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Washington University in St. Louis Graduate School of Art

The Rupture Repeats

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A thesis presented to the
Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts
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Abstract

Rupture repeats without regard. Occurring on macro and micro scales, these historical, financial, and social upheavals continue throughout our lives, remaking our worlds and leaving us to respond as best we can. Rupture is a condition of human existence. For marginalized communities and Black Americans specifically, rupture is familiar and precarious. Historically, Black people respond to the space that rupture makes through a rigorous, interdisciplinary, creative tradition which serves as a strategy for survival and a way to produce and transmit knowledge. These methods of knowledge production exist in excess of formal training and are evident of quiet and expansive interior lives that defy reductive tropes of representation.

As an artist, who is also a woman, Black, and Queer, my own ruptures repeat. I use rupture as a conceptual framework for my practice, letting it guide my thinking and treatment of material. The official record, our institutions and disciplines will always fail us in the redress of rupture. I look to quiet and interior ways that everyday Black folks have worked and lived in the face of rupture. In this thesis, I examine my creative work through the lens of rupture and unpack ideas of knowledge production, interiority, quiet, and care.

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The hope is that return could resolve the old dilemmas, make victory out of defeat, and engender a new order. And the disappointment is that there is no going back to a former condition. Loss remakes you.¹

-Saidiya Hartman

Loss Remakes You: The Rupture Repeats

Ten years ago I lost my first real job. At the time I was working as an assistant superintendent for a large commercial contractor helping to manage the construction of multi-million dollar buildings. This loss was the first of several upheavals that would characterize the coming years. In the decade that followed, I lost both of my grandparents, as well as an aunt and uncle. I lost my savings and I lost my home. Whether financial or familial, these ruptures followed me, they repeated.

I define rupture as a shift that requires us to reorient ourselves. Sometimes you don't recognize it until it has passed, other times you know it is coming but are still unprepared for its arrival. Our lives and our histories are full of rupture and I believe that rupture repeats, and that it will always repeat. Rupture is a birth or death, the beginning or ending of a relationship, a relocation, a career change, chemical dependency, or incarceration. These examples are human in scale but rupture also occurs on a macro level. Colonialism, The Atlantic slave trade, Jim Crow Legislation, The Great Depression, and the Great Migration are historic ruptures that have remade and continue to remake worlds. The shifts prompted by repeating ruptures create space, and this space is what we are left to contend with in its wake. As an artist, this compels me to think about what goes in the gap? What do we do with the space that rupture makes?

Rupture is a condition of human existence and yet rupture feels augmented as a Queer, Black woman. Rupture is precarious and amplified at the margins. We hold histories of rupture in our bodies and seek refuge through artmaking. The cultural productions of Black Americans have

been sustaining during periods of rupture. Following this tradition, rupture reappears conceptually and formally in my creative practice. (See fig. 1)

In *A Map to the Door of No Return* author and poet Dionne Brand discusses a psychic rupture created by the absence of a coherent narrative of ancestral origin. In the beginning of the book she recalls a childhood memory of her grandfather being unable to remember the African people her family had come from:

Papa never remembered. Each week he came I asked him had he remembered. Each week he told me no. Then I stopped asking. He was disappointed. I was disappointed... After that he grew old. I grew young. A small space opened in me. I carried this space with me... But the rupture this exchange with my grandfather revealed was greater than the need for familial bonds. It was a rupture in history, a rupture in the quality of being. I was also a physical rupture, a rupture of geography.²

The “small space” that Brand describes as opening within her opens in all of us when faced with rupture. These moments are impossible to fully reconcile. This space can make room for experiences that are generative or it can swallow us whole with grief for the loss of a former condition. Both extremes are possible and probable. For a poet like Dionne Brand language helps to bridge this gap, for a musician it is sound. Creative gestures are one way to respond to rupture and perhaps the only radical way to find the possibility of pleasure or even joy in its aftermath.

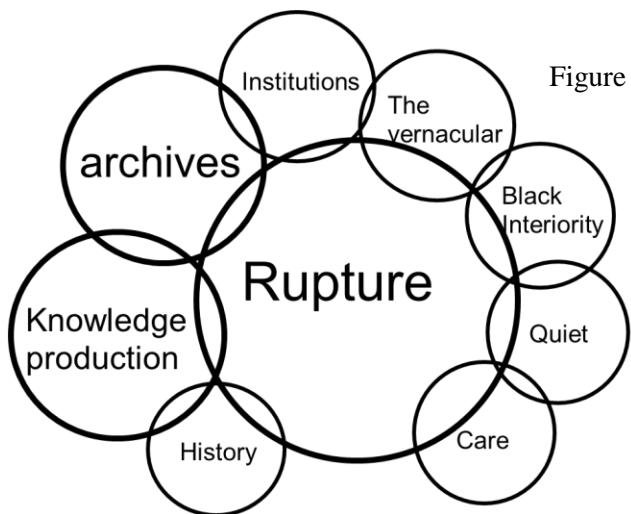


Figure 1. *The Rupture Repeats*, 2019 Diagram

The Record: Reworked and Remade with Care

In my artistic practice I use rupture as a conceptual framework to unsettle dominant histories through engagement with images, objects, and text. I excavate, appropriate and disorder information held within archives. This includes vernacular photographs and moving images of Black Americans, found objects, photographs and texts from institutional collections and printed matter that references popular culture. I use collage and assemblage to place this material in relation, reconfigure it and to signal multiple meanings using repetition, cropping, transfer, and distortion. These gestures connote a troubling of existing modes of receiving information.

Archive is a loaded word with its own history and implications. As it relates to my creative practice, the archive is comprised of the materials we collect, the information we hold in our bodies and where the two converge. Diana Taylor, in a keynote address titled “*Save As...Knowledge and Transmission in the Age of Digital Technologies*” described the multiplicity of the term *archive*:

An archive is simultaneously an authorized place (the physical or digital site housing collections), a thing/object (or collection of things – the historical records and unique or representative objects marked for inclusion), and a practice (the logic of selection, organization, access, and preservation over time that deems certain objects “archivable”) Place/Thing/Practice function in a mutually sustaining way.³

Place/Thing/Practice is a useful context for considering the expansive possibilities of the archive and the relationships between each of these designations. In my work, I seek to interrogate what sites are authorized and whose records are considered “archivable.” I believe that a living room can hold special collections and rare volumes including a family’s photographic history, record collection, or other heirlooms. A practice of care and stewardship over these “unofficial archives” is important to me as an artist, and demonstrates how collective history is transmitted, and communal knowledge is shared.⁴

Being embedded within an institutional learning environment over the past two years has made me think deeply about the types of knowledge we value and trust. And has made me notice how we are trained to dismiss and discount knowledge that is produced in other ways. I am increasingly interested in how my work can rupture as well as complicate *what* is considered knowledge and therefore valuable in the project of knowledge production.

I am fascinated by the systems that institutions, as well as, individual citizens employ for collection and dissemination. The collecting and parsing of so-called official, as well as, everyday archives has come to be an integral part of my recent work and is a reflection of my desire to express the rigor and the beauty within the ordinary. I endeavor through my work to examine the limits of these disparate sites of knowledge production as well as the possibilities within them and the relationships between them.

Unforgotten, Unpossessed

Identify, describe, catalogue, appropriate – these words best sum up the West’s relationship with Africa – the Other, against which are arrayed the forces of reason, rationality, logic and knowledge as possessable and certifiable⁵

- M. Nourbese Philip

Last semester, during a studio visit, one of my professors mentioned that the anthropology department had discarded a large collection of books. It was unclear whether the contents of an office library had been recently emptied or if the volumes were being phased out of use. Regardless of the circumstances, hundreds of books filled the wooden benches that lined both sides of a lengthy corridor in McMillian Hall. With an empty backpack in tow I began to leaf through the collection before me. There were volumes with titles like *The Institutions of Primitive Society* and *Principle Voyages of the English Nation*. I had a familiar sense of excitement and fear as though

someone would soon emerge from an office and stop me from filling my bag despite the sign that read “Free Books.”

As I held each book in my own hands I wondered how many other hands had these books passed through. How many minds had been shaped by the ideologies propagated in these texts? How many had been crushed under the weight of these words, charts and illustrations? I didn't know what I would do with these books but I felt that I had to do *something* and this was no coincidence.

Around the time that I acquired the books, I had been looking deeply at sculpture and specifically photographs of African masks of the Dan people held in University museum collections and other institutions. I scanned and manipulated the images, making multiple digital collages. (See fig. 2) In these works, I used the glitch to express my disconnection from the representation of the masks and the objects themselves. I was attempting to address what could not be known through study, including the full history of the artifact and our inability to possess the knowledge it carried.

The images of the masks prompted questions just as the anthropology books did. How had these objects come to exist in collections, removed from their context and purpose? How many scholars considered themselves experts on these artifacts and the people who created them, but felt nothing of their spirit? I wondered what my role was as an artist who had encountered this material. How could I rupture it?

One book, *The Observation of Savage Peoples* resonated. Despite the brutal title it was an unassuming volume with a yellowing jacket and traditional typeface. This was a standard of the discipline. The book seemed commanding, accurate and unquestionable.



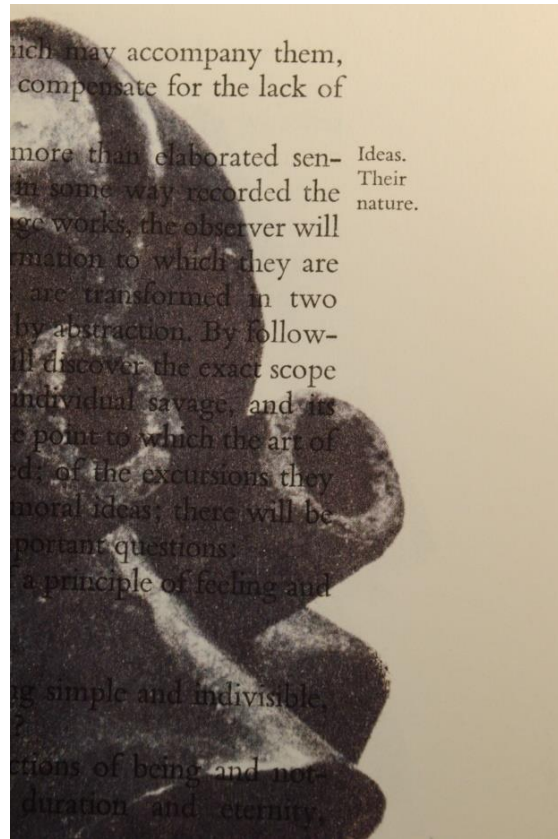
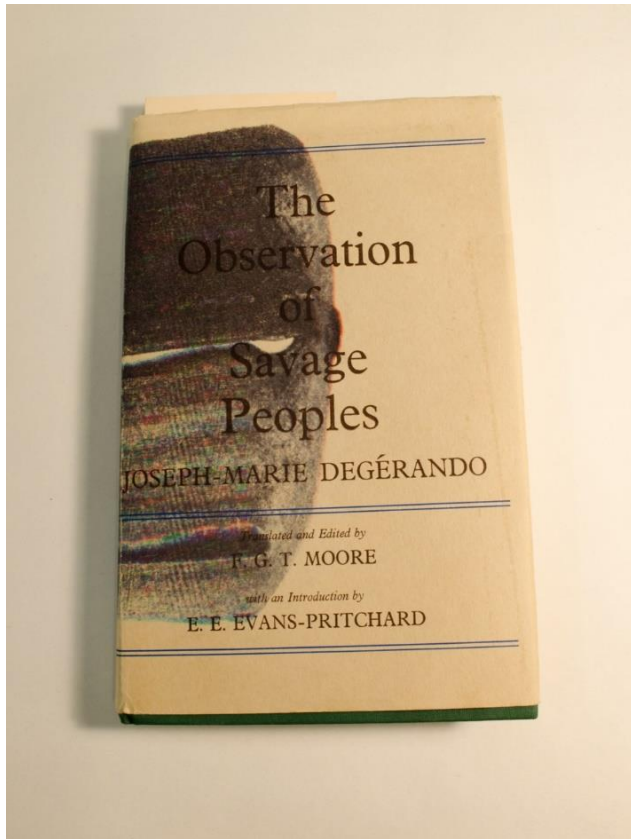
Figure 2. *Untitled*, 2019 Digital Collage, Dimensions Variable

I began to read passages from the text and imagined the retort of those being *studied* or from relics held within other institutional collections. What would it mean for the text and the associated disciplines to be held accountable and even haunted through creative intervention?

I made a series of solvent transfers directly onto the book's cover and pages, burnishing images onto the body of the text itself. (See figs. 3-5) The act of marking and creating another layer of information atop the text obscures without full redaction. The pigment transferred from the image does not render the text illegible. It is an additive process rather than a subtractive one. The words still come through. The images of the masks and the book's text are equally authoritative.

After completing this work, my impulse was to keep it hidden rather than have it on the wall of my studio or in some other conspicuous manner of display. I kept the book in a drawer and would present it to select visitors toward the end of our time together. I cannot name any underlying logic that governed with whom to share the book. It was an intuitive decision. I showed the book to those I hoped the images would be safe with, those who would handle them with a level of care.

Encountering a book is an intimate experience and so I let them each handle it, turn the pages and discover the image transfers. I carefully studied their responses and interaction with the work. Some were confused, asking whether I had found the book this way, repeatedly questioning if I had made it. Others immediately wanted to photograph it, some did, without permission. Some eagerly offered to acquire it. I thought about these reactions and what may have triggered them. It is a question I return to and that remains unresolved. This work forces me to interrogate myself. What are my intentions? Why am I drawn to these images and what possesses me to appropriate them? As an artist I have a responsibility to be deliberate and careful about the ways I choose to engage images. Whether I find them in my own albums or within the pages of a museum catalog whose collection is attributed to colonial conquest.



Figures 3-5. (Clockwise from left) *Untitled*, *The Observation of Savage Peoples*, 2019 Solvent transfer on found book, 8 3/4 x 5 3/4 x 5/8 inches.

Surrender: What We Cannot Know

In addition to formal or conceptual provocations, personal experiences of rupture within my own life regularly become catalysts for new bodies of work. The divorce of my parents almost three years ago was one such event. The end of my parent's marriage left photographs and home movies spanning decades in a state of uncertainty as my mother and father prepared to sell the home where I spent much of my childhood. They sorted through hundreds of photographs, decided which ones they wanted to keep, and turned the rest over to me. When I think back to this moment, I wonder why they trusted me with this task and why I was eager to undertake it. I wasn't living in the same state, and this was no small collection. It was a mass of several hundred photographs, negatives and home videos spilling across multiple albums, cardboard boxes, storage bins and plastic bags. This accumulation would regularly migrate from basement to hall closet or den depending on the last unsuccessful effort to contain it.

Our photographic history recorded birthday parties, picnics, and preludes to Sunday service. Christmas and Thanksgiving celebrations filled our albums alongside the banal moments captured when trying to finish a roll of film. The format of the snapshots varied, moving from small Kodachrome and Polaroid prints to 5x7 doubles. Amongst the images were sleeves for containing the photographs advertising bygone technologies. In my installation work, I often source this ephemera, the containers we use to hold our histories of the everyday.

I assumed this archive would always be there, available for me whenever I was ready to attend it. I was mistaken. And I found myself operating with an almost frantic sense of urgency. During trips back to my parent's home, I would bring empty suitcases to pack up as much as I could. As a child, I understood the importance of an organizing principle and recognized that this material was valuable and worth returning to. I would frequently encounter my handwritten labels

logging what events were captured on the VHS tapes. I had made attempts many times over the years to catalogue it, but never finished.

The fragility of this ordinary archive became apparent to me when I revisited the material. As time passed many of the tapes degraded, the moving images gradually dimming and receding into darkness as the tape deteriorated, sometimes leaving only sound to trigger our memories. Gaps would often appear in the albums, a missing spot where an image should have been, perhaps scanned for a #throwbackthursday social media post or loaned to another family member and never returned. Some were lost to mold and mildew after being haphazardly stored in the dank of our basement or succumbing to water damage after a sump pump failure.

The physicality of our family photos was under the threat of further deterioration and scattering. And despite the inconvenience and my resistance, rupture was propelling me forward. Somehow I had to capture, preserve, and engage this archive as an artist. I needed to reckon with the material and my emotions. (See fig. 6) It was not easy or pleasant work, so I avoided it. The task felt too immediate and close. I was in a state of mourning and could not effectively enter the work as an artist, I needed time and distance.

During this period, I looked to digitized collections like ones from the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the New York Public library for a reprieve. (See fig. 7) I began to appropriate these images and create digital collages that relied heavily on cropping and repetition. (See fig. 8) I was interested in the re-contextualization of the images and had a desire to gesture toward withholding and unknowability. This exercise required me to look deeply at these often unnamed subjects and consider whose images had become the property of institutions, held in collections and made open, available, and vulnerable.



Figure 6. *Untitled*, 2018 Digital Collage, Dimensions Variable.



Figure 7. Collection of images from New York Public Library Digital Archive.



Figure 8. *Untitled*, 2017 Digital Collage, Dimensions Variable.

I began to keep my own collection of images – of the subjects I could not stop seeing. And whose eyes continued to arrest, even after sustained looking. The ones that seemed to haunt me, not as potential material for my own project, but who helped me to think about what it means to practice care through representation and to move from objecthood to subjectivity.

Eventually, I became less interested in the digital collections and began to look for images of Black folks in local thrift stores. Images that I could physically touch, like the ones from my family's albums. Initially, very few snapshots emerged from these visits, but over time I began to encounter more and more photographs. It seemed as though while I was seeking these images they were also seeking me. Some would become part of the work, others it seemed were meant to simply be in my care.

After amassing dozens of photographs I filled albums with them. The found snapshots blending with ones from my family's archive. These small collisions revealed what little context I had for either archive. Though I knew many of the subjects in my family's snapshots, there were countless unfamiliar faces, especially those in the photographs of my grandparents and distant relatives from the south. I had little recourse in acquiring this lost information, and the people who could fill in the gaps were no longer here to tell me. I had to accept that the information was lost. I had to surrender. In that moment the work began to deepen, and what had started as an autobiographical project evolved into a broader meditation on collective history, kinship, and the limits of archives and photographic representational modes. I continued to mix images, making digital collages that combined the photographs of my own family with those sourced from thrift stores, signaling to the messiness of history, the archive and what we profess to know.⁶

The private moments of Black life recorded in the photo albums and home movies of my own family and in millions of other families are usually lost in mass media representations of

Black people. Subjectivity is flattened in favor of more spectacular and profitable imagery. Reductive representations are never complex or worthy of contemplation. Instead they rely on familiar tropes which are easily consumable. Whether traumatic representations of struggle, pain and protest or feats of athletic or sexual prowess and musical genius, Blackness is limited to these extremities. I am drawn to found and familial vernacular archives because they are evidence of richness and complexity even in the banality of the everyday.⁷ Lack of nuance and erasure within popular media culture compels me to source this material.

Quiet Interiority: Leave a Room Better for Having Been There

Interiors are the spaces we inhabit literally and metaphorically. In her essay *Toward the Black Interior*, Elizabeth Alexander describes the connection between interiority and possibility, she writes “The living room is where we see black imagination made visual, a private space that inevitably reverberates against the garish public images usually out of our control. What does how we arrange interior space say about how we live? And what does it say about who we are? Is there a particular power of the visual to make possible or imaginable that which is not the present reality?”⁸ Alexander’s questions transport me to the living room of my grandparents and the beautiful objects that filled their space and remained just outside of my reach. The clear plastic covered sofa and chairs kept pristine for decades by their uncomfortable barriers. I also consider the many rooms that populate the backgrounds of the images of my family archives. How these rooms were meticulously arranged and how the subjects of the photographs posed within them.

Alexander considers the Black interior a metaphysical space.⁹ It is my contention that this space was born out of rupture and a need to imagine a world beyond the rigid social and structural enclosure that characterizes Black existence. Revisiting Alexander’s essay reframed my conception of Black interiority and instilled that seemingly ordinary acts can be rigorous.

Knowledge produced in the ordinary ways that Black folks have had to, in order to survive, and see themselves as free is worthy of attention.

Reflecting on the time I spent with my grandparents has revealed the importance and radical possibility of interiority. As a child they cared for me while my parents worked opposing shifts, often shuttling me to school, chaperoning field trips, preparing breakfast, packing lunches, even washing and braiding my hair. This love encircled the safe, small universe of my girlhood. I spent many days and nights in their modest yet immaculate three bedroom home on the northwest side of Detroit.

My grandmother was a caretaker and it was clear that she needed to cultivate living things and be surrounded by their growth. There were lush potted plants inside her home and outside my grandmother kept an impressive flower garden. She would joyfully recite the names of the varieties she tended. Impatiens, hosta, geraniums, and begonias, all of which sounded exotic to my young ears. I frequently covered the driveway in chalk drawings while she weeded and prepared beds for her flowers. My grandfather called her a “fanatic” and sucked his teeth in annoyance at the black seedling trays that filled the trunk of their Oldsmobile after each trip to Eastern Market. Instead, my grandfather raised tomato plants in the alley adjacent to their home and spent spring afternoons deterring squirrels with his bb gun. I never considered it then, but perhaps these things reminded them of the South, where they were born and raised and where most of their families remained. Maybe these practices were in part, how they made sense of the rupture of migration; how they attempted to heal from it.

The attentiveness and care shown by my grandparents provided lessons on the importance of rigor in study and in life. But they also encouraged creativity through play, enduring my requests for us to paint pictures, make construction paper dolls and build brown bag fortresses. It was their

story-telling however that excited me the most. I never considered these tales part of a larger African American oral tradition. I only knew that their relationship to language never ceased to activate my imagination. My grandmother frequently read to me. These were cherished times, typically before bed and always from the *World Book* encyclopedias and *Childcraft* volumes kept on the shelves in their den. Whether short verses, nursery rhymes or stories, my grandmother loved the act of reading and reciting aloud. Better than any stories or poems these books contained were the ones she told from memory. The childhood she recounted to me in these stories sounded like an alternate universe. She recalled catching lightning bugs and sticking them in her ears or naming the chickens in the yard but never having the stomach to snap their necks in a single gesture as her mother could. My grandfather would also entertain me with stories of his boyhood in the South, often while we snapped green beans. From hunting in the woods with his father or the funny riddles and rhymes he tried to stump me with, his memory was impeccable and his mischievousness always shone through as we shared these moments.

The way my grandparents crafted their interior world and held it up as a mirror for me and for those around them was a type of care and a type of knowledge. This practice provided a place of refuge, beauty and possibility that would prepare me for a larger world outside of girlhood and care. Their support was vital to me and would become significant to my creative approach. My artistic practice is concerned with many things, among these is an engagement with the ways Black Americans have had to produce and transmit knowledge for themselves as a matter of survival. This knowledge is rich, dynamic, always evolving and valuable.

These alternative methods of knowledge production are not fully quantifiable or knowable. The part that excites me the most about my work and the traditions it references is that some of it *is* unknowable and therefore cannot be bound. There is pressure to name and classify it, but to do

so would limit its power and fullness. So much of it is feeling and sensibility, known through a daily practice of living rather than the type of knowledge that can be transmitted through study. What would a Black interior look like if I could build it? Construct it? That is what I am attempting with my installation and assemblage work. Something beyond the limits of what we know.

The work of painter Jennifer Packer embodies the complexity of the interior and perhaps, quiet subject. I am taken by her intricate and layered compositions. They feel intimate and yet her subjects remain unknowable and protected. The paintings contest my gaze and the desire for an explicit narrative. There is tension between what is revealed and what is withheld. I encounter and embrace this tension in my own work. Using cropping, transfer, arrangement and distortion to shield. (See fig. 9, 10) How can a representation tell all of it – the fullness of a life? Maybe it can suggest or signal, but we will never know the full story of anyone, and why should we?

Packer, during an interview with Kerry James Marshall in which both discussed their practices, stated “I want to feel at times, quieted. I want my invisibility. And I want that invisibility to be weaponized.”¹⁰ Like Packer, I want to feel quieted during the process of making. I do not, however, associate quiet with invisibility. Instead, quiet is a quality of the private, vast interior. Author and scholar Kevin Quashie’s book *The Sovereignty of Quiet*, is helping me re-imagine the possibility of quiet, Quashie writes:

Quiet, instead is a metaphor for the full range of one’s inner life – one’s desires, ambitions, hungers, vulnerabilities, fears. The inner life is not apolitical or without social value but neither is it determined entirely by publicness. In fact, the interior – dynamic and ravishing – is a stay against the dominance of the social world; it has its own sovereignty. It is hard to see, even harder to describe, but no less potent in its ineffability. Quiet.¹¹

In *Listening to Images*, author and scholar Tina Campt refers to the “sonic frequencies of the quotidian practices of Black communities.”¹² She notes that “Sound can be listened to, and in equally powerful ways, sound can be felt; it both touches and moves people.”¹³



Figure 9. *Untitled*, 2017 Pigment Print on vinyl, 36 x 24 inches.

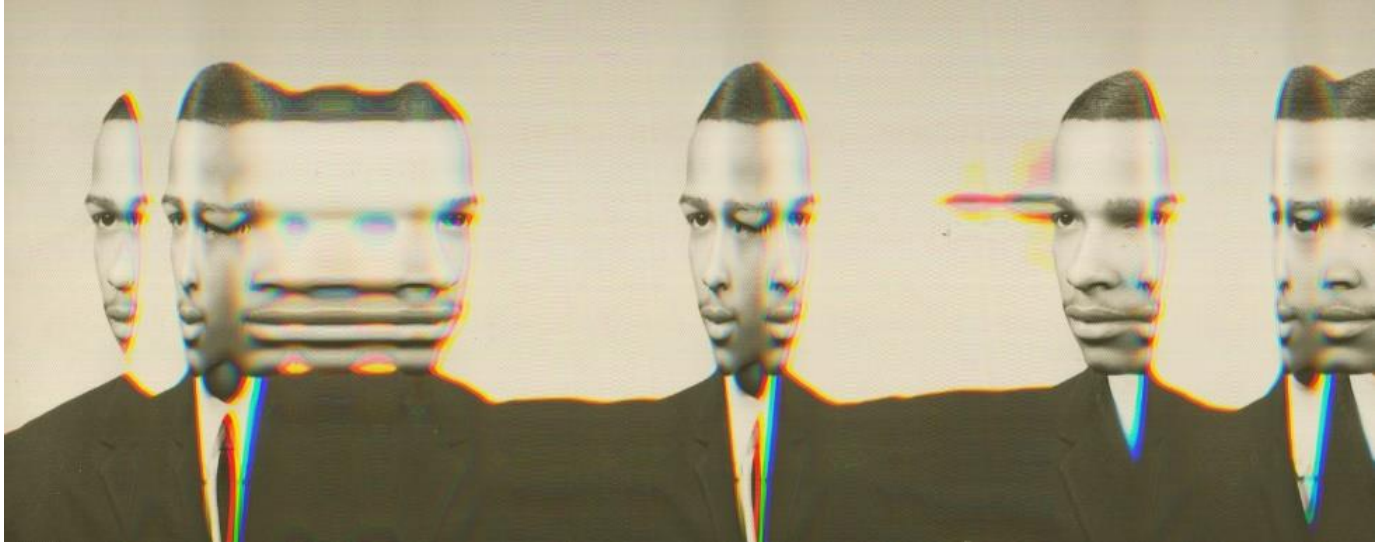


Figure 10. *Untitled*, 2019 Digital Collage, Dimensions Variable.

I am moved and touched by the materials that I encounter. As an artist, I hope to bring forth the quiet frequencies of the images and objects that I choose to work with through my interventions, manipulations and arrangements of them.

Collections: Recovery and Conjure

Mrs. Watts, an elderly woman who lived across the street from my grandmother had a collection of autumn leaves. They were bound neatly together in a laminated book made of colorful construction paper. I must have been eight or nine when she ventured across the street to show me the book while my grandmother and I were outside in the front yard. I marveled at the leaves pressed into the pages as she bent down to show me her collection. The care to collect something as mundane as fallen leaves and the joy it brought her to share it has always stayed with me. We both smiled as she turned the pages. How did she know?

Much of my process as an artist and scholar begins with a period of collection. This is evident upon entering my studio. When I started graduate school and was assigned a studio space, my first self-assigned project was to create an interior that I wanted to inhabit. I am intentional about the things that I display and keep close. Whether inherited or found in thrift stores, I have to gather material and let it reveal itself before I can begin to engage it creatively.

During a studio visit a poet friend posed a question to me, what will happen if you keep collecting like this? I keep returning to the question but I have no answer. Do we collect to display? To see ourselves in the ways we would like to be seen? To create our own images? To make a world – private and interior so that we can face the one we must go out into each day? Is collection a building practice? Fortification? I don't know. But it repeats in so many ways, and in so many homes.

My own habits of collecting started in childhood with typical items like stickers, comic books and seashells. The containment and display of these collections was just as important as the objects themselves. I kept binders of trading cards in plastic sleeves, often arranging them and

rearranging them. Carting them to the homes of family and friends. I grew up in homes filled with images but they were also full of beautiful objects. Porcelain and ceramic figurines, music boxes and other knick-knacks that commemorated a vacation or event. Some items were kept in curio cabinets, others filled bookshelves and side tables. I must have learned these habits by observing the way those around me took pride in their possessions, and were eager to display them and share their histories.

The artists, scholars and other cultural workers with whom I feel aligned are those engaged in the process of collection. The collage work of Lorna Simpson suggests a deep commitment to this practice. In her recent book *Lorna Simpson Collages*, the artist has culled images from Black American print publications including *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines. Often discussed exclusively within the context of beauty and the politics of Black hair, I am interested in how this ongoing body of work also functions as archival intervention. The Johnson Publishing Company which produced the magazines that Simpson used as source material, was for many years the largest Black owned publisher in the United States. *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines were in the homes of countless Black Americans. These images were part of a constellation of media that informed my perception of self and community. Mining this material references that history.

From these collections, Simpson created collage works whose primary subjects are Black women. They feature portraits taken from a variety of advertisements and some images repeat across multiple works. Each photograph is clipped closely, barely extending past the subject's shoulders. Some of the collages depict women with bejeweled necklaces and earrings while others are unadorned. The countenance of each woman is different. What remains consistent is the Simpson's treatment of hair. In each collage, it spills onto the page in uncontrollable washes of ink. In a collage titled *Touching*, one photograph depicts the subject looking out at the viewer with

a steady gaze. Her eyes almost question, and her mouth gives no indication of mood. It is clear that this visage is a public one, there is enough softness to register beauty but not invitation. In the second image the subject's eyes look downward, her face in profile. There are shadows cast across her features making her expression ambivalent. It is a private and introspective pose. The viewer's access is limited. When I view these works I wonder what the women are thinking and what they may be dreaming. By merging the fixed content of the magazines with the fluidity of ink and pigment, Simpson conjures the possibility of imagination. (See fig. 11)

The work of Glenn Ligon has also been significant to my own practice when considering strategies of collection, arrangement and reconfiguration. Especially impactful is Ligon's project *A People on the Cover*, in which the artist maps Black American representation through his arrangement of book covers. The books he has selected range from literary classics like James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* to titles considered obscure to those less versed in the Black American literary tradition and its associated canons.

While Ligon's exercise of selecting books primarily for their covers is significant, thinking through the textual implications of these books adds another layer of meaning and point of entry. In an essay that accompanies the book, the artist describes going through library stacks and selecting books based on their covers. Through this initial act of selection the artist has created a space of possibility for other narratives to emerge through arrangement. Ligon's sequencing of the image spreads provide moments of quiet pause between image and text. In these spaces I wonder what can images do and what does it mean when a Black person appears on a cover? How are they read or misread? Ligon has created his own record through selecting and re-presenting this material in *A People on the Cover*. It is an interrogation and an intervention.



Figure 11. Lorna Simpson. *Touching*, 2012 Collage and ink on paper, 11 x 8.5 inches.

Through this work, Ligon makes me more aware of how the Black figure has been encoded with meaning in all of our traditions and disciplines, literary or otherwise.

Like Ligon, I am engaged in the act of arrangement and concerned with its' implications. At times, this takes the form of collections that appear casual or haphazard. I frequently visit thrift stores and second hand shops, looking and feeling for objects whose purpose may be unclear to me in the moment of selection. Over time, however and through juxtaposition and relation their significance is revealed.

Sustained collection and arrangement were central to my first assemblage work. Titled *For Henry/I just want to be of use to my Ancestors* 2017, the work is comprised of found objects. It includes a wooden cabinet with a glass door affixed to the wall. Inside the cabinet is an assortment of radios of varying sizes, colors, and types, as well as radio and television tubes and other components. Below the cabinet sits a wooden, half-moon shaped table filled with more radios. Some are meticulously stacked and others are arranged more casually. The covers of two pocket sized transistor radios have been detached, leaving their wires and controls open to inspection. (See fig. 12)

This work was inspired by and dedicated to my grandfather who was served in the army as a radio repair technician during World War II. I remember him working in the yard to the soundtrack of a Detroit Tigers game or holding a pocket transistor radio to his ear at night. Though the assemblage is made of devices we expect to carry sound to our ears, *For Henry* remains quiet. In addition to honoring my grandfather, I was interested in the qualities of sound and specifically of radio. How turning a dial and scanning for a station can feel like time travel in our digital age of touch screens and streaming. How a signal hauntingly fades in and out of range with movement, the strength of its sound punctuated by static. The qualities of radio also serve as metaphor for the



Figure 12. *For Henry/I Just Want to Be of Use to My Ancestors*, 2017 Vintage radios and components, wooden cabinet, half-moon table, Dimensions Variable.

precarious relationship that many Black Americans have to kinship, family and history. Relationships marred by rupture. The signal is at times clear and constant but frequently it quiets, drops and cannot be discerned, leaving the listener longing for the next sound.

The Unheard Sounds Came Through

I recall crawling into the small cabinet beneath the turntable where the records were kept, pushing the stacks to make room for my small body. I remember the smell of the vinyl. The songs my parents would play that would become part of my own archive of sound, mapped onto my memory and transcending the generational gap between us. I remember my mother's split pea soup colored 45 case. And the homemade cassette tapes dubbed from records that served as soundtrack as we journeyed through the city. Sound was ever present, whether curated or ambient.

The evolution and historical significance of Black American music is unprecedented. This sonic tradition has become a barometer against which other creative forms of expression are measured. Birthed by the rupture of displacement, Black Americans have continued to remake themselves and the cultural forms that sustained them. The foundational quality of music in relation to Black art forms has been acknowledged by artists across multiple media. Toni Morrison during an interview with scholar and theorist Paul Gilroy writes: "Black Americans were sustained and healed and nurtured by the translation of their experience into art above all in the music. That was functional...My parallel is always the music because all the strategies of art are there. All of the intricacy, all of the discipline. All the work that must go into improvisation so that it appears that you've never touched it." ¹⁴

I am drawn to objects that reference this history and continue to work with them in my assemblage work. I search for speakers, cassette tapes, radios and records. These are well worn objects with histories that remain unknowable to me. They trigger collective, cultural memories but also personal ones like the record player and cabinet in our living room. The pair of metal headphones that were too heavy for my head. And the records whose lyrics were beyond my

understanding but whose rhythm I could catch. Like the arrangements I have encountered in the living rooms and other interiors I've inhabited, the objects in my installations are unfixed and subject to rearrangement. Whether in my studio or gallery, these objects remain in flux, shifting as sites, conditions and audiences do.

My recent work *Metronome* includes a collection of found objects measuring approximately 55 inches in height. The assembly includes a Technics SB CR33 two-way speaker, several stacked cassette tapes including gospel, hip-hop, r&b and some spanning multiple genres. Also included is a Sanyo boom box style radio/tape player and a clock radio with an empty tape deck, the door of which is open and in a state of transition between the switching of tapes. Two pocket sized transistor radios with extended antennae are also included in the array. Atop the boom box, which has been turned on its side sits a worn copy of Martin Luther King's text *Why We Can't Wait*. Tucked inside the book's pages, peeking out like a flag is a small sticker from a speaker with the word "Paradigm" printed on it. (See fig. 13)

There are other books present, some whose titles are partially obscured by other objects. There is a black hymnal with multi colored foil text titled *Songs of Zion* and a slim red volume whose cloth bound spine reads *My Face is Black*. Almost completely covered by the other objects is a copy of poet Gwendolyn Brooks' book *Blacks*.

Next to the objects, an eighteen inch wide, six foot tall cream colored paper scroll is tacked to the wall like a banner. Solvent transfers depicting African masks are composed vertically. The masks range in size from eight to twelve inches and are situated approximately twelve inches apart. The prints are manipulated and appear to be stretched across the paper's surface, some portions of the images faded, others rich. The grayscale palette is interrupted by blue, green, orange and red glitches that imply the presence of a technological process. In one image, the opening for the mask



Figure 13. *Metronome*, (detail) 2019 Found Objects, Dimensions Variable.

wearer's eye seems to squint as it streaks across the page, in another the mouth appears to open as if preparing to speak. There is something eerily inaccessible about the distortions, they are at once animated and flattened, seductive yet unsettling.

The juxtaposition of image and object reads as separate but relational. The masks are in a state of motion, like faces flickering on a TV screen stuck in a loop. The radios with raised antennae are trying to receive a signal. The door of the tape deck is open, awaiting the next sound. In the absence of music, what waves do the speakers emit? Perhaps the masks vibrate in accordance with something inaudible.

The source image for the mask was appropriated from a small black and white pamphlet titled *Sculpture from Africa in the Museum of Primitive Art* published in 1963. On page eight we find the following image credit: "Mask, Poro Secret Society. Liberia: Dan. Wood, 8 5/8" high. 57.109." Upon seeing the image I was struck by the object's beauty. In the photograph, the light catches the masks' surface highlighting its' eyelids, forehead, nose, and lips.

Even after scanning, manipulating, and transferring the image, the mask still remains a mystery to me. No matter what gesture I apply to the form, I cannot possess it. This object had a life, a history, and a use which is lost in my translation of it. A ritual of everyday use is a way of producing and transmitting knowledge. Masks serve a function in the belief system of the Dan people, often occupying multiple roles and even embodying personality traits.¹⁵ A mask's acquisition by the uninitiated creates a separation from its function and a rupture. Complicating the motif of the mask further is the likelihood that it was acquired through the violence of colonial conquest. Recent media attention surrounding institutions endeavoring to redress these wounds illustrate the precariousness of possession.

Everyday use as knowledge production is mirrored in the objects gathered in *Metronome*. While the masks are indicative of an African practice and tradition, the objects reference various Black American traditions from literary, poetic, theological and sonic. The everyday practices of faith, hearing and performing music, reading poetry and literature are all ways that Black Americans have engaged knowledge production in formal and informal ways. During a studio visit, a classmate remarked that the objects recalled what her living room looked like as a child. In this way, though the installation invokes sound through objects we expect to produce it, the work remains quiet, literally and conceptually. Again, the living room, is a quiet space and an interior one.

In *Metronome*, the masks have traveled time through their lives as ritual objects, stolen and rarefied artifacts, and finally archived image for appropriation. The interior spirit of the object remains inaccessible and unknowable. The assemblage of objects that accompanies the print is an incarnation of the Black interior. The living room and private space that remains inward and expansive. The richness that cannot be reduced to type or metaphor for never-ending struggle. The relationship between these two interiors one African, one Black American has been ruptured by history, geography, and time but the connections remain open and possible.

Improvisatory Imaginings

As an artist concerned with knowledge production, interiority and the vernacular image making practices of Black Americans, invoking possibility and imagination through enclosure is essential to my work and life. I encounter possibility in my personal archives and within the collective archive of found photographs that I source in my artmaking. I encounter imaginative possibility in the homes, gardens and free spaces that my grandparents made for themselves and that Black people continue to make. I seek to engage possibility in my work through the treatment

of familial and found images, texts, objects and my refusal to attach this material to rehearsed, stereotypical and flattened narratives for others to consume. (See fig. 14) In my work, there is always the possibility that an object can be added, adjusted, or subtracted. There is always the possibility for an image to be revisited and reconfigured.

Zoe Leonard and Cheryl Dunye's *The Fae Richards's Photo Archive* imagines and creates a record to counter erasure. Fae Richards is a fictional character created by Dunye whose archive is the subject of her film *The Watermelon Woman*. Leonard and Dunye stage photographs comprised of production stills from Richards' career as an actress and candid snapshots that depict the richness of a life well lived. Richards is portrayed as a Black woman who is loved deeply.

The photographs show evidence of touch, there are tears and creases. Dunye and Leonard have created a body of work that feels like you have stumbled upon a forgotten album and are left to page through what a woman like Fae Richards might have experienced. I am especially drawn to the last few pages of this book. They show two Black, queer women in love. There are photographs of the couple during a birthday celebration and on the street in front of a laundromat. Richards and her lover have aged, Fae's hair is gray and it is clear that her performing days have passed. (See fig. 15) And though I know that the images are posed and the snapshots a fiction, there is beauty still. Perhaps it is because I don't see images like this. I have never encountered such photographs in the albums that I pore over in my own work. What would it feel like to come across pictures like these? Images, even ones depicting banal scenes can compel us to dream. To imagine and conjure a narrative in the absence of one.



Figure 14. *Untitled*, 2019 Digital Collage, Dimensions Variable.

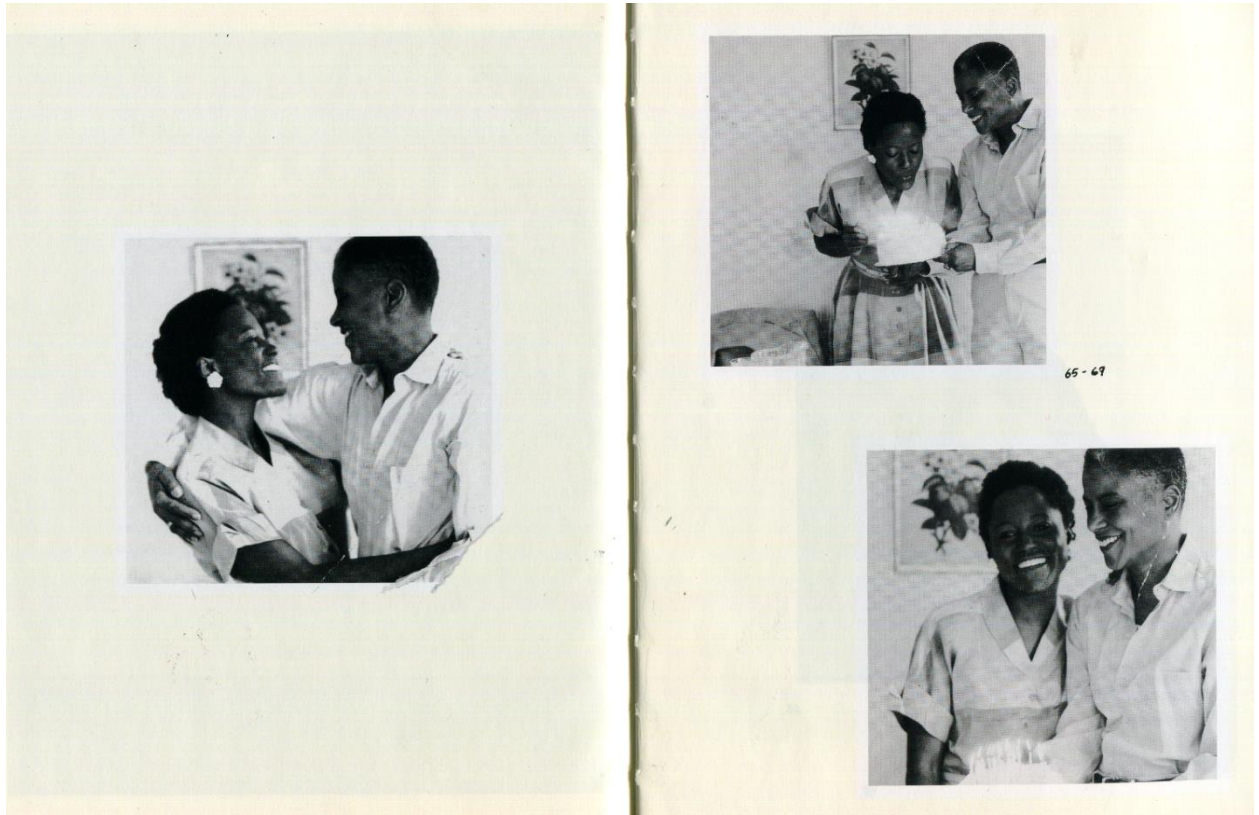


Figure 15. Cheryl Dunye, Zoe Leonard. *The Fae Richards Photo Archive*, 1996 Artist Book

Conclusion

My mother recently shared that she remembers my grandmother playing Dinah Washington's "This Bitter Earth" over and over again. "I wonder was she depressed" she said under her breath and more to herself than me...

Rupture repeats and loss remakes, but neither can diminish the Black interior. Perhaps rupture forces us to remain prepared, with an awareness that the interior is the only space we can freely cultivate beyond enclosure's reach. I know that my grandmother did not believe this earth was absolutely bitter because she continued to plant seeds in the earth, to put her hands in it and to trust the earth to yield beauty in return.

I look to the traditions of Black cultural workers of all disciplines to guide me through rupture in work and in life. I also look to my great-grandmother, grandmother and my own mother to better understand what a practice of healing looks like in the everyday. To recognize how I must adapt these practices and apply them to my own life. Perhaps it looks like a ritual of caregiving. Care that radiates outward but that is from within. Planting things and seeing them grow and change, watching them die and resurrect themselves in the cycle of seasons.

I am grateful for the space that is made for me within institutions, but I am aware of its limits. I am thankful for other types of rigor and knowledge that operate in excess of unyielding structure. Thankfully, rigor in the way my grandmother lived it is accessible to anyone. It extends past theory into the possibility of poetry. This possibility gives me the room that all artists need, room to conjure, room to dream.

Notes

¹ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*, 1st ed (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 100.

² Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2001), 4.

³ Diana Taylor, "Save As... Knowledge and Transmission in the Age of Digital Technologies," *Imagining America*, January 1, 2010, 4, <https://surface.syr.edu/ia/7>.

⁴ BCRW Videos, *In the Wake: A Salon in Honor of Christina Sharpe*, 2017, <https://vimeo.com/203012536>. When I use the phrase "A practice of care" I am referencing the type of care noted by Saidiya Hartman during this salon. She remarks that "care is the antidote to violence."

⁵ Marlene Nourbese Philip, *Blank: Essays & Interviews*, First edition, Essais, no. 3 (Toronto, Ontario, Canada: BookThug, 2017), 122.

⁶ "Somehow I Found You: On Black Archival Practices," text, C Magazine Issue 137 Page 8, March 5, 2018, <https://cmagazine.com/issues/137/somehow-i-found-you-on-black-archival-practices>.

⁷ Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 11. See Campt's discussion of the quotidian as a striving for futurity.

⁸ Elizabeth Alexander, *The Black Interior: Essays* (Saint Paul, Minn: Graywolf Press, 2004).

⁹ Alexander.

¹⁰ Jennifer Packer, University of Chicago, and Renaissance Society, *Jennifer Packer - Tenderheaded.*, 2018, 91.

¹¹ Kevin Everod Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (New Brunswick, N.J. ; London: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 5.

¹² Campt, *Listening to Images*, 4.

¹³ Campt, 6.

¹⁴ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Nachdr. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 2000), 78.

¹⁵ M. C. Jędrej, "Dan and Mende Masks: A Structural Comparison," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 56, no. 1 (1986): 72, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1159734>.

Illustrations

Figure 1. Jen Everett. *The Rupture Repeats*, 2019 Diagram

Figure 2. Jen Everett. *Untitled*, 2019 Digital Collage, Dimensions Variable

Figures 3-5. (Clockwise from left). Jen Everett. *Untitled, The Observation of Savage Peoples*, 2019 Solvent transfer on found book, 8 ¾ x 5 ¾ x 5/8 inches.

Figure 6. *Untitled*, 2018 Digital Collage, Dimensions Variable.

Figure 7. Collection of images from New York Public Library Digital Archive, Dimensions Variable.

Figure 8. Jen Everett. *Untitled*, 2017 Digital Collage, Dimensions Variable.

Figure 9. Jen Everett. *Untitled*, 2017 Pigment Print on vinyl, 36 in. x 24 inches.

Figure 10. Jen Everett. *Untitled*, 2019 Digital Collage, Dimensions Variable.

Figure 11. Lorna Simpson. *Touching*, 2012 Collage and ink on paper, 11 x 8.5 inches.

Figure 12. Jen Everett. *For Henry/I Just Want to Be of Use to My Ancestors*, 2017 Vintage radios and components, wooden cabinet, half-moon table, Dimensions Variable.

Figure 13. Jen Everett. *Metronome*, (detail) 2019 Found Objects, Dimensions Variable.

Figure 14. Jen Everett. *Untitled*, 2019 Digital Collage, Dimensions Variable.

Figure 15. Cheryl Dunye, Zoe Leonard. *The Fae Richards Photo Archive*, 1996 Artist Book.

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