

Evolving Definitions of Power Relations in the United States through Language as Form

Caitlyn Wilson

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington

2018

Committee:

Helen O'Toole

Zhi Lin

Ann Gale

David Brody

Ryan Weatherly

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Art

©Copyright 2018

Caitlyn Wilson

University of Washington

Abstract

Evolving Definitions of Power Relations in the United States through Language as Form

Caitlyn Wilson

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Helen O'Toole

Department of Art

Each work has specific content that is derived from absorbing writing from scholars. These writings vary in specificity but relate to larger subjects of interest. My overarching areas of study include form as content, positionality, present day colonialism, power relations within the U.S., evolving definitions, continued racism, and how secular ethics combined with an improved education system can help us move in a positive direction. In order to make sense of where we stand today as a nation and also as individual citizens within society, we have to understand the past and how these relationships continue to morph through time. Through my research and utilizing language as form, I learn how we operate in a society of changing definitions and hope to expand my curiosity to the public.

The discovery of the plurality of cultures is never a harmless experience.

When we discover that there are several cultures instead of just one and consequently at the time when we acknowledge the end of a sort of cultural monopoly, be it illusory or real, we are threatened with the destruction of our own discovery. Suddenly it becomes possible that there are just others, that we ourselves are an “other” among others. All meaning and every goal having disappeared, it becomes possible to wander through civilizations as if through vestiges and ruins. The whole of mankind becomes an imaginary museum: where shall we go this weekend—visit the Angkor ruins or take a stroll in the Tivoli of Copenhagen? We can very easily imagine a time close at hand when any fairly well to do person will be able to leave his country indefinitely in order to taste his own national death in an interminable aimless voyage.

-Paul Ricoeur 1962

In my studio, making is a means for asking questions, for understanding and learning. Researching my interests fuels my practice; it is through research that I am able to create work that is meaningful for me and for others. The process of making the work is partly comprehending information and also bringing thoughts forward to present publicly, not to present an answer, but to plant a seed in the socially conscious individual. I firmly stand by being foremost an artist and implementing interests and concerns into my practice. I do not disseminate calculated information to the masses; I am concerned with getting people to think for themselves and to ask questions. I want to make it clear that I don't believe that the museum/gallery is a place solely for social justice. I think art needs to talk about many more things than political, environmental, ethical issues, etc. because there is so much more that art can do. Understanding the current political environment in the United States through a genealogical analysis and also through individual experience is what truly captivates me right now and that is how I choose what to make art about and why it is important for me to make.

My unquenchable thirst to understand the present socio-political state of our "nation" and how we function in society on an individual level was born last summer from an artist residency trip to Singapore. Through the many filters of my own social bias, I witnessed and participated in (through silence) acts of social violence. Though my inclusion was unintentional and only later realized, and though (to most listeners) the situations I could recall may seem trivial; the sensation that I had in fact been guilty of participation put a burning need in my mind to comprehend what micro-aggressions are and how we still live segregated lives on individual, localized, institutional, and global levels. Although my interests reach as far as worldwide colonialism, and though there is far more information in this world regarding the history of power relations than I could ever sort through, I attempt to bridge gaps in my knowledge through

research focusing on the United States. Although my traveling involved harsh realizations, and though I have traveled several times before, I have come to realize it is the accumulation of several recent events that demands me to teach myself what I have not been previously taught. The events that I experienced in Singapore in conjunction with the election of President Trump, the murder of Charleena Lyles by local Seattle police, and the rise of White Nationalists in the south (the region I grew up in) are the root causes for this passion to attempt an understanding of the evolving definitions of power relations within the United States.

I do not want to speak on behalf of any “group” of people that I do not historically identify with. I am a white person speaking from my own positionality about personal experience and researched information. To quote Robin DiAngelo who holds a Doctoral degree in Critical Racial & Social Justice Education from the University of Washington:

*Positionality is the concept that our perspectives (what we see or don't see, what we know or don't know) are based on our positions within the social hierarchy. Positionality recognizes that where you stand in relation to others in society shapes what you can see and understand.*¹

I know that addressing so many issues in one paper is constrictive of how far I can delve into any one specific issue, however; my reasoning for doing this is that I believe knowledge is relational and I have to paint a whole picture in order for the larger ideas to be understood.

¹ Robin DiAngelo, *What Does it Mean to be White?* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2016), 80.

*The concept of addressing history in a way that brings to light the multitude of effects and consequences of traditions, formations of institutions, and power relations, etc. is necessary in understanding our socio-political present.*²

I favor West's genealogical materialist analysis method to analyze conceptions of race, nation, colonialism, etc. This method serves to address these issues in a microinstitutional (localized), macroinstitutional, and genealogical level and I also add to that the self-experiential (positionality) that Robin DiAngelo describes. This format provides insight on how I comprehend socio-political issues and is the foundation my studio practice revolves around.

The quality of knowledge disseminated and the amount of respect cultivated in our public schools for Indigenous tribes differ depending on the school's geographical location. This statement comes from a place of personal experience. Growing up, I attended public schools in Tennessee where we learned very little about Indigenous tribes, and much less about settler colonialism. What we did learn was an incorrect history obscured through U.S. Exceptionalism, language, and white culture sprinkled with crafty projects in "native dress". Much later in life I understood these "celebrations" to be a gross form of cultural appropriation and highly offensive to some. Since moving to Seattle last year, and through daily conversations with locals, I have noticed that people here are a lot more educated about Native American history, cultural values, and geographical displacement than I am. I understand that the reason for a higher population of Native Americans here is due to the geographical nature of colonialism. Certainly the simple fact that there are more Native Americans living in the Pacific Northwest Region than in the South plays a roll in the higher concentration of education about the people, history, and culture. Still, I

² Cornell West, *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America* (Abingdon: Routledge, Inc., 1993) 261.

notice a lot of tribe's symbols around Seattle and I wonder if they are being misused or misinterpreted.

I am continually replacing the misinformation I was taught in southern public schools with actual accounts of history and culture. It is necessary to bring up the mass genocide and geographical displacement Americans brought on the natives and the power we continue to exert over them because this tragedy is the foundation of the United States and sets our nation's first example of colonization; a continued colonization. To recognize this is to be able to begin further understanding of how U.S. colonization is alive and functioning today.

During settler colonialism, Native American way of life was not seen as legitimate or even worthy of acknowledging. Indigenous definitions of place and belonging were disregarded in constructing American land ownership. Native conceptions of land exist as storied and symbolic relationships in contrast to American geo-political conceptions of land ownership defined by borders and citizenship.³ Because Natives define property rights differently than Americans, we claimed our right to land through "just" property transactions; often these transactions were misinterpreted due to language barriers. They were conducted through the lens of American/English understanding of rights to ownership.⁴ Americans said that the land had been left in its natural state, it had not been marked by human hands therefore it was "waste" and that left it vulnerable to become the object of settlement. Justification for the American settlement of the land also surfaced in the term "possession". Americans argued that because the land was left in its natural state, the Indians did not truly possess the land, so therefore they were not considered to be the first people to own the land according to U.S. definitions.⁵ During settler

³ Alyosha Goldstein, *Formations of United States Colonialism* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2014) 16.

⁴ Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property" *Harvard Law Review*, Volume 106, Number 8 (1993): 1721.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1721.

colonialism, definitions of white possession were seen as legitimate, Indian definitions of possession were deemed too ambiguous.

This idea of “firsting” the land is woven into whiteness and possession. Alyosha Goldstein describes territory as “land occupied by violence”.⁶ The continued exploitation of land and resources denies the existence of violent human expendability in order for the U.S. to maintain its empirical status. This empirical status was obtained through settler colonialism, through the accumulation of land and resources by violent dispossession, and justified through white American definitions of ownership and entitlement.

The U.S. fails to resolve ongoing disputes of its colonization of Native Americans and actively tries to affirm and normalize its status as native to the continent. Money and resources for millions of acres of land are still owed to Native Americans and many of them are now considered a “landless” people. They are a people who largely remain invisible in our mainstream culture and when they are represented it is through stereotypical and often degrading ways.⁷ The media has imprinted an image in our mind that Americans oftentimes too readily accept as truth. One example that permeates parts of our current daily life is the Washington Redskin’s logo and name. These types of imagery are easily digestible for us because they mask the harsh reality of settler colonialism and racism through symbolism.

Settler colonialism and racial slavery were the beginnings of modern racism.⁸ My curiosity about the origins of race in relation to slave labor led me to the infamous John Locke. It surprised me to learn the enlightenment thinker and “Father of Liberalism” played a huge role in defining the inseparable relationship of black skin and slavery within the colonies. Although

⁶ Goldstein, “Formations of United States Colonialism.”

⁷ DiAngelo, “What Does it Mean to be White?”

⁸David R. Roediger, *How Race Survived US History: From Settlement and Slavery to the Obama Phenomenon* (New York, Verso, 2002), XD.

Locke never physically went to the colonies, he was part of the British colonial empire and helped write Carolina policy. Locke and other men of the colonial empire looked to the island of Barbados for inspiration for the Carolina policy. Due to the small size of the island, colonialists were unable to convince indentured servants to become settlers of the island because they had a better chance of getting more land in the colonies. This meant that African slaves did all labor on the island, which resulted in all slave labor of Barbados being associated with black skin. By 1668 Barbados had a racialized slave code backed by law under the title: “An Act declaring the Negro Slaves of the Island to be Real Estates”. Morgan Godwyn, the minister in Barbados, stated in 1680 that “Those two words, Negro and Slave” had become inseparable and “white” was synonymous with European.⁹ When Locke brought colonizers from Barbados to Carolina, he also brought this inseparable connection between skin color and slavery that spread like a disease in the colonies. Plantation agriculture linked with African slavery allowed Locke and his men to benefit wildly off of the black body since African Slavery was more profitable than Indentured Servitude. Locke justified his exploitation of forced human labor by concluding that African slaves and their children were legitimate war captives and because the war was ongoing, their enslavement was just.¹⁰

Beginning with the colonization of Native American lands and use of Africans as slaves, colonists started to see “race” as colored. Slaves were *black*, Indians were *red*, and colonists were *white*. The focus became about how people who aren’t white are different and how it is bad to be any race but white. This type of race thinking constructed a false sense of whiteness as superior. These colored bodies functioned differently in colonial society under symbols of stereotypes in terms of culture, socio-economic position, temperament, and language.

⁹ Ibid., 9-10.

¹⁰ Ibid., 11.

Differences were emphasized between the new groups. These differences have continued to be pointed out in our society through our past of slavery, settler colonialism, Jim Crow Laws, overseas empire, and hostility about immigration.¹¹ The systematizing of distinctions between races was created and is maintained by those in power (predominantly, white elites).

In order to understand how this pitting of races against each other to produce capital gain was allowed in a nation that boasted freedom and equality, that sold itself as anti-feudalist to its citizens, I looked to the actions of those in power. Slave-owning Thomas Jefferson argued that science proved biological differences between people of color and whites. Scientists began searching for reasons as to how whites were superior to other races. The American Scientist Samuel Morton stated that brain capacity and skull size were linked and noted that because Caucasians had the greatest skull capacity, they held superiority over all nations of the earth. Samuel A. Cartwright and other scientists during the years of racial slavery claimed Africans were prone to mental illnesses and weak offspring.¹² Because these claims were backed by science, slavery and racial capitalism could be supported in court through “scientific evidence”. Scientific racism served to validate racial slavery. Jefferson’s toting of white racial superiority came to be accepted as fact.

Regardless of race holding no real biological meaning aside from difference in appearance, it has gained social meaning through our history in the exploitation of human labor.¹³ Whiteness quickly became the characteristic of free human beings, of human beings possessing what we would now consider to be basic human rights.¹⁴ To be white was to possess the ability to control, to own human bodies, to hold the legal rights that allowed profit from

¹¹ Ibid., xiii.

¹² DiAngelo, “What Does it Mean to be White?”

¹³ Ibid., 102.

¹⁴ Harris, “Whiteness as Property.”

forced human service. Even after the Emancipation Proclamation, Jim Crow Laws allowed white privilege to grow and further solidified the relationship of white skin with ownership and property rights.¹⁵ Whiteness became more than just a racial classification. Being white meant possessing the benefits of a higher social, legal, political, economic, and institutional status.¹⁶ It is easy to imagine an individual wanting to hold onto these benefits, of protecting their access to them at any cost, of identifying with an “us” and “them” mentality. Being white meant the psychological freedom of having a race. Whiteness became the baseline to humanity, an object of entitlement, and an identity with expected benefits.

This social idea of white racial superiority has continued to have profound negative effects on every level of our society. On an individual level, people of color may experience internalized racial oppression. This type of oppression refers to embedded beliefs and related behaviors that are accepted by people raised in our current white supremacist society and may include feelings of powerlessness, inferiority, or self-hate.¹⁷ While I could never understand how it feels to experience internalized racial oppression because I am white, I know it is important for white people to be aware of and accept as truth. These embedded behaviors and beliefs of our society projected onto people of color continue to perpetuate the cycle of systemic racism. (I personally have difficulty using the term “people of color” even if it is acceptable to most, because I feel like it groups people with different histories into one overarching category; therefore generalizing and further grouping people together who are not white. You could literally just say “non-white” and it would be the same as “people of color”. Obviously, I have

¹⁵ Harris, “Whiteness as Property.”

¹⁶ DiAngelo, “What Does it Mean to be White?”

¹⁷ Ibid., 153.

failed to come up with a better solution for this flaw in language.) Internalized racial oppression helps to keep the dominant narrative of our racialized society in tact.

There are countless statistics proving that racism is still alive and functioning today on more than an individual level. White college graduates find jobs twice as quickly as black college graduates.¹⁸ The median net worth of white families is estimated at \$265,000 and \$28,500 for black families.¹⁹ Contrary to recent popular beliefs, this is not a result of one race working harder than the other; this is the product of long-term institutionalized racism. On a localized level here in Seattle, I have seen more racially segregated neighborhoods than I did growing up in Tennessee. This fact surprised me because I had heard so much about how “liberal” and “inclusive” Seattle was before moving here and I definitely expected a different vibe than I was greeted with. In fact, 69 percent of white people live in north Seattle while south Seattle houses only 28 percent of the city’s population of white people.²⁰ I can’t help but think about this in relation to the terms “good neighborhood” and “good schools” when what is clearly meant is “white neighborhood, white schools.”

Part of what perpetuates white privilege is when white people remain silent about racial issues and do not contribute to the conversation in order to challenge systems of oppression. Since we are in positions of power more than other races, we possess the ability to oppress. I do not believe white people should feel guilty about being born white; I feel that it is important to acknowledge how we still operate from a position of power so that we can accept our position in society and have the knowledge needed in order to challenge it. As a white individual, I want to be aware of unbiased histories of racial oppression and white supremacy; histories that go

¹⁸ Ibid., 113.

¹⁹ Ibid., 111.

²⁰ Jamala Henderson, “Why is Seattle so Racially Segregated” KUOW, September 20th, 2016. <http://kuow.org/post/why-seattle-so-racially-segregated>.

untaught or miss-taught in public schools. I aim for a deeper understanding of how systems of oppression and violence have operated in the past and how they continue to evolve and exist today. Acknowledging this continued history is the first step to dismantling white privilege and enables listening with an informed mind. I am presenting research, self-experience, and continual learning as a way to understand how I exist as a citizen of this world and of this nation and how I can best incorporate this knowledge in a way that provokes dialogue in my artistic practice.

When white people are confronted for saying or acting racist in some way whether intentional or not, we sometimes lash out in anger and rebuttal. The reason this happens is because we have accepted that we exist in a binary culture where you are either racist or not racist; there is no way to exist in-between. We try to defend ourselves from being perceived as racist by casting ourselves as individuals in society. When we do this we can say that we are different from other white people, that we have good moral values: we don't see color, we don't discriminate, and we don't possess social bias (all three of these are impossible because we are all born inheriting social bias). The problem with this individualism is that it disregards history, it hides the distribution of wealth and opportunity and its accumulation over hundreds of years to benefit whites today.²¹ This individualized mode of thought makes it impossible to build community and shared understanding. It also means that we don't have to experience the discomfort of realizing our implicit biases. It is easy for white people to ignore racism (or believe it doesn't exist) when we experience the privilege of not being forced to confront it on a daily basis; individualism promotes this behavior and elites benefit from this individualized citizenry.

When we lack community, we look for ways to define ourselves in order to feel like we have meaning in our lives. Our focus turns to checking off the imagined boxes of life that society

²¹ DiAngelo, "What Does it Mean to be White?"

tells us we want. Our intellectual class is overly concerned with the self, wealth, materialism, and the image they project into their social circle. This materialism is a form of control that is pushed on us through large corporations that have the resources to influence the media and political process. We are distracted from having concern about the state of the world and the condition of our communities by being subservient to the elite. The result being highly educated individuals that make sure they got that college degree to award them financial stability so that they can have enough money to retire and possess everything they desire. It keeps us in the cycle of consuming things we don't truly want and constantly grasping in the wrong direction for happiness and connection. The byproduct of individualism is a depoliticized people colored with cynicism and apathy; we feel disengaged, demoralized, and socially powerless.²²

*"Wherever people feel safe they will be indifferent"*²³ -Susan Sontag

Instead of fostering local communities, there has been significant effort to create and maintain national identity. The concept of national identity thrives because of our inherent biological need for belonging to something larger than ourselves. Historically, if we are alone we die, so we naturally long for this connection as a mode of survival. This aspect of human existence makes us vulnerable to hurriedly accept any notion of community and safety in our lives. Beginning with our education system and continuing through media, we are presented with a national narrative that moves through time in a shared, linear way. The idea of "nation" is

²² Noam Chomsky, *Profit Over People: Neoliberalism and Global Order* (New York, Seven Stories Press, 1999), 11.

²³ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003), 100.

imagined because we will only ever know the tiniest fraction of our fellow citizens.²⁴ Our national narrative paints an image of communion; this unity doesn't actually exist. To be critical of the concept of "nation" is to question how, when, and why these narratives are being presented. Part of Noam Chomsky's work that I feel is particularly useful as a critical view on the idea of nation is the call for democratic activists to reestablish our media system so that it can be open to antitcorporate and antineoliberal perspectives.²⁵

Our nation functions as a political community, it is limited by its' borders and possesses the power to make decisions on behalf of its inhabitants.²⁶ Our political leaders use the term "national security" as a way to make us feel united, like we are safer together. This language also serves to justify the colonial actions of our government; I am referring to settler colonialism and also to our possession of overseas territory and ongoing military presence in foreign countries. This exploitation of land and people is a way for the United States to maintain its' empirical status.²⁷ The argument of national security is that the U.S. invades in order to protect the state of the "nation" and creates a false sense of security among the people. The presence of our military in foreign countries is sold as national security and marketed as liberal democracy; we are told that we are helping less powerful nations by helping them set up their own democratic government, helping them be successful like us. This contributes to the national narrative that the U.S. is a helpful, and selfless nation.

²⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York, Verso, 1983), 62.

²⁵ Chomsky, "Profit Over People."

²⁶ Anderson, "Imagined Communities."

²⁷ Julian Go, *Patterns of Empire: The British and American Empires, 1668 to the Present* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2011), ix.

*“America is not the crude stereotype of a self-interested empire. The United States has been one of the greatest sources of progress that the world has ever known. We were born out of revolution against an empire. We were founded upon the ideal that all are created equal, and we have shed blood and struggles for centuries to give meaning to those words—within our borders, and around the world.”*²⁸ –President Barack H. Obama (2009)

Obama’s words are an example of our constructed national narrative. The constitution is an object used to exemplify how much we value freedom and how we could never be empirical because we are not Britain. We seem to keep coming back to this document as a way to justify the violence of our colonialist actions. National identity is formed by the idea that the U.S. is exceptional to all other nations because we are unique in these characteristics. National narrative serves as a system of knowledge that justifies everything the government does; it is a collective memory that is constructed by those in power. The problem with collective memory is that it is a historical, chronological memory that promotes a general intellect and fails to address truths about the atrocities committed and the continued affects of violence and oppression. This is why the genealogical method is a more ideal way of understanding that searches for truths and draws nonlinear connections instead of relying on an incomplete historical narrative. When we use this method we can reject prevailing ideas of history in the name of genealogy.²⁹ Thinking this happened, then this, then that erases the violence and displacement of groups of people who are not white.

²⁸ Barack Obama, “Text: Obama’s Speech in Cairo,” The New York Times, June, 4, 2009. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/04/us/politics/04obama.text.html>

²⁹ West, “Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America”

“Memory is the art of forgetting. It doesn’t deal with reality, reality is not what engages it, it has no substantial relation whatsoever to that inexpressible, infinite complexity that is reality itself, in the same way and to the same extent that we ourselves are unable to reach the point where we can catch even a glimpse of this indescribable, infinite complexity..... the rememberer always works starting from the essence of the image about to be evoked, an essence that has no reality, and not even starting from a mistake, for he fails to recall reality not by making a mistake, but because he handles what is complex in the loosest and most arbitrary manner, by infinitely simplifying the infinitely complex to arrive at something relative to which he has a certain distance, and this is how memory is sweet, this is how memory is dazzling, and this is how memory comes to be heartrending and enchanting...”³⁰ - Lázló Krasnahorkai

It is important to address nation and collective memory through image. Our memories, both individual and collective, are categorized through image. It is not possible to separate image from memory. In our collective national memory we use images as markers for historical references of the western concept of time and national narrative. In elementary school we learn to associate Native American culture with teepees, feathers, Christopher Columbus, and Thanksgiving. We carry these learned image symbols with us our entire lives until we learn truths behind the symbols, and even then it is difficult to separate that implicit bias from memory. We are taught in school that racism exists in the past and “the pictures lock the story in our mind”.³¹ I feel confident that the names Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, and Wilma Rudolph bring particular images and symbols of freedom and equality to our collective national

³⁰ Lázló Krasnahorkai, *The World Goes On* (New York, New Directions Publishing Corporation, 2017), 95.

³¹ Sontag, “Regarding the Pain of Others.”

narrative. The election of Barack Obama as president left people feeling hope that the nation had finally moved beyond race.³² Though I agree that these images represent progress in so many ways, we should not use these images as justification to believe that racism is over; if we live in such an all-accepting, pluralist society, then segregation would not exist and it is statistically clear that it still does. The images that outline our collective national narrative oversimplify issues that are infinitely complex.

The idea of nation as defined by our closed geographical totality and our oversimplification of historical narrative through images creates a fictive collective identity in what is clearly a very segregated society. Our increased military presence in overseas nations, increased hostility towards immigration, and rise of white nationalist hate groups are politically rationalized products of this miss-identification. American nation building has always included some form of colonialism and racism. Foucault sums it up brilliantly:

*“The war that is going on beneath order and peace, the war that undermines our society and divides it in a binary mode is, basically, a race war.”*³³

I don't think it is possible to accurately discuss any aspect of our society without addressing how systemic racism affects every level of it. The more comfortable we become with handling discomfort while talking about issues regarding race, the better we understand how to change.

*“Perhaps too much value is assigned to memory, not enough to thinking”*³⁴ – Susan

Sontag

³² Roediger, “How Race Survived U.S. History.”

³³ Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the College De France, 1975-76* (New York, Picador, 2003), 60.

To initiate change is to be involved in public discourse negating our current socio-political climate. Of course no matter what you do, you are a citizen of this capitalist society, but I think daily individual choices and communities you choose to engage with based on inner values and secular ethics lets you choose how you exist and affect others as an individual citizen. The more attention and education that is brought to our communities, the greater the potential for radicalization of the general intellect. To negate the consumer citizen outcome currently produced by neoliberalism we can voice support for more public meeting places, interaction with our neighbors, labor unions, better public education, etc..³⁵ Compassion, love, and community building should be implemented in education. We should focus on dialogue over violence, what unites us instead of what divides us.³⁶

“Art is the most radical thing possible; you get to do what you think.” –Irena Haiduk

I want to address how my research interfaces with my studio practice by way of space, form, artistic influence, process, and concept. Sources for my studio practice do not end with my current research. To paint a more comprehensive picture of my work, I will describe my broad style of sourcing that seems to work best for me. During my undergraduate degree, I was lucky enough to have a professor that taught me how to open my eyes to everything around me and to use what I observe on a daily basis in my work. Much of the aesthetic and formal choices in my work come from my obsessive interest in ordinary sights like graffiti, industrial architecture,

³⁴ Sontag, “Regarding the Pain of Others.”

³⁵ Chomsky, “Profit Over People.”

³⁶ Dalai Lama, *An Appeal to the World: The Way to Peace in a Time of Division* (New York, Benevento Publishing, 2017), 41.

stains on the street, trash, and fashion. I have been particularly obsessed with power lines since 2014. I take a lot of photographs of them and I see that they influence my work on a formal level. Part of the intrigue for me is the weight of them as a line and how they are drawn in space. More recently I have taken interest in the wire-y and springy, weighty line connections between train cars. Their form functions as a type of metaphor in my work; how they have two opposing functionalities: to connect and to restrict bodily movement.

Over the years of making, I have realized how much my history of dancing and of being a musician has structured not only the forms in my work but also the way I physically make the work. I started ballet at 3 years old and progressed to tap, jazz, hip-hop and eventually competition dance. I switched from dancing to playing trombone when I was in my early teens, starting with concert band and later adding in jazz band. In high school I switched instruments from trombone to electric bass until I finally found my place in creating art in college. Movement and listening to music have been fundamental while making since the first series of charcoal drawings I completed during my undergraduate degree. For me, making is a very active process in which I am constantly moving around the work and moving the work itself around my studio. The music that I choose to listen to encourages the feeling and movement apparent in the work itself. Sometimes the connection is from the lyrics of the song and sometimes it is in the feeling I get from listening to the music. To be more specific, I listen to a lot of avant-garde, experimental, and sampling music. A few of the musicians I have listened to while making work for my thesis include: Benjamin Clementine, Jaubi, Erik Satie, Daniel Lanois, Yussef Kamal, J Dilla, and more. This type of music and these feelings I embody while working correlates with ideas that stem from research and expressed through the movement in the form of the work.

To be clear about feeling and form as content I want to address how Mark Rothko and Cy Twombly have shaped my view of making. In 2011 I saw works by these artists as part of the MOCA's permanent collection. I remember the first time I saw a Rothko painting very vividly. I had this out of body experience standing in front of his work, like an all encompassing humming vibration. I then saw a Cy Twombly drawing and thought "how beautiful this swirling line drawn over and over" and I couldn't understand how it was so captivating and meaningful. Through the experience of seeing their work, I knew I could be an artist in a meaningful way and it is what I strive for in everything I make. Art has the capacity to embody some idea so clearly that it can physically and mentally alter the person who experiences it. For these reasons, abstraction has been my preferred method of working since I began making; it is what feels closest to a direct translation of my intentions.

My studio practice has its own mode of thought that I adapted from a speech John Cleese gave called "On Creativity". He explained different states of mind that he termed open and closed. In the open mode we are more relaxed and better able to be creative and in the closed state of mind we are able to apply ourselves to tasks with intense concentration and vigor. I run this model in my studio by allowing for a certain amount of arbitrariness into my practice. Sometimes I see a material I find interesting or a random idea pops into my head and I allow myself to play around with it in the studio without having any particular idea in mind for what it should turn into. The product of that time of play could be anything and I don't try to delegate what it has to be in terms of content. After this material inquiry, I enter the closed mode by asking myself some very basic questions—questions I learned to ask myself from Denzil Hurley. Denzil came into my studio last winter quarter and asked me "What are you contextualizing?" and "What are you really trying to get at in your work?" At the time, I had no idea how to answer

these questions, but now I find myself checking to make sure that I can and it has served for great transformation in my work.

After I have the answers to these questions, which I now sometimes get through preliminary sketches thanks to the persistence of my professors, I can finally enter into that closed mode that John Cleese describes. In that time I enter a hyper-focus on saying what I have to say as best as I can. Sometimes the work doesn't line up with my intentions and I have to re-enter the open mode again. This format of working gives me the space to relax and let something new and unexpected happen that carries over into other projects or ends up transforming the current one.

The form in all of my work within the past year, whether it has been drawing, painting, installation, or somewhere in between, have all been influenced by Strzeminski and Kobra's theory of sculpture:

The painting has natural limits that are determined by the dimensions of the canvas. It cannot go beyond its natural limits. This is why the construction of the painting takes its limits as a point of departure...A sculpture, on the other hand, does not have such natural limits, defined a priori. Hence the natural law must be for a sculpture not to enclose itself within a volume, but to unite with the totality of space, the saturation of space by the sculpture, the fusion of the sculpture in space and its link with it constitute the organic law of sculpture.

The spatiotemporality of the work of art is related to its variability. We call spatiotemporal the spatial changes produced in time. Those variations are functions of the third dimension, of depth, which, although momentarily hidden, nevertheless reveals its existence

while transforming the appearance of the work of art, the appearance of each form, in creating variability; when the spectator moves, certain forms present themselves, others hide; the perception of these forms changes constantly.

Both Ann Gale and Denzil asked me what the forms inside my painting were doing; a question I couldn't even comprehend at the time. I let that question sit with me and through reading Yves Alain Bois' *Painting as Model* and re-hashing the writing of Kopro and Stzemiński, I came to realize what it meant to me to create those forms. I was familiar with moving the canvas that I worked on around my studio, but I started thinking of being inside the painting, of creating an atmosphere and a place inside of that two-dimensional surface. This thinking helped lead me to make three-dimensional forms out of found objects and also to hanging my paintings as objects themselves to be walked around. A painting, a drawing, an installation, all derived from the same headspace.

Richard Serra is one of my favorite sculptors and has been a steady influence of mine since the first time I experienced his work. I love the way he delineates space. The inescapable presence of his work is so clear in its' intentionality that you can't help but physically feel it. To me, there exists a resonance so strong when you share space with his work that you can almost hear it. That almost audible resonance is something I strive to have in my work. Serra also helped me connect my love of language with the forms in my work. Of course this seed was initially planted with Twombly, but Serra's word lists provide a different approach that I find useful. I now keep word lists for every work that I make. They help give tactility and voice to what I want to say within the work and they help me from straying from my intentionality. More recently I came across Carl Andre's poems, which influenced me to keep a grid journal that runs

tangential to my studio practice. This is part of that “arbitrariness” that I allow in my studio and I believe it influences the finished works I produce. I am also inspired by the way he visually organizes language and I have applied a similar relationship between form and language in my paintings.

To address the topic of space, I think my work has better results when I am aware of the context it will be shown in. I try to take into account the shape of the space and what social context that space is associated with. I prefer to work this way, if I can, rather than making something and then putting it in some arbitrary space afterwards. The form of my work is often influenced by the space it is shown in. When constructing my solo show, *Positionality*, I was able to realize this fully for the first time. I was not able to choose the space, but knowing the space and having time to install in it made the work much more succinct. I was able to work in a way where I had several projects going at once and let them evolve and materialize at the same time. It gave me the opportunity to show my three-dimensional work alongside my paintings and it allowed for better understanding of the way my thoughts oscillate between mediums.

The show took the jumping off point of a residency in Singapore and evaluated the term *Positionality*. After returning to the United States, I continued to expand upon my experience by questioning how my perception of the world is relative to my nationality, my language, my race, and my position within society as a whole. This body of work continues to investigate and raise questions about the ways in which we are socially conditioned to make sense of ourselves in relation to the world we share. The work incorporates the architecture of Philip Cox (specifically his double helix bridge), and writings from the social philosopher Frantz Fanon, Dr. Robin DiAngelo, and American poet Morgan Parker.

Morgan Parker's poem *99 Problems* inspired one of the paintings that I showed in *Positionality* this past November.³⁷ The poem is essentially a list of issues that she encounters in her life ranging from an individual level to an institutional level; a lot of them revolve around how racism continues to function in our society. I was inspired by her directness, which I often feel an absence of since moving to this region of the United States. I also love the syntax of the poem and felt that I could relate to the way she uses language. I decided to generate my own list of words derived from personal experiences I had during my time in Singapore. The words deal with witnessing racism and experiencing silence of others and silence of myself in those situations.

Julie Mehretu is a visual artist who uses language and form, but in a more abstract way that is largely through mark making. For the new paintings she has installed in the SF MOMA, she took photographs of recent political events and digitally manipulated them and then printed them on the canvas of her paintings.³⁸ She describes the process as embedding the paintings with a sort of DNA. I think of language in my work as a form of DNA. The language is derived from my research, from the content that the work is made from. Sometimes this language is indecipherable through looking. The reason for this is that I am more concerned about making the work out of an experience or out of learning than I am of presenting explicit information that instructs viewers on what to think or how to feel. When I do allow the language to be legible in the form, or when I make that language clear in the title of the work, I aim for the language to prompt questions rather than provide answers.

Cornelia Parker is a conceptual artist who is successful in prompting dialogue. What draws me to her work is her ability to keep her mind open to new information. She's always

³⁷ Morgan Parker, *There are More Beautiful Things than Beyoncé* (New York, Tin House Books, 2017) 66-69.

³⁸ Julie Mehretu, "Politicized Landscapes: Art21", YouTube Video, 1:19, Posted September 13, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=xcM31F4Es_s.

collecting and responding to that information in her work. Her work isn't predictable and I don't see it as having a linear progression. I appreciate how she approaches her practice by thinking of what material would be appropriate for her idea instead of using what is convenient or what she already knows how to use. I strive to be that concise in my own work and hope I can reach that level of open exploration. In her recent work *Magna Carta*, Cornelia addresses how the Magna Carta carries enormous symbolic power as an ancient defense against arbitrary and tyrannical rulers, and also for individual liberties. She noticed how most of the clauses have been repealed or replaced by other legislation and the lack of dialogue about it among the people. The Wikipedia page was hand embroidered by hundreds of citizens, from prisoners, to lawyers, to Edward Snowden, whose contribution was the word "Liberty".³⁹ I admire how Cornelia's work often carries this element of time—a displacement of time—a sense of something that is being taken up again.

In my own work I explore a similar interest in observing history in relation to the present, often by way of texts that I am thinking through and connecting how it relates to contemporary society. One example is Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. He discusses the effects British Colonization of Algeria had on the natives; specifically how the only way the natives felt like they could truly become decolonized was through violence.⁴⁰ I've been thinking about the term "colonization" and how it has changed over time. As I mentioned earlier, we initially defined colonization by the way we stole land from Native Americans and claimed to be here first, through the literal violence of geographical displacement, outright stripping of culture, land, language and dress. Now we station our military in other countries and call it "national security".

³⁹ Cornelia Parker, "One of Britain's most celebrated artists, Cornelia Parker has created a new artwork", YouTube Video, 0:58, Posted May 17, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x1m80QablvA>.

⁴⁰ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York, Grove Press, 1963).

The way this connection enters my work is through language and form. As I learn and begin to understand the history, I take language from the text and translate it into visual form.

In my painting “Language of Politics” I use the terms “Neoliberalism” and “Liberal Democracy” to create form. The terms are both legible and obscured through the form of the painting. I want to address how political language is often used in a way that is purposefully confusing to the masses. Politicians often say liberal democracy to disguise what is actually neoliberalism. Often there are two sides to the same term: one side is the literal textbook definition of the term and the other is whatever the United States happens to be advocating at the time. “Neoliberalism” is a term that I have struggled to understand clearly because of this intentional confusion. Exploring these terms through visual form as I learn about evolving definitions helps me address the ways language is being used by our current political leaders and hopefully inspires others to draw their own conclusions on how language is being used against U.S. citizens.

Each work has specific content that is derived from absorbing writing from scholars. These writings vary in specificity but relate to larger subjects of interest. To reiterate, my overarching areas of study include form as content, positionality, present day colonialism, power relations within the U.S., evolving definitions, continued racism, and how secular ethics combined with an improved education system can help us move in a positive direction. In order to make sense of where we stand today as a nation and also as individual citizens within society, we have to understand the past and how these relationships continue to morph through time. Through my research and utilizing language as form, I learn how we operate in a society of changing definitions and hope to expand my curiosity to the public.

Bibliography

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso, 1983.
- Chomsky, Noam. *Profit Over People: Neoliberalism and Global Order*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 1999.
- DiAngelo, Robin. *What Does it Mean to be White?* New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2016.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press, 1963.
- Foucault, Michel. *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the College De France, 1975-76*. New York: Picador, 1997.
- Go, Julian. *Patterns of Empire: The British and American Empires, 1688 to the Present*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Goldstein, Alyosha. *Formations of United States Colonialism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.
- Harris, Cheryl I. "Whiteness as Property", *Harvard Law Review*, Volume 106, Number 8. June, 1993.
- Henderson, Jamala. "Why is Seattle So Racially Segregated?" KUOW, September 20, 2016. <http://kuow.org/post/why-seattle-so-racially-segregated>.
- Krasznahorkai, László. *The World Goes On*. New York: New Directions Books, 2017.
- Lama, Dalai. *An Appeal to the World: The Way to Peace in a Time of Division*. New York: Benevento Publishing, 2017.
- Mehretu, Julie. "Politicized Landscapes: Art21", YouTube Video, 1:19, Posted September 13, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=xcM3IF4Es_s.
- Obama, Barack. , "Text: Obama's Speech in Cairo," *The New York Times*, June, 4, 2009. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/04/us/politics/04obama.text.html>.
- Parker, Cornelia. "One of Britain's most celebrated artists, Cornelia Parker has created a new artwork", YouTube Video, 0:58, Posted May 17, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x1m8OQablVA>.
- Parker, Morgan. *There are More Beautiful Things Than Beyoncé*. New York: Tin House Books, 2017.

Roediger, David. *How Race Survived US History: From Settlement and Slavery to the Obama Phenomenon*. New York: Verso, 2002.

Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Picador, 2003.

West, Cornel. *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America*. Abingdon: Routledge, Inc., 1993.

Image List

1. *137*, Acrylic, Ink, Airbrush, and Pen on Canvas, 67 X 67, 2017
2. *How Thinking Feels*, Acrylic, Ink, Airbrush, and Pen on Canvas, 67 X 67, 2017
3. *Summer Said to Me*, Zinc-plated Chains and Hardware, Dimensions Variable, 2017
4. *Positionality 1*, Acrylic, Airbrush, and Paint marker on Canvas, 67 X 67, 2017
5. *Positionality 2*, Acrylic, Airbrush, and Ink on Canvas, 67 X 67, 2017
6. *Positionality 3*, Acrylic, Airbrush, Ink, and Paint marker on Canvas, 67 X 67, 2017
7. *Positionality 4*, Acrylic, Airbrush, Ink and Paint marker on Canvas, 67 X 67, 2017
8. *Positionality 5*, Rubber Vacuum Hose, Dimensions Variable, 2017
9. *Positionality 6*, Rubber Vacuum Hose, Spray Paint, Dimensions Variable, 2017
10. *Revolt*, Graphite, Airbrush, and Paint marker on Canvas, 67 X 67, 2018
11. *Melancholy*, Graphite and Airbrush on Canvas, 67 X 67, 2018
12. *Language of Politics*, Graphite, and Ink on Canvas, 67 X 67, 2018
13. *Secular Ethics*, Acrylic, Conte Crayon, and Airbrush on Canvas, 67 X 67, 2018