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The (Next) Life of Property: Grandma Never Believed in Hell

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Report

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Dedication

To my late grandmother Marjis Allen and late grandfather Linton Allen. I bear the fruits of your labor as you walk with me through life. Your legacy lives on throughout my artistic practice.

Abstract

The (Next) Life of Property: Grandma Never Believed in Hell

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Throughout Ariel Rene Jackson's family's history, land has been both a permanent reminder of systemic racism and temporal unfolding of possible transformations and outcomes based on individual and communal actions. Material remnants of a legacy of farming and traditions of black epistemology throughout the diaspora functions as a guide to sourcing materials and research. Jackson often uses installation to situate her practice into ideas of spatial matters as black matters understanding landscape as palimpsest, something reused or altered but still bearing visible traces of its earlier form. Jackson's installations incorporate physical, virtual, and aural elements. Jackson often encases found objects, embeds molds of material archives, and enlarge communal structures using naturally ephemeral materials like soil, clay, and chalk. Performance for Jackson is an opportunity to collaborate or engage with video projection, thinking of the body as both virtual and physical. In different and at times concurrent moments the body, materials, and objects become themselves and leave traces of themselves in Jackson's landscape(s).

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The (Next) Life of Property: Grandma Never Believed in Hell

My practice employs fugitive performance of everyday relics in sites that signify acculturation, assimilation, and identity. For the past two years I have been making frequent trips to my grandmother's home in Mamou, Louisiana, a small town about three hours north of New Orleans. Going there, I roamed the remaining 45 acres of land from the time my grandparents farmed rice, soybeans, and crawfish. The remnant of this amassed property contains material remains of tires, chairs, and garden tools—objects that signify mobility, self-realization, and embodiment. My grandpa passed away just after I was born and left behind a horse stable that my grandma used as storage for relics of those she cherished, such as my grandpa and an old man who used to live down the road. He'd come over to have supper and catch up with my grandparents in creole. In her garden, my grandma would turn this way and that to tear up weeds from her garden. She'd use tree branches to hold chairs, buckets, and ropes—anything that could be taken and carried away by coyotes or neighboring dogs. When fences needed mending, grandma would use whatever was lying around to act as a connector or tied loose ends together with her bare hands. When sweeping the car porch, my grandmother would continue off the concrete and onto the soil, making the entryway to her home attractive. My grandma's pragmatism, quick thinking, and maintenance were her guides to taking care of what was lost.

Last year my grandma's dementia worsened and she began to fall more frequently in the garden. Eventually my mother took over her garden, receiving requests and suggestions on what to do in order to ensure growth. Because my grandma couldn't go into the barn anymore, cobwebs took over the objects placed there for safekeeping. Each trip to my grandparents' home, I would go into the barn, their physical archive, and retrieve objects that signify the body and transport them back to Austin, Texas. Once back in my studio I began to operate memories of grandma mending and cleaning onto the chair, which served as

a proxy for her body. Like a surgeon, I replaced the legs with plaster molds, gifting them with the ability to mark on surfaces like chalk. The back legs were brooms that would spread soil, a marker of place. I began to play with how the chair could move, pivoting it on its axis, its orientation being brought back to its origin. As I processed the chair's mobility and form, words came to mind that converged memories and understanding, resulting in meaning that suggests an internalized diasporic understanding of loss and gain. The reanimated chair became a performer by my hands (Figure 2).



Image 1: Detail of *The (Next) Life of Property: Grandma Never Believed in Hell*

Throughout the Caribbean diaspora, black and indigenous cultures survive generational acculturation and assimilation through various modes of performance and syncretism, suggesting that memory lives on through the body. Older generations like my grandma who were born and raised in rural Louisiana illustrate this survival and resistance in seemingly mundane acts of mending, cleaning, and

positioning objects and material in space. In my practice I focus on the transfer of ontology and survival through gesture and performance. My research understands these mundane rituals as modes of fugitivity and resilience in the wake of what is lost in sites of assimilation. Growing up, my grandma and others from her generation were expected and pressured to perform in non-indigenous ways towards an Americanization of Louisiana cultures. Being born and raised in Louisiana exposed me to residual facets of colonial acculturation. My family's traditions carry the cultural remnants of colonized, disenfranchised, and enslaved groups (e.g. festive dancing, pidgin languages, gendered spaces, rituals, religion).

The (next) life of property: grandma never believed in hell is an installation that functions as stage and site, meditating on thoughts of national and personal identity in the realm of life and death. I've modified a chair to inscribe a circle of chalk and soil in a space that posits as both classroom (i.e. chalkboards) and yard (i.e. soil). Confluence of chalkboards and modified chair bring together symbols of assimilation and self-realization. At the entrance, the chair is perched on three flag poles, resting on an erased chalkboard drawing of the United States flag (1.). On the floor sits a wooden platform marked by the chair's plastered legs. Alongside the platform are rows of soil laid out to create an illustration of the flag. This illustration suggests a stage expecting a performance to reoccur. While this expectation of a performance is prevalent, audio fills the space with sounds of chalk marking a surface. Audio emits from a projected video onto a green chalkboard that sits low on the wall opposite the chair. The video captures the animation of the chair as it marks a circle. Poetic language speaks interchangeably with traditional Zydeco music and lyrics (an amalgamation of cajun, blues, and folk music) that echo in the background. The language begins with a variation of the title of the installation "my grandma never believed in no hell" and begins to describe poetically how grandma couldn't be held by spirits of the deceased and systems created to control the body's cultural expressions of self-realization. The performance here is staged in the real as a past occurrence while the projection of action is performed continuously in a past

state, having been recorded and edited for viewing. Based on this notion that the past lives in the present through the body, I attempt to imply the body in past notions of performance. Inverting the process of remembering sets up a system of learning outside of spectatorship where the viewer must engage imagination and sense to assemble the performance that has taken place. Meaning is developed through cultural literacy that is brought into the space by looking at diasporic signifiers of the body and symbols of identity and ontology.

It is my belief that stage-making and performance of the archived memory creates meaning that reverberates and develops cultural retention apparent in diasporic research and cultural literacy. Research on African-American yards makes visible a common display of nkisi tradition, where materials are bundled in sculptured forms to direct energies. Nkisi (pl. minkisi) means charm, and is known as a transatlantic cultural residue from the Kongo. Chairs are said to signify sites of dignity, knowledge, and power, as well as future status², bridging the perceived ties between the chair being symbol and tool. The plaster legs of the chair mark a circle calling forth ideas of cyclical time and cosmograms (Image 3). The chair's final resting place is above eye level, resting on three flag poles against a chalk drawing of the United States flag. The confluence of the chair and flag symbolizes the attachment of individual identity to national identities. Perched on three flag poles, the chair holds space at the threshold of the installation, suggesting a guardian of the classroom (i.e. chalkboards).

¹ Gundaker, Grey. *Tradition and Innovation in African-American Yards*. 1993.

² Gundaker, Grey. 1993.



Image 2: Still from *The (Next) Life of Property: Grandma Never Believed in Hell*

Leading up to this chair, I had been making works that illustrate and incorporate mark making, situating my thinking within placemaking by marking space. The marking of circles is later made known to me as part of a transatlantic network system of ground writing. The circle and point are abstracted forms reminiscent of cosmograms where the gesture of circles marks the meeting point between spiritual and earthly powers:

This Kongo concept compounds the paths of the sun and human soil in one spatial-temporal equation, beginning at dawn with birth, progressing toward the apex of human strength at noon, and descending at sunset into an underwater spirit world that mirrors the world of the living—where the spiral life begins again. The Cosmogram recurs in the iconography of African American churches, burials, and yards.³

The circle and the gesture of creating it is the practice of producing, knowing, and negotiating space in the present and past, making way for the future. In thinking about the American public school system, I'm combining soil with classroom aesthetics. Horace Mann's "The Factory School," or the

³ Gundaker, Grey. 1993

Prussian model, was an industrial revolution model introduced in the early 1800s. This model became the go-to for public schools, which were roughly established during the 1870s. The standardization of twelve years of education came about later, in 1892, making it possible for graduates to enter the workforce, which made industrialization progress through much of America. Although the Prussian model made it possible for students to increase their wages with in-demand industrial jobs, African-Americans and other minorities were barred from seeking higher education due to prejudice and the lack of transportation to all-black schools. Therefore, many African-Americans whose families sharecropped or owned land continued to farm and look for trade positions where their skills would translate.

In Katherine McKittrick's *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, she argues "while we all produce, know, and negotiate space – albeit on different terms – geographies in the diaspora are accentuated by racist paradigms of the past and their ongoing hierarchical patterns." McKittrick's writing points to sociological cycle theory, which argues that, rather than events and stages in society and history progressing, they are generally repeating themselves in cycles. This theory is discussed by Stow Persons in a 1954 *American Quarterly* as part of an American transformation of political theories about the organic cycle leading up until the end of the Revolutionary War, where Persons states we enter into a revolutionary age of pushback against the organic cycle and towards ideas of progress. The organic cycle refers to the way empires have historically risen and fallen (e.g. the Roman Empire). At the time, political conversations circled around the notion that America would face the same organic cycle of having its empire rise and fall if certain precautions were not taken, such as creating a uniform cultural identity.

McKittrick's *Demonic Grounds* is a play on words. Demonic, she writes, "connotes a working system that cannot have a determined, or knowable, outcome" and is therefore nondeterministic. Person explains how America became obsessed with competing ideas about enlightenment and its future as a

growing nation. It is a case of spirituality versus rationality around ideas like life cycles repeating themselves, giving opportunities for redemption or refinement. Persons argues that the cyclical process contains the nation's fear of dissolution and hopes for transformation. Following the Revolutionary War, this theory continues, but is now in hierarchical competition with progress, where cyclical theories could suggest a demonic system with no possibilities for change.

I challenge this hierarchy in thinking about theories of creolisation and Christine Sharpe's idea of the wake in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, where she discusses the remnants of the Atlantic slave trade. She focuses her writings around what she calls the "orthography of the wake," referring to the path behind a ship, keeping watch over the dead, and a coming to consciousness. When circles are drawn in space, they create ripples that have a variety of large and small effects on the space they travel into. I use ripples as an analogy for my work in thinking about the creolisation of historical effects. In Shona N. Jackson's *Creole Indigeneity: Between Myth and Nation in the Caribbean* she equates creolisation with acculturation, and indigenization with "rooting" or cultural survival and retention. She writes about the elements of being creole as being a process of belonging with no end in sight. She equates elements of being creole with indigeneity, suggesting that resistance, labor, and dimensional layering of culture create an epistemological relationship between blacks and the geographical locations they've been forced into.

While sharecropping on a few acres both of my grandparents accrued land and became prospering farmers growing rice, soybeans, and crawfish. In the mid to late eighties, loan companies took advantage of their illiteracy in order to overcharge them taxes, therefore putting them in a position to sell the majority of their land. Since the death of my grandfather, Linton Allen, the remaining property, 45 acres out of 300, remained under the stewardship of my grandmother, Marjis Allen. Spending summers and holidays with my grandmother, she would repair fences, nurture her garden, and perform other small

amounts of labor compared to the years of helping her father, and then her husband, with growing crops and managing fieldhands.

Mamou is part of the cluster of southwest towns whose history revolves around the acculturation of African, North American Indigenous, Caribbean, Spanish, French, Canadian, German, and Italian migratory groups. The American system of slavery subjugated African and Indigenous groups while French and Spanish cultures' forms of slavery allowed for free people of color to develop their own cultures, albeit to the detriment to enslaved Africans. In addition Haitian culture transferred via the Haitian Revolution of 1804 and Cuban culture via the Spanish conquest⁴. These cultures subjugated each other in varying degrees and generated a culture possessed by history, history becoming a site haunted by "property" (i.e. people)⁵. Christine Sharpe describes "wake work" as the persistence of Black life, the ways in which Black people make spaces of joy as they witness the resurgence of Black death in the afterlife of slavery. I think that joy is complicated, is not simply a moment of good feelings. I believe that joy comes from being recognized fully, and beyond the limits of how the body is understood.

Gestural expressive practices, such as the video using the chair to perform the construction of space, time, and spirit could be understood in the art studio as a kind of Jackson Pollock tradition; the artist physically acting out their inner impulses, and that something of their emotion or state of mind would be read by the viewer in the resulting marks. I depart from this tradition because I am not looking to express an unknown knowledge, but a knowledge that is shared throughout the diaspora, that perhaps goes unnamed, yet felt when expressed. I embrace Édouard Glissant's idea of shared knowledge as meaning carried in the exchange of object or person from one location to another. This is in opposition to

⁴ Spitzer, Dr. Nicholas Randolph. *Zydeco and Mardi Gras: Creole Identity and Performance Genres in Rural French Louisiana*. 1986.

⁵ Adams, Jessica. *Wounds of Returning*. 2007.

the “Imperial Archive,” what Thomas Richards calls fantasy knowledge when analyzing the Victorian epistemology of organizing artifacts as the British empire colonized various parts of the world. Glissant’s shared knowledge pushes for other modes of understanding beyond the limitations of the colonial need for palatable information regarding the meaning of colonized artifacts. The “Imperial Archive” separated the artifact from its possessors, creating a system of knowledge based on limited perceptions of what the other is capable of when creating meaning.

I feel it is important to listen to Dr. Denise Ferreira Da Silva’s demands that we go beyond representation of what we think we know of the object or thing. Silva calls for a praxis that unsettles our knowledge of the object/thing leaving its meaning open ended. In “Radical Praxis or Knowing (at) the Limits of Justice,” justice is a referent for force but also of scientific and historic signification. Knowing and doing must be part of the same plan to escape or break open the conditions of measurement such as a grid or system. I am drawn to gestures that disrupt grids and/or form circles, moving back and forth from a linear grid to a cyclical form.



Image 3: Detail of *The (Next) Life of Property: Grandma Never Believed in Hell*

In *The (next) life of property: grandma never believed in hell*, the rows of soil laid down around the wooden platform will be disrupted during a collaborative performance to take place the opening night of the Thesis Exhibition. Michael J Love, an MFA candidate in performance studies at University of Texas at Austin, creates and curates aural-visual performances that make parts of the Black experience visceral. Love is trained as a tap dancer and together we have explored using tap dance and soil to create visual and aural disruption and placemaking. Our performance will incorporate the embodiment of history as we create, cover, and re-adjust landscape in the studio. In thinking about fugitivity we will not perform on the platform, a site that can easily be read and felt akin to colonial constructs of black performance. The expectations of performance on the platform are evaded and sidestepped as we move around the platform, pushing soil to construct place out of a grid-like space, a visual cue to national identity and a present conception of the chair's past and future.

In Fred Moten's *In the Break*, he studies the "black radical tradition" through notions of performance, exploring phenomenology and jazz through ideas of Saidiya Hartman. For Moten blackness is something fugitive, a performance of the desire and spirit of escape to transgress proper notions of playing the part. Love and I take on this realization and sidestep expectations. These expectations are additionally thwarted when the platform, marked with a circle of chalk by the chair, suggests that a performance will occur. Saidiya V. Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* chapter entitled *The Centrality of Practice* explores everyday practices of the enslaved as tactics such as "work slowdowns, feigned illness, unlicensed travel, the destruction of property, theft, self-mutilation, dissimulation, physical confrontation with owners and overseers that document the resistance to slavery"⁶. Going back to the idea of cyclical time where events are re-occurring, time is disrupted in the installation *The (next) life of property: grandma never believed in hell* in different modes; temporal, performance, placement, and modifications

⁶ Hartman, Saidiya V. "The Centrality of Practice" from *Scenes of Subjection*. 1997.

of a space that re-calls labor, (dis)possession and expression of desire to evade. Hartman writes about the term “redress” from Victor Turner’s quadripartite schema of social drama:

In Turner’s model, redressive action is about limiting or containing a breach. Nonetheless, the need to contain or reconcile the breach is no less desperate because of its impossibility and inevitable failure, especially when the crisis is unceasing and acts of breach are endlessly perpetuated. In the redressive phase of what Turner calls “disharmonic processes”—in my terms, the contradictions and antagonisms of the social—pragmatic techniques and symbolic action reach their fullest expression.” Redress has limited characteristics, the quality of being “betwixt and between”; it is poised between breach and mounting crisis and , as such, furnishes “a distanced replication and critique of the events leading up to and composing the crisis.” These techniques concern remedying disrupted affiliations, caring for the violated and broken body, and reconstituting the terms of subjectivity for the socially dead. The symbolic actions range from the redemptive “march to heaven,” another way of describing the shout, to mundane activities like exchanging stories, staying up all night talking with your lover or singing across the Potomac to slaves on the side. The incompleteness of redress and the constancy of breach and crisis are primary determinants of the force of repetition in black performance and the ambivalent formation of pleasure.⁷

The use of performance, sculpture, and video corral modes of re-remembering and animation to reconsider what it means to be an American when considering how we learn culture in sites marking systemic traditions of acculturation and assimilation tied to histories of slavery and migration.

⁷ Hartman, Saidiya V. 1997.

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