

An Inheritance in Two Parts

by

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INTRODUCTION (THE MINE AND THE MANHOLE)

During my childhood in Germany, most places I looked, I could find the aftermath of the Second World War. The vast majority of that childhood played out on a handful of American Army Posts in Hessen and Bavaria, direct results of the military conflict between the United States and then Nazi Germany. Somewhat separately from the aftermath of military conflict, and far more importantly, the landscape that surrounded me was littered with the aftermath of the Holocaust.

Visits to sites connected to the Holocaust were fairly typical occurrences for school-aged children, even at the school I attended, which was operated by the American department of defense. I remember visiting the Flossenbürg concentration camp on annual school trips as a middle schooler. Though now a memorial to the victims of the Holocaust near the border of Germany and Czechia, the Flossenbürg camp was once a labor camp adjoining a granite quarry,¹ where roughly 100,000 Jewish and Roma people (along with political prisoners and those the Nazi Party deemed criminals or deviants) were forced to work in slavery. Of those people, at least 30,000 died.¹

My memory of these visits, now half my lifetime ago, is a bit hazy. I remember very little of how the buildings in the camp looked, except for the main gate, inscribed with the words “Arbeit macht frei.” I don’t remember the museums in the buildings that once served as the camp kitchen and laundry facility, but I remember pedestals displaying shoes and glasses that would never be worn again. I don’t remember the path that led us from the gate through the camp, but I remember its culmination at the crematorium and cemetery. I remember the burial mound, a pyramid of grass that seemed far too small for the grief it housed, and the list naming each and

¹ “History,” KZ-Gedenkstätte Flossenbürg, accessed February 8, 2023, <https://www.gedenkstaette-flossenbuerg.de/en/history/flossenbuerg>

every person interred within it. I remember an overcast sky on my first visit, and being surprised that the sun was even capable of shining on my second visit. I remember an air of shame that such a place was allowed to come into being in the first place.

During my first year living in Athens, Georgia, I visited the Oconee Hill Cemetery quite a few times. The cemetery was less than half a mile from my studio, which made it a convenient place to take walks or eat lunch between classes. Most of the time, the cemetery was sunny when I was there, aside from the evenings when Sanford Stadium, across the street, would cast the graves into shadow.

Often, I was greeted upon my arrival to the cemetery by rebel flags placed on the graves of confederates buried at Oconee Hill, including the four generals I later learned had been laid to rest at the cemetery. It was clear that the flags were being maintained and replaced rather frequently: they never seemed to fade in the sun or become worn by the weather, and removing them always proved ineffective on the next visit. The thought crossed my mind more than once to deface them, but a person my color wouldn't have gotten away with it. In the years after, a few friends confessed to me that they had pissed on these graves. I envied them for it. Aside from the inescapable effects of time on the stones and the urine of a handful of graduate students, the confederate graves always seemed immaculately maintained.

Other graves were less immaculately maintained. On the other side of the cemetery lay a historic black burial ground. I gathered from the historic site marker and the context in which the cemetery was established that the people buried here had likely been enslaved or lived through the early days of Jim Crow. This is all I'll ever be able to know about many of the people buried in this part of the cemetery. No inscription remained proclaiming to me the names of these people, no headstones save for one slab that had been toppled and another that was sunken

halfway into the earth, no legible message left behind to inform me that in life they were a beloved husband and father, a treasured leader, or a patriot. There remained no markers indicating where one grave ended and the next began. The closest structure I could find to the marble obelisks commemorating their white neighbors who fought to hold them in bondage was a rusted manhole, and it seemed likely to me that someone had been disinterred to put it there.

The magnificent cultural splendor of the South was built by my father, and his father, and his fathers before him, but it will never be mine to inherit. The splendor of the South, in fact, is predicated entirely on the central notion that it is not mine to inherit, just as it was not my fathers' to inherit, nor was it his father's, nor any of his fathers' before him. Instead of stately white mansions, we inherited the violence that made those mansions possible.

In this research, I investigate the way that sites and objects connected to slavery exist in the modern day South, both as records of history and as figments of the Southern imagination. These sites serve as monuments to American chattel slavery, proclaiming its greatness and the prosperity that one of the most infamous abuses of human rights in recorded history brought to the South. This proclamation of greatness and prosperity, it should be noted, is extremely atypical for developed nations when recalling acts of unspeakable racial violence and cruelty.

The works presented in this paper reflect a critical examination of the landscape I inhabit and the history that informs it. I challenge narratives presented by existing artifacts by creating new objects in response to them. Through these response objects, I seek to better understand the ways in which the constructed environment and material culture of the South act as tools of white supremacy, and I seek to communicate the violence of experiencing these sites every day from within a black body.

I: LAND, FICTION, AND DIGNITY (MONTICELLO)

When I was driving up Brown's Mountain, just outside of Charlottesville, Virginia, to Monticello, a sign on the side of the road described the mountain as 'hallowed ground'. I wasn't entirely surprised, this site was the birthplace of one of the most important documents in American history. Thomas Jefferson was the voice of freedom in America after all, as long as you didn't count the hundreds of people whose freedom he personally denied on the sole basis of their blackness.

Atop the mountain, Monticello had been transformed into a tourist attraction: the residence and plantation stood at the peak, and a swarm of shuttle buses carried visitors to and from the museum and gift shop half a mile below. Further still down the mountain lay an expanse of parking lots to accommodate visitors so that they might admire Jefferson's great and glorious legacy. Before I found a parking spot, I found a sign which gave directions to an enslaved people's burial ground on the property. The burial ground was flanked on all sides by parking, and partitioned therefrom by a waist-high black metal fence. Separated from the rest of the property by half a mile, it was apparent to me that this burial ground was never truly meant to be considered or experienced as part of Monticello. There was no chance that tours of the property walked half a mile from the residence, beyond the boundaries of the maintained property, to see these unmarked graves. Even so, self-congratulatory informational plaques told the story of how the Thomas Jefferson Foundation honored and remembered the people enslaved at Monticello and buried here. One such plaque read "He buried them as property, we remember them as people." Despite the numerous claims that the stewards of this site were deeply reverent of this burial site, I suspected that it existed only because disinterring upwards of forty human bodies to further expand parking wasn't a viable legal option.

Italicized texts are personal anecdotes.

Eventually, I made my way to the peak of the mountain, to the actual residence and the plantation that supported it. Inside the residence, I was presented with information concerning Jefferson's great contributions to history: His penmanship of the Declaration of Independence, the founding of the University of Virginia, his selfless sale of his many books to the federal government to create the Library of Congress, among others. Information regarding the practice of slavery at Monticello, it seemed, was restricted to outside.

Behind the residence stood a handful of structures identified as Mulberry Row, built over what was once "the negro quarter". Though not nearly as extensively as the residence, a few buildings on Mulberry Row had been restored: a weaving house, a nailery and smithy, and a smokehouse. Though I missed them on my first pass of the row, there were also a half dozen plaques marking the quarters of enslaved families, or at least where those quarters would have been had they been restored, rather than removed. Other plaques proclaimed Jefferson's kind and benevolent treatment of the people he enslaved. One such plaque claimed that "he struggled to balance humane treatment of slaves with the need for profit at Monticello" as though the words 'humane treatment of slaves' held any meaning at all. Others described how strongly Jefferson felt that 'labourers' should be 'well treated.' I found this dedication to preserving black dignity to be less than believable of a man notorious for sexually assaulting enslaved women and girls.

Eventually, my visit to Monticello ended very similarly to the way it began: in a cemetery. The Jefferson family cemetery, however, was not like the enslaved people's burial ground: The Jefferson cemetery was still an active site, headstones indicated new burials as recently as three years ago. The Jefferson Cemetery was beautifully maintained: the stones were polished, and the eight-foot-tall wrought iron fence that separated me from them had a fresh, smooth coat of paint

on it. The Jefferson family cemetery was filled with sprays of daffodils, some laid above graves and others planted between them. Above all else, the Jefferson cemetery was not in a fucking parking lot.

It is plainly apparent to all people who have experienced the American South that as a cultural region, it largely does not regret its history of anti-black violence. Rather, it regards this history of violence as something that, when acknowledged, is to be cherished. Confederate apologists remain a significant voice in the South's cultural discourse. Some, like the United Daughters of the Confederacy, flatly deny the presence and significance of anti-blackness in Southern history by misrepresenting the confederacy with claims that the civil war was fought over vague and amorphous issue of states' rights, and that the continued use of confederate imagery (now tied in the United States to multiple white supremacist groups² and often used in Germany as a substitute for Nazi imagery which otherwise could not legally be displayed in public³) is motivated solely by a desire to represent their heritage and carries no racial or ethnic sentiment.⁴ Others see this violence as central to Southern society, as the keystone of what they believe makes Southern culture great. This view is demonstrated in Margaret Mitchell's 1936 novel, *Gone With The Wind*, (as well as its 1939 film adaptation) which notably presents slavery as the natural order of power between black and white people, and characterizes black people as happy to take this supposedly natural role of enslavement. Mitchell also depicts the Ku Klux Klan as a force for good, protecting this natural order and the dignity of the South. The narratives created by the United Daughters of the Confederacy and Mitchell both deeply misrepresent

² "The Confederate Flag: The Use of a Symbol," Museum of Jewish Heritage, Accessed March 16, 2023, <https://mjhnyc.org/blog/the-confederate-flag-the-use-of-a-symbol/>

³ Sanders Isaac Bernstein, "Germany's strange nostalgia for the antebellum American South," USC Dornsife College of Letter, Arts, and Sciences, March 31, 2021, <https://dornsife.usc.edu/news/stories/3441/germanys-nostalgia-antebellum-american-south/>

⁴ Jinny Widowski, "Statement From the President General." United Daughters of the Confederacy, accessed 15 March 2023, <https://hqdc.org/>

confederates, suggesting they are honorable or upstanding, yet there is no honor to be found in the enslavement of another human being.

The fictional view of historic anti-black violence as positive and central to Southern culture or identity, is as visible in the landscape as it is in literature. The land is littered with monuments to the confederacy, and the bulk of the maintained historical sites in the South are sites of enslavement. The romanticization of antebellum history can be perceived in descriptions of these sites provided by their modern stewards, as well as claims that the South will ‘rise again’, and is openly displayed in the use of these sites as venues for weddings and other events. This frames the unimaginable horrors of slavery as an appropriate and desirable backdrop for moments of joy in white lives.

A largely unspoken, but massively important component of constructing this fictionalized Southern history, is the continued denial of dignity to black people. The methods by which personhood and the dignity accompanied thereby were denied to black people in the time of chattel slavery is obvious: they were not considered people in the most literal possible sense. This denial of dignity takes subtler forms today, including the framing of sites of enslavement mentioned above and the erasure of black lives from the landscape. When historic sites of enslavement are maintained or restored, the quarters of enslaved people are often left in disrepair or removed entirely, erasing the reality of violence at these sites in favor of preserving the beauty and legacy of enslavers’ homes. black burial grounds meet a similar fate as black bodies are often disinterred and quite literally eliminated from the landscape when deemed inconvenient.

In my ongoing work, I respond directly to the Southern landscape and the ways it is used to perpetuate white supremacy primarily by creating objects and performances in response to specific sites and artifacts within that landscape. In *Gallantry Took its Last Bow (2022-2023)*^{images}

¹⁻⁸, ornamental ironwork details from sites of enslavement are appropriated and used to create objects which re-frame existing narratives linked to these sites. A badge and a branding iron for each site prompt viewers to consider who is afforded dignity by each object and who is afforded dignity by each site, as well as interrogating who is afforded the option to mark themselves and who is simply marked. Each of the addressed sites is selected for the local (or national) significance of the enslaver which owned the property for their contribution to either the American government, the southern economy, or the confederate war effort. Each of these enslavers is presented as a hero whose legacy must be honored and remembered, this work challenges those legacies.

Something in the Water (2021)^{image 9} and *The Brig Duddon's Cargo* (2023)^{images 10-12} address fictionalized narratives attached to sites within the Southern landscape in similar ways, but contain actual material collected from the landscape rather than appropriating imagery from that landscape in new objects. These works each investigate bodies of water in the American south (Lake Lanier and the Charleston Harbor, respectively) which have served as sites of significant anti-black violence and now serve other purposes, and use water collected from those sites to re-center the ways in which the sites are informed by violence.

Something in the Water compares the contemporary use of Lake Lanier as a resort destination and one of the largest freshwater reservoirs serving the Atlanta Metropolitan Area with its historic role in the forcible removal of the black residents of Oscarville from Forsyth County, Georgia.⁵ This work consists of sweet tea brewed from raw and unfiltered water collected from Lake Lanier. Though the lake is now a life-sustaining source of freshwater and

⁵ Sabrina Kerns, "The truth behind Oscarville and the violent removal of Black residents from Forsyth County years before Lake Lanier was built," *Gainesville Times*, July 1, 2022, <https://www.gainesvilletimes.com/news/history/truth-behind-oscarville-once-prosperous-black-town-now-covered-lake-lanier/>

countless pitchers of sweet tea are undoubtedly brewed using its water every day, this water has not been filtered or otherwise potable, and to drink the tea made therefrom would be to use the water of Lake Lanier to enact harm yet again.

The Brig Duddon's Cargo investigates the historic and contemporary roles of the Charleston Harbor. The Charleston Harbor and the Atlantic ocean have served many purposes, including (and perhaps especially) their roles as parts of vital international trade routes for goods and materials for centuries. Owing to this role in international trade, these bodies of water also serve as an impenetrable barrier severing those in the African diaspora from our ancestry in Africa. This work projects a documented experience of the Charleston Harbor into water collected therefrom to highlight the ways in which this severance still impacts Black Americans.

To Have And To Hold (2022)^{image 13} attempts a more layered investigation of the relationship between historic sites, fiction, and Black dignity. This artwork responds to the wedding dress of Moselle Lyndon, an artifact housed in the Ware-Lyndon historic house in Athens, Georgia. The work also addresses the white Southern cultural practice of plantation weddings, and the betrothal practice of jumping the broom in the African Diaspora. In this work, named not for any words exchanged during a marriage ceremony, but for text commonly found on bills of sale from the American slave trade^{6,7}, a hand-tied broom is crafted from bridal silk. The work asks the viewer to consider the dignity stripped from enslaved people by imagining an object which affords it to them.

The ways in which historical narratives afford dignity are similarly challenged in the performance diptych *My Condolences* (2023)^{image 14}. In the first of two performances, I clean a

⁶ Bill of sale for Hannah and her children, Clarinda and Stephen, n.d., 2012.158.7, Liljenquist Family Collection, National Museum of African American History and Culture.

⁷ Bill of sale for a woman, Laurett, and her daughter, Anne, n.d., 2012.158.3, Liljenquist Family Collection, National Museum of African American History and Culture.

sewer access manhole in Oconee Hill Cemetery's historic black burial ground (the burial ground's most identifiable landmark) as though it were a headstone. Through this act, I attempt to treat the site as it exists today with the dignity that I believe it deserves. In the second performance, I urinate on a confederate cross of honor grave marker, treating it with the indignity that it deserves as well. Though not a documented part of this performance, I have also retained permanent ownership of the marker. Through this action, I hold ownership of the confederate soldier whose memory the marker once honored; he becomes a possession to me in death, just as he would have thought me a possession in life.

II: THE DOUBLE (LAKE LANIER)

I was very, very careful when I visited Lake Lanier. I sent my coordinates to my roommate so that someone would know where I was; I stayed on the phone with my sister from the drive out to the lake through the drive back home so that someone would know if something happened to me. I never actually dared to set foot in Forsyth County, but I was certainly aware that I was somewhere I shouldn't have been, and there was certainly an impression that I should tread very lightly, lest someone make sure I never tread again. Despite the precautions I took, I couldn't help but feel as though I was still in danger as I turned from Old Federal Road onto the side road that led to Old Federal Beach. My GPS had initially placed the beach at the end of GC Crow road, and I was caught off guard when the street signs read Jim Crow instead. As I wound down the last quarter mile to the beach, I looked at the houses that lined the street. They were almost certainly vacation homes, maybe even vacation rentals, but I wondered about the people who stayed in them. I couldn't help but ask aloud to nobody in particular, "What kind of person gets their mail delivered at 6198 Jim Crow Road?"

When I arrived at the beach, I had to take a moment to steel my nerves before I could begin documenting or collecting anything. To leave my car would be to give up whatever semblance of safety I had, and even with nobody else at the beach who could have done anything to me, I couldn't shake the idea that the lake itself meant harm to me.

The time I spent documenting the lake and collecting material proved to be as disquieting as navigating the roads that led me there; I was hesitant to physically touch the water as I collected it. The lake was cold enough to make my ankles hurt as I waded, and I was intensely aware of the people who were forced away from the lake and their homes that lay still beneath it. I stood alone on the beach in my blackness, and watched the people out on the lake who

Italicized texts are personal anecdotes.

experienced no such trepidation. I could see boaters, paddleboarders, and swimmers further out on the water. There were approximately a dozen in total, all seemingly having the time of their lives, all as white as the glare from the sun that shone off the water. I couldn't say with any certainty how much they knew about Lake Lanier, but the communities around the lake had a reputation as sundowns. That doesn't happen without people knowing. People didn't buy vacation homes on Jim Crow Road without knowing. It seemed more realistic that they knew, at least in some capacity, about the violence of this site, and that knowledge either didn't detract from their enjoyment, or perhaps it added to it.

In his 1903 text, *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Dubois described a psychological phenomenon that he called double-consciousness. Double-consciousness, as Dubois described it, is a state of “two-ness”, or “a sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others”⁸ that black Americans experience when understanding themselves both as they truly exist (or wish to exist), and as they are deemed to exist racially in the context of a white supremacist₂ society. In the years since Dubois first described double-consciousness as a racial phenomenon, it has often been linked to another social phenomenon connected to two-ness as part of the black American experience: code-switching. This secondary phenomenon is characterized by seamless and often unconscious changes in speech and behavior when outside of one's own cultural spaces with the intention of matching expectations for behavior in other cultural spaces. As code-switching in the United states is primarily considered a tool that black people use to access resources in white spaces, some scholars suggest that it stems from racial double-consciousness.⁹

In 1967, Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke to students and faculty at Stanford University and described a different sort of two-ness. He told them of two Americas, one “overflowing with the

⁸ W. E. B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover Publications, 1994), 2-7

⁹ Taryn Kiana Myers, “Can You Hear Me Now? An Autoethnographic Analysis of Code-Switching,” *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, 20(2): 113–123

miracle of prosperity and the honey of opportunity,” and another with “a daily ugliness about it that constantly transforms the buoyancy of hope into the fatigue of despair.”¹⁰ King’s speech described intense economic stratification in the United States, a predicament exacerbated by the many points of inequity of both past and present American society. This account of two Americas was as apt a descriptor of class division as it was of racial and cultural separation: there is a black America and there is a white America.

Though the de jure segregation of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries no longer exists, its afterimage remains burned into American culture in the form of de facto segregation. In order to remain segregated, American society doubles itself: rather than one community, there is a white community and a black community, children attend white schools and black schools, the dead are mourned in white funeral homes and black funeral homes. This society is not doubled equally by the will of its black members as it is by its white members. Rather, white members of this society, having amassed the lion’s share of its power and resources through centuries of chattel slavery and decades of de jure segregation, exert that power to continue enforcing segregation by extralegal means.¹¹ Resultantly, this society is split into white communities that are defined and governed by their own power and black communities that are also defined and governed by the power of white communities.

I believe that, as a product of centuries of racial violence and segregation, the two-ness of America that informed Dr. King’s speech, and the two-ness of the South in particular, are linked to the two-ness that Dubois described. Having experienced the South and white Southern culture as a black person, I find the American South and its material culture to have a sort of double-consciousness of their own. The social and legal tools of racial violence and monuments

¹⁰ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Two Americas” (lecture, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, April 14, 1967).

¹¹ Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2017), 203-205

thereto exist both as they are in reality, and as they are through the lens of white supremacy. Sites and material culture in the American south became double-sided and effectively code switch to reinforce historic and ongoing anti-black violence by functioning as reminders of a seemingly gentle and graceful culture when perceived by white communities and cultural tools of white supremacy when perceived by black communities; the plantation house takes on the simultaneous roles of the honey of opportunity and the fatigue of despair.

In my research, I attempt to make more apparent this psychological or figurative doubling through the use of literal and material doubling. In the aforementioned *Gallantry Took Its Last Bow*, ironwork details sites of enslavement are transformed into matched pairs of badges and branding irons. These objects are to be understood as reflections of one another, or perhaps as one and the same. Each object serves the same purpose as its complement; both are tools for marking a person with an emblem signifying the glory of an enslaver, albeit with different understandings of the meaning and legitimacy of that glory.

Doubling is used in a similar, but distinct way in *Less Than Expected (View Of A Wayside Panel)* (2022)^{image 15} and *The Brig Duddon's Cargo*. In these single-channel video-based works, two clips of footage from sites tied to the American slave trade and text clarifying the violence of those sites are layered over one another in such a way that the first image is visible, but the second image and text are effectively obfuscated. Through this obfuscation, one of two possible understandings of a site overpowers the other. In *Less Than Expected (View Of A Wayside Panel)*, the doubling through layering of text and footage is reinforced by footage from related sites in Natchez, Mississippi: the shore of the Mississippi River, and the remains of the Forks of The Road slave market, the highest-volume market for the trafficking of enslaved people in the

United States after the Louisiana Purchase.¹² In the text, I reflect on the small scale and unimpressive nature of the Forks of The Road. Similarly in *The Brig Duddon's Cargo*, the doubling of footage is reinforced through the use of material collected from the landscape. Footage is projected onto seawater and sand collected from the Charleston Harbor, the highest volume site of importation of enslaved people in the United States prior to the Louisiana purchase,¹³ where it is split into two versions of itself, one projected onto the seafoam atop the water, and another projected onto the sand at the bottom of the water. In the text, I reflect on the ways in which the transatlantic slave trade has made information regarding my own ancestry inaccessible to me.

The double appears as a formal motif in *Gallantry Took Its Last Bow*, as 5 sets of brands and badges. Each of these sets is a diptych, as are the video performances of *My Condolences*. The format of the diptych in these works allows for the creation of objects and artworks which, though ostensibly two separate entities, are one and the same, mimicking the notion that the sites and objects referenced in this research often serve doubled functions. In this duplication of objects, the diptych serves as a literalization of the double consciousness described by Dubois.

Pretty Please (2022)^{images 16-17} also features duplicate objects, though this work is not a diptych. Instead, this work asks the viewer to use a water dipper drilled with 244 holes to achieve equity in the water level of two basins which are identical in all respects with the notable exception that one is entirely filled with water and the other is empty. The doubled basin, though primarily a literalization of the two Americas described by Dr. King, also functions as an investigation of Dubois' assertion that the resources and opportunities available to white people

¹² Jim Barnett, "The Forks of the Road Slave Market At Natchez," *Mississippi History Now*, accessed March 25, 2022, <https://www.mshistorynow.mdah.ms.gov/issue/the-forks-of-the-road-slave-market-at-natchez>

¹³ Gabriella Angeleti, "Once the US's largest slave port, Charleston will open African American museum next year," *The Art Newspaper*, 23 August, 2022, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2022/08/23/once-the-uss-largest-slave-port-charleston-will-open-african-american-museum-next-year>

were not and could not be his.¹⁴ By tasking the viewer with a futile attempt at equity, *Pretty Please* prompts the viewer not only to become aware of the disparity in resource access between white and black communities, but to become aware of the structures separating those communities and preserving that disparity.

Doubling and duplication as formal considerations are furthered through the prominence of mirrored and reflective surfaces, which double the viewer by reflecting their appearance, throughout this body of work. This is demonstrated best in *Closer Than They May Appear* (2021)^{image 18}. In this series of works, state-shaped ornaments marked with maps of sundown towns (intentionally and enforcedly all-white communities) ostensibly serve to decorate a vehicle's rear-view mirror, but serve more importantly as a double to the mirror, both formally as a reflective surface and functionally as a safety tool for motorists.

¹⁴ Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1-2

III: TOOLS, WEAPONS AND VIOLENCE (BOSSIER CITY, LOUISIANA)

I Wound up in Bossier City, Louisiana by a lack of caution that I had mistaken for an abundance.

My father and I had packed up our cars —his big white truck and my tiny Smart— and left Texas that morning to move me into my new home in Athens, Georgia. Aside from the first and last hour, the drive was essentially a straight shot east on I-20. Neither my father, who had left northwest Georgia at eighteen years old in 1979, nor myself, who had spent the last two years on the outskirts of a major metroplex in Texas, had had the good sense to consult a green book when planning our drive. We both imagined that proximity to the traffic volume of the interstate would shelter us from harm, that lynching only happened in the sticks. In hindsight, exactly what reasoning led us to this conclusion less than three months after George Floyd was lynched in broad daylight in his state's largest city eludes me.

I had mistakenly assumed that the hazards associated with taking I-20 to Georgia would be the same as those associated with I-10 on a trip I had taken to Arizona a year prior. I kept a close eye on the fuel gauge in my car, not intending to allow my tank to fall below halfway full if I could help it. I was convinced that, were the 'low fuel' light to come on, it would do so when the nearest gas station was 100 miles away in either direction. This concern was not entirely unfounded, the bayou of northern Louisiana is hardly known for its plentiful rest stops, but this, in hindsight, was not the best use of my considerable capacity for worry.

We had been on the road for just under six hours when my gas tank fell to half. The early August sunset lit the sky up bright orange against the green exit signs for Bossier City and shone a blinding light into my rear-view mirrors in a way that my memory compels me to imagine was

Italicized texts are personal anecdotes.

almost like a warning. I took no heed of this warning, and instead called my father, who had fallen about 20 miles behind me, to tell him I was pulling over at a Chevron station.

The white truck that followed me when I turned in at the station did not belong to my father. Instead, it was an old Ford Ranger occupied by four white men: two in the cab and another two in the bed. I might have described the four of them as rednecks or maybe hicks if I could remember their appearances more clearly, but the fear they instilled in me has long since obliterated any descriptor except 'white.'

The four men parked in front of the convenience store that adjoined the gas station, and stared me down as I pumped gas. I immediately understood the gravity of my carelessness. I had about another 45 minutes of sunlight left, but pumping gas and waiting for my dad to catch up with me felt like days on end with their eyes on me.

After about 15 minutes, two of these white men left the truck and started toward my car. I imagine their walk can't have been very slow, but it, too, felt as though it took days on end. When they were about 15 feet from me, my father pulled into the lot at long last, and parked his truck a few spots over from theirs. Immediately after seeing my father pull in, the two men who had left their vehicle returned to it. The four of them pulled out from the lot quickly; none of them ever pumped gas or went into the convenience store.

I'm not certain what motivated the white men's decision to turn around. Perhaps the massive scale of my father's truck in comparison to their own intimidated them; perhaps they somehow saw his pistol in the cab with him; perhaps I was simply no longer made vulnerable by my isolation.

I often wonder if I would ever have made it to Athens if my father had taken the wrong exit or gotten stuck behind a slow driver, I don't think I'll ever really know for sure.

The threat and presence of anti-black violence informs the lived experience of all black people in the South. This violence is often psychological, as discussed earlier, but is also often structural or physical. Importantly, anti-black violence in the South frequently falls into more than one of these three categories, as can be seen in the continued historic practice of lynching (a form of direct physical violence with psychological and structural implications), and in slavery and its afterimage (once a form of structural and physical violence, which now lives on in the form of structural and psychological violence¹⁵).

Acts of violence, like most actions, are often aided by the use of tools. On a smaller scale, these tools are often recognizable as weapons, especially when the tools in question are utilized for direct physical violence. Outside of direct physical violence enacted on a small scale, however, the distinction between tool and weapon often becomes blurry. This is especially true as the definition of “tool” is abstracted beyond functional objects. Law is a tool, but when used to enact structural violence, it is a weapon. History is a tool, but when used to enact psychological violence, it is a weapon as well.

A significant portion of my research has consisted of investigating and unpacking the relationship between the cultural tools of the American South and the weapons of anti-black violence. *Gallantry Took Its Last Bow* investigates the maintenance and display of historic sites of enslavement, which are often understood as tools for remembering and appreciating history, as tools of white supremacy and weapons of anti-black psychological violence. In this work, visual information from sites of enslavement is transformed into pairs of objects. Both of these objects (a badge and a branding iron) can be understood as tools, but one of these objects is also

¹⁵ Douglas Blackmon, *Slavery By Another Name: the re-enslavement of Black people in America from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Doubleday Publishing, 2008), 102-107

explicitly a weapon. Through these objects, the viewer is prompted to consider the ways in which the sites investigated act as weapons in their own right.

Similarly, *Something in the Water* investigates Lake Lanier, both as a means of supporting life along the Chattahoochee River and as a weapon used to eliminate the black residents of Oscarville from Forsyth County, Georgia. The work presents stagnant, unfiltered (and therefore impotable) water collected from Lake Lanier in the form of sweet tea. Though sweet tea is emblematic of Southern hospitality and nourishment, to drink this beverage would be to open oneself up to possibly fatal harm.

A different relationship between tools and violence is investigated in *Closer Than They May Appear*. This series of works consists of a series of rear-view mirror ornaments in the shapes of states, each marked with maps of sundown towns as identified by Tougaloo College.¹⁶ By identifying these communities, the ornaments aid black motorists in avoiding them, and serve as tools to resist anti-black violence.

Pretty Please demonstrates a more complicated relationship between weapons to enact violence and tools to resist it: the disguising of one of these roles as the other. This work presents the viewer with two basins (one full and one empty, placed as far from one another as possible) and a water dipper, accompanied by the instruction, “*Using only the water dipper provided, please move half of the water from the full basin to the empty one.*” Upon attempting this task, the viewer discovers that the bottom of the dipper is perforated by hundreds of drilled holes, and cannot transport water. As the dipper loses water, each attempt to complete the task given makes that task less achievable. The transportation of water in this work serves as an analogy for attempts to dismantle white supremacy using the same legal and social framework that it has

¹⁶ “Historical Database of Sundown Towns,” History and Social Justice, Tougaloo College, Accessed November 13, 2021, <https://justice.tougaloo.edu/sundown-towns/using-the-sundown-towns-database/state-map/>

created to preserve itself: achieving equity between the two basins is not possible using the dipper provided. The dipper, in fact, is not a tool to be used by the viewer, but a weapon to be used against them.

IV: CRAFT AND LABOR (JARRELL PLANTATION)

The Jarrell Plantation was, at first, unremarkable in comparison to what I had anticipated. I had already known that the plantation would not measure up to the stately antebellum mansions that I passed on my daily commute, but the weather-worn shacks I encountered at the site were almost pitiful, or at least they might have been if I knew less about them. I was the only person present on the acre or so that was maintained for public viewing, save for the man who took my admission fee in the Parks Service building at the front of the property. I took that as carte blanche to go anywhere I wasn't physically barred from entering. Steel screens on the windows and doors kept me outside of the actual Jarrell house, but no such obstacle prevented me from crawling under the sawmill and gin house, or from making my way into the tool shed and blacksmith's workshop. The latter was the first building on the site that made me truly uneasy. The sight of anvils and scrap iron made me feel a sort of guilty kinship with the blacksmiths who had worked on the plantation long before my visit: I was, in a very abstracted sense, in the same place and doing the same work as them, but I was there of my own free will. I was free, should I decide that I was finished for the day, to leave whenever I wanted and return to my home, to go wherever I wanted and do whatever I wanted. And yet, there I was.

When I was confident I had gotten everything I would from the site, I made my way back to the front of the property with the intention to take another quick look at the ruins that once housed enslaved people and then return to Athens. On my way out, I was surprised by the backside of the Parks Service building, which now greeted me with a mural depicting what life on the plantation supposedly would have looked like. The mural depicted three farmhands, all with smiling white faces, happily tending to livestock and neat rows of cotton plants. The uneasy dread that I usually felt at sites of enslavement and the guilt that I felt at this one in particular

Italicized texts are personal anecdotes.

gave way to disgust and contempt: This place had been created for the sole purpose of forcibly extracting labor from black people. Black labor was the only reason the plantation existed in the first place, and the stewards of the site had chosen to imagine that labor and the people it was extracted from away entirely.

No place exists in the South where one cannot observe the presence and products of black labor. Where black labor cannot be seen in slavery's long-standing monuments to its own glory, it can be found in the Southern imagination. Where it cannot be found in the Southern imagination, it can be found in the modern Southern economy. Black people are proportionally overrepresented in service and production employment roles in comparison to white people, who enjoy greater access to management and professional roles.¹⁷ Even nearly 160 years after abolition, there is nothing in the South that exists without the black labor that creates and sustains it. The creation of work within my studio is similarly dependent on black labor, though this dependence often has less to do with the afterlife of slavery than it does with the practical reality of making. Put simply, nothing can exist in my studio unless my labor creates it.

In my studio, craft and the labor of making serve as tools for better understanding the ways in which man-made objects exist in context, and the ways in which we interact with those objects.¹⁸ By making functional objects, I gain insight into the world an object functions within through the relationship between the object's practical function and visual appearance:¹⁹ The design of these functional objects is, without exception, tied to and informed by the cultures that they originate from. By making new objects in response to those that already exist, I obtain information about the relationship that the existing objects have to both the world as it was when

¹⁷ "Labor force characteristics by race and ethnicity, 2021," U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed April 11, 2023, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/reports/race-and-ethnicity/2021/home.htm>

¹⁸ Tim Ingold, *Making* (New York: Routledge Publishing, 2013), 6-9

¹⁹ Ingold, *Making*, 111-113

they were first created and the world as it is when I encounter them. I gain additional insight from the human labor and materials used to create objects, which are both inherently charged by their origins and historical context. By applying these tools with a particular attention towards the role of black labor in the American South, I am able to investigate both the ways in which black labor fuels the South, and the ways in which black people are often denied access to the fruits of that labor.²⁰

Though the majority of the objects I have created within this body of work are simple in terms of construction, they are made elaborate and labor-intensive by detail. The labor necessitated by these objects serves three functions: First, it is reflective of the power dynamics present in the sites and artifacts I respond to. Though these original objects are the result of a considerable amount of labor by a black hand, they are, by their very nature, artifacts and emblems of anti-black violence and not made to be held by that hand. Echoing the black labor which made the original objects possible in the context of my studio practice enables me to have power over these objects and challenge the dynamic they originally presented. Second, creating labor-intensive objects in response to the psychological violence of the landscape I inhabit helps me to survive that violence. I find the white supremacist narratives built into the houses and objects I see every day impossible to ignore or leave unaddressed, but by channeling my experience of the landscape into the labor of making, I feel as though I am retaliating against its violence, rather than simply being subject to it. Third, I feel that my labor connects me to my ancestry within the African Diaspora. It is inaccurate and reductive to suggest that the ability to perform manual labor is central to what it means to be black, but it is equally inaccurate and reductive to suggest that labor has not been a defining component of the black experience

²⁰ Robert H. Zieger, *For jobs and freedom : race and labor in America since 1865* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 215-223

throughout American history. Through my labor, I am connected to my father, who felled trees in Georgia in the 1970s. I am connected to his father, who worked as a gardener in Alabama in the 1950s. I am connected to a long line of ancestors who lived long before my father or his father, who were once enslaved along the Cotton Belt.

The use of my labor can be seen in *A Whole World Which Wants Only to be Graceful and Beautiful* (2022)^{image 19}, which prominently features intricately hand-pierced mother-of-pearl, as well as hand polished stainless steel mirrors. These processes necessitate long hours of repetitive tasks before resulting in a finished object. This finished object, a folding fan, then bears a connection to the image of the archetypal antebellum socialite as she exists in the fictionalized Southern imagination that precludes the object from being mine to use. A similar process of labor that results in objects that, due to my blackness, are not mine to use exists in the badges and brands of *Gallantry Took its Last Bow*. The hand-piercing of each pair takes days of labor, and places strain on my black body in the form of exhaustion and soreness. The leather handles of each brand suggest an attention to detail and quality in each object, but both the badge and the brand are by nature tools to be wielded by a white hand. When considering the function of these objects, one is prompted to consider what purpose the labor involved in these objects serves and who benefits from that labor, as well as who is afforded dignity by the objects.

A slightly different relationship to labor is visible in *To Have and To Hold*. In this work, a broom is made from white silk taffeta, and its form as an object of labor is overridden by its cultural use as a betrothal object. The purpose for which brooms were initially made accessible to enslaved black people in the Americas is contrasted with a purpose for which brooms, as accessible objects, have been appropriated in the African diaspora. Though labor is still necessitated in the creation of this object, the product of this labor is made accessible to black

people. Owing to this accessibility, viewers considering the role of this object are prompted to consider what about this object separates it from other products of labor presented in this body of work, as well as other existing objects which serve to facilitate labor and other betrothal objects. Additionally, when rendered in white silk, the broom is removed from its status as an object of labor. To use this object to sweep floors or to clean messes would be to risk its ruination.

V: WATER AND CATHARSIS (SULLIVAN'S ISLAND)

I always imagine the ocean as looking alive. I imagine a teeming ecosystem so full of life that it spills out from the water onto the land. When I arrived at the beach in Charleston, that teeming ecosystem seemed absent. The sky, sand, and water were nearly identical shades of gray, and all stretched featureless and empty out into the horizon on my left and right. What the ocean lacked in life, it made up for in restlessness: As I stood in the rising tide, the sand that gave way beneath me seemed to pull me into the ocean just as insistently as the waves that rolled onto shore pushed me back out.

I had imagined, for some reason, that seeing the ocean from the harbor might have done something for me. I thought that I might have gotten some closure that generations of my family had been denied. If I could only have seen far enough, I suppose, I might have seen all the way from my vantage point on Sullivan's Island to the western shore of Africa. If I had only known where to look, I might have seen the places where those who might have been my kin plunged into the churning waters to save themselves from a still worse fate. I couldn't, and nobody ever could, but I imagined that I might have. Instead, I saw the ocean, too vast and opaque to offer me the catharsis that I asked of it.

When I left the beach, I took water home with me. I had brought a hand truck from my studio to aid in this endeavor, but it proved entirely useless on the wet sand, leaving me to carry two five-gallon buckets of seawater from the beach back to my car, just over a quarter mile each. This distance had been almost unnoticeably short on my walk to the beach, but was made great by the weight of the water on my walk back. My labor, therefore, was punctuated by a series of stops to rest my body, tired from both the task at hand and the twelve-hour day that led thereto.

Italicized texts are personal anecdotes.

As I carried the water, I thought that some ancestor of mine had almost certainly done the same, sometime long before I was born. I imagined that this ancestor, whomever they might have been, had carried their water for more practical purposes than I did, but that they had carried it nonetheless and we were connected by our labor. I imagined that, perhaps, this ancestor had fetched their water here in America. If this was indeed the case, then I could conceivably find them in documents somewhere and be reunited with them in my knowledge of their existence. I also imagined that, perhaps, this ancestor had carried their water in Africa, before any white man had ever come to take them. This ancestor I could not be reunited with. They were further from me than that western shore I could not see, further even than the moon that pulled the very tide I had stood in.

Christina Sharpe uses the wake as a metaphor to unpack black American trauma and grief. The wake, a disturbance in water marking the path of a vessel that no longer occupies it, is reminiscent of the mourning ritual which shares its name, and both are tied to the loss of recent human occupation. The wake, importantly, is also evocative of the transatlantic slave trade: people in the African diaspora have lost our connection to our ancestry in Africa, we are still floating in the wake of the ships that sailed along the middle passage.²¹

The landscape of the American South offers little in the way of catharsis for the intergenerational trauma carried by the descendants of formerly enslaved people. Just as the empty promise of reparations failed to move freed black people beyond the material circumstances of their enslavement, the preservation of a landscape built around slavery prevents modern-day black Americans from moving beyond the emotional and psychological implications of our ancestors' enslavement. This is as true of the water that separates the Americas from Africa as it is of the land on which black people were enslaved: the transatlantic slave trade

²¹ Christina Sharpe, *In The Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 3-6

obliterated any cultural or documentation that would have connected us to our African ancestry, we are unable to return to where we came from because we do not know where that is.

The denial of catharsis from the slave trade through the American landscape is manifested in this research primarily through *Less Than Expected (View of a Wayside Panel)* and *The Brig Duddon's Cargo*. In each of these works, I travel to sites connected to the American slave trade (the remains of the Forks of the Road Slave Market along the Mississippi River, and the Charleston Harbor, respectively), with the intention of gaining some form of closure or catharsis for my own experience as the descendant of enslaved people. Though the visits to both sites are an earnest and sincere attempt at this goal, closure and catharsis do not occur at either. While at these sites, I document my attempts both by recording footage of the sites and by writing about my experience of the site. Upon returning to my studio, I layer the footage with text in such a way that the text is mostly (if not entirely) illegible. In obscuring the content of the text, I deny the viewer access to an experience that they have been promised just as I have been denied the experience of catharsis. Importantly, I respond to these works with footage of themselves, rather than through objects. Visits to these sites proved more notable for the absence of closure for the inherent trauma of the African Diaspora, rather than the presence of any man-made infrastructure. Just as the sites lack any closure that could be obtained, the works responding to them lack any physical objects that could be owned or wielded.

CONCLUSION (DENTON, TEXAS AND ATHENS, GEORGIA)

In May of 2020, I participated in a protest calling for the removal of a confederate monument erected in 1918 by the United Daughters of the Confederacy and Klavern 136²² (Denton's chapter of the Ku Klux Klan)₃ in front of the Denton County courthouse. This was one of many protests I attended in the summer of 2020, amid a national outcry opposing both anti-black violence and the preservation of white supremacist legacies. I did not remain in Denton long enough to see the product of this effort realized, but plans were made to remove the monument in the second week of June.

My life in Athens, Georgia began on August eighth, 2020. Though I did not see the removal of the Denton Monument, I saw the product of another effort realized two days after my relocation: on August tenth, a confederate monument located on Broad Street in Athens was removed. The site at which this monument stood was a single block from the apartment I now lived in, and I was eager to join the gathering that observed its removal. My father, who had helped me move and had seen violence against protesters fill the news for the past three months, was concerned that attending this rally would be dangerous. He thought that white supremacist counter-protesters might bring guns or bombs, or that some other harm might befall us if we attended. Thankfully, this did not occur. The air that night, it seemed, was filled with a victory, even if only symbolic. When the obelisk was lifted from its base, the crowd cheered and I cheered with them.

In the time since I have begun this work, I have learned that both the monument that once stood outside the Denton County courthouse and the monument that once stood in Downtown

²² Lisa Bubert, "One man's 21-year protest to take down a Confederate monument – and force his Texas town to face its racist legacy," *Business Insider*, June 11, 2021, <https://www.businessinsider.com/a-21-year-protest-to-take-down-a-confederate-monument-in-texas-2021-6>

Athens have been re-erected. The former now stands inside the Denton County courthouse²³ and the second now stands near the site of a battle from the civil war in Athens.²⁴ Words cannot describe how sad and frustrated this makes me.

Of attempts to achieve equity, Audre Lorde said “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.”²⁵ Lorde referred specifically to the exclusion of black women and lesbians from feminism, but her words remain an insightful assessment of racialized power dynamics, even when applied more broadly: The structures that white supremacy creates to reinforce itself are not a viable means to dismantle it. Through the creation of the artworks featured in this document, I hope to expose the constructed landscape and material culture of the South as those very structures, and encourage viewers to work toward more viable means of dismantling.

As I said at the beginning of this document, the magnificent cultural splendor of the South is not mine to inherit. Now, at the end of this document, this fact remains unchanged. Moreover, I do not wish to inherit it. I wish for this splendor, predicated entirely upon its inaccessibility to myself and my race, not to exist.

²³ Ileana Garnand, “Denton County Confederate monument to be relocated inside courthouse museum,” *North Texas Daily*, April 29, 2021,

<https://www.ntdaily.com/denton-county-confederate-monument-to-be-relocated-inside-courthouse-museum/>

²⁴ Stephanie Allen, “Athens Confederate monument being reassembled in its new location”, *Athens Banner-Herald*, Aug 31, 2021,

<https://www.onlineathens.com/story/news/local/2021/06/25/athens-confederate-monument-being-moved-new-location/5347398001/>

²⁵ Audre Lorde, “The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House,” The Personal and the Political Panel (lecture, Second Sex Conference, New York, September 29, 1979)

IMAGE INDEX

Image 1:



J Taran Diamond

Gallantry Took Its Last Bow, 2022-2023

Installed as part of *re: (de)construction*

Steel, leather, waxed thread

Image 2:



J Taran Diamond

Gallantry Took Its Last Bow (detail), 2022-2023

Installed as part of *re: (de)construction*

Steel, leather, waxed thread

Image 3:



J Taran Diamond

Gallantry Took Its Last Bow (detail), 2022-2023

Installed as part of *re: (de)construction*

Steel, leather, waxed thread

Image 4:



J Taran Diamond

Gallantry Took Its Last Bow (Edward Ware), 2022

Steel, leather, waxed thread

Image 5:



J Taran Diamond

Gallantry Took Its Last Bow (John Jarrell), 2022

Steel, leather, waxed thread

Image 6:



J Taran Diamond

Gallantry Took Its Last Bow (Thomas Jefferson), 2023

Steel, leather, waxed thread

Image 7:



J Taran Diamond

Gallantry Took Its Last Bow (James Camak), 2023

Steel, leather, waxed thread

Image 8:



J Taran Diamond

Gallantry Took Its Last Bow (William Gist), 2023

Steel, leather, waxed thread

Image 9:



J Taran Diamond

Something in the Water, 2021

Found glassware, tea, sugar, raw, unfiltered water from Lake Lanier

Image 10:



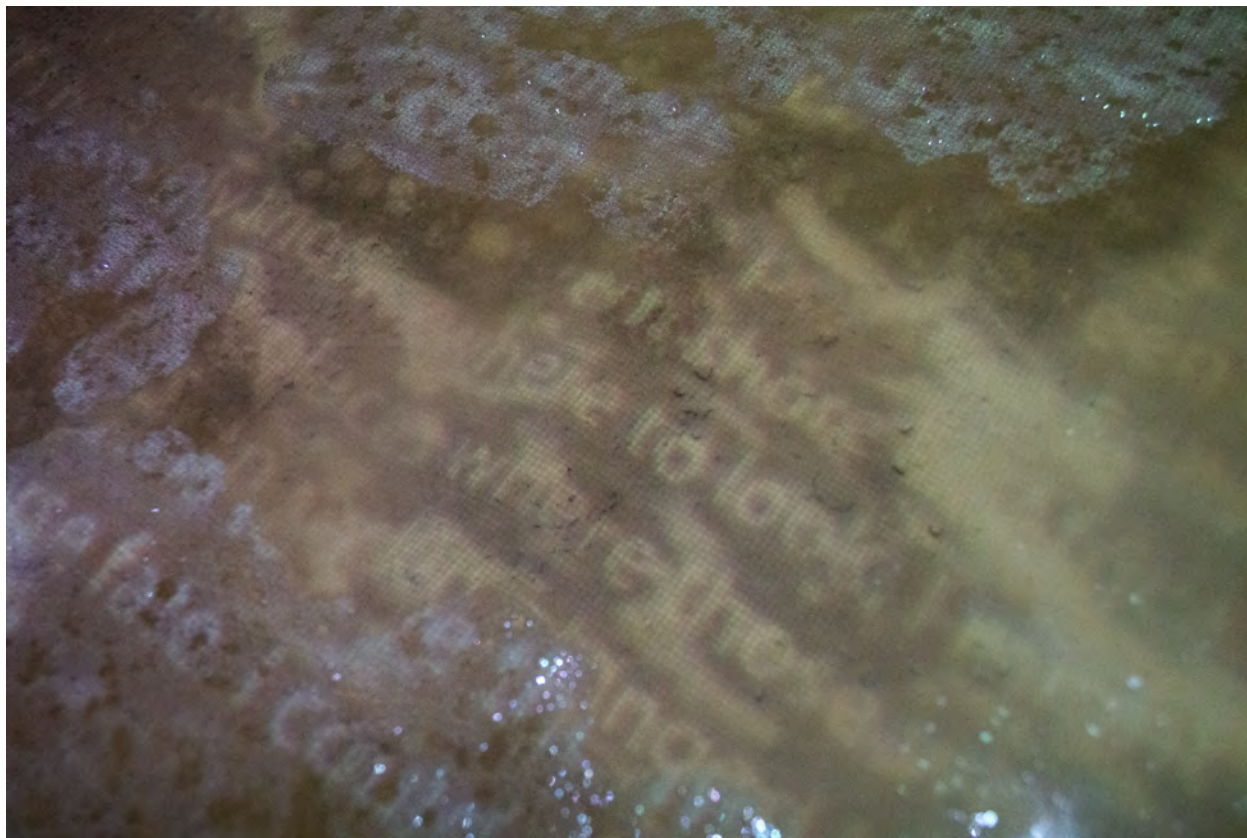
J Taran Diamond

The Brig Duddon's Cargo, 2023

Installed as part of *re: (de)construction*

Steel, water from the the Charleston Harbor at Sullivan's Island, projected single-channel video

Image 11:



J Taran Diamond

The Brig Duddon's Cargo, 2023

Installed as part of *re: (de)construction*

Steel, water from the the Charleston Harbor at Sullivan's Island, projected single-channel video

Image 13:



J Taran Diamond

To Have and To Hold, 2022

Poplar, silk, nylon

Image 14:



J Taran Diamond

Stills from *My Condolences*, 2023

Double-channel video, 7:58

Image 16:



J Taran Diamond

Pretty Please, 2022

Copper, powder coat, found basins, water

Image 17:



J Taran Diamond

Pretty Please (detail), 2022

Copper, powder coat

Image 18:



J Taran Diamond

Closer Than They May Appear (Georgia, Arkansas, Alabama, Texas), 2021

Nickel, steel chain

Image 19:



J Taran Diamond

A Whole World Which Wants Only to be Graceful and Beautiful, 2022

Stainless steel, mother of pearl, cotton, black blood, sterling silver, thread

NOTES

1: The Flossenbürg Concentration Camp Memorial is under the stewardship of descendants of people imprisoned at the camp. Efforts are being made to make similar arrangements for the quarry adjoining the camp, but it is currently owned by the State of Bavaria and is separate from the Memorial.

2: Dubois does not explicitly use the language "white supremacist" or "white supremacy" when describing double consciousness, but does describe double consciousness specifically within the context of a society in which black people are held to be an inferior race, and white people enjoy a privileged position with greater access to knowledge and resources, for which the term "white supremacy" is an accurate description.

3: The commemoration on the Denton County confederate monument only identifies the UDC as a contributor to the monument, Klavern 136 is identified as a contributor in financial documents housed in the archives of the Denton County courthouse. Additionally, the KKK and UDC (a male-only and female-only organization, respectively) are known to have operated in tandem for a significant portion of their existence.

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