Unfortunately, in a system organized by colonialism, non-white others have little voice in making substantial changes to the order. Artist and scholar Rasheed Araeen describes this condition in his essay “Art and Post-Colonial Society”:



Figure 10. *Untitled Figure Study*, 2015. Oil on canvas. 24"x48".

The absence of non-European people as active agents from [the cultural] narrative is based on the idea that colonized peoples cannot be agents of history, as they are not free subjects. They cannot therefore enter history, act upon it, and change it...they cannot and must not play any crucial role in the construction of the world and must allow themselves to be led by those who are inside and are part of the dynamic history. (370)

This way of thinking ignites acts of white fragility. It is why America frames its story as a discovery of a land and not something more nefarious, such as a massacre that left behind millions of brown-skinned victims. To question otherwise would question patriotism. The omission of non-white others from history is also exemplified by the way the Republican Party, who has under the current leadership of Donald Trump, made it their mission to undo the legacy of America's first black President, Barack Obama, by dismantling many of his policies. Non-white others, under the rules of colonialism, are not owed a significant place in history. But how is this segregation from reality helping to improve the quality of life for Americans at large?

There is a general misunderstanding that only the colonized are faced with the "specific conditions of post-coloniality" and that there is no need for white Europeans to undergo a liberation from their ties to colonialism (Araeen, 366). In a recent interview, political commentator, Chris Hayes, suggested that many white Americans feel that if privilege is shared with others, the majority will miss out on benefits; to them it is a zero-sum game. By characterizing non-white people as dangerous, Americans have become enslaved by their roles within colonialism. Perhaps the most pervasive example of the adverse effects of colonialism on society are the vast resources dedicated to adjudicating crimes and maintaining the prison industrial complex. America's commitment to this system creates a greater racial divide, requires more financial resources to operate, and uses Americans of all races and ethnicities as pawns for

political gain (Johnson). From my perspective, people who are open to other cultures live with less fear and anxiety, which offers more opportunity for success and harmony. Racial intolerance and lack of empathy do not help anyone, which is why I was propelled toward activism with my work. I have made it my mission to demystify the way locals and others are locked into hegemonic roles. My greatest challenge is to do so without deterring white audiences from confronting their own roles within a racialized society by minimizing the impact of white fragility.

Communicating to Fragile Audiences

In the studio, I began making a series of photographs and paintings that responded to the increasing racial discord in the United States¹, which included, in microcosm, my own rural community's lack of empathy for non-white others. I photographed myself performing a range of emotions like sadness, anger, and fear, illuminated by a single source of



Figure 11. Kerry James Marshall, *Untitled (Beach Towel)*, 2014. Acrylic on PVC panel. 60 7/8" x 72 5/8"

¹ Police brutality against blacks has become transparent over the past decade, due to the advent of camera phones and social media. The cases of Sandra Bland, who was stopped for a minor traffic infraction, but later found dead in her jail cell; Eric Garner, who was detained for selling loose cigarillos and strangled to death by police while pleading that he could not breathe; and the hasty shooting by police of Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old playing with a toy gun serve as examples of this violence. In each incident, and many others like them, the offending officers were exonerated of any wrong doing. This led to outcry from civil rights leaders and the black community who organized, protested, and rioted. Also, anti-black and immigrant hate crimes increased since Donald Trump's entry into the Presidential arena in 2015 and through the election. Also, White Nationalist groups have increased in numbers. (Potok)

light for a dramatic chiaroscuro effect. The photos were left as-is or used as source material for several 2'x4' oil and acrylic paintings. Both modes acted as expression of my personal rage, which was formed by the continuing news of racial injustice. The overt expressions, scale, and neutral flesh tones against a palette of pastels or cool white capture the attention of viewers, which was my intention, to be recognized as a complex and feeling person through poeticized expression.

In her 1978 poem, "Power," Audre Lorde wrote about the importance of poetry in processing one's Baldwinian rage. She said, "I have not been able to touch the destruction



Figure 12. Kerry James Marshall. *Vignette 2.25*, 2008. Acrylic on Polyvinyl. 73.25" x 63".

within me / But unless I learn to use the difference between poetry and rhetoric my power too will run corrupt as poisonous mold." In other words, Lorde's rage must be processed through creative awareness of her experience and in a language of her own. This route of communication empowers the artist, whereas "rhetoric" limits expression through a set of rules established by colonial institutions. Like Lorde, I too needed to find a way to communicate my unique perspective on my own terms; I needed to control the language.

Additionally, to avoid negative reactions from white audiences, I needed to nuance my visual language in a way that engages the audience first and then slowly allows a narrative to unfold.

In earlier work, I had avoided themes of racial identity, but African American painter Kerry James Marshall inspired me to embrace my blackness. In an BBC interview Marshall stated, “when you find yourself, your culture, and history is [sic] having been subjugated, enslaved, and colonized, you got to fix that” (Duguid). While I doubt racial inequality will be fixed in my lifetime, I understood Marshall’s manifesto as a call to challenge white dominance through racial intervention. In his work, Marshall showcases black people within the predominantly white art institutions he has been accepted into and seeks to demonstrate that beauty can be found in the velvety blackness of skin (Fig. 11).

Marshall’s painted figures are unforgivingly black against the backdrop of everyday and idyllic settings, and his paintings often borrow from art history, a subject Marshall is passionate about. This is exemplified in his *Vignette* series (Fig. 12), which includes paintings of a couple displaying romantic frivolity reminiscent of French Rococo. This nod to art history speaks to Marshall’s interests, and at the same time, is a subversive reminder that black people were not included in that history aside from playing minor roles as servants. (Sooke)

I also looked at Carrie Mae Weems’ 1990 *Kitchen Table Series* (Fig. 13). This photographic series depicts Weems as the lead character in what feels like a storyboard. A lamp hangs over the kitchen table like an interrogation light, as life in a black household unfolds.



Figure 13. Carrie Mae Weems. Images from the *Kitchen Table Series*, 1990. Photography.

Weems explained the setting choice in a 2012 lecture, “Kitchens are narrow spaces to have big conversations” (Battipaglia). When asked what motivated her to be a social artist, she explained that growing up in the radical 1960s made it difficult not to become involved in social issues. “Being aware of social conditions was part of who you were. It was part of America at that time” (Battipaglia). This is much like present-day America, in which socially conscious people cannot help but fight to protect the rights of non-white others amid growing racial violence.

As my work developed, I kept Marshall and Weems in mind by choosing to make race a focal point. This was first handled through photography, I shot myself in blackface (Fig. 14), a decision influenced by

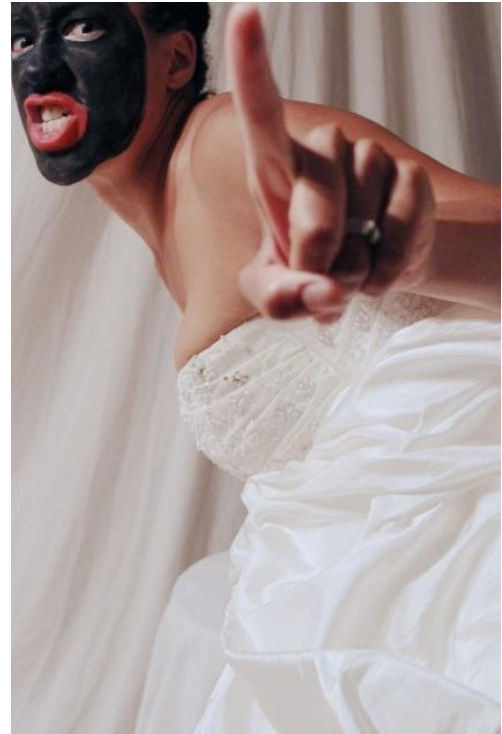


Figure 14. *Blackface Bride*. Photograph, 2015.

my grandmother’s 1941 minstrel show photo. The images were meant to be confrontational and feature me wagging my finger, scowling, or seated with a deadpan expression. I am sometimes clothed and at other times not. My purpose with this body of work was to create bold imagery that forces the viewer to acknowledge me, as a black person with real emotions. However, it became clear that the intensity of the work might deter the white audiences I sought to communicate with; I would likely be summed up as just another “angry black woman.”

Deborah Luster and Ken Gonzales-Day provided examples of ways contemporary artists address social issues without being overtly didactic. In Ken Gonzales-Day’s photo series, *Erased Lynching*, he displays large reproductions of vintage postcards from the American West (circa

late 19th century through the 1930s). In one example, “a sparse tree cuts the center of the photograph. A group of white American soldiers flanks the tree. One man grins. The others stare passively into the camera” (Berger). At the bottom of the postcard is an inscription: “Disguised Bandit,” but there is no bandit present (Fig. 15). Gonzales-Day digitally erased the so-called outlaw, who, in the original photograph, is hanging dead in the tree; he does this with all the images in this series. This creates an absence in the narrative that is intended to provoke the viewer to think about the image’s meaning (Berger).



Figure 15. Ken Gonzales-Day. *Erased Lynching (Disguised Bandit)*. Photograph, 2012.

As art critic Maurice Berger said in his 2012 review of *Erased Lynchings*, Gonzales-Day narrows the “psychic distance between the viewer and the photographs of violence and death” and “slows down the viewing process by introducing a degree of interactivity into the experience of his work.” To put it simply, the artist is able to discuss an uncomfortable topic by omitting graphic details of the brutal hanging. Viewers are then invited to wonder about the significance of the work, which is where context and narrative unfold. Deborah Luster’s *Tooth for an Eye: A Chorography² of Violence in Orleans Parish* (Fig. 16) uses similar devices, such as the absence of graphic imagery, to tell the story of murder victims in New Orleans. Inspired by her mother’s murder, Luster investigates violence using archives and photo documentation. Instead of appropriating images, like Gonzales-Day, Luster photographs the locations in the present-day and collects facts about the crime committed there. Her large format tondo photos are presented as an archive of her investigation, alongside a

² The term “chorography” is the subjective mapping of a place and it is how Luster illustrates the violence within the boundaries of New Orleans (Diaz).

corpus delineating the specifics of each crime. Like *Erased Lynchings*, this method provides a gentler way of discussing the prevalence of violence in New Orleans. Additionally, both bodies of work provide evidence that we exist within a world where past atrocities, while unseen, are part of our historical a priori, which we should not deny. Foucault describes the importance of looking to the past in order to understand ourselves in his book, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, “The document...is no longer for history an inert material through which it tries to reconstitute what men have done or said...history is now trying to define within the documentary material itself unities, totalities, series, relations” (7). My exploration of Delaware County correlates with this idea, as I give value to the repetition of related historical behaviors.

Recognizing the subtleties of certain actions comes with ease because my status as a local gives me access and an understanding of the everyday lives of Delaware county natives and a natural affinity for my community. However, my unique position as a black person within this space, provides me with clarity about how the residue of colonialism affects the people around me.



Figure 16. Deborah Luster. Example from *Tooth for an Eye*, 2011. Photographs.

Choosing a poetic style that reflects local codes and aesthetic, as opposed to rhetoric, I create psychic distance so that sensitive audiences can consume potentially didactic material.



Figure 17. Left: Detail from a *Children of All Nations Coloring Book* (1932) found in my grandparents' home. Objects like the coloring book provide an example of the way racialized propaganda has been accepted as normal throughout history and has helped to perpetuate myths about non-white others and white supremacy. Right: *Dinner Party*, 2016, Photograph.

Overview of *Untitled Interactions One Through Three*

From my collected stories, observations, and interviews, I chose three anecdotes that stood out as representing unique iterations of the way racism is perpetuated in mundane interactions. Below is a general overview of the narratives chosen for my video documentary *Untitled Interactions*.

Interaction One: "Oh! The Measures"

In the early 1970s, my white, rural mother brought her urban black boyfriend (my father) to meet her parents. My mother was very hesitant about the interaction, as my grandmother, a teetotaling conservative was notoriously judgmental and prejudiced against blacks. But my mother knew that if she and her beau were to continue their relationship, she would need to

introduce him to the family, so she did. Countering my grandmother's bigotry was my father's charm and good looks. He told my grandmother she was beautiful and at one point in the afternoon, performed cartwheels for her; she was charmed (Fig. 16) (Truax).

Interaction Two: "Racial Tensions"

In 1998, a group of local high school boys discovered the rap stylings of the all-black rap group, the Wu-Tang Clan. In deference to the group, the boys called themselves "The Wu-Tangers" and began wearing similar clothes, listening to their music, and emulating personas. This was *too much* for a rival gang of local hicks, who saw the cultural "invasion" as a threat (Fig.18). What's worse, the girlfriend of one of the hicks broke up with him to date one of the Wu-Tangers (Hoover). Tensions erupted and fights broke out between the two factions until school officials got involved. Their solution was to ban overtly urban attire, especially related to the Wu-Tang Clan (Tucker).



Figure 18. Video Still from "Racial Tensions," 2017.

Interaction Three: "County Fair"

As described on page three,

Delaware County Fair's board of directors were asked whether they would follow suit with many other New York State Fairs by banning the sale of Confederate flags by vendors, board members answered, "the more of them the better" (Cairnes). "County Fair" is a modern documentary shot a year later, in which Confederate flags are displayed like a centerpiece of local pride. In the video, a sea of white faces meander through the fairgrounds participating in this American pastime. As people who lean on their historic ties to the area and are proud of their country, their passivity with respect to the Confederate flag, sold by many of the vendors, is ironic. In

predominantly white Upstate New York, the pro-slavery symbol's racist implications are not an issue; they are ignored. Within white self-segregated communities like Delaware County, locals lose grasp of the reality surrounding their myth of their superiority.



Figure19. Video Still from "Oh! The Measures," 2016.

Video as Storyteller

Discussing race with white audiences can be very difficult, as many are not ready to admit their role within the system of white racial hegemony. Using a visual language derived from my research of local history and personal reflections, I provide a familiar landscape for discussing the topic. Additionally, I utilize cinematic devices and borrow from pop culture to build these stories in ways that are familiar and easily consumed.

In "Oh! The Measures," I use a simple narrative arc with silent film and cinematic styles to give the video structure. The arc is defined by the exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. Additionally, a narrative spine runs through the storyline acting as a subplot that creates another layer of depth and interest. In "Oh! The Measures," a reenactment of my mother's introduction of her black fiancé (my father) to her mother, the exposition occurs immediately as music from the movie *The Minstrel Show* plays and a very conservative woman

(my grandmother) peers from her front door; she is the star of the show. The rising action is marked by the introduction of her daughter's black fiancé, the woman's physical responses of turning away and glaring, and the entry of the fiancé on in a split screen (Fig. 19). The man performs cartwheels and slowly the woman's response softens. In the climax, the fiancé does a high kick, which delights the woman into laughter. She remarks that he is "well-spoken" and has a "fine physique." This interaction continues and acts as the falling action, along with the introduction of the minstrel tune "That's Why Darkies Were Born" (Brown).

As the scene transitions from an elated mother-in-law-to-be back to her original sour state, the song's lyrics belt, "Sing, sing, sing when you're weary and / Sing when you're blue / Sing, sing, that's what you taught / All the white folks to do" (Brown). This is the conclusion, which is meant to remind the viewer of the woman's original state of judgement. It is as though each future interaction with an African American will begin with her hesitation, followed by a performance to comfort the woman's suspicion. Her prejudice is poeticized through the cinematic filming techniques, editing, and acting. The theme of minstrelsy acts as the narrative spine and is demonstrated through the soundtrack, silent film style, and by using a clear division of performer and audience via split screen.

In "Racial Tensions" (Fig. 20), I use another narrative approach, Joseph Campbell's "Hero's Journey" (Fig. 21). This format is influenced by Campbell's observations



Figure 20. Video still from "Racial Tensions," 2017.

that mythologies and legends throughout history and across many cultures have related elements that provide structure to the narrative. This model is flexible and can be adapted to reach an infinite variety of shapes, which is achieved through repeating, avoiding, and shifting stages to fit the needs of the story (Vogler). I also reference Wu-Tang Clan's "Method Man"³ music video, clips from Sergio Leone's film *Once Upon a Time in the West*, and interviews to develop the structure of the reenactment. The Wu-Tangers in "Racial Tensions" act out scenes from the actual music video, which, I imagine replicate ways the original Wu-Tangers formed their appropriated urban personas. Similarly, I assign the rugged, outlaw personality from Leone's classic spaghetti western to the hicks.

The hero in "Racial Tensions" is the teenage Method Man character, which I will refer to as MM2. His call to action is represented by a cassette reel playing a sample beat from the song "Method Man." MM2's reenactment of the music video suggests that there has been a meeting, of sorts, between he and the original

Method Man. This is evidenced by the way MM2 absorbs the words, gestures, and rhythm of his role model, which initiates MM2 into a new paradigm or, as Campbell calls it, "special world."

As MM2 enters the special world he and his friends form a community of "Wu-Tangers." They are white high school boys that embrace urban rap culture (allies), and are challenged by

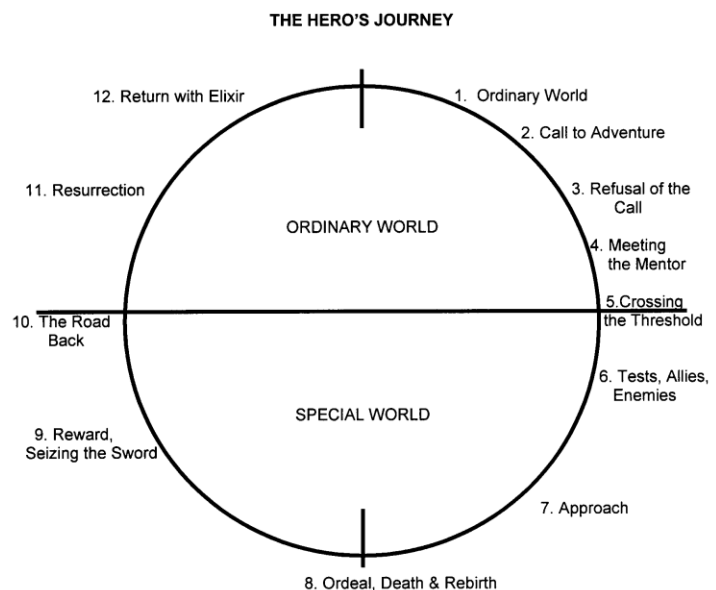


Figure 21. Stages of The Hero's Journey.

³ Method Man is the name used by a member of Wu-Tang Clan. The song is in his namesake.

the “hicks (enemies),” who see MM2’s urban transformation as an invasion of rural culture; fights arise between the two factions (ordeal). The video’s ends unresolved in the same way as “Oh! The Measures,” as there is



Figure 22. Video still from "County Fair," 2016.

no tidy ending to colonialism nor MM2’s journey as a self-assigned other. Instead, it is assumed that any attempt to integrate black culture into the rural community will be met with disdain and unspoken rules will arise to maintain white supremacy. Representing this through white-on-white discrimination, I show how ingrained and accepted it is for locals to use physical and psychological violence to shut down a cultural intervention, even when it is introduced by a fellow white local.

Unlike the first two interactions, which are more rooted in poetic documentation, “County Fair” is an expository documentary (Fig. 22). This style, which is exemplified in Ken Burns’s work, such as the 2009 *National Parks* series, uses interviews, b-roll footage, reenactment, still images, text, and graphics to expose the viewer to the subject matter. Due to the nature of modern documentaries, “County Fair” is the most didactic of the three videos and, interestingly, triggers my fear of insulting local people.

Using the same narrative structure as “Oh! The Measures,” I first expose the viewer to the historic relevance of the fair with vintage photos from, now deceased, Delaware County photojournalist Robert Wyr. The montage is accompanied by the U.S. Marine Corps rendition of “America the Beautiful.” The story transitions into video of present-day Delaware County, which depicts the busy midway populated with meandering white locals and droves of parked trucks in the lot. “Oh, say can you see” creeps into the soundtrack as a Confederate flag appears, or to trigger the viewer to look at the only proof of diversity at the event, collections of dolls of various races and ethnicities on display. “County Fair” reaches its climax as the voice singing “Oh, say can you see” continues through the entirety of a distorted version of the national anthem; we are walked to a retail vendor selling piles of Confederate flag merchandise on the last measure. More photos and video footage reveal the many vendors selling Confederate flags



Figure 23. Video Still from "County Fair," 2016.

and making the symbol the centerpiece of their tents. As the action falls, so does night and the flags become less prominent again. The video concludes with a festively lit ferris wheel (Fig. 23) rotating in the twilight accompanied by the cacophony of a truck in the tractor pull.

The choice to steer away from reenactment and instead use actual footage of my poor, predominantly white Delaware County community, has triggered mixed responses from viewers. Some see “County Fair” as pure observation from an insider (me), while others feel as though the piece mingles too closely with exploitation. Interestingly, this latter view suggests that I am an outsider, and as an African American local, I reckon I am both. It is difficult to “out” my community as place where one sees the ugly effects of generations of self-segregation – an ugliness captured in my observations at the Delaware County Fair -- but my Baldwinian rage compels me to have the conversation, despite the problem of white fragility.

Conclusion

In my video documentary, *Untitled Interactions*, I use references to pop culture genres, poetics, and reenactment to illuminate the complexity of racism. Using these tools, I provide a vehicle that slowly exposes viewers to the impact of colonialism by focusing on the subtleties of racialized actions and words. As an African American living in a predominantly white rural community, I know it is in my best interest to harness my Baldwinian rage with poetics, as it allows me to discuss racism gently and, ideally, without triggering excessive discomfort and dismissal of these critical issues. To do nothing makes me complicit in the perpetuation of white supremacy and allows people to “shut their eyes to reality and simply invite their own destruction (Baldwin)” because, as James Baldwin suggests, to remain in an innocent state long after virtue is dead will turn us into monsters (175).

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