

Desubjectification and Ritual Process

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Abstract

The process of decomposition can be used as a method for disrupting the knowing subject, thus creating space for the awareness of unnoticed ideologies and beliefs. The body of work presented in this thesis intends to point towards, symbolically represent, and alchemically initiate a process of dissolution. It arises from an intention to negotiate psychospiritual suffering, by transmuting impulses of self destruction and violence into ceremonial and ritual processes. This work incorporates various methods into its scope, including video, performance, sculpture, painting, and gardening.

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General Audience Abstract

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Introduction

“Modern nonreligious man assumes a new existential situation; he regards himself solely as the subject and agent of history, and he refuses all appeal to transcendence. In other words, he accepts no model for humanity outside the human condition as it can be seen in the various historical situations. Man *makes himself*, and he only makes himself completely in proportion as he desacralizes himself and the world. The sacred is the prime obstacle to his freedom. He will become himself only when he is totally demysticized. He will not be truly free until he has killed the last god.” – Mircea Eliade, 1987

The process of decomposition can be used as a method for disrupting the knowing subject, thus creating space for the awareness of unnoticed ideologies and beliefs. The body of work presented in this thesis intends to point towards, symbolically represent, and alchemically initiate a process of dissolution. It arises from an intention to negotiate psychospiritual suffering, by transmuting impulses of self destruction and violence into ceremonial and ritual processes. This work incorporates various methods into its scope, including video, performance, sculpture, painting, and gardening.

The thesis focuses on my own investigations and detangling of self narrative and mythology, and intentionally excludes work that has been done in collaboration with others in my community, in order to protect the secrecy and intention of that work. I believe that the intimacy involved in working with groups of people within a ritual context needs to be protected, in order for any seeds to sprout, if they have been planted. As Malidoma Patrice Somé says, “...a ritual is a work of unification, or oneness with the gods and with each other. To disclose the ritual is to tear open a space that must remain hermetically sealed” (1997).

I myself have only included parts of my process in this collection, for the same reasons. My primary goal is the processing and healing of subtle ideological toxins and traumas, and it is my belief that in order to maintain integrity within the work, it is important that some of it is performed only for this reason, without the possibility of appropriation into a professional and modern identity apparatus. However, it is also my intention to humbly accept the opportunity to make this work that has been afforded me by the institution, and to express my gratitude and recognition for this privilege.

The works presented here investigate my own relationships with the decomposition of my identity, and exist as artifacts and documentation of these processes and actions. For me, what is important in the work is the actual effects of the process. My interest in aesthetic choices in the works is primarily from a desire to please the process, to make an emotional connection between myself and the work. It is from this place that ritual space can be opened, where the symbolic actions and gestures can be in alignment with my relationship and attachment to the material.

All of the pieces in the body of work can be seen as dances around a central theme: that of an attempt to nurture relational intelligence. In an attempt to foster a space for the presence of felt experience in response to the materials and identities summoned by the work, I am attempting to “garden” myself in a practice driven methodology. As Sara Ahmed says: “What makes a lesson hard is what makes a lesson worth repeating” (2012). Part of this process is the clearing of the garden, so to speak. If most of the soil is colonized by weeds, I will need to go

through the process of getting to know and identify them before pulling them out and beginning the process of decomposition.

In his essay, "The Destructive Character," Walter Benjamin outlines a mythological archetype associated with the process of clearing and destruction. He presents this actor as an amoral force, unconcerned with what follows in its wake: "The destructive character knows only one watchword: make room. And only one activity: clearing away. His need for fresh air and open space is stronger than any hatred" (1931).

My work explores some of the intersections between the violence of this clearing away and the slower remedial process of the things cleared. Some of the pieces have taken years to take form or be revealed from their initial amorphous becomings, and some of these initiations have been sweeping acts of violence or sudden transformation. In "The Conquest of America, The Question of the Other," Tzvetan Todorov speaks of two distinct types of violence, one being improvisational and related to massacre, the other being ritualized and associated with sacrificial rites (1999). I argue that the actions of the destructive character are in relation to the violence of western conquest, as well as sacrificial ritual. It is at this intersection that I see my work functioning theoretically, in the sense that it attempts to initiate a process of retribution through acts of sacrificial violence.

It is important to me to bring a kind of humility into this endeavor, to not take credit for the process initiated. The plants in this garden are nurtured in collaboration with other beings and happenings, as are the processes of decomposition and dissolution. In this way, I relate my work to mystical poetry, in the sense that it does not attempt to speak directly to an ultimate understanding or knowledge. Instead, these works are devotional, functioning to hold space for the praise of an unknowable reality. This knowledge is the subject of mystical ritual across cultures and religions, and is my guiding star in this process. The relationship of sacrificial action to this knowledge operates contrary to established academic methodologies in the sense that the categorization and identification of knowledges becomes dissolved in the process of ritual sacrifice and desubjectification. "We could not reach the final object of knowledge without the dissolution of knowledge, which aims to reduce its object to the condition of subordinated and managed things. The ultimate problem of knowledge is the same as that of consumption. No one can both know and not be destroyed; no one can both consume wealth and increase it" (Bataille, 1991).

In a process of identity remediation and sacrifice, a focus on an authorship of the process becomes dubious and counterproductive (A hermit crab, finding its way into a new shell.) The authenticity of the work is known only to the subject, who has in this process, become somewhat desubjectified. What authority is able to determine the efficacy of the process, especially when this work becomes a collaborative undertaking with other beings and their respective narratives?

For these reasons, I resist the attempt to find or reveal solutions to larger issues of social justice that are connected to the suffering that this work relates to. Instead, my intention is to: "...locate its hidden area, its symbolic dimension, work with it first, and then assist in the restoration of the physical (visible) extension of it" (Somé, 1997).

The Swamp

The swamp is the site of pain and transformation, the frogs sing a song of alchemy.

“...myth is bound up with ontology; it speaks only of realities, of what really happened, of what was fully manifested” – Mircea Eliade, 1987

To set the scene for these processes of becoming and unbecoming, it is helpful to understand my initiation into a visceral kinship with these realities in relation to landscape. For this reason I will share some amount of my personal mythology and background.

I grew up in the subtropics of the Virginia piedmont, overlooking a small wetland teeming with life. There I spent countless unsupervised hours interacting with this landscape, growing and learning unspeakable secrets of reality as my body was woven throughout the landscape. Swamps like these act as filters for ecosystems, where pollutants and toxins can be neutralized and remediated through plant and animal life. Some of these animals are highly sensitive to the balance of the ecosystem, and their presence is considered an indicator of health and fecundity. Frogs and amphibians are at the vanguard of this process, their skin being highly permeable to the outside environment. Amphibians exist in between worlds, underwater and on land, and in the muddy spaces in between. The journey of the egg and its transformation from tadpole into vertebrate is something akin to an underwater butterfly, emerging from one element to exist in a space between the two worlds of water and land. It is here that the frogs sing a song of thriving glory, weaving multiple realities in a landscape of transformation and healing.

These early experiences with a space between worlds deeply inform the ways that I think about my relationship to objects and processes. Discovering animals and plants in all stages of life, while they were being sustained and sustaining the landscape, I was made aware of multiple dimensions and narratives and the ways in which they weave into a greater body. Naturally, the felt presence of life and death awoke in me a penchant for ritual processes, to situate my relationship as participant and observer to the swamp. These early experiences with ritual process and visceral reality inform the relationships between my body, memories, and artifacts, and these become negotiated through ceremonial processes of worship and decomposition that take the form of artworks in this thesis.

I am haunted by memories, both pleasant and horrible. The swamp outside mirrors the swamp inside, where tendrils of identity weave between roots of aquatic plants and snail trails of iridescent slime. This glowing miniature jungle that exists as the locus of two worlds, dry and wet, comes most alive at the intersection of day and night. As the mosquitos suck my life-blood and carry it into the mouths of singing frogs, the firm delineation of self and other is blurred, and I begin to be eaten by the swamp. My skin is a prayer that connects me to the swirling, hungry jungle; like the thin membrane of the frog, so sensitive to the dissolute soup of collective identity.

These membranes speak to the remediation of objects and identities in these artworks, as they are vehicles and sites of relationship and communication. The latin “membrana” is the root of “membrane”, as well as “media.” A medium or intermediate, a skin prepared for writing, a sheath or middle layer, these all speak to the nature of mediums of identity in relation to each other, the landscape, and to themselves. The in-between-worlds nature of amphibians makes them suited to ritually negotiate these processes, as they sing the songs of their lives.

When my family first moved to the land with the swamp, there was a legendary bass that haunted the shallow waters of the pond. One evening, I watched in wonder as my father caught this fish with a live frog. Did I bring him the frog? I can't remember. But we ate the fish as a family, completing a circle of transmuted identity and ownership as the flesh of the frog that was sustained on our blood returned to the swamp of our guts. A few years later, I would feed the pond with the body of my dying, beloved, one-eyed goldfish. After kneeling down and watching his shimmering orange form swim into the murky depths, I got up and walked away with a feeling of peace; this sincere, ritual negotiation with death was intuitively understood by my young self.

All of fecundidad life is in process of becoming and going. When we moved to this swamp, I was six years old, and feeling uprooted from my old home in the suburbs. Where were my friends? Now it was just us and the frogs. To make this transition easier, my father brought with us the stories of Wormy the worm, who lived in our compost pile. These stories began at our old house in the suburbs, and when we moved to a rural area he had to find a way to bring Wormy to our new compost pile. What ensued was weeks of adventure as Wormy hitched a ride with a crow, avoided being eaten by various animals, and all along the way was doing what worms do: eat and poop, eat and poop. I remember a feeling of belonging as I knew that Wormy was safe in the new compost pile. Now the table scraps from our meal of the giant bass would feed him well, too, and the nutrient rich soil from Wormy's compost would feed our garden. Listening to my father tell my brother and I stories in the evening, the vegetables from the garden melting in our guts, the identity of place and home was woven into the story of who we were and the coming and going of our bodies in time.

My relationship with the swamp and its myriad systems has influenced the ways that I think about materiality and embodiment. All of the experiences growing up in this ecosystem are a part of my bodily identity and the language of my personality. There is a swamp inside of me, with blinking fireflies and blooming flowers in the dark mud. The sensuous nature of the wetlands has informed my taste for a visceral, interactive reality; touching, tasting, listening. I can trace this influence into the ways that I make paintings – with lots of texture and wet paint mixing on the canvas, or with sculpture – my hands often being the primary tool for shaping and assembling disparate objects into a relational whole. In the case of painting with a language, or sculpting with objects, the gestures of mixing, transforming, and destroying are modes that I have always returned to. These processes are found in the swamp in abundance, as well as in a more domestic form – the compost pile.

All of these artworks can be thought of as compost piles, as a way to begin to situate their ritual significance. Some of the works are more literally piles of objects and organic matter in various states of becoming, and some are allegorical, pointing towards an experience that refuses to be contained or packaged by language; the annihilation of the mind. This dissolution of individual identity and fixed intellectual knowing is one of the greatest functions of ritual and ceremony, and this is where the theoretical understanding of devotional actions and sacrifices enters into the conversation, mostly as a way to bridge the gap between heart and head. As with much ritual activity, the projections of theoretical understanding wane in comparison to the presence of felt experience, and if the rich, dark mud of the swamp is a sweet chocolate dessert for the soul, then the proof is in the pudding.

Toxic Toad / Compost Pile



In the Toad sculpture, I am thinking about devotional statuary and garden sculpture, as well as ritual decomposition. In the belly of the toad there is a treasure trove of artifacts from my life. Some of the contents of the stomach, as well as the skeletal structure of the toad, are created out of old artworks that had a previous life in a similar function – that of remediation and digestion. Part of the toad is made from the spine of a scarecrow that had stood in my garden for years. This Scarecrow was created from multiple sculptures that I had made during my final year of undergraduate studies at VCU. Those sculptures had been assembled from objects anywhere from the pool that I swam in growing up to blinds from my apartment that had been repurposed for an installation with fluorescent lights. All throughout this process, as the form has changed, it has picked up additional materials: microphone cables; shirts and jackets; paint; dog collars; wasp nests; etc. I have always had a feeling that these items contained spiritual powers, and that they deserved to be honored. Their being is haunted by their memories, as I am haunted by theirs. This hauntological (Derrida, 1993) relationship is being processed in this ritual context, blurring the distinctions between matter and memory.

The toad, in a way, is a container for these objects to have a proper burial. It is also a seed bomb and a *hugelkultur*, attempting to negotiate the toxic debris of my modern, material existence. This becomes a site for collaboration with insects, plants, and animals, as these multiple narratives and intentions begin to incorporate my histories into theirs. Wrapping, weaving, bending, and twisting these memories together revealed the malleability of my memories, as well as the impermanence of my identity. Using my hands to cover the skeleton of

the toad with mud from the swamp helped me “To feel the sensuous gravity of the life that surrounds us and is within us (as) an act of profound intimacy, vulnerability, and courage” (Melissa K Nelson, 2017).

After my work is done, the material existence of the piece remains in flux, visibly changing in relation to a wild world. As the VHS tapes, photographs, love letters, and soccer trophies are woven together by the roots of plants and mycelium, their memories are remediated, giving the nutrients and toxins of their being to the process of new becomings – haunted by the past.





The Frog



The frog painting is an allegorical swamp, a site of decomposition and healing. Decades of keepsakes, letters, toys, and photographs, make up the debris of memory and nostalgia that is equalized and sung into oblivion by the spirit of the frog. The assemblage of the objects and the building of the frog is a process of devotional offering; by sacrificing symbols of identity to the spirit, I am putting it in the frog's hands and asking for help. This impetus to surrender my cherished personal history and narrative is driven by a search for peace and reconciliation.

By using wax to affix the artifacts to the painting, they are being consumed by the swamp in gesture, but from a material perspective, they are being entombed. The wax effectively contains them, protecting the objects from the elements that would destroy them

sooner. This tension of material and symbolic meaning accesses the ongoing interrogation of historicity in the work. The painting carries with it the tradition of encapsulating an image and using material to preserve ideas and memories. Can the thing be what it's about? The representation of the swamp can simulate the effect of the swamp by referencing remediation and explosive fecundity, and by obfuscating and transforming the objects that it is fed, but it cannot fully be the thing that its about – it functions more akin to mystical poetry.



There is something else, however, in the dynamics of this painting, it is my negotiation of attachment and surrender. Many of these objects represent stories from my life and hold special meanings for me. In a sense, this painting functions in a similar way to the dream rug, as in they are both sites for processing and ritual sacrifice. Here, the excess of my ontological substance is ritually sacrificed to initiate new life and transformation (Bataille, 1991; Eliade, 1987). In a way, I am creating a meaningful burial for these objects, where they can interact with each other in their dissolution and combine to create a fertile soup of possible meanings. But again this can only be a symbol for an invisible process, yet one that points towards the conflicts of materiality and spirit, especially in the relationship with modern objects, many of which have a toxic footprint.

The material reality of these objects contains a toxic element, in their relation to the biosphere. When I die, my body could potentially break down to feed new life, the plastic objects, however, will disrupt ecosystems and poison water for thousands of years, with a very specific and small amount of life that will be able to coexist with it. Their encapsulation in paraffin wax, a petroleum product, will keep them from leaching into the earth more quickly, thus postponing the inevitable. In this way. The painting acts perpendicularly to the toad sculpture, in that it (re)presents the same process indoors using symbols and language to access an internal

wilderness. As the language represents and becomes reality, the paraffin wax acts as the mud in the swamp, combining and obfuscating the languages that it encases. This process of self-destruction and unravelling of narrative is an accelerated process, yet exists in opposition to the material reality of these objects. This tension is negotiated through and by relationship to poetry and mimesis, as a sign or language that enacts a process that refuses to be named or exhibited.



Salt Doll



The disruption of the knowing subject. In this video, I go on a road trip to the beach with a doll made of salt. Along the way, we converse about the meaning of life, and what we are hoping to find at the ocean. The salt doll is concerned for the fate of the world, and has heard that the ocean contains answers to all of life's problems. In a spirit of altruism and curiosity, the doll enters into the water. As it becomes clear that the answers that we are looking for are further from the shore, the doll spends longer and longer in the water, all the while dissolving. After much has been dissolved, I ask if we should go get lunch, to which the doll replies that it wants to go into the deeper water, and then is swept away by a wave. In the seconds that follow, by pure chance, my new video camera is eaten by salt water that has found its way into the circuits. The glitching, jolting video cuts out after we see the doll swept away for the final time.

“Initiation, death, mystical ecstasy, absolute knowledge, “faith” in Judeo-Christiansity – all these are equivalent to passage from one mode of being to another and bring about a veritable ontological mutation” – Mircea Eliade, 1987

This ceremonial enactment of a Buddhist parable is used here in an attempt to bridge the gap between story and reality. This slow dissolution of the knowing subject, culminating in the annihilation of singular perception, is the unspeakable goal of the work. The real function of the work is to introduce the narrative as a possibility, and to enter into this shell of stories like a hermit crab. Like mystical poetry, or alchemical tradition, these ritual actions point towards a state of being that cannot be contained by language, or thought. They provide a system of belief and narrative to allow for humility and single pointed focus. I use these actions as a way to encourage myself in my search for peace and self obliteration.

“Intellectually they may seem convinced, but in action they betray their bondage.”
– Nisargadatta Maharaj, 1996

Clay Skeleton



In this piece I am actively engaging my identification with the body, by making a life sized skeleton of myself, imbuing it with my voice, and dissolving it. This allows me to think about the role of my body, my voice, and my time here in this world as this being, in a way that can be difficult to access without the technology of ceremonial action and reflection.

One of my teachers once told me that in order to change our thought and behavior patterns, we needed to use symbols, because habit patterns are stored in the subconscious, and the subconscious thinks in symbols, not abstract theories. "A religious symbol conveys its message even if it is no longer consciously understood in every part. For a symbol speaks to the whole human being and not only to the intelligence" (Eliade, 1987).

It's possible to think of the symbol of my skeleton as a sacrificial entity, ceremonially offered to the water, covered in prayers, in the hopes of blessings of peace. The sacrifice asks for a version of myself, and I offer this as a stand in, to channel the violent urges of self destruction into ritual transmogrification and transmutation. The healthy expression of this violence leads to an intense centering in my body; as I am making the bones, I am more aware of my impermanence and fragility. The bucket of clay that makes the bones certainly weighs more than my own bones, how is it that mine are stronger? What mysterious force has woven me, with all of the intricacies and ribbons of nerves and sensations? These meditations imbue the sculpture with identity and story, as much as the prayers and ideations inscribed on its surfaces. Preparing this body for ritual offering, I hope to loosen the knots of identification with my own, by making familiar the process of identification and belief.

As I am making the bones, I begin writing on them with a sharp tool, etching words that feel like tattoos. The words are coming out as a stream of consciousness, one sentence bleeds into another. As I am engraving words onto my pelvis, memories are returning to me from my childhood. As I feel as though I might be accessing a repressed one, the pelvis breaks, and I have to bandage it with wet clay. Now I wait for the joint to dry, and hope that it will hold in place as I work further on it. I am finding that I am very sensitive to the skeleton. When it breaks, I am sad, and if a roommate comments on something that is incorrect or missing, I am offended. The process of building and writing is weaving myself into the forms, and in a way, I am making another me. Am I making a golem?



After offering the skeleton to the creek, a small watercress plant beneath the ribcage quickly began to fill the space. Here, where I live, we eat the watercress and drink the water from this creek. The offering of my skeleton back to the source that sustains me completes this material and symbolic circuit, while dissolving the archive of memories into the indistinct. The process of shaping and engraving the bones required many hours of intense focus, which forged a connection to these visceral ontologies of intimacy. It also made my hands hurt. As these processes are undertaken with the goal of actively remediating my mind, I was reminded of a quote from Standing Bear: that “The hand is the tool that has built man’s mind, it too, can refine it” (1933). The dissolution of this sculpture speaks to my felt reality of embodiment, and nurtures an understanding of my impermanence.

“The whirlpool is to water what the body is to consciousness.” – Vasishta

Boy Scout in the Snow



In this ongoing process of reconciliation, I am negotiating my relationship with the lands that I was raised on, and the ways that that relationship has been defined and informed by social institutions and ideologies. One of the main socializations I had growing up was with the Boy Scouts of America. It was here that I learned to interact with and mostly pretend to dominate the natural world, by being indoctrinated into the technologies of colonialism and war. We were taught how to plan expeditions, read maps, set up camp, go on scouting parties, and report back through a chain of command. In many ways, the Boy Scouts was a precursor to military service, and we experienced a good amount of contact with armed services culture. Camping trips were held at Army forts, and we were often brought before various military officials for lectures or sermons.

This was a time (1995-2000) when a culture of militant patriarchal order was still very strong in these institutions. In many ways, these experiences effectively gendered and disciplined my identity and body for years to come. I remember saluting flags, statues, monuments, and battlefields, without much idea of their context with any world outside of my own, and very little inside of that, even. Most of the loyalties and identities created by these rituals were never questioned, and although there were wonderful things about the entire experience in terms of bonding with other humans and interacting with the natural world, much of the ways that the institution interfaced with the world as a political entity was in the indoctrination, service, and maintenance of the apparatus of Western imperialism.

My first experiences with ceremonial and ritual performance were within these contexts. We had rituals for just about everything, from sunup to sun down. Some of these practices extended into more secretive realms, and were performed much less often. Most special was the Order of the Arrow, a semi-secret society within the Boy Scouts that conducts initiations and rituals, often in the form of playing Indian. This was a way of “legitimizing conquest through invented mythology of indigenous peoples” (Smith, 1999).

I was chosen for this around the time that I was 12 years old, an initiatory age for many boys around the world. After my initiation, which lasted about three days, I was an active member of the Order for a couple of years. It was during this time that I prepared for a special role in a massive ceremony, in which I adorned bull horns and some appropriated Indian garb, and delivered a speech in front of a thousand scouts, before a roaring bonfire. In this ceremony, after my speech, we would venture into the crowd of scouts and “tap” future initiates. This was all determined ahead of time, and we spent lots of energy in preparation for the ceremony. It was a proud moment in my young life, but also I had no idea what in the hell I was doing. As Philip J Deloria Says: “they played Indian in order to address longings for meaning and identity that arose from the anxieties of their time” (1999).

The Boy Scouts of America is considered an organization, and that is basically what they do best –organize. During my time there, they organized young, male-bodied people into linear, positivist, obedient soldiers. As I ventured into adulthood, my lessons with the Boy Scouts did come in handy while navigating interactions with authorities, institutions, and other organizations with hierarchical structures. The ideology of productivity and hard work is interlaced with the mythos that animates modern culture, and especially the post war industrial patriarchy that spawned the Boy Scouts of America. My to-do lists that I have saved since 2005 are an interesting collection of artifacts that speak to this lineage. The style in which I recorded and completed the tasks on the lists is especially revealing of an impulse to obliteration and completion of goals and abstract actions. After I had accomplished the task, I would completely

ink out the words of the task, so that some of the lists are just writhing worms of blue and black ink, with no indication of the tasks that I had performed. This evidences a modality of completionism and control, the hollow dowry of the epistemological marriage to colonial culture.



I have sewn these lists into a small quilt, under which I lay, in my Boy Scout uniform, on a sheet of ice. The attempt to keep warm with these artifacts is an exorcism of the still lingering belief in the efficacy of their associated ideologies. As I melt the ice with my body, I perform a feat of endurance, a ritual to honor my relationship with the Boy Scouts and the Order of the Arrow, as well as expose the shortcomings of these ideologies to keep me warm. There is no doubt that this history is a part of my identity and retains cultural meaning to me, and it is my intention to understand and process the reality of this relationship. In this way, I am resisting Manichaeian understandings of these issues; attempting to “beware modern man’s quest for pure ontology” (Hokowhitu, 2016).

As the ritual is completed, I leave the Boy Scout uniform in the snow, next to the quilt of to-do lists. These two objects lay in conversation with each other, as they are left to the wild, returning the trophies of their ideology to the land that it was made to conquer. The merit badges on the green sash echo the tasks on the quilt, a system of planning, domination, and meritocracy. While I do believe that these technologies themselves are neutral, they have undoubtedly been used to manipulate and force the lands that they now rest on. In a way, I think of this as an homage to Ana Mendieta.



Battlefield Tree



“Its sources (the archive) fill the historical landscape with their facts, they reduce the room available to other facts. Even if we imagine the landscape to be forever expandable, the rule of interdependence implies that new facts cannot emerge in a vacuum. They will have to gain their right to existence in light of the field constituted by previously created facts.”

– Michel-Rolph Trouillot, 1995

I grew up surrounded by battlefields from the Civil War. This history haunted the woods where I lived, as well as the narrative in which I was placed. All along the edges of these battlefields there are trees and shrubs that are looking to get in, to colonize these empty fields. The forest is hungry for the open space, and for the sun. When I was younger I had thoughts about how much blood must have been soaked into the soil of these fields, and how perhaps the ground had been changed by this, refusing to let any tree take root. Maybe this land is haunted by memory; “the land is mnemonic, has its own set of memories” (Wheeler, 2010).

As it turns out, this hallowed, hollow space is preserved through the hauntology (Derrida, 1993) of its history, and the ongoing recitation of the battle, through the ritual silencing (Trouillot, 1995) of the forest. These fields are carefully manicured, their edges trimmed and kept at bay by government funds and labor. This dance of machine and man, along with stories told in schools, maintain the architecture of these memories, folding the past into the soil of the land, and guarding it from the remedial process of the churning forest. The ruins of a building, carefully kept visible by a worker with a line trimmer, are visited by tourists from all over the

country. I lived down the street, confused as to why somebody would want to see this empty field next to the highway.

The preservation of this story, and the perpetuation of the narrative in which it is woven, is precariously balanced against the edge of the waiting forest. Every year, trees send out seedlings and scouts, in an attempt to gain a foothold in the wealth of space before them. Maple propellers twirl on the wind, birds deposit seeds of sumac and Russian Olive, and squirrels work to populate the field with acorns in their drunken frenzy. The space is defended, the invaders mowed down in a choreographed whirl of blades. This ritual maintenance of the space is seemingly performed without an awareness of its greater historical narrative, as the fields are also periodically used to produce industrial soy and corn crops, further damaging and depleting the soil. “The religious meaning of the repetition of paradigmatic gestures is forgotten. But repetition emptied of its religious context necessarily leads to a pessimistic vision of existence” (Eliade, 1987).

The complexity of my relationship to this history cannot be understated. As a benefactor of the American colonial project, I cannot deny the privilege that is afforded me by the realities and mythologies of US history. In *Silencing the Past*, Michel Rolph Trouillot says that: “...our constitution as subjects goes hand in hand with the continuous creation of the past. As such, (we) do not succeed such a past: (we) are its contemporaries” (1995). An attempt to erase this history is fraught with evasive fear and the arrogant idea that I still have the ability to deny or control the narrative.



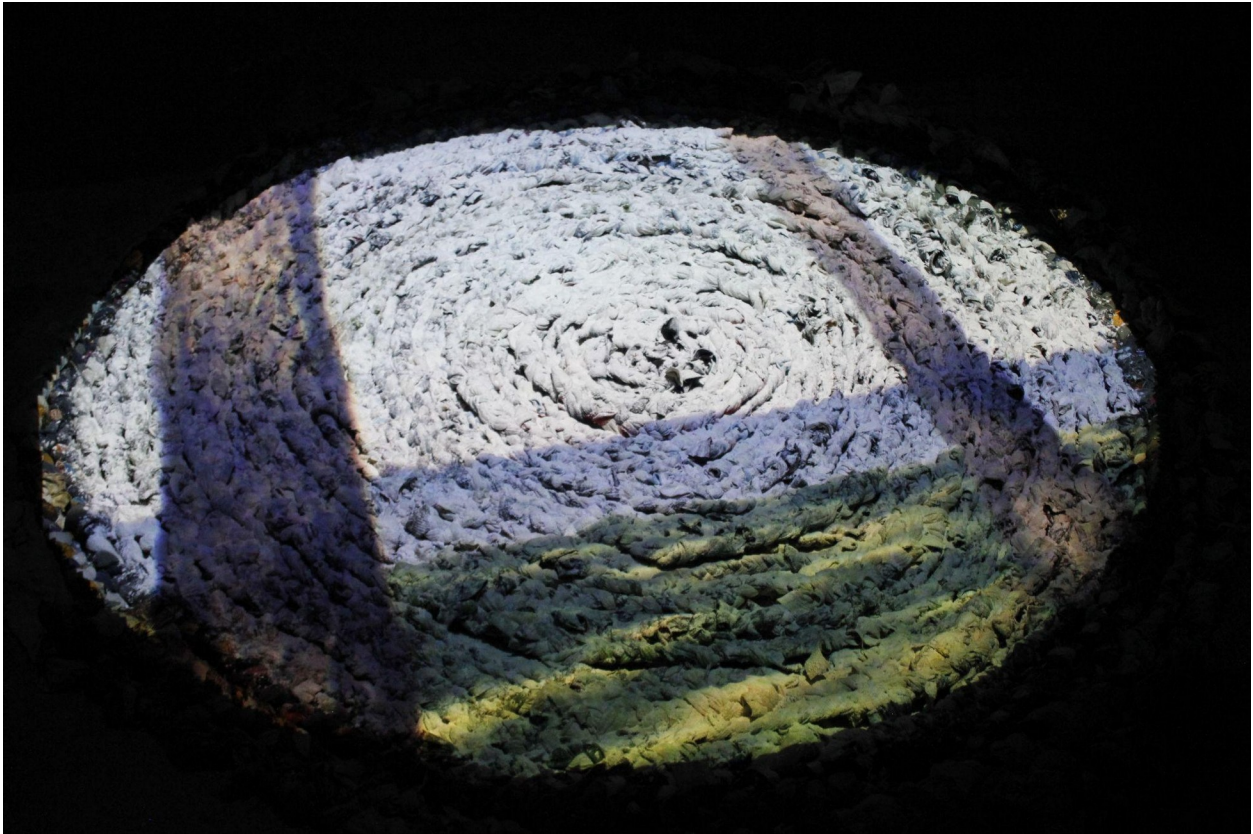
These spaces, however, continue to enact an authority over such narratives, and I feel as though by not engaging with the conversation and interplay of powers in these battlefields, I am continuing to be a complicit benefactor of them. I am not interested in destroying these

spaces, per se, but challenging the ecological and spatial dynamics that are dictated through ritual mowing and forest suppression. The tree being planted in the middle of the field is a gesture and not a statement. It is important to me that this gesture can be interpreted in various ways, according to the different relationships with the space that people have. The tree engages the field on symbolic and functional levels— as a membrane where these potentially meet and become the same thing; it is performed in allyship with the will of the forest, and is a spell that is cast in order to bore a hole in the barrier of communication between the history-making of this landscape and the people in it.



It is important to remember that this land also holds thousands of years of history belonging to its indigenous populations. These narratives have been silenced at best, and more than often destroyed. Where has the forest overtaken these spaces, and what buried histories are entangled in webs of mycelium and tree roots already? It is here that we see that history is always created through the maintenance or silencing of stories and voices, and that “there are not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses” (Trouillot, 1995). By bringing attention to the marking and erasure of space through the planting of the tree, I am also bringing into play the reality of time and change into the narrative. Ecologies, stories, and peoples, all interact to create histories that mutate and change through time, and realizing my place within these narratives is a responsibility that comes with this process.

Dream Rug



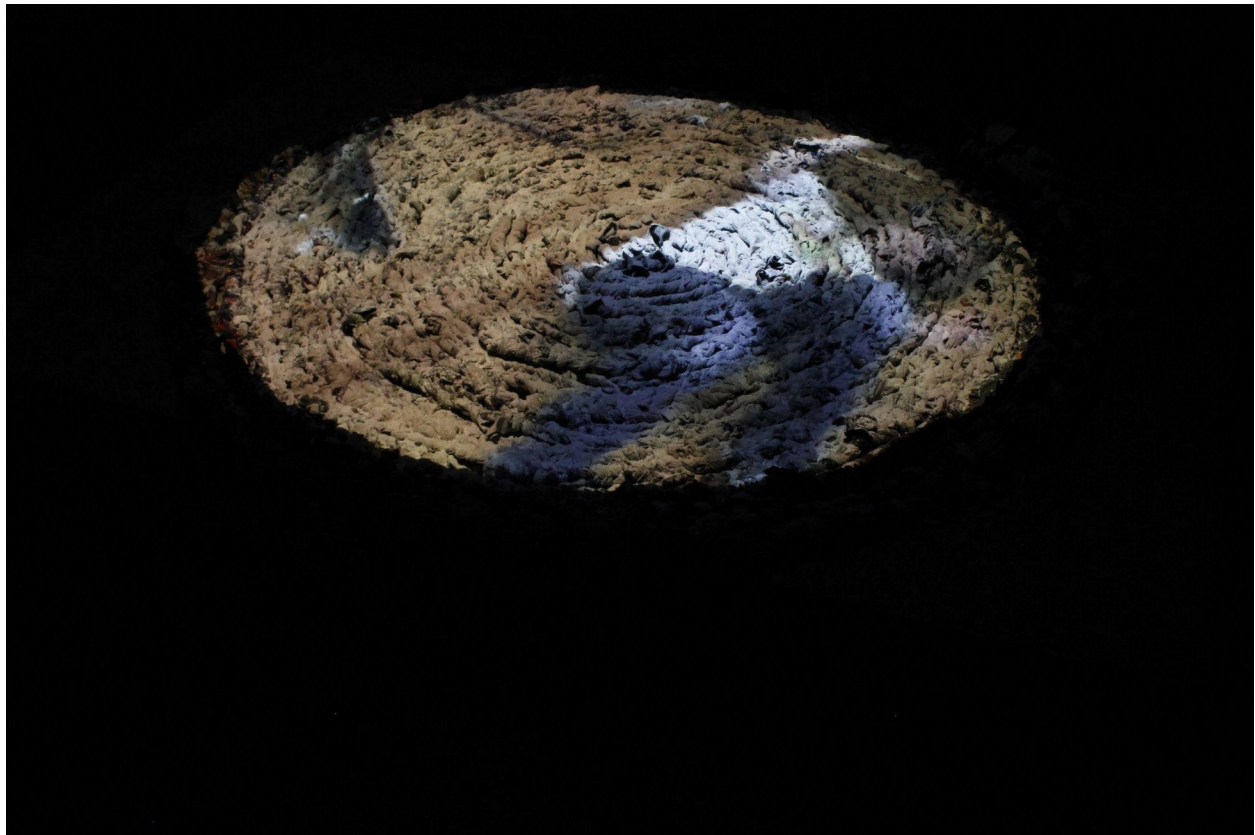
I remember asking my Grandfather what the function of nostalgia was when I was a young adult and started to have these feelings. I think that he said something about remembering feeling good, and being rewarded for it, and how we leave clues for ourselves in the future, so that we can follow the breadcrumbs back to a good thing. Nostalgia and sentimentality seem to hold hands, especially when it comes to my experiences with clothing. The evidence of histories through wear or stains, and the connection to people who have given me the clothes that I wear, as well as the time of my life that I remember wearing a piece of clothing – all of these things weave into an inner tapestry of memory and projection. The nostalgia that I feel with these clothes is dreamlike, like a film.

My Grandmother used old clothes to weave braided rugs that she would wind and sew into circles of seemingly chaotic and hypnotizing designs. For me, these rugs are imbued with my memories of playing as a child, and feeling the comfort of my grandmother's presence as she wove the rugs. These patterns of being that were braided into me through nature and nurture have brought me to the point where I am using these methods to make sense of my life. They are a language with which I can connect to the spirits of my ancestors, as well as synthesize the objects and stories of my life into ritual objects.

This modality of negotiating memory through material has a long history in weaving and quilting. However, there is an interesting difference between a rug and a quilt. Quilts seem to cover and keep warm, they comfort, and rugs support from underneath, providing a space for

conscious processing. In a way, the quilt is for sleeping, and the rug for waking. I pray on my rug, and sleep under my quilt. Here, the memory that is simultaneously woven within and projected onto the cloth seems to access both of these modalities. Similar to other pieces in this body of work, this process is concerned with the honor of a proper burial; enacting a ritualized bedtime routine before I am tucked in or swept under the rug.

My mind is reflected in the relationships with the objects of my memory – photos and videos, artworks, letters, notes, nick nacks, and literal garbage. What does it look like on the silver screen inside? More of the same – a breathing world of images, feelings, words, and sensations. Is it a rug? Is it a swamp? Do the fireflies connect the dots in time to languid nights inside my body? If the rug is a spiral, where does it lead? What exists in the space outside of the rug, and is there a difference between the space in the center or beyond the outer edges? If I play this rug like a story, or a record, which way does it spin? Does the story start from the outside, or from within?



To understand where I stand in this swamp of memories, I sat still, and processed the material. I sat down and cut into strips all of the clothes that had been saved, some of which had already been sewn into a quilt, which was also cut up. I then sang a song, whose words consisted of memories that would come to me as I braided the cloth. Each cloth would connect me to different times and experiences, and the song was sung in a devotional nature, giving thanks and recognition for the journey, and mostly, for the people in it. As I braided this pile of

cloth, the rope was formed and tangled into a pile before me which resembled my intestines, another storehouse of memory and feeling. My body, my hands, my voice, and my mind were engaged in this process of remediation and reconciliation; I wove like a spider.



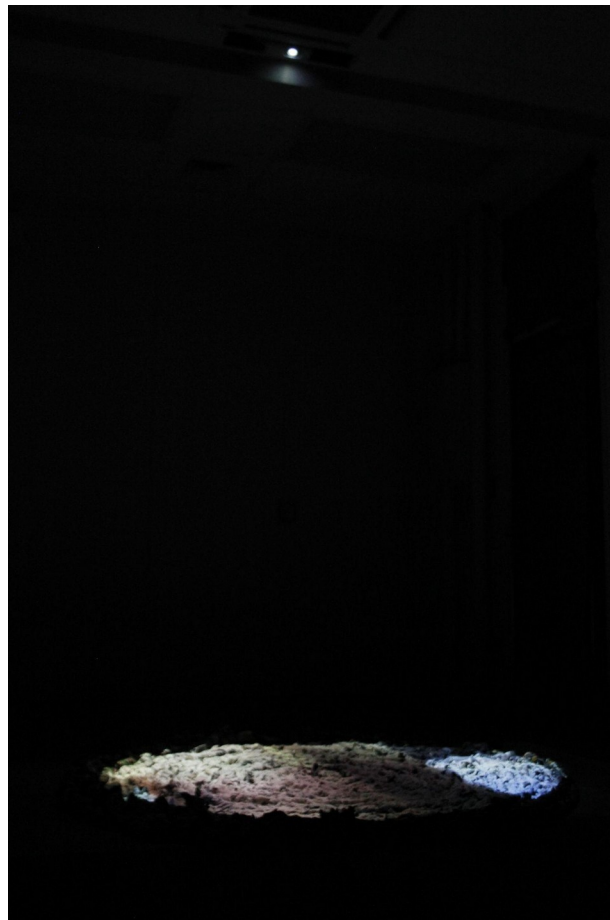
Once the material clothing was processed, I digitally wove, cut, and spun together hours of home videos, as well as the recordings of the songs that I sang while braiding the rug. The combination of these processes results in a circular projection from the ceiling onto the coiled braid. The circle rotates one way and then the other, speaking to the circular back and forth of narrative. The videos and audio are selected randomly, and played for random amounts of time. The goal is to simulate a projection of memory and dreams, all associated with each other and woven together in time and place. The assemblage of content and meanings attempts to fluidly navigate different layers and manifestations of story and personal mythology. In the videos, I am often wearing the clothes that found their way into the rug, and sometimes, the song of the story associated with the cloth matches the appearance of the story referenced in the video.

Through this active composting of my stories, I am disturbing the settled narratives that these objects represent, and this “Disturbance realigns possibilities for transformative encounter” (Tsing, 2016). This nonlinear re-presentation of memory language is challenging, yet somehow closer to the reality of the process of identity synthesis that occurs in my body/mind. The linear time of modern progress narratives is visibly altered by this scrambling machine assemblage. As I watch these projections and hear these stories, my knowing subject becomes

re-territorialized; I become nomadic within my own language, able to weave and pass through the associative machinic flows (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

By deconstructing and re-assembling these narratives, parts of my identity become abstracted. This “Abstraction can create a distance that allows (one) to comprehend a systemic logic” (Torkwase Dyson, 2018), in this instance, my systemic logic is revealed as the myriad processes of identifying and internalizing the experiences of my life into an assembled mythology. By destabilizing this mythology, I am attempting to loosen the rug, allowing for a radical re-imagining of self and identity. “Whether a disturbance is bearable or unbearable is a question worked out through what follows it: the reformation of assemblages” (Tsing, 2017).

The remediated and blended contents of the work can, again, be thought of as a swamp: where the separations between individual entities and stories begins to blur, and the overall process of synthesis becomes apparent. The nostalgia and sentiment that I feel when I see the videos is anchored in the awareness of my impermanence, and the constant becoming and unbecoming of individuated forms.



Remediation (compost pile of books)

“Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. In like manner, silence and secrecy are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions, but they also loosen its holds and provide for relatively obscure areas of tolerance.” – Foucault, 1976



The heritage of western imperialism. Positivism and knowledge. Our great progress. How do I recognize where I am from and the privileges that are afforded me, while also moving beyond toxic habit patterns? There is a literal pile of books that I have inherited either from my family or other families that I have been close to, with such titles as: *Our Great Progress*, *Great Men of History*, *The People and the Fatherland*, *the History of the World*, etc. These books represent a domestic archive of imperialism—“Built into any system of domination is the tendency to proclaim its own normalcy” (Trouillot, 1995). This archive exists in a space between the past and the future, the membrana transmitting the texts on its skin. The composting of these books is the simultaneous transformation of matter and meaning, a remediation of the archive. The text begins to deconstruct itself, the archive opened up to encounters with new narratives written by beetles, worms, and fungi.

For years, part of me has wanted to throw these books away, but there is also a feeling that I have about responsibility and identity. These books represent the history of white supremacy and western imperialism that I have been born into, and these problems will not go away by simply getting rid of the books. My identification with the philosophies and

epistemologies associated with these books runs deeply into the ways that I navigate reality, in the same way that: “Tying a shoe involves memory, but few of us engage in an explicit recall of images every time we routinely tie our shoes” (Trouillot, 1995).

The eagerness to disassociate with these narratives could result in a process like book burning— this relates to the massacre ideologies (Todorov, 1999) mentioned earlier and would be another extension of the violent modalities of imperialism. Instead, I am interested in how these books can be decomposed in a slower way, one that allows for a process of integration, and would produce fertility from the resulting dissolution. It takes time to compose or read a book, and it takes time for the earth to digest and decompose them. The rotting books function as a language which speaks to the unconscious, to address a psychosis that cannot be engaged on a rational or intellectual level.

When I turn the compost piles where the books are now, I find half eaten pages of this history, beginning to be reconfigured, remediated. Insects and tunnel through the pages, disrupting the linear coherency of the text. Images of Boy Scouts and Campfire Girls wearing appropriated clothing from Native Americans, as well as pictures of bridges, locomotives, and industrial factories, all symbols of domination and modern progress, are returned to the earth in an offering, or sacrifice. In order for the sacrifice to be successful, it cannot simply be trash, there has to be something that is given up, something a part of me, of this body of knowledge.

While many people talk about giving up their legacies of western imperialism, few who benefit from such legacies actually do it. Most of us performatively denounce these ideologies, while simultaneously engaging in the accelerated landscape of late global capitalism, where the conversation of healing and decolonization itself becomes a marketable identity, a simulation of the deeper process that would ultimately lead to the breakthrough of self liberation (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). While I do not suggest that this compost pile of books will actually deprogram my mind from these operating systems, it attempts to engage me in a process, where I can directly feel my responses and reaction to seeing these images and texts decompose, and this process allows me to check in on myself, to learn through relationship to this archive. This ritual decomposition opens a space that allows for deeper introspection and communication with self-mythologized identities.

The future of the books is as important as the process of their decomposition. Bringing awareness of their return to the circle of birth and death is a gesture of repositioning, shifting the narratives of modernity and technological progress. The soil that is created from the books is being redistributed to the flower beds where pollinators come to retrieve nutrition. These are gestures, symbolic acts of redistribution of material fertility and bio-power. They function as poetry, pointing towards a larger process of reckoning and cultural remediation that will take more than the decomposition of a pile of books to achieve.



Summary

All of these works exist in relation to each other, in physical space and within my memory. The neural branches inside my body mirror the mycelial networks that grow beneath and through the artworks as they are absorbed by the earth. By remembering one of these time/places, I am connecting to the field of experience that is actively processing my internal narrative. In the same way that Trouillot talks about historicity being an active process, the understanding and relational intimacy with identity is open to change, constantly being re-enacted and remediated through storytelling and ritual performance. These pieces all engage in this process, whether through direct physical confrontation and intervention, or through symbolic and poetic remediation.

While it is important for me to resist the prescription of such activities to anybody else, I do believe that the accumulative disassociation of modern capitalist modalities is parallel to the toxic material and immaterial legacies that it leaves in its wake. These ritual activities have become ways for me to attempt to navigate and process these realities. The intersection of the personal and the political is not clearly delineated, and I have found that the same blockages that exist within my psychospiritual experience become mirrored in outside behavior and systems. A beginning step for me has been repeated attempts to surrender to the reality of presence, to learn an intimacy with what is hidden beneath a surface level.

The works presented in this thesis are artifacts of processes that all link together in order to sing a song of deepening, of slowing down. Dagara shaman Malidoma Somé says that “speed is a way to prevent ourselves from having to deal with something face to face. So we run from these symptoms and their sources that are not nice to look at. To be able to face our fears, we must remember how to perform ritual. To remember how to perform ritual, we must slow down” (1997). The speed of decomposition and desubjectification is a soft violence in this context, disrupting the primary operating procedure of identity through repeated and constant collaboration with processes of remediation and dissolution.

Within this academic context, it is important to me that I speak to the “endemic discursive psychosis” (Hokowhitu, 2016) of institutionalized knowledge modalities in the West. This thesis easily becomes another instance of (re)presentation and commodification of relational and intimate knowledges within this context, potentially neutralizing the efficacy of the work. If the frightened hermit crab simply scuttles into another shell, one with an archive of books about mysticism and desubjectification, then the point is lost. For this reason, I continually emphasize the importance of slowing down, of surrender into processes of felt experience, in order to re-approach a relationship with heart centered knowledge. To quote Aimé Césaire: “It is not the head of civilization that begins to rot first, it is the heart” (1972). The recurring theme of a remediation of the archive within my work is a symbolic device to approach this issue, to mythologically initiate a process that might resist its full appropriation by the intellectual mind.

The healing and reclamation of relational intelligence is synonymous with a heart centered approach to identity and historical process. My difficult issues and feelings are looked at and acknowledged in this approach— there is no escape. The swamp is slowly working, its muddy waters teeming with fecundity; decaying bodies feeding the flowers, while the frogs sing the song of their lives.

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“People who know not the power of shedding their tears together are like a time bomb, dangerous to themselves and to the world around them.” - Malidoma Patrice Somé