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In/Visible

Raymond Thompson Jr

Thesis submitted to the
College of Creative Arts
At West Virginia University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts with an emphasis in
Intermedia and Photography

Michael Sherwin, M.F.A, Chair
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School of Art and Design

West Virginia University, Morgantown, West Virginia 2021

Keywords: video, photography, African Americans, race, alternative process, documentary,
trauma, landscape

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Abstract

In/Visible

Raymond Thompson Jr

My MFA thesis and supporting exhibition focus on challenging the United States' photographic archive that often left out African-American people. The work, through the use of appropriation and alternative photographic processes, disrupts America's historical visual archive and notions that surround the white gaze. Through the unsettling of this visual space, new speculative narratives can be created to help imagine new futures. This work is the beginning of a process of mourning histories I have never known and reclaiming a place for myself and my family in the American landscape that is free of racial trauma.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iii
List of Figures.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Previous Work.....	3
Background and Research.....	6
Artistic Influences.....	10
Thesis Exhibition.....	14
Conclusion.....	24
Illustrations.....	26
Bibliography.....	40

List of Figures

- Figure 1. Raymond Thompson jr, *Justice Undone- The Campfire*, 2012
- Figure 2. Raymond Thompson Jr, *Imaging/Imagining- Elissa*, 2017
- Figure 3. Carleton E. Watkins, *Cathedral Rock, 2600 Feet, Yosemite, No.2, 1866*
- Figure 4. Raymond Thompson Jr, *Appalachian Ghost #1*, 2018
- Figure 5. Jerry Burchfield, *Pista Stratiates - Floating Lettuce*
- Figure 6. Willian Fox Talbot, *An oak tree in winter, Lacock*, 1842-43
- Figure 7. Louis Jacques Mande Daguerre, *Boulevard du Temple*, Paris, 1838
- Figure 8. Joseph T. Zealy, Jack (driver), Guinea, plantation of B.F. Taylor, Esq., Columbia, S.C., 1850
- Figure 9. Binh Danh, *Shock and Awe*, 2008
- Figure 10. Raymond Thompson Jr, *Playing in the Dark*, 2021
- Figure 11. Roy DeCarava, from *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, 1955
- Figure 12. *Dawoud Bey Untitled #25 (Lake Erie and Sky)*, from the series *Night Coming Tenderly*, Black, 2017.
- Figure 13. Dionne Lee, *North*, 2019
- Figure 14. Derrick Woods-Morrow, *Frederic on Lake Pontchartrain | after Lincoln Beach*, 2019
- Figure 15. Raymond Thompson Jr, *the trauma of white light*, 2020
- Figure 16. Raymond Thompson Jr, *Let him in (3:44)*, 2021
- Figure 17. Raymond Thompson Jr, *After Dorothea Lange and the trauma of white light #7*, 2020
- Figure 18. Dorthea Lange, *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, CA*, 1936
- Figure 19. Sherrie Levine, *After Walker Evans: 4*, 1981
- Figure 20. Raymond Thompson Jr, *Playing in the Dark detail #1*, 2021

Introduction

With my work, I have sought to challenge America's visual archive that has left out, ignored, disregarded, downplayed and distorted the role of black people in American life. I have also sought to highlight the photographic medium's role in defining the American racial caste system. Finally, I have begun to explore the visual edges of my personal history, which due to an absence of material, I have had to create my own speculative narratives. Ultimately, I want to push up against the wall of forgetting that plagues my family history. Because of the lack of primary source materials, I have had to rely on incomplete facts and narratives filled with half-truths. I believe that the search itself is an invaluable part of this work.

Before entering graduate school, I worked as a documentary photographer. After the 2016 election, I began to doubt my belief in the documentary image and its ability to change people's minds. Before that time, I had a deep belief that once people saw social injustices captured in photography they would empathize with the human beings portrayed in the images. I also believed that this newly formed empathy could spur viewers to help make a change. That belief, broken after the election of President Trump, helped me realize that my documentary work did not function in the way I thought it did. I realized that my work was actually having the opposite effect. I was making poor people, brown people, and black people more palatable to my audiences, which were mostly white people. For example, one image from my project, *Justice Undone, 2012, The Campfire* (figure. 1), in my mind was about African American children getting a break from the stress of city life and having the rare chance to connect with nature. But, after the 2016 election I lost faith in the belief that my images were functioning in the way I intended them to. For me, photojournalism served as a tool to invoke empathy, but I have come to believe that empathy did not spark action and in fact could be doing more harm than good.

Christina Sharpe writes in her book, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, that “we know that, as far as images of Black people are concerned, in their circulation they often don’t, in fact, do the imaging work that we expect of them.” She continues, “Most often these images function as a hail to the non Black person in the Althusserian sense. That is, these images work to confirm the status, location, and already held opinions within dominant ideology about those exhibitions of spectacular Black bodies whose meanings then remain unchanged.”¹

To break with this mindset, I began making work for me and people who looked like me. The first lesson for black people in America is to hate thyself. This a lesson that I have unconsciously carried at my core for most of my life. America’s visual culture played an important role in my education as an adolescent, from the endless hours of War on Drugs news footage that featured black people either addicted to drugs, being arrested because of drugs, or killing for drugs. Hollywood played a role as well by constantly enlisting the role of the black “superpredator” in the dozens of “hood” films produced in the 1990s, like *Menace II Society* or *Juice*. The superpredator myth was already inspiring states across this country to enact laws that fueled mass incarceration.²

Looking back now, I realize that these experiences were extremely traumatic and they influenced who I am today. Concurrently, I realized that photographic images can be a double edge sword. As much as they have caused harm in the past, the medium could be used to heal. I am motivated to make work for myself as an attempt to repair the damage from my past. I also believe this work is important to the visual agency of the African American community.

¹ Christina Elizabeth Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 119.

² “The Superpredator Myth, 25 Years Later,” Equal Justice Initiative, accessed on April 22, 2021, <https://eji.org/news/superpredator-myth-20-years-later/>.

Previous Work

I began this journey close to my documentary roots with the project *Imaging/Imagining* (2017, figure 2) which looked at the symbol of the tree in black life in America. I created portraits of African Americans in the woods and paired them with quotes about how it felt to be in that space. I was deeply interested in how the black body was a part of and separate from the American landscape.

I was struck by how racial groups were represented differently in America's natural spaces. In Google searches it was easy to find quotidian images of white people enjoying the woods and other features of the American landscape. But, when I did the same search looking for the African American, I found a large percentage of lynching images. In the United States, the landscape is a political, rhetorical and historical space that over time has been used as a tool to boost the ideas that surround America's ideology.

The landscape, and the people who navigate it, has close visual links to the ideas of what it means to be American.³ Naomi Rosenblum argues in the book, *A World History of Photography*, that there was a belief system in place that related the divine to the landscape:

North American attitudes about scenery reflected the unique situation of a nation without classical history or fabled ruins that shared a near religious exaltation of virgin nature. Many Americans were convinced that the extensive rivers and forest were signs of the munificent hand of God in favoring the new nation with plenty: others recognized the economic value of westward expansion and found photography to be the ideal tool to enshrine ideas of "manifest destiny."⁴

Carleton E. Watkins's *Cathedral Rock, 2600 Feet, Yosemite, No.21* (1866, figure 3) was one of the many photographs of the west that played into the American correlation of the landscape

³ Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), 101.

⁴ Naomi Rosenblum, *A World History of Photography*, 3rd ed. (New York: Abbeville Press, 1997), 128.

to manifest destiny. John Muir (1828-1914) naturalist and philosopher contributed to the naming of the mountain in Yosemite National Park. Carolyn Finney argues in, *Black Face, White Spaces*, that Muir's values were informed by the identity politics of whiteness and religious belief.⁵ Finney claims that Muir worked to mark, "Yosemite as a sacred place to be saved from civilization by comparing American wilderness to Europe's cathedrals and regaling the white man's god."⁶ The naming of Cathedral Rock is an example of symbolic white supremacist thinking that redefined the western landscape as the domain for white people.

In the present day, the National Parks have become symbols in America's cultural landscape where public opinion, cultural identity, environmental values and United States history collide.

⁷This symbol is especially problematic for African Americans. I understand that there are no monolithic African-American experiences, but I still felt an absence of visual culture representing people who look like me in the American landscape. With my project *Imaging/Imagining*, I wanted to begin a personal healing process to reconnect to the American visual imagination of nature and create a counter archive that simply showed black people in the woods.

In my following project, *Appalachian Ghost* (2018, figure 4), I challenged the erasure of African Americans from a tragic moment in West Virginia's history. I made portraits and still-life images based on historical and fictional documents produced around the Hawks Nest Tunnel Disaster (1930-1935). This project also marked the first time I became more physical with my work. I appropriated and cut out human figures from archive images of the construction of the

⁵ Carolyn Finney, *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors*. ProQuest. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014.

⁶ Finney, *Black Faces, White Spaces*, 28-29.

⁷ Finney, *Black Faces, White Spaces*, 28-29.

Hawks Nest Tunnel and blew them up to present them at human scale. These figures introduce an interest in creating work that focused on the phenomenological nature of sculptural-based photography and an effort to create a more visceral experience for the viewers. Due to the extreme scale of the images, viewers struggle to uncover the characteristics and identities of the people who are barely distinguishable in the life-size figures.

This project also represented a move to creating speculative archives. I pulled from archival photographs, newspaper stories and even poetry to help inspire the creation of new images that reimagine the visual history of West Virginia. In this speculative space, I believe I can help inspire new cultural myths that are important for political and historical agency. Kimberly Ruffin argues in, *Black on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions* that, “myth often resides at the scientific limits of human understanding about nature, allowing people to address what they do not fully understand but still deem valuable.”⁸ She continues, “Myth gives us an aesthetic toolbox by which we attach ourselves to place. It conveys the conceptual complexity of our connection to place, past, present, and future in language.”⁹ In trying to create visual imagery that works to create a mythical narrative of black life on the community level, I began to realize that I also need to focus on my own experiences as an individual.

⁸ Kimberly N. Ruffin, *Black on Earth : African American Ecoliterary Traditions*. ProQuest. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2010. Accessed on April 22, 2021, 112.

⁹ Ruffin, *Black on Earth*, 112.

Background and Research

My technical research in photography is focused on the alternative photographic process of lumen printing and chlorophyll printing. I believe both processes comment on the nature of photography as a scientific process and the role photography has played in reinforcing white supremacy. Lumen prints are a type of photogram, which are created by exposing objects on photographic paper. The photogram has a long history and has been used by photographers like Man Ray (1890-1976), who through this technique embraced abstraction and montage in the photographic image,¹⁰ and Anna Atkins (1799-1871) who was a botanist and photographer and the first person to publish a book with photographic illustrations titled, *British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions in 1843*.¹¹ Lumen prints are created by placing a negative, or a translucent object over photographic paper and exposing it in direct sunlight for two to three hours.

Artist Jerry Burchfield (1947-2009) coined the term “lumen” print (figure 5). He used the process to create a body of images of flora from the Amazon rainforest. Jonathan Green in the essay, “Beyond the Importance of Objects,” argues that Burchfield’s lumen prints of Amazon flora move beyond pure scientific illustration towards something more spiritual. “Burchfield’s lumen prints are predicated on chance operations, indeterminacy, and the anarchy of sun, wind, and weather. His procedures necessarily dispense with the indexical notion of the photograph as document and substitute instead a generative process of uncontrollable transformation,” he

¹⁰ “Man Ray(Emmanuel Radnitzky) American, 1890-1976,” MoMA, accessed on April 23 2021, <https://www.moma.org/artists/3716>.

¹¹ Jerry Burchfield, *Primal Images : 100 Lumen Prints of Amazonia Flora*. 1st ed. Center Books on the International Scene, 3. Santa Fe, N.M.: Center for American Places, 2004, xi.

writes.¹² Green positions Burchfield's lumen prints in line with those in the Photo-Secession movement who focused on "photographic vocabularies and strategies derived from pictorialism, metaphorical modernism, and alternative photographic practices--effectively subvert the documentary, scientific, evidentiary eye of the hard-edged optical lens, replacing it with visions of strange, private, disturbing, psychological, and mythic worlds that reference not the optical reality seen by the camera but the interior world felt or discovered by the photographer."¹³

Burchfield's process is nearly identical to the salt print process created by William Henry Fox Talbot (1800 -1877).¹⁴ Talbot called his prints calotypes, but this process has had many names during the history of the medium, which include calotypes, photogenic drawings, photograms, sun prints, and contact prints (figure 6).¹⁵ Talbot would expose a plant specimen on a piece of photo-sensitive paper and the resulting image would be the negative image of the plant. He would then contact print the negative image against another piece of photo sensitive paper to get a positive image.¹⁶ There are many variables that contribute to the final prints, from quality of light to temperature and humidity.¹⁷ Because of these variables, it is very difficult to duplicate a specific print. The lumen print has a direct connection to the origins of the photographic medium.

In 1839, Louis Jacques Mande Daguerre (1787-1851) announced his process, the Daguerreotype¹⁸, and a few months later Talbot debuted his calotype process (figure 7).¹⁹ Since

¹² Burchfield, *Primal Images*, xv.

¹³ Burchfield, *Primal Images*, xii.

¹⁴ Burchfield, *Primal Images*, xv.

¹⁵ Burchfield, *Primal Images*, xv.

¹⁶ Douglas Stockdale, "Jerry Burchfield - Primal Images," *PhotoBook Journal: The Contemporary Photobook Magazine*, accessed on April 23, <https://photobookjournal.com/2009/07/22/jerry-burchfield-primal-images/>.

¹⁷ Stockdale, Jerry Burchfield - Primal Images.

¹⁸ Rosenblum, *A World History of Photography*, 17.

¹⁹ Rosenblum, *A World History of Photography*, 29.

its invention, the connection between photography and science has been closely linked. By 1853, there were three million daguerreotypes being created each year in the United States.²⁰

Photography's rise in popularity in America as both a vernacular medium and a scientific tool collided with pro-slavery scientists looking to use this new technology to boost their arguments.

Daniel C. Blight argues in his essay, "The Image of Whiteness," that photography quickly became the new tool of choice for mid-19th century scientists and other wealthy white men to define the other.²¹ "After hundreds of years of colonial slavery, during a period of supposed modernity and progress, colonial 'scientists' and photographers helped revitalize the kind of violent race thinking that underpinned slavery," he writes.²² "One of empire's most powerful weapons, this kind of photography (literally) framed the colonialist project, visually buttressing the wider logic of European colonial rule," he writes.²³ One example is Louis Agassiz (1807-1873), a geologist and biologist, who saw the daguerreotype as a tool for the pro-slavery argument (figure 8).

During a meeting of the Cambridge Scientific Club in 1850, Agassiz unveiled a series of 15 daguerreotypes that showed nude slaves. He commissioned the images to be used as visual evidence for his theory of polygenesis that states that, "each human race originated from separate and distinct origins."²⁴ Tanya Sheehan argues in her essay, "Business as Usual?: Scientific Operations in the Early Photographic Studio," that Agassiz and other scientists

²⁰ John Wood, "The Curious art and Science of the Daguerreotype" in *To Make Their Own Way in the World: The Enduring Legacy of the Zealy Daguerreotypes*, edited by Barbash, Ilisa, Molly Rogers, and Deborah Willis, 169-185. Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum Press, 2020, 171.

²¹ Daniel C. Blight, *The Image of Whiteness: Contemporary Photography and Racialization*. New York, NY. SPBH Editions, 2019.

²² Blight, *The Image of Whiteness*, 20.

²³ Blight, *The Image of Whiteness*, 21.

²⁴ John Stauffer "Not Suitable for Public Notice" in *To Make Their Own Way in the World: The Enduring Legacy of the Zealy Daguerreotypes*, edited by Barbash, Ilisa, Molly Rogers, and Deborah Willis, 279. Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum Press, 2020.

believed that daguerreotypes allowed them to, “discern racial type merely by observing subjects.”²⁵ “This ability to read the body—to go beyond the surface with a penetrating gaze sensitive to slight variations—was one of the defining characteristics attributed to scientists in the nineteenth century. She writes.”²⁶ This scientific racism that was present at the birth of photography has continued to haunt the medium into the present day.

²⁵ Tanya, Sheehan. “Business as Usual?: Scientific Operations in the Early Photographic Studio” in *To Make Their Own Way in the World: The Enduring Legacy of the Zealy Daguerreotypes*, edited by Barbash, Ilisa, Molly Rogers, and Deborah Willis, 189. Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum Press, 2020.

²⁶ Sheehan, “Business as Usual?: Scientific Operations in the Early Photographic Studio,” 189.

Artistic Influences

Through my research, I discovered and became inspired by the artist Binh Danh (b. 1977). Danh, who is generally credited with inventing the chlorophyll print process, merges the photographic image with living leaves and grass (figure 9). The process works by placing a large negative on top of the leaves' surfaces and exposing them to sunlight. The sun is the only catalyst in the making of the image, because it bleaches the leaves' uncovered surfaces. Beyond adapting Danh's chlorophyll process for my *the trauma of white light* series, I found that his sentiment expressed about the power of this process rang true for myself as I began to make my own prints using tobacco leaves: "Nature is the final place where memory lies. . . . I imagined that through my interaction with the landscape I could flush those memories out, particular traumatic events like war, through art-making."²⁷ While the war he alludes to is the Vietnam War, I can relate to his use of the term. Even though there are no literal shots being fired in my war, there is a battle to claim a space in the mythical American landscape that drives my own work.

In other work, such as my piece *Playing in the Dark* (2021, figure 11), I was inspired by African-American photographer Roy DeCarava (1919-2009)'s printing technique, which focused on underexposure, soft papers and an incredible range of dark and gray tones (figure 10).²⁸ DeCarava was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship to complete his book, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (1955). In this work, he focuses on everyday black life in Harlem. He purposely avoided the imagery that was typically published of blacks that focused on the extremes. In Teju Cole's

²⁷ Adam McCauley, "Vietnam War Images, Photosynthesized." *New York Times*, May 30, 2012.

²⁸ Teju Cole, "A True Picture of Black Skin" in *Black Futures*, edited by Drew Kimberly and Jenna Wortham, 404. New York, NY: One World, 2020.

essay, “A True Picture of Black Skin,” he argues that DeCarava’s darkroom printing palette reverses the power structures associated with the white gaze in photography:²⁹

The viewer’s eye might at first protest, seeking more conventional contrasts, wanting more obvious lighting. But, gradually, there comes an acceptance of the photograph and its subtle implications: that there’s more there than we might think at first place, but also that when we are looking at others, we might come to the understanding that they don’t have to give themselves up to us. They are allowed to stay in the shadows if they wish.³⁰

Cole connects DeCarava’s work to philosopher Edouard Glissant’s thinking that surrounds the word “opacity.” In his writing, he claimed a space for the rights of minorities not to be defined by others’ definitions and the right to be misunderstood if they wanted. “Glissant sought to defend the opacity, obscurity, and inscrutability of Caribbean Blacks and other marginalized peoples. External pressures insisted on everything being illuminated, simplified, and explained. Glissant’s response: No.”³¹

Dawoud Bey (1953-), an African-American photographer who focuses on black communities and histories, has also been an inspiration to my work. His work, *Night Coming Tenderly, Black* (2019, figure 12) is a series of images that focus on the landscape of the Underground Railroad. Most of the images are taken at night and are printed very darkly on silver gelatin papers. The darkest of the prints required viewers to enter into a different kind of relationship to the images. Matthew S. Witkovsky writes in, “Dawoud Bey’s Shadowy Landscapes Trace Paths of the Underground Railroad,” that, “the nighttime passage may thus be grasped only in person, it cannot readily be ‘shared’ or ‘liked’ and the version made available to a broad audience is a

²⁹ Cole, “A True Picture of Black Skin,” 405.

³⁰ Cole, “A True Picture of Black Skin.”

³¹ Cole, A True Picture of Black Skin, 405

deliberate compromise.”³² Bey’s decision to print the image dark, “turned the photograph into a sculptural object whose presence implicated the spectatorial body,” writes Withovsky. Bey’s focus on “phenomenological and historical concerns” found its way into my work.³³

I was also inspired by photographer Dionne Lee (b.1988), whose series, *Trap and Lean-to* (2019, figure 13) offered insight into how to use archival documents in an alternative darkroom practice, as well as subtle ways to include the artist’s body in their work. The title of Lee’s work refers to her research in African-American wilderness survival practices.³⁴ Her work inspired me to research camera-less art making methods, which led me to research alternative processes. These inquiries led me to experiment with photograms and eventually led me to the lumen printing process.

I also discovered and was inspired by artist Derrick Woods-Morrow (b.1990)’s projects, *The Roach is Coming* (2017-2018, figure x) and *Black Alchemy + Restoration Toile* (2019, figure 14). Woods-Morrow’s work also uses archival images and self-portraiture. He collects personal interviews, which he turns into text-based photographs. His work informs how I approach adding my family’s oral histories into my work.

And finally, I was inspired by the video work of Arthur Jafa (b.1960). His film, *Love is the message, the message is Death* (2016), combines narrative, news, documentary and commercials clips appropriated from YouTube. Jafa combines them in a way that emphasizes black joy and pain through the medium of black gesture. His work also explores the idea of “black visual intonation”, which in an interview he describes as, “not slow motion, it’s not fast motion, it’s like

³² Matthew S. Witkovsky, “Dawoud Bey’s Shadowy Landscapes Trace Paths of the Underground Railroad,” *Art in America*, accessed on April 22, 2021, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/dawoud-bey-underground-railroad-photographs-mark-new-direction-1202671445/>.

³³ Witkovsky, “Dawoud Bey’s Shadowy Landscapes Trace Paths of the Underground Railroad”.

³⁴ Mary Lee Hodgins, “Dionne Lee: Trap and Lean-to,” *Contact Sheet* No 205, 2020.

a micro shifting back and forth between slow and fast.”³⁵ Jafa’s idea directly influenced how I approached my video piece, *Let him in*, which looks at the black church as a space built around gesture and joy.

³⁵ Arthur Jafa, “In Your Face: Interview - Arthur Jafa,” interviewed by Carrie Scott, SHOWstudio, Nov. 24th 2017. Video, 52:13, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XAk0dk0IAWw>.

Thesis Exhibition

My thesis exhibition, *In/Visible*, features three series, *the trauma of white light* (2021, figure 15), *Playing in the Dark* (2021, figure 9), and a video piece, *Let him in* (2021, figure 16)

The trauma of white light features five chlorophyll printed tobacco leaves that have been mounted in open black shadow boxes and hung on the wall. Pins have been placed around the edges of the leaf so as to not damage the fragile leaves. There is no glass between the viewer and the leaf, which pushes the leaf forward and emphasizes it as a singular unique sculptural object. If a viewer gets close enough they may smell tobacco, enhancing the phenomenological aspects of the work. The physicality of the dried leaves makes a claim on reality by connecting the viewer to a moment of agricultural and cultural history. I believe this presentation treats the leaf as a scientific specimen meant for further examination. The desire of viewers to examine the tobacco leaf might be similar to the reaction of scientists from the 1850s, who upon seeing an image affixed to a metal plate for the first time, leaned in to inspect the daguerreotype. Here, the magical reveal is mixed with irony and context.

The first major piece of *the trauma of white light* was made after a visual audit of black life in 1930s North Carolina. While researching the Library of Congress archive, I discovered images created by the Farm Security Administration (FSA) during the 1930s. A few of the FSA staff photographers — including Jack Delano and Dorothea Lange — had visited my grandfather's region. These photographers depicted life on the plantations, including portraits of individual black subjects working in the fields. In particular, Lange's work featuring black farmers working in tobacco fields resonated with me and my yearning to connect with the past.

I intend the titles of each leaf to directly reference the appropriation of the source materials I used to create the chlorophyll prints. For example, *After Dorothea Lange and the trauma of*

white light #7 (figure 17) is an image of two African-American men riding away into the North Carolina horizon. The title is a reference to photographer Dorothea Lange (1895-1965) who made the now famous image called *Migrant Mother* (1936, figure 18). I wanted to place my work in conversation with the archive created by the Farm Security Administration photographers. I took inspiration from photographer Sherrie Levine's (b.1947) work, *After Walker Evans* (1981, figure 19). Levine was a part of a cohort of artists like Cindy Sherman (b.1954) and Richard Prince (b.1949) who were called the "Pictures Generation."³⁶ This group of post-modern artists used, "photography to examine the strategies and codes of representation. In reshooting Marlboro advertisements, B-movie stills, and even classics of Modernist photography these artists adopted dual roles as director and spectator. In their manipulated appropriations, these artists were not only exposing and disassembling mass-media fictions, but enacting more complicated scenarios of desire, identification, and loss."³⁷

Much of my work is an attempt to experience a part of my history which is lost to the past. In 2020, in an effort to reconstruct that story, I started by interviewing my extended family members. From those conversations, I began to piece together threads of family myths that contain our origin story. I discovered that my family comes from two small towns on the North Carolina coast. I also uncovered the names of my great-grandparents. I learned that my great-grandfather was a farmer, who mostly likely would have grown cotton and tobacco. I was told several stories about what drove my grandfather north during the Great Migration, which included a murder. I then used the information from those interviews to inform parts of my research.

³⁶ "After Walker Evans: 4," The Met, accessed on April 23, 2021, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/267214>.

³⁷ "After Walker Evans: 4."

Tobacco is a plant whose taproot is buried deep into the American experience. Like other cash crops, it had a whole agricultural ecosystem devoted to its cultivation. Sharecropping was one part of the ecosystem that formed in the wake of slavery in which farmers worked land they did not own and paid a share of their crop to their landlords as rent. The landlords would then pay sharecroppers for the remaining harvest minus any outstanding loans made for seed, housing, or any number of other materials needed to maintain a working farm. This system often left the sharecroppers in debt to the landlords.³⁸

Cotton and tobacco were at the heart of my family's mythologies that surround my grandfather. I wanted to find a way to move one step closer to my grandfather's mythical experience and to have a better sense of what life was like for him as a teenager and young man. It was through the dirt and the life-giving power of the sun that I found a strategy. I began *the trauma of white light* project by purchasing tobacco seedlings. Once they arrived, I planted them in large pots that sat on my front porch in the summer of 2020. Over the period of two months, the plants grew and began to mature. I was surprised at the size of the plants as the leaves continued to grow with some leaves spanning nearly 19 inches in length. I used the chlorophyll printing technique to print images from the FSA archive onto living tobacco leaves.

The tobacco leaves and the images created by the FSA held important roles in American visual culture, myth-building and economic stability. The tobacco plant was one of America's important cash crops. It was a plant that helped finance the American project, along with other crops like cotton and corn. Similarly, the FSA images played an important role in controlling

³⁸ Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. First Vintage books ed. (New York: Vintage Books, a division of Random House, 2011), 53.

public political opinions by providing the “photographic testimony of the post-Depression condition.”³⁹ These became crucial to the continued political support of New Deal legislation.⁴⁰

The appropriated FSA images I chose could be divided into two groups. The first group is African Americans at work. These images feature black people working in tobacco fields or elsewhere. The second set includes images that show African Americans in the more liminal space of photographic portraiture. In the beginning, I tended to print wide frames filling as much of the leaf’s surface as possible. Later, I began to select a smaller portion of an image to print that focused on the faces and eyes of the people in the photographs, which I found further removed the images from the original context of the FSA archive. I created digital negatives with my chosen images and then I contact-printed them using direct sunlight. In the heat of July and August, the leaves needed to be in direct sunlight for at least 12 hours, but that time could stretch into days depending on the quality of light and density of my digital negative. Once the leaves had been bleached resulting in a positive image, I would document the leaves, and press and dry them for storage.

I believe that by using the sun to fuse the two elements together, I have created an expanded space to interrogate and contest the symbols’ meaning and impact on America’s visual history. I also recognize that tobacco and FSA images create a problematic space for me to navigate as an artist and an African American. I was troubled by two challenges that the FSA archive presented to me. The first problem that I confronted was the problematic intent of the FSA archive. Sarah Boxer argues in, “Whitewashing the Great Depression,” that the FSA’s image archive had a political agenda and was manipulated to exclude the role of the black farmer in the Great

³⁹ Michelle Borge, *Documentary Photography Reconsidered: History Theory and Practice* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019).

⁴⁰ Sarah, Boxer, “Whitewashing the Great Depression.” *The Atlantic Monthly* 326, no. 5 (2020): 102–5.

Depression, “Although the photographers who worked for the FSA took many pictures of people of color — in the streets, in the fields, out of work — the Great Depression’s main victims, as Americans came to visualize them, were white. And this collective portrait has contributed to the misbegotten idea, still current, that the soul of America, the real American type, is rural and white.”⁴¹

The second problematic issue with the FSA archive is the notion of the documentary image and its connection to the sympathetic liberal white gaze, which, no matter how well-meaning its intentions, taints my understanding of my own visual history and agency. Martha Rosler writes in the article, “In, around, and afterthoughts (on documentary photography,)” that documentary photography has long been the tool of liberal humanism to breed sympathetic feelings without the requirement to actually act on those emotions:

Documentary photography has come to represent the social conscience of liberal sensibility presented in visual imagery. The liberal documentary assuages any stirrings of conscience in its viewers the way scratching relieves an itch and simultaneously reassures them about their relative wealth and social position, especially the latter, now that even the veneer of social concern has dropped away from the upwardly mobile and comfortable social sectors.⁴²

The very idea of documentary photography is based on notions of sympathy that are meant to relieve the consciousness of the dominant social classes. The fact that this is the place that I used to draw my primary source materials haunts me. Nevertheless, I used the FSA archive because it was my only visual connection to this part of my family’s history.

⁴¹Sarah Boxer, “Whitewashing the Great Depression.” *The Atlantic Monthly* 326, no. 5, Accessed on April 23, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/12/whitewashing-the-great-depression/616936/>.

⁴²Martha Rosler, “In, around, and afterthoughts (on documentary photography)” in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, edited by Richard Bolton (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1992), 303-306.

As I sat in my studio surrounded by images of black people working, I also began to question my use of the black body as a laborer in my art. When African Americans appeared in the FSA image archive, the photographs tended to focus on the black body in, or adjacent to, labor. Showing African Americans as productive members of society fed into this idea that labor was a humanizing force and a way for black people to get closer to whiteness, with whiteness being the ultimate form of human.⁴³ I was drawn toward images in the FSA archive that showed people in the in-between moments of life in 1930s North Carolina. But at the same time, there are numerous images of Africans Americans at work in the fields.

The trope of the black laboring body is scattered throughout parts of my work. In *Appalachian Ghost* (figure 4) and *the trauma of white light* (figure 14) the majority of the source imagery I appropriated features black bodies working. I have recently realized that I need to begin to move away from these notions to truly free my history from the dominant cultural imaginings that dictate my understanding of self. King argues that thinking of black bodies outside of the meanings of labor could offer a space to truly dream:

Moreover theorizing Black bodies as forms of flux or space in process rather than as human producers, stewards, and occupiers of space enables at least a momentary reflection on the other kinds of (and often forgotten) relationships that Black bodies have to plants, objects, and nonhuman lifeforms. A focus on the fungible flux of Blackness can temporarily arrest the tendency to assume that Black life always orients itself around the human as the center of space and life.⁴⁴

I have continued to harvest the power of the sun for my most recent series of self-portrait lumen prints, *Playing in the Dark* (figure 9)/ I borrowed the title from a Toni Morrison (1931-

⁴³ King, Tiffany Lethabo. *The Black Shoals : Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2019).

⁴⁴ King, *Black Shoals*, 119.

2019) book called, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, in which she critiques the dependence of American literature on the presence of the black body.⁴⁵

Playing in the Dark (figure 9) consists of 48 self-portraits lumen prints mounted organically on a wall. For this series, I use a process closely related to the process in use at the birth of the medium. The images for this work are in conversation with Daguerre and Talbot with the goal of placing a metaphorical asterisk in the photography history books. The annotation would point to photography's relation to race and racism in American culture. Christina Sharpe argues in her book, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, that a mode of "black annotation and black redaction" is needed to create a space for "ethical viewing and reading practices," that are free of traps of settler colonial violence.⁴⁶ I intended this work to push back against the white gaze's need for easily digestible otherness. My body became the site for a practice of "black annotation and redaction."⁴⁷ The series asks viewers to look deeper, by purposely deemphasizing my body with various levels of dark tones and colors. My body is not easily consumed in this work. This decision was inspired by both DeCarava's, *Sweet Flypaper of Life*, and Bey's, *Night Coming Tenderly, Black*. I used the lumen printing process, because the way images are rendered on the surface of the prints creates a shroud that forces the viewer to investigate at close range.

The series consists of 48 silver gelatin prints that have been split toned with selenium. The prints range in size from 5x7, 8x10, 11x14 and 16x20 inches. The lumen printing process allowed me to create unique variants. Each decision that I made has left a record on the surface of the image. For example, *Playing in the Dark, detail #1* (figure 20) features an abstract image

⁴⁵ "Playing in the Dark," Penguin Random House, accessed on April 24, 2021, <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/117655/playing-in-the-dark-by-toni-morrison/>.

⁴⁶ Christina Elizabeth Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016, 117.

⁴⁷ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 113.

of my hair. Along the edges of the print are signs of chemical reaction from the split-toning process. I could control the intensity of these marks by how long I left the paper in the toning solution. The images are mounted to the wall with four metal magnets and the fiber-based paper gently curves at the edges, which prevents the images from being completely flat. This enhances the sculptural aspects of the work and allows the viewer to also focus on the material nature of the photographic paper.⁴⁸ I chose to leave the images unframed, because I didn't want to hide behind the traditional ornaments of frames and glass with photographic presentation. The flattening out of the images with conventional presentation methods would have changed the interaction the viewer had with the images. The border of a frame would have taken attention away from the physicality of the paper and mounting the images to the mat board would have taken away the curve of the paper edges. I believe the lack of depth would cut the work off from the viewer.

Playing in the Dark was installed in a random pattern of 48 prints. The prints are positioned between 36 inches and 72 inches from the floor, because I wanted to keep them at the eye level of the average person. The installation also made use of a 90-degree corner of the gallery wall by continuing to have prints displayed on the adjacent wall.

I chose to display 48 images, because I wanted to overwhelm the viewer with a choice of where to look. Some of the images repeat in the series, but because of the unpredictability of the lumen printing process the print surface has different color, tonality, and artifacts. I chose to repeat images, because I wanted to push back against the notion that the photograph can represent reality. I wanted to highlight the fact that each image represented a choice on the part

⁴⁸Virginia Heckert Marc Harnly, and Sarah Freeman. *Light, Paper, Process : Reinventing Photography*. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2015.

of a photographer. The scientists like Agassiz that used photography at the birth of the medium to dehumanize African Americans believe that the image epitomized some sort of truth.

There is no defined entry point for the work. The viewer must choose where to start. In giving this choice to the viewer, I'm enlisting them to participate in the process of creating meaning through looking. There are images within the work that are easier to read and some that are very abstract. Displaying the prints in this way, increases the abstraction of the entire work. I am using abstraction as a tool to push back against the power dynamics of the gaze.

Let him In (2021, figure 116) is a single-channel video that features appropriated video footage from my grandmother's church where she was a bishop. The footage is of a praise break. The praise break is the moment when a church congregation is so overcome by the Holy Spirit interrupts the sermon to dance and yell praise of joy.⁴⁹ These videos reflect my experiences as a child, when I would spend a few weeks every summer with her and would attend church two or three times a week. The video is divided up by three horizontal frames that are cropped to focus on the gestures of specific parishioners. The clips play forward once and then are reversed to highlight the viewer's attention on the sync of video. The video's low definition is overlapped with interlacing frames and other digital artifacts. The original audio tracks play unedited, but the music on the track sounds slurred and bent at times. This could be from the quality of video footage, or from the natural intonation of steel guitar that plays during the recording.

The low-quality, analog footage creates ghost-like imagery. Image deconstruction in the form of digital artifacts, ghostly figures, and grainy photographs have become important parts of my

⁴⁹ Erika Ramirez, "Exclusive: Daniel Caesar Premieres 'Praise Break' EP, Talks Creative Process & 'Violet' Video," *Billboard*, accessed on April 24, 2021, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/the-juice/6259151/exclusive-daniel-caesar-premieres-praise-break-ep-talks-creative>.

work for two reasons. First, many of the primary source materials I work from have not been properly archived and are only available in digital format with poor resolution. Secondly, I believe the ghostly images offer a comment on the nature of memory and erasure that has been a large part of the African American experience.

My memory of these church services often focuses on the music and the intensity of gesture. Both gestures and music dominate my memories of these church services. I have realized that in black gesture and music there is a language that is coded in both survival and joy. There is a moment at the beginning of the piece where my grandmother takes flight during the opening to the praise break. In this moment, she throws her arms up in the air, lifts her head up to the ceiling and, while wearing high heels shoes, hopped high enough for the tips of her shoes to leave the floor. These gestures and others like it are at the heart of the African American experience. I want this work to focus on these moments. “In the space of Afro American black expressivity we know that music occupies a privileged space, it’s like the one space in which black people’s potentiality is fully realized,” Arthur Jafa said.⁵⁰ From these micro movements seen throughout *Let Him In*, I began to understand another level of what it means to be black in America and experience joy.

⁵⁰ Arthur Jafa “Arthur Jafa about his cinema” interviewed by Judith Benhamou, *Judith Benhamou Reports*, accessed on April 24, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6YdoPFQv-1U&t=107s>.

Conclusion

In this exhibition, I have explored the complex notions of visibility in black life that spans a spectrum moving from the communal to the personal. The exhibition acknowledges and makes visible the multiple levels of connection between three important symbols of American culture production, the tobacco plant, the FSA archive, and the black body. The exhibition moves to a more personal statement on visibility with my lumen prints. In this work, I use my body as a site for a conversation on opacity and the right to be seen or unseen. Finally, the video work in the exhibition marks a new line of inquiry using appropriated footage from my grandmother's church to explore the language of black gesture and black music.

When I first started using the language of photojournalism and documentary photography, I believed in the medium's power to inspire social change based on its empathic capacity alone. I found that my initial conclusions were wrong and I needed a new way to engage with image making, specifically around the use of the black body. My solution was to directly engage the racial, social, and historical narratives informed by the white gaze to create new speculative narratives. In this process, I began to explore the visual edges of my personal history.

This exhibition marks a move in my work from an outward look at the social and political landscape to a more personal investigation. This is a space that I was not always comfortable with because of my training in journalism. As a journalist, you are expected to remove obvious traces of yourself from the work you produce. This work is the beginning of a process of mourning histories I have never known and reclaiming a place for myself and my family in the American landscape that is free of racial trauma. Ultimately, this process may prove to be futile, but I believe that it will create a foundation to truly know myself. The creative direction I have

started in this exhibition will be continued in my work as I dive deeper into my personal history and my connection to the American landscape.

Illustrations

Figure 1. Raymond Thompson jr, *Justice Undone- The Campfire*, 2012

Figure 2. Raymond Thompson Jr, *Imaging/Imagining- Elissa*, 2017

Figure 3. Carleton E. Watkins, *Cathedral Rock, 2600 Feet, Yosemite, No.2*, 1866

Figure 4. Raymond Thompson Jr, *Appalachian Ghost #1*, 2018

Figure 5. Jerry Burchfield, *Pista Stratiates - Floating Lettuce*

Figure 6. Willian Fox Talbot, *An oak tree in winter, Lacock*, 1842-43

Figure 7. Louis Jacques Mande Daguerre, *Boulevard du Temple*, Paris, 1838

Figure 8. Joseph T. Zealy, Jack (driver), Guinea, plantation of B.F. Taylor, Esq., Columbia, S.C., 1850

Figure 9. Binh Danh, *Shock and Awe*, 2008

Figure 10. Raymond Thompson Jr, *Playing in the Dark*, 2021

Figure 11. Roy DeCarava, from *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, 1955

Figure 12. *Dawoud Bey Untitled #25 (Lake Erie and Sky)*, from the series *Night Coming Tenderly*, Black, 2017.

Figure 13. Dionne Lee, *North*, 2019

Figure 14. Derrick Woods-Morrow, *Frederic on Lake Pontchartrain* | *after Lincoln Beach*, 2019

Figure 15. Raymond Thompson Jr, *the trauma of white light*, 2020

Figure 16. Raymond Thompson Jr, *Let him in (3:44)*, 2021

Figure 17. Raymond Thompson Jr, After Dorothea Lange and the trauma of white light #7, 2020

Figure 18. Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother*, Nipomo, CA, 1936

Figure 19. Sherrie Levine, *After Walker Evans: 4*, 1981

Figure 20. Raymond Thompson Jr, *Playing in the Dark* detail #1, 2021

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