Ambitious Confusion: Recovering the Unthought in Contemporary Memorials to the Antebellum South

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Abstract
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Aundeah J. Kearney
Thadious M. Davis

This dissertation examines how contemporary authors and artists who craft memorials to the antebellum South reconcile the presence of disruptive artifacts with narratives of history they inherit as members of a national collective, actively engaging with shared memories of critical moments in the nation's past. In this study, I identify ambitious confusion as a generative state which moves beyond mere recognition of conflicting histories toward a memorial that successfully manages the reintegration of previously excised artifacts of history. I borrow the term “unthought” from Rinaldo Walcott, and deploy it rather than the more innocuous “forgotten,” to refer to these disavowed artifacts, as the term acknowledges the intentional actions that led to certain exclusions from the privileged narrative.

Throughout the dissertation, I use ambitious confusion to read memorials that engage what I determine to be the four dimensions through which narrative is constructed as a rhetorical event: time, place, body, and law. In each chapter I demonstrate that an analytical posture informed by ambitious confusion illustrates how contemporary artists, for instance Kara Walker, and authors, such as Harryette Mullen, Natasha Trethewey, and Edward P. Jones, destabilize the boundaries that demarcate each of these four dimensions to provide space for the reintegration of the unthought. Attending to the formal qualities of the memorials, which include Walker’s silhouette tableaux, and her more recent Sugarbaby, Mullen’s Sleeping with the Dictionary, Trethewey’s Native Gaurd, and Jones’ The Known World, ambitious confusion exposes fractally dense temporalities, slippery subjectivities, and a unique state of temporally ambiguous being which I call “static animation” as fecund sites for memorial projects. Memorial narratives, as continuously revised and performed rhetorical events, allow for understanding ambitious confusion as a new method of reading that can account for the diverse influences and innovative techniques that often surface in contemporary memorials as moments of disjunction or even nonsense. Ambitious confusion allows for reading not only memorials that blatantly resist the excision of the unthought, but also for looking again at memorial sites deemed beyond reclamation, such as controversial monuments to heroes of the Confederate Army, for the dynamism that belies voices long thought lost.

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AMBITIOUS CONFUSION: RECOVERING THE UNTHOUGHT IN CONTEMPORARY MEMORIALS TO THE ANTEBELLUM SOUTH

Aundeah J. Kearney

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Introduction

In “All is not lost when dreams are,” a poem featured in her 1991 collection, *Rainbow Remnants in Rock Bottom Ghetto Sky*, Thylias Moss posits confusion as a generative affective state, with the power to propel the creation of testaments to innovation. Writing of a fish that, having “forgotten” the purpose of fins, leaps from the water to take flight, Moss asks us to suppose what might happen if we disentangle the braid linking tradition, use, and value.

Long ago a fish forgot what fins were good for
And flew out of the stream
It was not dreaming
It had no ambition but confusion (5)

When unconstrained by inherited narratives confusion, she suggests, leads to innovation, which reveals the previously inconceivable utility of historical legacies. I extend Moss’ reading to the confusion caused by the incomplete and, at times, conflicting records in the archive. No longer a state of futile intellectual stagnation, confusion takes on the generative aspects of an affect that can revitalize attempts to make sense of an incomplete or incoherent historical record. Confusion does not here inhibit progress, but rather serves as the driving force behind efforts to understand historical figures, events, and artifacts.

I distinguish between ambitious confusion and a mere awareness of ambiguity or contradictions within a given archive. Ambitious confusion goes beyond recognition to posit solutions, attempting to reconcile knowledge of alternative memories with the privileged histories already in circulation. For artists such as Natasha Trethewey, Kara
Walker, and Harryette Mullen, who dig through the archives of nineteenth-century America to find inspiration for their work, ambitious confusion functions aptly as a term for the affective force behind their creative processes. Confusion is not impotent for these contemporary black artists and authors whose engagement with, and rejuvenation of, history grounds many of their recent projects. Instead, ambitious confusion is an impetus for the artists' effort to resolve the dissonance of the incoherent annals through the reintegration of what Rinaldo Walcott calls the “unthought,” that which is cast aside or disavowed in order to advance a particular narrative. I call this generative confusion “ambitious” because it attempts to move beyond its own blind spots, to undo a socially imposed myopia. Where the conventional narrative suppresses or omits information, those spurred by ambitious confusion attempt to respond through inclusive works of commemoration and representation. The contemporary memorials examined in this study destabilize the borders that determine what is and what is not included in historical narratives to permit the reintegration of the unthought.

In his article, “Outside in Black Queer Studies: Reading from a Queer Place in the Diaspora,” Rinaldo Walcott uses the concept of “the unthought” to examine the place of queer studies within a black diasporic framework. According to Walcott, black queers were disavowed during the formation of the project of “black studies proper,” in part because more general notions of propriety required some individuals and groups to defer the promotion of their politics in favor of working to achieve the goals of the broader population. Walcott uses the unthought to signal towards black studies’ shortfall vis-à-vis a discussion of fluctuating communities and diaspora. I borrow the term “unthought” from Rinaldo Walcott to identify the residual elements formed in the process of creating
the narratives that will be passed down to posterity; the drafters of history necessarily excise those elements or artifacts that do not conform to the narrative they intend to promote. The unthought disrupts the otherwise smooth veneer of acknowledged histories by conjuring the subjects that always haunt the present due to their inability to be anchored to the past. Walcott deems these disavowed elements the unthought to call attention to the fact that the disavowal was a conscious process, not allowing the violence done to be masked behind the more innocuous term “forgotten.” Though Walcott uses the term to aid in queer reading practices within black studies, I expand the term to include those elements that belie the erection of borders demarcating particular temporal, spatial, corporeal, and legal dimensions that that occurred as collective historical narratives of slavery were being fabricated.

Walcott's distinction between the unthought and the irrevocably forgotten is significant with regards to generating a method of reading memorials that reveals the media's capacity for the reincorporation of the unthought. Despite the efforts to eliminate the undesired unthought from the collective memory, the unthought retains a shadow presence that, for some, makes it impossible to accept the conventional narrative wholesale. This dissatisfaction with traditional narratives leads some authors and artists to craft memorials that maintain the ability to include unthought elements and put forth a more holistic retelling of an historical event; I call this drive to recover the unthought ambitious confusion.
I take my definition of narrative from the theoretical precepts of rhetorical narrative theorists James Phelan and Peter Rabinowitz, among others. They conceive of narrative as an event with at least two parties, orator and witness. This dialectical construction of narrative reveals the ways in which efforts of communication are always subject to the interventions of either party. In other words, no one can be a bystander to the event of narrative; therefore, all who encounter historical narratives must grapple with their complicity in the project of determining which events or figures are deemed worthy enough to be strung together to put forth to convey a particular interpretation or history. This definition of narrative introduces the dynamism within collective or individual histories while maintaining the difficult and generative work of determining the meaning(s) of the critical events in our nation’s history.

I distinguish between narrative and memory throughout the dissertation to illustrate the incremental steps taken to arrive at the interpretation of historical events put forth as truth. Narrative occurs at both the individual and collective levels; therefore, it requires a set of reading practices that can account for the stakes incidental to both planes of interaction. Likewise, memory (as well as history) arises from both individual and collective encounters, but it does not perform the same function as narrative. Marianne Hirsch’s work on trauma and memory studies reveals the ways in which affect combines

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1 “Narrative as Rhetoric.”
with artifact to form memory uniquely experienced and articulated at the various levels of witnessing.²

Hirsch’s useful theorization of how memory is created and how it contributes to the genealogy of collective and individual identities demonstrates the need for a reading practice that can incorporate the copious amount of materials that shape memory and its transfer across generations. Ambitious confusion performs that function through an identification of memorial projects that destabilize the borders that delimit how memory is interpreted and represented. Within the study, I use an elastic, though targeted, definition of memorial. I read memorials as those artistic projects that seek to recall or commemorate an event in the past, though not necessarily with the somber tone of reverence. Memorials come in every type of imaginable media, and I work to include as many as possible here to demonstrate the flexibility of the theory of ambitious confusion. Within these broad contours, I narrow the criteria of what counts as a memorial to include only those works that actively seek to address and contribute to the discourse surrounding formative events history, not just the pieces that allude to historical moments.³ They employ a set of techniques and aesthetics that inform as well as reflect the narrative associated with the memorialized event. Many scholars, from Paul Ricouer to Jeffrey

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² The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust.

³ For example, whereas reenactments of the Battle of Gettysburg is a memorial in that it seeks to recover and preserve the individual lives of the soldiers as well as the national significance of the event, Margaret Mitchell’s Gone with the Wind is not, since it argues for the letting go of outdated philosophies and nostalgia in favor of an unequivocal embrace of the present. As I have defined the term, memorials are only those projects that work toward a reconciliation of past and present, towards a streamlined narrative that contains and reflects the affective and archival aftermath of significant events in the past.
Olick eschew a fixed definition of memory to preserve space for the varied manifestations memory assumes. Consequently, a comprehensive study of memory and its effects on the nation as well as the individual requires a theoretical posture that recognizes the significance of diverse influences.

The Civil War and the decades leading up to it represent a crucial moment in America’s history, when the nation struggled to reimagine itself in the wake of the upending of institutions fundamental to structuring the social order. Much of the current scholarship regarding memorials to antebellum America and the Civil War identifies two types of memorial narratives: One camp reads the narratives as intentionally exclusionary; the drafters of these narratives purposefully unthink those artifacts that would not advance the narrative they wish to convey. For example, the 2014 collection of essays on Whitman edited by Ivy Wilson, *Whitman Noir: Black America and the Good Gray Poet*, traces throughout the poetry the gradual unthinking of black subjects. The authors included in the anthology interrogate the conventional interpretations of what it means for a nation to strive to “contain multitudes” by directing the reader’s attention to the progressive diminishment of blackness in Whitman’s landscape of burgeoning democracy. For these authors, Whitman’s memorials to the South and to the nation’s experience of war demonstrate a civic epistemology that gradually eclipses the significance of blackness in favor of promoting a unified body politic.

Similarly, in *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth Century America*, Kirk Savage reads monuments as an exercise in community

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4Memory, History, Forgetting and “Introduction.” *States of Memory: Continuities, Conflicts, and Transformations in National Retrospection*, respectively.
formation. According to Savage, the monument represents a consensus reached on a particular historical figure or event; the permanence of the medium itself assumes an authoritative posture and a semblance of immutability that inhibits discourse or critique of narrative it puts forth. Monuments necessarily exclude any elements not in accordance with the narrative the erectors of the memorial desire to convey. Thus, Savage reads the popularity of monuments in the decades at the end of the nineteenth century as a signal of the desire to develop a singular interpretation of the shifts in the national epistemology caused by the Civil War. Monumental sculptures such as Thomas Ball’s “Emancipation Memorial” easily overshadowed and unthought conflicting memories of slavery, instead positing a narrative of the supplicant, nonthreatening freed black man, and the benevolent and heroic Abraham Lincoln. The narrative put forth by the design of the group sought to alleviate fears of black men as vengeful and dangerous now that they were free and instead suggested that the status quo would endure despite the abolition of the institution that for so long regulated interracial interactions even as it unthought the fundamental role blacks played in procuring the funding for the memorial. The ability for blacks to earn and dispose of their wages as they sought fit exposed blacks’ newly-gained access to economic power and social participation. Savage argues that “Emancipation Memorial” effectively unthinks the black dollars that helped to build the memorial in order to preserve a narrative of black obsequiousness and indebtedness while portraying Lincoln as a hero for all American subjects.

The other camp views absences in narrative as evidence of traumatic disjuncture; the ineffability of traumatic experiences leads to dissonance and incoherence in any narrative that attempts to relate those experiences. Stella Setka’s concept of “traumatic
rememory,” developed through her reading of Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora*, describes the “paralysis” caused by entrapment in cycles of remembering, even if those memories are of another’s experiences. According to Setka, failure to find a way to articulate traumatic memories leads to a continuation of the cycle, progress is inhibited and the same original history keeps encroaching on the present. Setka argues that Jones uses the story of Ursa’s struggle to find her voice as a way to propose a blues narrative structure as a way to finally escape traumatic legacies. In other words, in locating the mouth—vocality—as the site of healing, Jones posits a new method for black women to pass on their histories to the next generation. Nevertheless, a blues-informed narrative structure still maintains the spiraling repetition characteristic of narratives of trauma. Setka’s reading of *Corregidora* does bring us closer to understanding how the body and language can coexist as ways of articulating the past. In that way, she moves us beyond theorizations of memory that privilege one form of remembering/witnessing over another. This critical intervention provided by Setka informs my method in developing and applying the theory of ambitious confusion. As a lens, ambitious confusion does not place value on one particular form or medium over another. Rather, it demands that the reader examine those aspects of the piece that work to destabilize conventional borders that delimit and, at times, determine interpretations of the past.

Tim Armstrong’s *The Logic of Slavery: Debt, Technology, and Pain in American Literature* (2014), begins to move toward a way of theorizing collective memories of slavery that manages various types of memorial sites. Armstrong traces the legacy of

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5 “Haunted by the Past: Traumatic Rememory and Black Feminism in Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora*,” 2014.
slavery in the metaphors that pervade American culture. Though the title of the work suggests his focus on literature, Armstrong also includes other forms of cultural works, such as art, history, law, and economics. He argues that slavery continues to shape cultural analyses of some of the most fundamental aspects of our lives, from the economics of interpersonal interactions, to the mandate to endure pain in silence. Though I appreciate Armstrong’s decision to include a wide array of sources in his work, I depart from him in that I do not propose a reading practice informed by ambitious confusion to merely trace recurrent themes in the content of American cultural products. Rather, I look to the formal aspects of different types of representations of memory and posit ambitious confusion as a methodology capable of simultaneously exploring the intertextuality that always informs memorial narratives.

My elastic definition of memorial encompasses several different types of media, thus enabling me to think theoretically about the aesthetic possibilities that arise from incorporating diverse sets of materials and objects into the study. The creators and curators of these memorials employ certain aesthetic choices to establish the borders that delimit the memorial narratives and designate the unthought. Ambitious confusion compels the reader to examine the formal qualities of the memorials and identify those moments when the formal boundaries that determine the analysis of the memorial’s contents are removed or expanded. What happens to narrative when the very contours that give it shape and lend it meaning disappear?

Narrative arises from the intersection of four loci of analysis that together comprise dimensions of comprehension: time, place, the body, and the law. Analysts of historical narratives must examine each of these aspects as they are represented before
them in order to arrive at a coherent interpretation of the event. They must then read across a series of episodes, which may or may not be contemporaneous with the original event, to develop a narrative that conveys the significance of those artifacts of the event that were not unthought. The time and location of an event are the two dimensions most familiar to us and, therefore, their significance in determining the contours of memorial narratives often goes overlooked. The first two chapters of “Ambitious Confusion” treat these two dimensions of narrative, demonstrating the necessity for a method that can accommodate the expansion of these seemingly rigidly-defined aspects of memory. The body and law are treated in the third and fourth chapters, respectively, wherein I contend that ambitious confusion permits analyses of contemporary memorials that enable the reintegration of the unthought body in narratives of terror and the personhood and access to civic institutions unthought of in conventional theories of slavery as social death.

Throughout the dissertation I argue for a reading practice informed by the theory of ambitious confusion, for such a practice enables an analysis of contemporary memorials to the antebellum era and the rupture of the national epistemology wrought by the Civil War. I submit that, just as the fish in Moss’ poem was unconstrained by the water in which it dwelt, ambitious confusion allows readers to erase the boundaries of time, place, body, and law, to create space for the reintegration of the unthought, while still recognizing comprehensive and readily intelligible narratives of memory. Ambitious confusion does not mandate that we relegate any aspects of history to the unthought; the generative idiosyncrasies and inevitable deviations from customary interpretations of and reactions to memories of the experiences of blacks in America at that time remain in the narratives of the memorials I read through a lens of ambitious confusion. Thus ambitious
confusion lends nuance to a study of American cultural products that inherit legacies of slavery, even those that fall outside of the category of memorials. As cultural studies scholars attempt to identify a tradition within the vast and diverse archive of cultural products informed by the legacy of American slavery, ambitious confusion presents an opportunity to explore how dissolving boundaries of analysis that normally follow from the production of memorial narratives can still preserve cogent interpretations of history without sacrificing any artifacts of memory to the realm of the unthought.

Those are high stakes, and this project cannot hope to attain such a level of utility without first clarifying and justifying the merits of its propositions. Therefore, in each chapter of this dissertation, I apply the theory of ambitious confusion to readings of contemporary memorials to the Civil War and the antebellum South. Across the four chapters, I present ambitious confusion as a new type of reading practice that attends to the ways contemporary authors and artists structure their memorial projects so as to expand or eliminate the borders surrounding each dimension of narrative. I dissect narrative into its four dimensions—time, place, body, and law—and treat each one separately to highlight the value of ambitious confusion as a concept that can at once destabilize and interrogate the outlines of analyses of memorials while maintaining the integrity of a coherent and readily intelligible narrative even as unthought and supposedly nonsensical elements find their place once again in the memorial narrative.

In each chapter I identify the predominant theorizations that structure the analysis of the memorials studied therein to expose the insights and shortcomings of the extant scholarship. I pair each dimension of narrative with a particular type of contemporary memorial to demonstrate the capacity for ambitious confusion to recognize the formal
innovation and revolutionary aesthetics proffered by contemporary memorials across diverse media. Consequently, unlike the useful though somewhat limited works of scholars such as Cheryl Wall’s *Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition* (2005), I do not use ambitious confusion to define and defend a tradition of memorial practices within a particular genre or medium. Instead, ambitious confusion presents itself as a reading practice that can simultaneously analyze the multiple influences and inspirations that ground contemporary memorials to the antebellum South.

Each of the contemporary memorials I read through the lens of ambitious confusion evinces the formal qualities that mark it as an inheritor of the postmodern tradition that embraces disjunction and nonsensical elements as the inevitable consequence of an attempt to articulate the supposedly ineffable legacies of slavery that continue to resonate in the present. Though each chapter makes mention of earlier memorials to contextualize the discourse, the sources fundamental to a demonstration of the utility of ambitious confusion span the period from 1995, with Kara Walker’s *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven*, to 2015, with the laser show projected on the face of Stone Mountain outside of Atlanta, GA. Within just those two decades, the creators of memorials to the antebellum South and the Civil War reflect an urgency to transform memorial spaces, reconfiguring their formal boarders to craft a memorial aesthetic that enables the reintegration of the unthought. Each memorial tackles one dimension of narrative, expanding the contours of that dimension to draft more comprehensive narratives of memory. Throughout the study I posit ambitious confusion as an analytical posture capable of reading form as a crucial factor in the
development of a coherent narrative even when each of required dimensions—time, place, body, and law—are made nearly unrecognizable in order to allow for the harmonious reintegration of the unthought.

The first chapter, “The Subtle Gluttony of Hope: Fractal Geometries of Memory and the Poetics of Deferral,” introduces fractals as a model through which one can identify the expansion of temporal borders of narrative to permit the reincorporation of the unthought in contemporary African American poetry. Within contemporary memorials the residue of the archive appears on a multitude of scales. Unlike other models of inquiry that are often limited to one or two media, such as Meta Jones’ *The Muse is Music* (2011), and Evie Shockley’s *Renegade Poetics* (2011), a fractal model preserves and recovers the artifacts of varied influences scattered throughout these memorials. Throughout the chapter, I dissect the lyric poems included in Harryette Mullen’s *Sleeping with the Dictionary* (2002) and *Recyclopedia* (2005) and Elizabeth Alexander’s *Antebellum Dreambook* (2001) as examples of the recent resurgence of historical poems identified by scholars such as Evie Shockley and Nikky Finney. Both Mullen and Alexander invest in resurrecting the voices silenced in favor of a clear distinction between the antebellum past and a postracial present supposedly untouched by the legacy of slavery. I contend that fractals provide a way to track the resurfacing of memory and the unthought throughout their work by examining the sonic, linguistic, and

6 “Going Overboard: African American Poetic Innovation and the Middle Passage,” 2011.

visual elements they highlight in the formal and aesthetic techniques they use to expand the borders of time within the poetry.

My reading of Mullen and Alexander’s poetry, informed by ambitious confusion’s attention to the destabilization of borders, reveals their arguments against a linear concept of time that always moves us farther from America’s tainted past, toward a state of atonement. Rather, fractals demonstrate that Mullen and Alexander’s contemporary memorials proffer a “lyric time” that contains the density necessary to incorporate the unthought remnants of slavery that still haunt the present. Building off of Sharon Cameron’s theory of “lyric time,” I call this temporal expansion a “poetics of deferral,” as it reveals the incessant yet always unsuccessful attempts to keep the past at bay, to remove its traces and occlude any indelible marks. Mullen and Alexander dig underneath the archive’s “soured skin” looking for the gaps and fault lines which signal an uneasy resting of buried tales, and their ambitious confusion leads them to manipulate both the temporal and linguistic aspects of their poem as they demonstrate language’s capacity to asymptotically approach a faithful relation of unthought desires and histories. Outlining a fractal cartography of memory in contemporary black poetry elucidates the temporal density within that the poets use to resolve the dissonance caused by the haunting presence of the unthought even as it highlights the nonliterary sources upon which the poetry is based. Consequently, this chapter also works to add nuance to scholarship that often seeks to identify a neat literary tradition from which contemporary black poets inherit. Thus ambitious confusion enables an analysis of the destabilization of the temporal aspects of narrative and consequent reintegration of the unthought that nevertheless preserves the coherence of the poetry’s memorial narratives. Though the
first chapter deals heavily with form in its analysis, the second chapter explicitly treats
the most formal dimension of narrative—place.

“Places of Pilgrimage and the Creation of Nonsense” traces the process behind the
denomination of certain sites as “sacred,” worthy of preservation and reverence. These
sites are not only distinguished by the events that took place upon them (such as
battlefields), but are also made meaningful through the erection of monuments
commemorating key historical events and figures. The chapter identifies two dominant
theories of memorial spaces and offers ambitious confusion as a response to the earlier
reading practices. As recounted earlier, Savage reads the erection of monuments in
public spaces as attempts to edify a singular interpretation of history and, at the least,
promote the semblance of consensus. On the other end of the spectrum, Erika Doss
argues in *Memorial Mania* (2012) that the enormous quantity of the memorial sites result
from the drive to establish sites of catharsis, of containment where the potentially
overwhelming effects of grief would not threaten the broader public sphere. Ambitious
confusion makes note of how the production of place—the ascription of meaning to and
the imposition of borders on physical space—necessarily establishes a jurisdiction of
analysis that leads to the determination of some remaining artifacts as nonsense, which
needs to be unthought, removed from the space to present a coherent and placid narrative.
Ambitious confusion builds upon the work of Savage and Doss and incorporates Linda
McDowell’s theorizations of place as the product of inherent power relations to arrive at
a reading of memorial place that recognizes the tensions between subjects of distinct
temporalities thrust into the same location in order to transform space into a memorial site. 8

Within the chapter I read Edward P. Jones’ Pulitzer Prize-winning novel The Known World (2003) to elucidate the role of place in the delineation of a jurisdiction of analysis within which only certain subjects (and objects) can be said to “make sense,” to promote the narrative the place is designed to convey. I argue that Jones employs a particular syntax to demonstrate the ways in which the act of memorialization necessarily reduces the subject to a state of “thingness.” Even so, he also demonstrates throughout the novel how a dense temporality signaled by verbs unanchored by fixed subjects can destabilize the borders of place by infusing animation erasing the physical borders of place that delimit what is “knowable” within the world. I supplement my literary readings with a study of the “restored” Destrehan plantation home, located just a few miles outside of New Orleans. The curators of the Destrehan museum claim to present an authentic representation of antebellum life while relying upon narratives of nostalgia for close familial bonds that are made all the more rare with advances in modern forms of transportation (ironically the very same forms of transport that bring tourists to the plantation). The novels’ and plantation museum’s concern with failed familial legacies anchored in real estate reveals the supposed inability to project place beyond its current moment. The borders of place are assumed to be so fixed that they cannot transcend temporalities, cannot carry the meaning of that space outside of the present locale.

8Gender, Identity, Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies...
I then offer a reading of Stone Mountain, often called the “Mount Rushmore of the South” to demonstrate how ambitious confusion reveals that the destruction of the borders that claim to give place meaning can in fact be used to create space for the reintegration of the unthought without the narrative put forth by the memorial devolving into nonsense. The three portraits etched into the stone, Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis, and Stonewall Jackson, were originally carved between 1916 and 1972; however, present-day visitors to the park can enjoy a laser show that ignores the boundaries of the stone’s face(s) to literally project new narratives that assert the Founding Fathers of the Confederacy as quintessential American heroes, akin to Martin Luther King, and unthought of in narratives that portray them as racists dedicated to the preservation of slavery and the subjugation of blacks. Ambitious confusion allows us to read the disregard of the stone’s face as an impenetrable boundary buttressing the monument’s proffered narrative, and to recognize a coherent narrative despite the seemingly anachronous insertion of new subjects.

The third chapter tackles the most basic aspect of subjectivity, the body, in those moments where that subjectivity is most vulnerable to annihilation—moments of terror. “‘You nightmare with open eyes’: The Unthought Body in Narratives of Terror,” outlines how the production of narratives of terror ironically entails obscuring the body of the victim even as it emphasizes the spectacular violence that body endures. I first discuss the illustrations contained within Moses Roper’s 1838 *A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper from American Slavery* to demonstrate how not only terrorists, but also abolitionists and latter-day analysts unthink the victim’s corporeal individuality so as to turn the victim into an icon, shorthand for any other member of the targeted
group. In other words, narratives of terror rely on the distillation of the victim to a common denominator within the targeted group, be that common ground race, gender, religion, etc. I use Hartman’s concept of precarious empathy, outlined in her seminal text *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* to make clear how the conveyance of terror, as well as its analysis, necessitates the removal of the suffering body in order for the viewers to imagine themselves in the same position.

I include several close readings of Kara Walker’s silhouettes, as well as her more recent textual works, grounded in the theory of ambitious confusion to show how one contemporary black artist uses the parodic representation of icons to bring the body back to the center of an analysis of narratives of terror while permitting that body to experience unthought sensations such as pleasure even in the midst of violent acts of terror. Walker’s works adopt the methodology of those who draft narratives of terror—the dissolution of the outlines of the individual body in order to democratize the position of the victim and underscore the targeted onlookers’ vulnerability. Nevertheless, her aim is not to instill fear of violence in her audience; quite the opposite. Walker’s pieces utilize the same methods to demonstrate that even when the subject is distilled to the most basic traits of humanity, transformed into an icon, a coherent memorial narrative that highlights the individualized body and all its idiosyncratic ways of reacting to the pains and pleasures of slavery is possible through parodic repetition.

Given terror’s centrality within the experiences of blacks in America, memorials to the victims of terror need to confront the site of terror’s inscriptions. Often, both to preserve the dignity of the victim, as well as to create the distance necessary to accomplish an objective analysis, readers who come along after the original act elide the
actual body of the victim. Thus, the transmogrification of an individual body into an icon occurs on two fronts. Though Walker has been accused of merely recycling and exploiting harmful stereotypes for her own gain, my readings of Walker’s pieces posit the utility of ambitious confusion in revealing the ability of the icon to reintegrate the unthought body and undo the project of community formation and narrative construction that both terror and objective analysis demand of it.

I read Walker’s tableau *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* (1995) and her recent textual collection *Dust Jacket for the Niggerati* (2013) through a lens of ambitious confusion to articulate how Walker’s use of parodic repetition elucidates the process through which the individual body is turned into an icon, capable of signifying multiple temporalities (that which is, which was, and which can be). Building off of Glenda Carpio’s informative *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery* (2008), ambitious confusion illuminates the penetrable contours of the physical body, the destabilized borders of corporeality, to reveal that the parodically repetitive forms of Walker’s memorials betray the fallacy of placing faith in terror’s ability to designate groups and establish communities through the occlusion—unthinking—of corporeal individuality.

The final chapter builds off the question of community formation to examine the level of personhood the black slave actually enjoyed through a measure of access to civil institutions. Contemporary theorizations of slavery as social death are, of course,

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9 Betye Saar’s critique of Walker is now so well-known that I feel no need to rehash it in extensive detail here.
indebted to Orlando Patterson’s 1982 comparative study; however, few scholars move to complicate Patterson’s analyses. Two notable exceptions are contemporary scholars Vincent Brown and Michael Craton. Brown argues that the funeral practices of slaves revealed a modicum of civic participation while Craton looks to a slave’s reputation as an unthought aspect of social participation elided in the theory of social death. I counter that claims of self-defense in cases of murder and assault reveal the slave’s extant access to the court as a civic institution. Furthermore, my readings of the opinions of two North Carolina cases, *North Carolina v. Mann* and *North Carolina v. Will, a slave*, from the mid-nineteenth century reveal the legal acknowledgement of the slave’s right to ownership of her able body as capital, contra the notion that the slave as socially dead property could not themselves claim the right to leverage and preserve capital.

I then turn to Natasha Trethewey’s 2006 poetry collection *Native Guard* as a memorial to black’s access to civic institutions even before emancipation; the first Louisiana Native Guard formed in 1861, was comprised mostly of free men of color and fought for the Confederacy. The Union Army counterpart, formed in 1862, consisted mostly of slaves who sought freedom in the ranks of the Guard. *Native Guard* destabilizes the boundary between the individual and the state and posits slaves’ taking up of arms as a form of self-defense, akin to the protection necessary to help victims of domestic violence escape their own master/slave relationships. Trethewey juxtaposes

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10 “Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery” (2009) and *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (2009), respectively.
poems of her mother’s abuse and murder at the hands of her second husband with elegies for the (former) slaves that joined the Native Guard.

Throughout the collection Trethewey alludes to burials as a metaphor for the unthinking that necessarily occurs when some pieces of “evidence” are excluded from legal review. Trethewey reveals the fallacy behind the philosophy that legibility in the eyes of the law is the only way for something to be remembered, preserved, to stave off the organic processes of healing and rot eclipse the unthought lives of slaves who sought avenues of civic participation. This chapter uses ambitious confusion to read in *Native Guard* the dismantling of the barriers to black civic participation presumed by advocates of a theory of slavery as social death. I examine “What is Evidence?” and “Native Guard,” to show how Trethewey highlights the destruction of the barriers through her revision of traditional forms such as the sonnet and through her reliance on enjambment to posit a new type of legally legible evidence, one that is dynamic and not frozen in the “landscape of splintered [bodies].” This new form of evidence, made salient through a reading informed by ambitious confusion that accounts for the destruction formal barriers, permits a recognition of unthought methods of self-defense in the eyes of the law, thereby realizing black personhood as exercised through access to and participation in civic institutions.

As Erika Doss remarks, the drive to erect numerous memorial sites is not only an attempt to redress the violence and silence imposed on the unthought, but also serves to designate spaces in which catharsis might take place. If each newly erected site deals with greater specificity or, on the other hand, moves so close to ultimate inclusivity that it sheds all markers of historical context, then each memorial narrative has a place and
cannot spill over into the broader public sphere. Ambitious confusion does not sequester narratives of memory in neatly parceled sites. Rather, throughout the chapters, I demonstrate that in each dimension of narrative it permits the dissolution of the boundaries of form that cordon off potential narratives and interpretations behind labels of sense and nonsense, acknowledged and unthought. The destabilization of the borders surrounding narratives of memory enables the development of a shared vocabulary that reaches across memorial genres and enables a better understanding of the “multitudes” of histories that ground the archive of national memory.
The Subtle Gluttony of Hope: The Post-Civil Rights Generations and the Poetics of Deferral

That sacred Closet when you sweep—
Entitled “Memory”—
Select a reverential Broom—
And do it silently…

August the Dust of that Domain—
Unchalleged—let it lie—
You cannot supersede itself,
But it can silence you.

--From F1385, Emily Dickinson

In 1982 renowned mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot coined the term fractals to describe a self-similar pattern that lies between the conventional geometric planes. When viewing a fractal at any scale of magnification the part that you are examining resembles the whole, either exactly or approximately. Mandelbrot provided many now classic examples of fractals in nature, from the expansive British coastline to the more tangible fern leaf, though many examples exist -in computer-generated illustrations.11 One of the

11 The triangles below are a prime example of the multiple scales of repetition inherent in fractals. The pattern of a single upside-down triangle surrounded by three triangles pointing upwards repeats even as you dissect the large triangle into subsections.
distinguishing features of a fractal is its relation to the space in which it is located. To be considered a fractal, a pattern must have a fractal dimension greater than its topological dimension. In simpler terms, a fractal dimension indicates that a particular curve or figure is more complex than its Euclidian dimension would indicate; it measures the ratio of a pattern’s complexity to its conventional dimension. For example, a curve with a Euclidian dimension of one is simply a line. However if that curve had a fractal dimension of a number between one and two, it would appear to be a line at first, but when zooming in, one would notice the detailed, self-similar pattern that comprises a fractal. A fractal dimension indicates a greater level of complexity, order, and, most importantly, repetition, than is readily apparent. Fractals reveal the existence of an intermediate plane, one that bridges the superficial with the foundational layers that would otherwise remain undetectable. Although fractals provided new avenues for understanding certain principles of nature, the reach and significance of Mandelbrot’s theory extends beyond the field of mathematics. Beginning in the last decades of the twentieth century, literary critics made use of the theory of fractals as a lens through which to identify and examine the formal and aesthetic qualities of various genres.¹²

When applied to literature, fractal dimensions indicate the temporal density that accounts for the incessant intrusion of the past on the present that is often the catalyst of ambitious confusion. The unstoppable progression of time promotes the notion of a

continued movement away from identifiable original events, such as the abolition of slavery in America. Nevertheless, remnants of the past continue to disrupt and reveal the continuing legacy of slavery in contemporary society. Ambitious confusion arises out of the pestering notion that the past has not been adequately reconciled with the present. The parts that others would have exorcised or disavowed—the unthought—are still visible to those who see the present as more complex and detailed than the simple parochial narrative of slavery as a particularly southern institution would suggest. I use fractals as a lens to examine the poetry of Harryette Mullen and Elizabeth Alexander and illuminate how these authors expose the unthought artifacts of slavery that continue to haunt the present.

I offer fractals as a model that provides the ability to account for the diverse array of influences on contemporary black poetry, as well as memorials taken more broadly. The innovative techniques of contemporary black poetry, that is, the way in which poets such as Mullen and Alexander build upon and revise traditional Western forms and aesthetics to incorporate the unthought, can be best understood with a model that enables the simultaneous analysis of multiple types of influences and memories. Fractals allow us to move between scales of engagement with the past, both at the formal and the temporal level, revealing the poets’ use of sonic and linguistic repetition to create a fractal dimension within the lyric’s temporality. Mullen and Alexander's ambitious confusion arises from their commitment to resurrecting the voices and revising the traditional narratives of slavery's memory. Consequently, their historical poems serve as memorials to the unthought subjects and elements excised from common narratives of slavery.
Evie Shockley and fellow poet/scholar Nikky Finney note that there has been a resurgence of “historical” poems in contemporary poetry.\textsuperscript{13} Mullen and Alexander serve as useful examples of this trend as they both have written collections that reflect upon the role history and memory play in the present. Mullen’s \textit{Sleeping With the Dictionary} (2002) highlights the utility of linguistic play in revealing and recovering the unthought while Alexander’s \textit{Antebellum Dream Book} (2001) explicitly cites historical events such as Nat Turner’s Rebellion and protests of the Civil Rights Movement, among others. An examination of these collections, and other selections from the authors’ oeuvres, demonstrates the capacity fractals have for revealing the consequences of the shapes and strategies of contemporary poetic memorials. Mullen and Alexander use a blend of linguistic and formal techniques—strategic methods of sonic and linguistic repetition—that work together to create a new and fractally expansive form of lyric time that enables the reintegration of the unthought in their retellings of history. Through my readings of these collections, I argue that fractals provide a way to track the management of resurrected memories throughout contemporary poetic memorials to black enslavement and the Civil War, while elucidating the fissures and irreconcilable disjunction that arises out of attempts to craft a linear, causal, narrative of history. Like fractals themselves, I move between scales while remaining in one dimension; shifting from the larger scale of the poetics prevalent throughout the genre, down into the various lines and words and letters of a single poem.

\textsuperscript{13} See Shockley’s “Going Overboard: African American Poetic Innovation and the Middle Passage,” and the introduction to \textit{The Ringing Ear}, edited by Nikky Finney.
Though the final product might seem to arise randomly out of the artist’s reservoir of creativity, fractals can help us understand how ambitious confusion leads to the construction of poetic memorials capable of reintegrating the unthought in a way that still proffers a narrative that makes sense. In his article “The Shape of Poetry,” Paul Lake remarks on the similarity between the creation of formal poetry and the genesis of certain natural phenomena. Lake linked these two creative processes with fractals: he notes the way shapes and order arise out of utter randomness and then how order compels the alignment of the remaining pieces, proliferating patterned structures in iteration upon iteration. Lake called this phenomenon the “strange-attractor,” and provides as an example the case of a tornado or a birthing planet that assembles itself randomly out of chaos until the force of its order induces other constituents to fall in line, as it were (163). According to Lake, the forms that poems assume do not have to be either a solely intentional product or a random assemblage upon the page in a particular form as the poet writes without any conscious effort to shape the verse. Instead, fractals offer a way to understand how form not only shapes our understanding of content, but how it can arise from that content as well. Charting the fractal geography of Mullen and Alexander’s historical poems demonstrates the order ambitious confusion brings to a tumultuous archive by highlighting the generative relationship between form and content.

I allow fractals to illuminate the connections between an original event and its memorial in the present. I ask: how do these authors and artists represent the legacies

and memories that haunt the present? Through an examination of the poetry of Harryette Mullen and Elizabeth Alexander, I use fractals to begin to disentangle the filigree of slavery’s legacy and gain a better understanding of how contemporary historical poetry navigates the tumult of unthought memories and artifacts, inheriting not just from literary sources, but from musical, photographic, and other types of artifacts as well.

Furthermore, the insight gained from a more comprehensive understanding of poetic memorials helps reveal and undo the process of excision inherent in the construction of historical narrative.

Together, the authors present two distinct methodologies: Mullen relies on word play and the repetition of sonic elements to expand the lyric moment into one that can contain both conventional history and the voices she resurrects. Conversely, Alexander invites her readers to question whether language is even capable as a medium to express memories of slavery. Through her diction, Alexander demonstrates how the act of remembering necessarily disrupts the tacit surface of the present, but she also exposes language’s inability to faithfully reflect the gravity of that disruption. Beginning with Mullen and concluding with Alexander, I chart the fractal elements of both poets' works, revealing how they use language to densify the lyric moment, connecting the isolated temporality of the genre to the unthought memories of slavery.

**Lyric Time**

Much of Mullen’s fame as a poet arises out of her adroit linguistic skill; Mullen won the Gertrude Stein Award for Innovative Poetry, and *Sleeping with the Dictionary* (2002) was a finalist for the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award. Despite her success as a manipulator of semantics, recent scholars have also
noted her adept handling of the aural/oral and corporeal aspects of her poetry. In addition to the insight fractals provide into the formal qualities of the poetry, we can extend the fractal model to the poem’s temporal characteristics as well. Through an analysis of the lyric genre, which many of Mullen’s poems occupy, I demonstrate how fractals can reveal the skillful manipulation of temporality within the poetic memorial, creating room for the unthought in the present moment. In revising the typical features of the lyric to include an identity located in multiple times and spaces these poets take full advantage of a fabricated “plureality,” my term for an expanded and pluralistic sense of temporality and subjectivity. Contemporary poetic memorials to nineteenth-century America bend the timescape of the lyric to simultaneously contain that which is always remembered and that which was disavowed-deferred-in an “eternal now” (Cameron 70). In other words, Mullen and Alexander serve as examples of authors whose ambitious confusion yields a revision of conventional poetic techniques; whereas the lyric typically remains unanchored to a particular moment in time, Mullen and Alexander’s poetic memorials create and capitalize upon a multilayered temporality that permits the reintegration of unthought subjects and memories.

Virginia Jackson revisits the questions Sharon Cameron takes up in her recent work, *Dickinson’s Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading*. She proposes instead that we understand how the lyric subject has been (mis)construed as a result of generations of scholars dictating which poems count as lyrics and which ones do not. The performative

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15 See, for example, Benjamin Lempert, “Harryette Mullen and the Contemporary Jazz Voice” or Alan Gilbert, *Another Future: Poetry and Art in a Postmodern Twilight* (2006).
generation of a particular lyric subject eclipses the oppositional stance taken in conversation as well as the pluralistic subjectivities possible within the lyric (10-11). I build upon Jackson's readings in order to destabilize this commonly accepted method of forming (and reading) the lyric subject. Departing from Cameron and Jackson, I propose an understanding of lyric time and subjects that is more elastic than conventional theorizations. In my examination of the Mullen and Alexander lyrics, I highlight the warping of temporality as well as the pluralistic subjectivities that occupy these poems. In their poetry lyric subjects often assume a confrontational stance, posed in opposition to not only their readers but also the ephemeral writer(s) of history that erased and buried their stories in the interest of a dominant narrative—those who demand(ed) that they defer realizing their own wishes in favor of achieving some civic recognition for the broader collective. Thus, by expanding lyric time to include these subjects, ambitious confusion reveals the construction of a poetics of deferral—a formal and linguistic acknowledgement and reintegration of the unthought.

**Fractal Genealogies**

Toward the end of the twentieth century poet and critic Alice Fulton brought the term fractal into the world of literary studies. In her essay, “Fractal Amplifications,” Fulton suggests adopting a theory of fractal poetics in order to move beyond what she views as delimiting schools of thought, such as formalism or confessional poetry. According to Fulton, fractals offer the opportunity to explore the complex and discordant spaces excised when we attempt to place a poet or poem within a particular genre (126). Fulton’s call for a concept of fractal poetics necessitates a recuperation of those aspects
of poetics which are disregarded in favor of easy categorization. Like Jackson, Fulton calls her reader’s attention to the elements of poetry sacrificed in order to preserve established generic conventions. However, neither critic devotes much attention to the significance of the unthought in relation to collective and individual memory.

Though she does not use the term, Fulton limits the concept of the unthought to that which inhibits neat classifications of poetry. Thus she identifies a process of narrative construction behind efforts at categorization and posits fractals as a way to recover what is disavowed when one attempts to neatly order and buttress the notion of postmodern poetry. Nevertheless, Fulton’s use of the word fractal remains at the aesthetic level of the poetry, referring only to the disjunction and fragmentation characteristic of postmodern works. Consequently, Fulton’s argument that critics should embrace a fractal model of poetics reads as a mission to reclaim the unsettled/unsettling aesthetic qualities of postmodern poetry readily cast aside by early readers of the works and does not extrapolate to identify how fractals might help us reclaim the unreconciled aspects of broader historical narratives. Building from Fulton’s model, I use fractals to reveal the order within the chaos of the sludge of historical legacies. The operations behind the inheritance and selective representation of memory become clearer as we apply the fractal model to not only the poetry’s formal aesthetics but also its temporal qualities. A theory of ambitious confusion calls for a recognition of the dense temporality surprisingly embedded within Mullen and Alexander’s lyric memorials, enabling the promotion of more nuanced and comprehensive historical memories.

As the model’s usefulness became more apparent, other critics such as Jan Andres and Martina Benešová began to use fractals to illustrate ever more complex and abstract
aspects of the literature. Indeed, much of the most recent work on fractals in literature has a more quantitative bend, one that seeks to highlight in empirical terms the gains, losses, and equalities between different iterations of a text, like in translation.\textsuperscript{16} In works such as \textit{Chaos and Order in the Capital Markets: A New View of Cycles, Prices, and Market Volatility}, by Edgar Peters, students of the markets use fractals to illustrate the patterns evident in the ups and downs of equities and commodities and how firms might use these patterns to develop more successful models and products. In Peters’ study, fractals are more than just a geometric transcription of price fluctuations—they are a way to measure time itself. As the markets move to correct themselves, the “invisible hand” does not push them directly to equilibrium. Rather, the markets adjust according to a set of dynamics that reveal a fractal dimension within time (Peters 5). Conceiving of time as comprised of a set of nonlinear dynamics opens up new possibilities for understanding the transfer and representation of memories in contemporary poetic memorials.

Rather than seeing contemporary readers as always irrevocably distanced from historical events, a concept of a fractally dense time within the lyric—a genre customarily thought of as temporally isolated—illuminates the ways in which remnants of the past continue into the present and, more importantly, how traditional memorials operate to occlude those legacies. In other words, a fractal chronology within historical lyrics by contemporary black authors illustrates how ambitious confusion yields memorials that still convey a sensible and comprehensive narrative without having to disavow disjunctive elements. Fractals then become a way to describe not only the superficial

\textsuperscript{16} See Jan Andres and Martina Benešová. "Fractal Analysis Of Poe's Raven, II."
formal qualities of the memorials, but also how contemporary authors utilize a malleable temporality. Contemporary memorials demonstrate a notion of time that enables the inclusion of the past within present moments, what I term a “poetics of deferral.” This set of poetics simultaneously highlights and reconciles the disavowal of unthought elements in the history, such as the role of black female bodies in the nation formation and expansion within the nineteenth century. The poetics employed by authors like Alexander and Mullen undoes the mandate to perpetually defer the reconciliation of the legacies of slavery with the contemporary “post-racial” society by creating temporal space for the unthought to coexist with the acknowledged in the present.

Of course, Mullen and Alexander were not the only contemporary poets to challenge efforts to downplay the persistent effects of racism and slavery. At the end of the twentieth century, African American poets found themselves the brunt of criticism regarding the so-called identity politics that had taken over the conversation of contemporary poetics. Harold Bloom’s now infamous introductory essay to The Best of the Best of American Poetry 1988-1997 claimed that contemporary poetry fell short of early twentieth-century work as a result of poets caring more about identifying oppression than actual poetic technique. Bloom introduces the anthology by admonishing certain “camp-followers” for siphoning attention away from “authentic” poetry. His uncontested “we” is an unequivocal division of American readership which positions those concerned with the “French diseases” of multiculturalism, Foucauldian theory, and “mock-feminism” against those concerned with supposedly more universal themes (15-16). His accusations did not go unanswered, however. Months after the publication of the anthology, poets Rita Dove, Thylias Moss, Kevin Young, Marjorie
Perloff, among others, responded with critiques of Bloom's myopia and examples of African American poets who contradict his presumptions.17

Nevertheless, in 2011 Helen Vendler wrote a review criticizing Rita Dove’s work on *The Penguin Anthology of Twentieth-Century Poetry*, contending that Dove held minority poets to a lower standard than whites, evidenced by her allegedly including certain poetry based solely on the racial/ethnic identity of the author and not the success of their poetic technique.18 Black poets such as Natasha Trethewey and Sean Hill responded to such accusations in part with a revival of traditional poetic forms, demonstrating their ability to conform to and innovate conventional poetic techniques.19

Works such as Evie Shockley’s *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry* and Meta DuEwa Jones’ *The Muse is Music: Jazz Poetry from the Harlem Renaissance to Spoken Word*, chart the trajectory of poetic innovation and the incorporation of and indebtedness to both literary and musical sources.

Jones traces a genealogy of jazz in black poetry while Shockley examines how “polyvocality” and nature shape black aesthetics (Shockley 16). The readings that Shockley and Jones produce in their respective texts include the diverse influences that inform contemporary black poetry. Jones underscores the dynamic between music and

17 For examples of responses to Bloom’s critiques, see Thylias Moss’s “The Extraordinary Hoof” and Kevin Young’s “Mrs. B and Me.”

18 “Are These Poems to Remember?”

19 See *Domestic Work* by Natasha Trethewey and Sean Hill’s *Blood Ties and Brown Liquor*, and *Dangerous Goods*. 
poetry, remarking how neither remained in their respective modes, each transliterating into the other and creating a blend for which traditional methodologies cannot account. Shockley’s attention to the formal aspects of African American poetry compels us as critics to not limit our theorizations of “tradition” to just a persistence of content. Rather than merely look for a persistent conceit or the echo of particular themes to identify tradition, Shockley looks to consistent formal qualities to trace a genealogy of contemporary black poets. Shockley traces the influence of aesthetics and form upon successive generations of poets, rather than merely noting the resurfacing of particular themes that correlate with experiences in black history.

While such works are undoubtedly significantly generative, neither suggests a model of reading or analysis that would allow for the integration of a multitude of sources simultaneously. Shockley’s attention to form and Jones’ focus on music results in little attention paid to the photographic, journalistic, or other types of inspirations for historical poetry. Consequently, what remains necessary is a model that can account for the various types of sources all at once, while still promoting a coherent narrative of how contemporary black poets negotiate the myriad legacies and memories of the antebellum era. Thus fractals provide a way to not only examine how unthought memories are reincorporated in historical lyrics through temporal manipulation, but they also lend insight into the sources of influence and inspiration that are unthought or underexplored in the contemporary scholarship.

In Moorings & Metaphors: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women’s Literature, Karla F. C. Holloway assigns the term “plurisignance” to those works which are “layered” so that their full meaning is only discovered when their density is probed,
allowed to refract the light of inquiry like a prism (55). In the same way, I suggest that we use fractals to explore the layers of history always already functioning as a scaffold for the present. By unfolding the layers of “plurisignification” in contemporary black memorial poetry, we can begin to unravel the tapestry woven from the interactions of legacy and (collective) memory and gain a better understanding of how the ambitious confusion of Mullen and Alexander works to resurrect the unthought voices suppressed in favor of promoting a narrative of slavery as a parochial aberration unthreateningly removed from America’s current society.

I offer fractals as a model that provides the ability to account for the diverse array of influences on contemporary black poetic memorials. The innovative techniques Mullen and Alexander use to build upon and revise traditional forms and aesthetics through temporal expansion and creative repetition of linguistic and sonic elements can be best understood with a model that enables the simultaneous analysis of multiple types of influences and memories. Fractals allow us to move between scales of engagement with the past, both at the formal and the temporal level, revealing the poets’ use of sonic and linguistic repetition to create a fractal dimension within the lyric’s temporality.

Sleeping with the Dictionary

In their scholarship Mullen and Alexander express their concern with resurrecting voices that were suppressed in order to advance a particular historical narrative of slavery and the post-emancipation struggles for civil rights.20 This narrative came out of the earliest abolitionist art and literature, which depicted slaves in various states of

20 See Mullen’s “African Signs and Spirit Writing” and Alexander’s The Black Interior.
supplication and/or enduring torture in order to present a nonthreatening image of black (masculinity) with which a white readership could empathize. Through Mullen and Alexander I examine how black poets account for the unthought within contemporary black poetic memorials. By expanding and unfolding the lyric moment, these poets create a multi-layered temporality that undoes the disavowal of idiosyncratic histories that could not advance the narrative of an inevitable distancing from the era of slavery, a narrative of a postracial society that relegates all memory of slavery to an imagined scapegoat named the south.

Mullen’s engagement with the past revolves around an axis of aural and linguistic elements. By unpacking the language used to describe the everyday detritus of the legacies of the black experience, Mullen calls our attention to the strengths and failures of that language. Her 2002 collection *Sleeping with the Dictionary* is an experiment in the fractal unpacking of weighted language. Mullen titles at least one poem for almost every letter in the alphabet, and orders the poems in the collection alphabetically. Mullen uses fractal expansion to reveal the unthought behind the language we use every day. Reading several poems in the collection, “Any Lit,” “Elliptical,” and “Why You and I,” I demonstrate how fractals function as a useful model for understanding the recovery and representation of the unthought.

21 See Maurie D. McInnis’ *Slaves Waiting for Sale: Abolitionist Art and the American Slave Trade*.

22 The third chapter of this dissertation will discuss the implications of empathy and its resultant unthinking of the suffering body.
The fractal elements of Mullen's poetry are most apparent in the poem “Any Lit.” The title itself, a transposition of the syllables that comprise the word “litany,” signals to the reader from the outset the linguistic unfolding that will take place throughout the poem:

You are a universe beyond my mitochondria
You are a Eucharist beyond my Miles Davis…
You are a unit beyond my mileage…
You are a euthanasia beyond my miasma…
You are a uselessness beyond my myopia

The lines repeat the sonic/phonetic formula “yu ar a yu*** beyond my my***” (6-7). In each line the sounds repeat while only the two key words change. The fundamental sounds of Mullen’s poem assert the autonomous subjectivity of the addressed that cannot be possessed by the speaker. Mullen posits that even as metaphors—and language more generally—function to somewhat identify the poem’s two subjects, the subjects can still remain inaccessible. The “beyond” functions as a fulcrum that delimits the boundaries of the speaker’s territory even as it signals the existence of an unattainable space. The title's inversion of the syllables that make up the word “litany” demonstrates the significance as well as the effects of repetition. This fractally repetitious series of revisions signifies the elusive other always exceeding the reach of one’s possessive grasp.

Unable to fix the desired object under a particular textual signifier—a single word—the poem’s speaker is forced to approximate the other through a series of repetitious evaluations. The poem's incessant rhythm calls the boundless subject into being, just as the act of praying can realize the desires of the person praying. In reciting the same
phonetic elements over and over, with the diction fractally alluding to the pronominal equivalents, the poem's speaker attempts to asymptotically approach the outer limits of the addressee. That is to say, the poem simultaneously fixes the identity of the addressee while it affirms his/her inability to be possessed.

Amy Moorman Robbins notes that even as Mullen positions the poem’s speaker as subordinate to the addressee, Mullen preserves a measure of elusiveness and prevents him/her from being fully known. According to Robbins:

That the framing term “my” is neither a subject pronoun nor a direct opposite of “you,” but rather a metonymically slanted pronoun deflecting an identity claim, indicates a slippage subverting metaphoric substitution, a slippage that precisely highlights the power differential between the subject of address, “You,” and the self, deferred into the defensive term of possession and/or protection in “my.” This displacement of an assumed “I” onto the metonymically slant “my” also exemplifies Mullen’s pointed avoidance throughout Sleeping with the Dictionary of the frequently too visible, too “accessible” embodied speaking subject. (365)

As Robbins notes, Mullen's protection of the speaking “I” behind a wall of deflective yet possessive pronouns signals that the use of language, the act of speaking, need not always be a moment of vulnerability for the subject. 23 The act of utterance, whether in direct conversation or through the (attempted) construction of a poetic memorial always involves the exposure of the subject. The subject submits him/herself to the examination of the addressee. Even as the poem’s speaker attempts to articulate the addressee’s ineffable qualities, s/he puts herself on display, as evidenced by the inter-relational construction of subjectivity that forms the basis of the poem’s structure. Here Mullen demonstrates that language can be a tool of protection itself, despite the

23 “Harryette Mullen’s Sleeping with the Dictionary and Race in Language/Writing.”
presumption that the speaking subject is vulnerable to scrutiny. The fractal structure of the poem makes salient Mullen's successful attempts to manipulate language to highlight the unthought. Exhaustively studied and endlessly analyzed, blackness (i.e. the other) is assumed to be known, understood in its entirety. For centuries, language has been used to delimit and define the unknown, to determine and fix him/her and leave no room for idiosyncrasy. However, Mullen asserts that the other always remains outside of our reach; language can reveal elusiveness despite being a tool used to fix and to know.

Ambitious confusion surrounding the disavowed ineffability of subjectivity leads to a poem like “Any Lit,” a manifesto of sorts, one that highlights the simultaneous fixing/expanding capabilities of language. Copulas and pronouns cannot pin down the addressee, despite the fact that that is what they are intended to do.

Given that the poem is structured around a former black courting ritual, one can assume that Mullen here invites us to imagine blackness as an elusive marvel, rather than a fixable object of study. She elevates black folk and culture into the realm of the unknowable while asserting language as a tool fully capable of exploring that realm. For Mullen language is not inherently biased or occlusive; rather, it is one of the only ways for us to begin to approach and convey knowledge (or to signal a lack of knowledge). The unknowable subject is the one that cannot be unthought, for it cannot be pinned to one particular moment. The conventional lyric “I” exists in a temporally isolated moment within the poem; conversely, Mullen's evasive subject demands a denser form of temporality, one that enables the subject to remain outside of a fixed and particular moment. Indeed, the pronoun never appears in the poem, signaling the need to break away from conventional readings of lyrics.
As the structure of the lines repeat throughout “Any Lit,” the speaker reveals aspects of herself even as she lists the qualities of her beloved. Nevertheless, Mullen’s refusal to fix either the speaker or the addressee’s subjectivities results in the expansion of the lyric’s temporality capable of containing subject brought forth by the very act of enumerating and refusing to disavow those qualities that resist enclosure. Her fractal repetition of the sonic elements “you” and “my” allow her to indicate the creation of this more nuanced temporality. Contra the narrative of black subjectivity as monolithic and thoroughly knowable, Mullen's poem presents us with several iterations of black subjectivity, all coexisting harmoniously within the same fractally dense lyric moment. Mullen’s lyric time does not demand the excision or disavowal of any aspects of its subjects’ characteristics. Rather, it resolves the anxiety of ambitious confusion as it allows for the an ever expanding moment that tolerates the ineffable instead of requiring it to be unthought.

Why you and I

Over the course of the collection, Mullen walks us through most of the letters of the alphabet to explore the relationship between language and the body. Through a command of the sounds as well as the connotations of the words/letters, Mullen highlights the unavoidable tension between the corporeal and the linguistic. She reconciles the body and the word throughout her collection by using the poems as testimonials of sorts and proving each letter as part of this dialectic; the notable exception of course is y, u, and i. Those letters, or, more specifically, the words they signify, attempt to draw the subject away from its tangible presence, and into a wholly linguistic realm.
A scan of the titles of the poems in the collection reveals that Mullen included no “entries” for the letters Y, U, and I. Mullen offers something in way of an explanation for the omission in the poem “Why You and I.” Throughout the poem, Mullen fractally expands the phonics of the three letters to highlight the relationship between their aural qualities and their role in the linguistic construction of subjectivity. Jessica Lewis Luck remarks that the pun works to destabilize language and reposition it as subordinate to the corporeal experience of communication. “Mullen’s litany, however, seems an attempt to decenter the semiotic meaning of words and to emphasize instead their phonic possibilities, their feeling and resonance within the body itself, an emphasis that is significant to many of the later poems in the book” (368).  

Deborah Mix’s work on the significance of impudence in Mullen’s writing underscores the importance of the corporeal in what can easily become an overly linguistic memorialization of black women’s experiences. Mullen’s poetry demands a theoretical model that can account for the multiple planes of subjectivity with which her works are engaged. Fractals permit the reader to simultaneously trace the aural/oral, linguistic, and corporeal aspects of the poems, thus creating a lyric temporality that straddles the immediate present (as embodied readings and memories evoke a sense of nearness) and the immutable past (the text in print), thereby not unthinking any aspects of experience or memory.

The final lines of the poem suggest that “you and I” are too intertwined and that one errs if they disjoin them in favor of an “orderly alphabet.” “[W]ho can stand to


25 “Inspiration, Perspiration, and Impudence in Harryette Mullen’s Muse and Drudge.”
reason why you and I let/our union dissolve to strike the orderly alphabet?” (78) While the word “we” is used explicitly only four times in the poem, the formula “you and I” reinforces the dialectic that is fundamental to Mullen's understanding of subjectivity. This “union” of the two pronouns is crucial, and were that to be “dissolved” to create individual entries, to maintain the traditional narrative sequence, Mullen's experiment in navigating the relationship between the linguistic, the corporeal, and subjectivity would fail. In linking the two pronouns, Mullen calls for a polyvalent form of subjectivity loosed from the confines of dichotomous configurations. This new form of subjectivity, revealed through a reading of the fractal nature of Mullen’s poetry, does not have to sacrifice its connection to anything or anyone outside of itself in order to preserve a concept of a subject distinct and apart from all others. Wary of delimiting temporality and notions of isolated subjects, Mullen manipulates the linguistic components of meaningful subjectivity to posit new elements of narrative that can be used to build histories that incorporate what was once unthought.

While “u” and “i” are clearly linked to their homophonic pronouns, the reason for the omission of “y” is less clear. The letter “y” functions in two distinct relationships, at once a linguistic component to the subjectivity of the addressee (you) as well as an element that here calls into question the origin of our current understandings of what “you” and “i” signify. Indeed, the “y” in you underscores the linguistic construction of the subject, given its phonetic superfluity. But its ability to interrogate the status quo becomes more significant for Mullen in this poem. In other words, the letter “y” and its interrogative homophone “why” seek not only to answer the question of why y, u, and I were left out of the collection, but also introduces the question that the rest of the book
tangentially addresses: why are “you” and “I” constructed in the way that they are?
Mullen questions the origin of conventional subject pronouns and signals her
commitment to engaging with the unthought. By highlighting the significance of the
omitted letters, Mullen calls to the fore that which is normally elided or disavowed in the
construction of those subjectivities. By asking “why you and I” Mullen questions the
status quo and forces an interrogation of the disavowal that took place in the construction
of the dialectic. Identifying the fractal qualities of the poem underscores the fact that
Mullen goes beyond simple critique and offers a way to formulate subjectivity so that it
does not rely on excision to convey its significance.

An incomplete lexicon

While the dictionary purports to be a complete lexicon of a given language, there
are inevitable omissions and elisions. Mullen reveals the significance of these omissions
in her poem “Elliptical.” The poem is composed of a series of clauses that are separated
by ellipses. Each clause is only the first half of a sentence, leaving it to the reader to fill
in the rest. Mullen thereby directs her readers to become participants in the construction
of the poem’s narrative. This exercise in absence destabilizes the passive nature with
which we customarily receive written information. In other words, Mullen demonstrates
to her readers that we are all active participants in the conveyance of information and the
construction of language as a vehicle for narrative. Mullen shows the possibility
something to “make sense” even if it is never relayed to another. If sense is formed by
the agreeable meeting of two illusions, then it is not necessary for language to be a
conduit in the process of sense-making. Each incomplete sentence in the poem only
makes sense if one shares and inserts the speaker’s implied opinion of the group to which she alludes. That is to say, the speaker loses control over the conveyance of the intended meaning, if any meaning is actually intended.

Like the exercise machine of the same name, Mullen's poem glides back and forth between the speaker and the reader. The push and pull, or call and unpredictable response, are an exercise in absence, a set of linguistic calisthenics. Each ellipsis negatively constructs the piece by demanding that the reader either fill in the missing speech, or take the poem at face value, seeing meaning in the spaces without text. Mullen invites the readers of this poem to rethink their concept of textual significance and signification. If meaning can be found not only in the text itself but in those spaces where the text is not, what does that reveal about methods of communication? The spaces become the fractal landscape of the poem, seemingly linear, but with a density hidden within the conventional plane. Mullen was never one to prioritize one aspect of black literature over another; she asserts that we must examine both the aural and “writerly” qualities of the text with equal vigor.26 Similarly, in “Elliptical,” Mullen demonstrates that even in the absence of either of those qualities one can discern meaning.

They just can't seem to...They should try harder to...They ought to be more...

They always...Sometimes they...Once in a while they...

Our interactions have unfortunately been...

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26 See Mullen’s “African Signs and Spirit Writing.”
The poem revolves around lack: what “they” are missing or unable to do or would benefit from having. Yet the speaker never reveals what it is that could be had or done. Or even to whom “they” refers. The reader is forced to arrive at these conclusions herself, destabilizing her position as an inculpable party in the production of flawed subjects. As we read the poem from beginning to end, we see that the text could easily be a debate about the merits of a particular group. The speaker(s) vascillate(s) between a position of compassion and understanding to one of blaming the group for their shortcomings. This back and forth mirrors the debate American society has had about black people for centuries. In determining capability, one determines culpability. Therefore, Mullen forces the reader to contend with his own potential biases and prejudices and examine the origins of the automatic insertions. In not saying anything, Mullen makes apparent the processes that circumscribe supposedly limitless subjectivities. Mullen’s hyperbolic representation of the process of excision supposedly inherent in the construction of narrative subjects reveals the ability for a fractal cartography of poetic memory to identify that which has been unthought on multiple levels within the poem.

Mullen structures the final line of the poem, “Our interactions unfortunately have been...,” in such a way as to yield two distinct yet complementary meanings. The first is the most obvious, that the interactions between the speaker and the referenced subjects have been less than what was hoped for (whatever that might be). The second, though not necessarily more generative meaning, is that it is unfortunate that the interactions took place at all. In this sense, the final line is the only one which is complete unto itself. The ellipses in this case are less a signifier of an omission than of tone, indicating that the
speaker chooses to let the idea drop off with a fading intonation. The punctuation calls
our attention to the aurality missing from the poem, and fractals make it possible for the
reader to consider both aspects of the poetry simultaneously. Reading the poem through
the lens of fractals, the reader can reinsert multiple meanings into the same space within
the lines, thereby unraveling the customary work of language as a tool to help fix and
identify subjects and their respective actions and qualities. The ellipses extend the time
within the poem beyond that signified by a complete sentence; without a conclusion to
each clause, the reader cannot complete the transformation from ignorant to informed that
language supposedly catalyzes. Or rather, the reader cannot be directed to one particular
conclusion; Mullen’s fractally dense lyric time calls for the reader to recognize their role
in the creation of the unthought.

*Recyclopedia*

Mullen’s 2006 book *Recyclopedia* is a reprint of three of her previously published
collections, *Trimmings*, *S*Pe*RM**K*T, and *Muse and Drudge*. The three works each
reflect upon a certain influence on Mullen’s writing. *Trimmings* and *S*Pe*RM**K*T
were originally planned to be the first two books in a trilogy modeled after Gertrude
Stein’s *Tender Buttons*. The two books correspond with the “Objects” and “Food”
sections of *Tender Buttons*. *Trimmings* plays with the semantics behind descriptions of
the accoutrements of the domestic sphere while *S*Pe*RM**K*T draws a connection
between the food on your everyday shelves with the bodies that are nourished by that
food and which are highlighted by the hyper-corporeality of the work’s title. In her
renditions of domestic objects within these two collections, Mullen brings the historical
legacy of black women to the fore. *Recylcopedia* is an apt metaphor for Mullen’s modus operandi (Tremblay-McGaw 72). She does not merely reprint her previous collections, but rather invites engagement with, reflection upon, and reference to her poems. The poems themselves, in turn, perform the same actions; many are fractally self-reflective and make the lyric temporality contained therein more dense. Within each of these collections, fractal readings expose Mullen’s expansion of the present moment to reintegrate unthought legacies.

Deborah Mix, in “Tender Revisions: Harryette Mullen’s *Trimmings* and *S*PeRM**K**T” posits that the name of the collection *Trimmings* plays with the dualistic position of the (black) woman in American society. “The word ‘trimmings’ can denote the lace and ribbons adorning a dress as well as the fat and gristle cut away from a piece of meat, so the word is a synecdoche for the place of woman in American culture and language” (73). Mix reads in the title of this collection Mullen’s assertion that a study of the marginalized positioning of black women in both American culture and in the English language requires attention to the duality and paradoxes which make this social position so fluid and prone to warping and transmogrification. Mullen’s collection seeks to stitch those unthought “trimmings” of (black) womanhood back into the American fabric of femininity by using a fractal approach to link the temporal aspects and tangible memory of everyday objects.

Her red and white, white and blue banner manner. Her red and white all over black and blue. Hannah’s bandanna flagging her down in the kitchen with Dinah, with Jemima. Someone in the kitchen I know. (7)
This poem, originally included in *Trimmings* and reprinted in *Recyclopedia*, combines the image of the kerchief of the stereotypical black “mammy” with allusions to classic icons of Americana, expanding the notion of what it means to be American by underscoring the role of the black domestic worker in the construction and maintenance of a narrative of American-ness that unthinks the laboring black body. Memories of “mammy” are hidden beneath the flags of the union and the “white and blue” of the Bonnie Blue flag of the Confederacy, obscuring the contributions of black labor to the nation and the abuse those laboring bodies suffered despite living beneath the banners of “mannered” gentlemen. A fractal reading of Mullen’s poem illuminates the ways in which Mullen adds density to the poem’s temporality to reintegrate unthought relationships between black laboring bodies and the domestic and civic spheres into conventional icons of Americana.

The first line of the poem outlines the fractal dimension which the rest of the poem will inhabit. The first words evoke the red and white of the archetypal “mammy” kerchief which is given more texture as we progress through the poem. Carrying the image of this single loaded icon of American culture throughout the poem, Mullen traces a fractal cartography of our collective memory and understanding behind the selection of what counts as “American(a).” Progressively unfolding the meanings and histories surrounding this object, Mullen’s poem follows a fractal pattern of magnification, each new level attained reveals more and more of the intricacies and outlines which are otherwise eclipsed as the cultural eye backs further and further away, moving to view the whole nation at once. The fractal progression of Mullen’s poem demonstrates that it is
only through a directed and incremental magnification (*ad infinitum*) of a given object, person, or event that we can get a full understanding of the history it carries and signifies.

Moving from the first line and into the second, the reader must wrestle with the change in the diameter of our mouths as the actual sounds of the words change from those requiring a closed aperture to an open one. The final repetition of “er” sounds in the first line emulate the closed “manner” of the silence surrounding the domestic worker, whose interiority is denied in order to foreground the subjectivity of the white people who make use of her services. Furthermore, it calls to mind the suppressed growl and mutterings of the frustrated laborer whose “black and blue body” is smothered by the nation’s “banner.” The following sentences rely on their ending vowels to aid in the fractally spiraling openness of the poem’s progressive unfolding. Sequence ravel[s out of sound here; from “ooo” to “aaahh” and to the final vulnerable and surprised “oh.” This progression of sounds signifies that with the reader’s recognition of meaning comes the re-constriction of that penetrable orifice that could catch more than it could hold. Moreover, this evolution within the line parallels the trajectory of examination of the black body that always finally surprises and startles the voyeur who presumed a thorough knowledge. The sonic unfolding throughout the poem establishes multiple planes of temporality that create the illusion of progression within one seemingly singular moment. This temporal manipulation in turn allows Mullen to reintegrate the unthought black laboring body into the narrative of American development.

The final line signals the asymptotic fractal progression from the large scale of collective memory towards the individual’s personal engagement with, and knowledge of, the legacy of black women in America. This filigree of memory’s temporally scaled
and scaling alterations elucidates the everyday living-with-living-through that marks the black woman’s experience. As the reader and speaker move towards the end of the poem, the accumulation of the past in this fractally ordered fashion enables one to make sense out of the information provided, to categorize it as “knowledge.” Despite the allusion to several markers of a collective American culture, Aunt Jemima, Dinah, and “I’ve Been Working the Railroad,” the speaker is able to acquire a personal and individualized knowledge of the figure in the kitchen. The fractal geometry of memory, therefore, allows us to chart the various scales of remembering that occur in the same temporal moment; the fractal dimension of memory means that the reader can maintain an understanding of the significance of cultural legacies at both the national and individual levels simultaneously, not having to relegate any elements as unthought.

The Black Interior

Like Mullen, Elizabeth Alexander uses her poetry to explore the annals of history. Some of her most famous works, the Amistad poems, recreate the insurrection that took place on the ship of the same name, as well as the trial that followed. Included in her 2005 collection, American Sublime, Alexander uses the trial to show how blackness challenged the limits of the nineteenth-century American psyche. The numerous appeals and precarious reasoning that went into the court decision in favor of the Africans’ freedom feed Alexander’s aesthetics in this collection. The majority of the lines in the poem “Amistad” begin with the word “after.” The refrain creates a semblance of sequence in what is often collapsed into a single historical reference point. The anaphora reminds the reader that s/he is irrevocably removed from the actual events, despite the
increasing attempts to achieve unerring specificity in the retelling (Walters 1043). A fractal reading of the poem’s indirect approach to history demonstrates Alexander’s use of repetition to expand the lyric moment and create space within the poem for the unthought.

Wendy Walters remarks on the influence of the multiple forms of historical artifacts through which Alexander “dug” when drafting the *Amistad* poems. “This fixed and local repository of documents opens the poetic imagination to a historical event that resonates across centuries… The twenty-four *Amistad* poems telescope out both temporally and spatially, enacting the remembrance of an event which was never only local, but also transnational…” (1041).27 Walters contrasts the three-dimensional cubic enclosure of the archive with the “telescoping” poems, a memorial site that occupies multiple spatial and temporal planes. Consequently, a fractal reading of the collection illuminates the dense temporality within the memorial, providing room for the multiple sources and voices that influenced Alexander’s writing.

Alexander is adept at linking individual and national histories. While the *Amistad* poems retell an event integral to our nation’s history, *Antebellum Dream Book* (2001) probes into the poet’s own family history, recalling the bonds—both familial and commercial—that resulted in her creation. Alexander skillfully weaves her family’s narratives into the broader fabric of African American history, resulting in a collection that is simultaneously a memorial to the individual and the community. Through her use of the lyric genre as well as the fractal rendition of historical events, Alexander creates a

27 “Elizabeth Alexander’s *Amistad*: Reading the Black History Poem through the Archive.”
poetics of deferral that enables a holistic representation of history that includes the unthought.

*Antebellum Dream Book*, includes a poem entitled “Fugue” that demonstrates the effects of an unwelcomed disjuncture of the black psyche on the representation and creation of history. Alexander takes us to five moments of history within the poem, moving between episodes of national and individual experience: the march on Birmingham, two episodes in the mid-sixties, and two occasions in the early seventies. Alexander’s poem conceives of a long Civil Rights Movement that extends beyond the passage of the Civil Rights Act. For her, the Movement was not just about achieving legal equality and recognition, but the formation and sustenance of a community, and she makes clear in “Fugue” that the years of the Movement were not only spent in the public sphere.

In the first section of the poem, which is labeled “after ‘Walking’ by Charles Alston,” she highlights the literal movement of the Civil Rights Movement. “The knees in the painting are what send the people forward./Once progress felt real and inevitable,/as sure as the taste of licorice or lemons.” The corporeality injected into the text bridges the gap between the poem and the actual historical moment. Alston’s work is far from a realistic representation of people moving, i.e., it is not portraiture. Indeed, his sometimes faceless people work to underscore the movement being depicted in the painting. Alexander highlights the bent knees of the figures to focus our attention on the direction of progress, the physical toll of the Movement. Unthought in narratives of civil equality as a logical and inevitable conclusion are the physical demands upon bodies that might not have survived to enjoy the gains of their protest. Corporeal memories of the
experience of protest belie narratives of stoic and uncomplaining black bodies that
withstood numerous assaults. Alexander uses a fractal expansion of the black psychic
interior to construct a new form of memorial that simultaneously signals a movement
toward a desired goal while also highlighting how the contemporary moment remains
anchored in the past.

Alexander succeeds in translating this motion-in-stillness into language through
her diction in the poem. She engages a multitude of senses from taste to sight to touch,
and yet it is when she contrasts the use of these senses with their absence that the most
significant aspect of the poem comes through. Fractals reveal the dense lyric temporality
characterized by the static animation that the poem employs. Rather than searching for
the next episode in the sequence of events, the poem requires that we see our present as
yet another dimension within the singular moment we all inhabit. In other words,
Alexander’s lyric time suggests that we have not moved away from the era of slavery and
Jim Crow and we instead imagine that we are progressing toward a more enlightened
time. The first line of the third stanza, “Once progress felt real and inevitable,”
destabilizes the notion that the Civil Rights Movement was successful, for, in the poem's
present, advancement of a people does not seem like an inevitable reality. By titling this
poem “Fugue,” and incorporating multiple tenses (both past and present tense verbs are
used) Alexander suggests that the act of remembering the Civil Rights Movement as well
as the Movement itself were “fugue states” of the (African) American psyche, a
dissociative state that resulted in (willful) amnesia.

This amnesia unthinks the suffering the bodies of the Movement endured in order
to present a narrative of the American people as unerringly, albeit gradually, moving
toward the equilibrium of a sane mind. In other words, the traditional narrative of the Jim Crow era as an aberration in an otherwise equal society necessarily unthinks the individuals that were sublimated to present a collective that changed how blacks were treated in this country. Alexander’s ambitious confusion led her to draft a poetic memorial that uses readily relatable sensory experiences to link the typically isolated lyric moment to the reader’s present. The poem links certainty to embodied experience; what is sure is what one feels, what one tastes. For the post-Civil Rights generations, the experiences of the Movement can never be had, indeed they run the risk of being unthought as narratives of a post-racial society abound. Nevertheless, Alexander suggests that they can still be known through attention to the body in memorials to the protests. Incorporating a body with which the reader can empathize, Alexander capitalizes on the expanded lyric moment to link the ephemeral and dynamic body to the static memorial. Alexander carries this method of corporeal memorialization beyond the Civil Rights Movement, using the body as a bridge between the reader’s present and the lyric’s moment.

Rebellious Dreams

One of the more traditional lyrics included in Antebellum Dream Book, is “Nat Turner Dreams of Insurrection.” In this poem Alexander assumes the voice of the famous revolutionary and invites her readers to imagine what might have inspired him. The first two stanzas describe the dream in pieces, as though Turner’s eyes were quickly panning from one shot to another. “Drops of blood on the corn, as dew from heaven./Forms of men in different attitudes, portrayed in blood.” The word blood appears three times in the first stanza; the violence of Turner’s plan underscores the
tension between the social and the individual that arises not only in the course of staging an insurrection, but also in the efforts to memorialize that uprising. Individual body walls are lost, blended, enmeshed with the external world. From this intensely corporeal introduction, Alexander shifts subtly to the shape and surfaces of the actors. That is to say, she shifts the poems attention towards the instruments of retelling–text and language. The only remaining aspects of self—the vessels of bodies holding a variety of postures—press back against the oppressive and stifling institution that seeks to hold them captive.

The poem’s speaker dreams of the “forms of men in different attitudes.” This line simultaneously suggests that the speaker focuses on what the external make up of a man could reveal about his stance on various issues and that these men are “indifferent” to the uprising about to take place around them. By highlighting the significance of body language, Alexander transitions from fleshy beginning of the poem to its lingual conclusion. Alexander's use of the body underscores the utility of reading the body as text, while adding to the sense that the events in the poem are transpiring in the reader's present moment. Thus Alexander invites us to examine the way language is called upon to mask and unthink the corporeal. As an alternative she posits a reading practice, birthed from ambitious confusion, which pays careful attention to the ways in which the body speaks, in its ability to be simultaneously an empty form that serves as a conduit for emotion, as well as a vessel that is already full of the ink needed to convey its message.

“Nat Turner Dreams of Insurrection,” like many of Alexander's other lyrics, braids multiple temporalities into a single lyric moment. The dreamscape idealizes the isolated timeless moment conventionally associated with the lyric, yet it is merely the
backdrop for the fractally complex layers of temporality Alexander relies upon to inject Turner's voice back into his own narrative. The poem contains several different verb tenses, moving the reader from the simple past to the subjunctive. Allowing for speculation even in a defined and seemingly closed moment, Alexander highlights the lyric’s ability to provide for the contemporaneous existence of not only that which was and, therefore, must be in retrospect, but also that which could have been. The question necessarily requires the simultaneous existence of at least two temporalities: the past as it was, and an alternative past as the speaker imagines it could have been. Brought back to the fore, the unthought inspirations of Nat Turner, articulated in this fractally expansive lyric present, redress the confines of deferral. Alexander uses tense and tension to unveil the unthought origins of rebellion elided by narratives of Turner that relegate him to one moment of unsuccessful revolution.

The poem opens with an epigraph quoted from *The Confessions of Nat Turner*;²⁸ Alexander drawing the reader’s attention to the hagiography surrounding the revolutionary figure. The readers of *The Confessions* and those of Alexander's poem appear to receive the story firsthand and the work of the intermediary—as well as the racial politics surrounding that intermediary—is eclipsed by the use of the first person pronoun. The speaker claims to be no “conjurer,” rather others have the power to conjure him. Indeed, even as he speaks, the poem does not contain the subject “I” until the very end, as though the construction of the memorial itself brings the subject into being. The timelessness of the dream combined with the lyric “I” appears to bring the reader into

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²⁸ Alexander selected the epigraph from Thomas Ruffin Gray’s 1831 pamphlet.
Turner's present, i.e., the reader's past. Nevertheless, this is a past full of the futurity inherent in planning for an insurrection. This past turns into a forward-looking present through the use of a fractal structure that scaffolds the poetics of deferral. Repeated references to the materiality of the bodies of the insurrectionists disrupt the placid temporal isolation of the dream and interject reminders of the disarticulation of those bodies even as their corporeality functions to link the reader to the poem’s historical moment. Memory contained upon and within the body, can at once be remembered (relived) and compartmentalized—set aside in a vessel destined for decomposition, no longer threatening to spill over into a later present. The memorial Alexander constructs in the poem operates within a timescape that expands to let the past's future integrate seamlessly into the poem's present.

“Fugue” and “Nat Turner Dreams of Insurrection” are only two examples of Alexander's investment in reintegrating the forgotten aspects of history into contemporary memorials. In “The Negro Digs Up Her Past: Amistad,” Alexander articulates the importance of recovering the unthought. In this case, the unthought are those figures or traits that complicate presentations of black historical subjects as a sort of infallible Prometheus who helps the unenlightened evolve to a state of acceptance.

Now that we have come through the historical revisions of several black arts movements, and now that the academic field of history as such has expanded to give us a more readily available accounting of those stories, how might we imagine differently? Need we still be reverent toward our Negro heroes, or might we imagine their complexities and flaws? Are we able to hold on to all of our history, or is writing the continual reminding of what we once knew but need to repeat in order to continue knowing? (464).
Alexander issues a subtle charge in her questions: if the black arts movements and the concurrent academic revolutions were truly successful, are we not then at liberty to reimagine history differently? Alexander states that the way they have told the stories of black “heroes” has always been at a distance, reverent. However, true freedom, she protests, would mean that we could now present these icons in a way that includes the blemishes that were covered up—unthought—to present them in a respectable light.

Moreover, Alexander questions the efficacy of writing as a method of representing history. She asks if writing can in fact represent the whole of history or if it always indicative of a process of distillation and excision. As “Fugue,” “Nat Turner Dreams of Insurrection,” and many of Alexander's other poems reveal when viewed through a fractal lens, writing—language—does possess the ability to faithfully represent the past. Fractals illuminate the dense temporality that Alexander includes in her poetry to simultaneously present the traditional narrative alongside its unthought elements. The need to write the past suggests, according to Alexander, that the past is perpetually falling away, that unless we repeated write it into memory, we risk forgetting it entirely. Fractal expansion of lyric time makes this reiteration unnecessary. If we are no longer continually moving away from the past, but rather conceive of time as a layered and nuanced experience of spaces, then we need not fear forgetting the historical events that continue to influence the present.

In “Islands Number Four” Alexander incorporates a variety of materials into her poetic descriptions of visual and textual representations of maritime memories and a fractal model of analysis enables the reader to identify the significance of each. The first section of the poem describes a painting by renowned minimalist artist Agnes Martin.
The poem borrows its title from Martin’s 1979 group of 12 paintings, which she describes as “Clean form from a distance, up close, her hand./All wrack and bramble to oval and grid.” Alexander repeatedly underscores the illusion of perfection and order that is belied by a closer inspection, revealing the fractal structure to Martin’s painting.

She calls attention to the chaos behind the superficial semblance of order and “peace.” In the same way, fractals lend order to the discordant products of ambitious confusion. Zooming into the painting to reveal the idiosyncratic hand of purposeful creation, Alexander highlights the disrupted flow to draw the link from the genteel rhythm of a sailing ship to the “funk” of the underbelly. From here, she progresses into the next section of the poem, a description of a slave ship from 1789. “Same imperfect ovals, calligraphic hand./At a distance, pattern. Up close, bodies…Slave ships, the not pure, imperfect ovals,…The flesh rubbed off their shoulders, elbows, hips.” A fractal model best reveals the complexities within Alexander’s memorial to the ships of the Middle Passage, as it permits the simultaneous examination of the multiple planes and dimensions operating within the piece. The first line of the second stanza links the slave ship description to her treatment of the Martin painting. Alexander highlights the fractal dimension of the slave ship, the hold of which at first glance appears to be no more than efficiently loaded space until a closer inspection reveals the individual bodies, aligned in a pattern crafted to achieve maximum efficiency, much like the lines that divide the equilateral triangle at the beginning of this chapter. Alexander suggests that in moving too far from the original artifact, we run the risk of seeing only the distilled icon, the deceptively placid pattern, and unthinking the violence that brought the individuals together. Similarly, fractals require that readers make note of the grit and disjuncture
hidden within the simple narratives of slavery as an increasingly removed aberration in our collective epistemology of the nation as just and inclusive.

The final line of the quoted passage focuses the reader’s attention on particular areas of the slaves’ bodies. Alexander thereby brings us to an even deeper scale within her fractal rendition of the slave ship, tracing our path as we zoom in further. Given that each of the aforementioned body parts are joints, I conclude that Alexander is inviting the reader to imagine the fractal significance of linkages: not only the links between the abstract pattern of a packed cargo hold and the flesh that comprised that cargo, but also the links binding the memories of the same object in different centuries. Alexander weaves her inherited memories of the slave ship into the written description pulled out of the archive. In doing so, she creates the “illusion” of a single temporal moment that holds both the real and imagined distance past. Alexander moves us forward and backward through the memory of the ship, each line lulling and ebbing through time, emulating the waves that brought the slaves to these shores. The poem forces its reader to look beyond the superficial symmetry of a “calligraphic hand” and to instead imagine the chafing, destructive encroachment of memory. Emphasizing the body and the text within the poem, Alexander demonstrates the necessity for a model of analysis that can accommodate these distinct yet intertwined forms of remembering.

Like Mullen, Alexander explores the generative possibilities within a dense lyric temporality; among these, she finds that the lyric subject existing within a polyvalent lyric time enables the inclusion of multiple forms of subjectivity, negating the work of excision and unthinking that customarily accompanies projects of subject and narrative construction. A fractal reading of these two poets’ works reveals how the dissection of
the lyric’s sonic and linguistic elements yields a temporality that is expansive enough to allow seemingly conflicting subjectivities to coexist within the same intelligible narrative.

This chapter demonstrates how fractals aid in the identification of the hidden planes within the seemingly one dimensional temporality of the traditional lyric. If narrative arises in part from the reading of a subject within a particular moment of time, then a form of lyric time that possesses a fractal dimension can enable the sensible existence of nuanced subjectivities not necessarily in accordance with conventional narratives. The next chapter continues to examine how the unthought is created out of the process of narrative construction in memorials to the antebellum south and, in turn, identifies the significance of space in the construction of narrative. Just as I use fractals to reveal the significance of the linguistic and spatial qualities of the text on the page, I identify the syntactical, formal, and architectural choices made to elide the labor of black subjects in fundamental and sacred spaces within our nation’s landscape, as well as the products of the ambitious confusion employed to craft memorials that include these unthought subjects.
Places of Pilgrimage and the Creation of Nonsense

Here, the river changed its course,
turning away from the city as one turns,
forgetting, from the past…
Here, the dead stand up in stone, white marble…
This whole city is a grave.
Every spring— Pilgrimage—the living
come to mingle with the dead…
relive their dying on the green battlefield.
--Natasha Trethewey, “Pilgrimage”

The end of the Civil War brought with it a sense of vulnerability; the abolition of
slavery and calls to enfranchise the emancipated men brought the presumably stable
concept of the American citizen into question. Furthermore, efforts to reconcile the
North and South as both blue and grey underscored the ineffable loss that resulted from
the new forms of death and disease the war introduced. Confusion became ambitious
when the drive to sort through the detritus of history compelled commemorative groups
such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Western Sanitary Commission
to try to establish sites of memorialization, ranging from declaring battlefields hallowed
ground to grandiose monuments dedicated to commemorate the heroes and ideals of the
war.

Nineteenth-century groups—and even contemporary artists—trusted that such
sites would offer a single, uncontested interpretation of significant aspects and
occurrences in the war; that they would present the consensus of all those impacted by
the event, and would be impervious to onslaughts of disagreement and dissent. The turn
to monuments and other structural memorials signaled the belief that designating a particular site as a sacred place of memory would contain and order the inchoate and dissonant memories of the experience of war.

Attempts to establish memorials that put forth a singular interpretation confronted the problem of conflicting versions relating the significance of the war, each claiming to be the authentic representation of the events. Free(d) blacks, former Union, and former Confederate soldiers all sought to memorialize their versions of the war’s meaning. While the newly emancipated population sought to commemorate the service and contributions of black soldiers, both Union and Confederate forces had an interest in eliding the agents of disruption and the unsettling question of the role blacks would play in the burgeoning postbellum society. Consequently, those building sites of memory were compelled to establish a process of sense-making in order to distill the histories of the war into a single, and universally appealing, interpretation to be conveyed to posterity. The dedication of memorial spaces involved the relegation of memory to that space, transforming previously insignificant space into meaningful place that contained and conveyed a particular historical narrative.

Commemorative groups used structural memorials to delineate the borders of memory and used the production of place to fabricate a placid narrative of a historical event that unthought elements not in accordance with the desired narrative. The production of place establishes a jurisdiction of analysis that deems those elements within it that do not agree with the proffered narrative to be nonsense, unintelligible, without meaning and, therefore, for within that place they cannot be read as artifacts of the promoted history. Structural memorials give meaning to space through a reading of the
artifacts contained therein; consequently, any artifacts that do not conform to a particular narrative must be removed (unthought) from the space otherwise they remain as nonsense. For example, the plantation home attempts to put forth a narrative of ordered interactions between the races through its clearly differentiated rooms, distinct living quarters, and separate spaces for the labor such as cooking and laundry. However, the presence of a slave within the intimate sphere of the home would read as nonsense given the influential bourgeois narrative of home as a space where labor does not enter. In other words, the enslaved body laboring within the plantation home became unintelligible, nonsensical, until a counternarrative was formulated that replaced compulsory labor with the notion of love and a (nearly) familial sense of duty, i.e., the “mammy” archetype.  

The production of place that leads to the demarcation of the borders of a memorial site is intended to inhibit not only the potential paralysis wrought by mourning and confusion but also to structure the narrative that will be disseminated to the broader populace and posterity, to determine what does and does not make sense. Through a systematic feedback loop memorial structures rely on symbols, space, and architecture to shape the narrative of an event. The formal qualities of spatial memorials determine narratives of memory—the particular rhetorical event that attempts to distill the assemblage of artifacts into a coherent (and convincing) story, and, at times, to establish

the semblance of plot in order to preserve notions of the inevitability of progress.\textsuperscript{30} This chapter deconstructs the production of place to reveal how the establishment of a jurisdiction of historical analysis leads to the identification of nonsense, and, consequently, the excision of the unthought.\textsuperscript{31} The latter portions of the chapter examine contemporary spatial memorials to the antebellum south, including Stone Mountain in Atlanta, the photography of Chester Higgins, and Edward P. Jones’ \textit{The Known World} (2003), a novel whose ambitiously confused engagement with the stakes and politics of cartography and capitalism reveals a denser form of temporality that emphasizes the dynamism of the memorialized subject even in apparently static sites of memory. Though my analysis focuses on physical monuments, I turn to this spatially-concerned literary memorial to illuminate the processes behind the denotation of nonsense fundamental to the construction of sacred place and the elimination of the unthought.

Understanding the production of place is critical to identifying the ambitious confusion behind contemporary memorials to the antebellum south and subsequently developing a reading practice that finds coherent narratives of memory that incorporate the unthought. John Frow aptly remarks how societies typically conceive of memory:

\textsuperscript{30} I build my definition of narrative off of the work of rhetorical narrative theorists James Phelan and Peter Rabinowitz, among others. Their concept of narrative as a rhetorical device and event reveals the fallacy of the notion of memorial narratives as an organic result of the formal and/or incidental aspects of the memorial while still highlighting the potential for revision after construction of the memorial site is compete.

\textsuperscript{31} As space is transformed into place, discordant artifacts that remain within the space are moments of nonsense within an otherwise coherent narrative until they are removed—unthought.
“...the moments of inscription/deposit and of storage correspond to the two major metaphors through which European culture has conceptualized memory over the last two and a half millennia...both metaphors suppose a direct relation between space and mental capacities” (223). In other words, Western cultures have traditionally thought of memory as a room, (in)finite, a “sacred closet” in which one’s thoughts and remembrances are organized into boxes or containers (Dickinson F1385). Physical containers of memory follow the same pattern.

From the filing cabinets of yore to the organization of electronic files on a computer, we see that humans are inclined to create dedicated spaces to hold particular memories. However, this goes farther than simply dedicating a building to the memory of a particular figure or event. The shape of the rooms and the architecture of the building both contribute to the way memory is handled and represented in a particular space. Designing space is the first step in producing place, and the design of structural memorials reveals how the artist established boundaries to define a jurisdiction of analysis and fabricate a narrative of memory.

Instead of dismissing memorials as exclusionary or inevitably incomplete, one can assume an analytical posture informed by the theory of ambitious confusion to expand the jurisdiction established within the borders of place to locate comprehensive narratives of memory. I first examine early spatial and monumental memorials to the Civil War, such as Arlington National Cemetery and Thomas Ball’s “Emancipation

Memorial” to articulate the investment nineteenth-century memorial societies placed in the erection of seemingly immutable testaments to the war’s historical significance.

I then move to Jones' The Known World, to dissect the production of place as a process used to ascribe meaning to space and establish borders for the containment and representation of memory. Within those borders, Jones develops a denser form of temporality exemplified in his subject-rich syntax. I argue that, like the fractals discussed in the previous chapter, this syntactical maneuver has the effect of generating a static animation within the text that permits supposedly temporally anchored place to sensibly straddle both past and future, allowing for memorialization without risking the paralysis of nostalgia or the excision of unthought elements of subjectivity. Jones' novel relates the failed attempts of their respective characters to establish a legacy anchored in the land they acquire during their lifetime. I read the failure to project place into the future, where it must confront new times and, therefore, new readings of the space, as evidence of place's ability to outline the boundaries within which its narrative makes sense, to generate a “known world” that itself makes some things knowable and others not. I conclude the chapter with a reading of spatial and monumental memorials to the antebellum south, specifically Chester Higgin’s photograph of the Door of No Return and Stone Mountain in Atlanta, GA, to explore how even these most staid and seemingly immutable memorials can be reread through a lens of ambitious confusion to highlight how the reconfiguration of spatial borders can densify the temporality within “fields of
care,”33 preserving room for unthought subjectivities and their degree of civic participation.

**Memorial Mania**

Two scholars, Erika Doss and Kirk Savage, offer divergent theories of public memorials: Savage argues that monuments were intended to offer a single interpretation of a historical figure or event, to signal a community's consensus. On the other hand, Doss reads the explosion in the number of public memorials as a desire to confine and order the confusion surrounding unreconciled histories, relegating them to particular sites wherein they might be processed. Departing from these theories, I offer ambitious confusion as a new way of reading memorial sites, one that deconstructs the borders that delimit analytical possibilities and instead reconfigures memorial space to create room for the integration of the unthought.

Erika Doss characterizes the frenzy of monumental construction and sacred ground dedication as “memorial mania,” defined as the drive to commemorate in visibly public spaces those events which have helped to shape our local or national identity. According to Doss contemporary American memorials invest heavily in accurate and holistic representation and respect, presumably because previous memorials “unthought” certain groups and narratives (2).34 Doss contends that memorials signify the faith society places in things to negotiate difficult and complex emotions. We expect that, by


establishing a site (whether permanent or temporary) dedicated to the processing and
mourning of a particular event, we can contain the affects and effects of grief and
mourning to just those established venues, leaving the rest of societal space unperturbed.
Thus, she reads memorial mania as a symptom of ambitious confusion, a way to
ameliorate the chaos caused by the uncontrolled grief.

However, I contend that ambitious confusion is not evidenced by the quantity of
memorial projects and their ever-increasing inclusivity, but rather by the reconfiguration
of place within memorial sites that expands the jurisdiction of analysis so that the
unthought can return and not be labeled nonsense. Whether progressively specific or
asymptotically universal, contemporary memorials attempt to accrue a myriad of
subjectivities to either avoid charges of bias or to redress perceived prejudice in other
memorial sites. My employment of ambitious confusion requires equal attention be paid
to not only the content of the memorial, but its form as well, and this consideration of
form highlights the ways in which the memorial project can successfully manage the
accumulation of subjectivities through the densification of the memorial’s temporality.
This allows for the creation of a static animation that permits the reintegration of the
unthought without sacrifice of the memorial’s inclusivity.

Though Doss’ study treats contemporary memorial projects erected during the
twentieth century, symptoms of memorial mania can be traced back to the years during
the War itself, although many of the public grandiose memorials were erected in the last
decade of the nineteenth century. As the nation faced the start of a new century,
American society began to reflect on the significance of the war and how the ubiquity of
death and loss and the destabilization of concepts of citizenship that opened new avenues of civic participation for black subjects.

Scholar Drew Gilpin Faust’s foundational text, *This Republic of Suffering*, outlines the significant changes in societal expectations of and responses to death during the Civil War. The removal of death from the privacy of the sickroom, filled with family and loved ones, to the simultaneously spectacular and anonymous deaths of the battlefield left nineteenth-century Americans at a loss as to how they were to perform the rites of *ars moriendi*, and how to accurately calculate the number of casualties. The presence of the family at the *hors mori* was necessary to assess the moral and spiritual state of the dying one; with the unknown of the afterlife encroaching upon the quiet domestic sphere, the bereaved could attempt to answer their questions of where their dead would go by noting their emotional and mental state at the time of their death (7).

Death on the battlefield, therefore, left all those questions unanswered. It became the prerogative of commanding officers, nurses, fellow soldiers to relate the last moments of a soldier to his family, so that their grief might be assuaged. Nevertheless, not every Civil War death could be witnessed by friends and colleagues and subsequently relayed to the bereaved. The “unknown soldier” raised the issue of how and whose responsibility it was to memorialize the dead even when neither he nor his family could be identified. As the government assumed responsibility for what used to be a private undertaking, the issue of memorializing the dead took on national significance. Projects to honor the Civil War dead on both sides sought to produce places that would in turn craft a narrative of citizenship grounded in the “common man” whose civic participation was evidenced by his sacrifice to his country. Moreover, the universal vulnerability to an unforeseen death
imbued with national import catalyzed memorial projects that relied on the structuring of place and the attempted suspension of time to determine the narrative to be generated through the analysis of otherwise senseless loss.

The efforts to account for the unknown dead and injured even included classified ads placed in newspapers in the hope that family members would recognize some of the particulars and write to identify the body, a public demonstration of the fallibility of government record-keeping. The time lapse between the printing of the advertisement and the receipt of the paper by the family meant that the exact status of the soldier was never assured to the readers, often a family might hear of their loved one being injured only to learn upon their reply to the advertisement that their beloved had passed away in the interim (Faust 127). The delay between the production and the receipt of information regarding the status of the soldiers’ health contrasted with the increasingly industrialized and modern world that made the manufacturing and distribution of materials ever more efficient. The precariousness of the soldiers’ welfare, emphasized by the family members’ uncertainty about the validity of the information they received, rendered the information posted in the newspapers almost meaningless. How could a report about a soldier’s injury and location of convalescence be meaningful if, by the time the report was received, the soldier had already died?

Such a process occurred across the fractured nation, resulting in a desire for a static temporality, fixed in such a way as to confer meaning upon the reports and anecdotes of fallen and captured soldiers. The memorials devised with this temporal suspension in mind arose from a state of ambitious confusion and included many monuments celebrating Civil War heroes including both known and unknown soldiers.
Tombs and monuments to the Unknown Soldier dotted newly sanctified grounds in the years after the war, the most famous, of course, being the Civil War Unknowns Monument in Arlington National Cemetery, which was built in 1865.\(^{35}\)

The original design of the monument featured plain walls, with the western face featuring an inscription recording the number of unknown soldiers buried beneath the sarcophagus as 2,111, collected from the surface of the battlefields where they fell.\(^{36}\) The tomb presents no individual, not even an allegorical figure to stand in as an emblem of the virtues of the fallen soldiers. Moreover, the sarcophagus reveals no suggestion of the dimension of the vault below. Together, the neat lines of the sarcophagus and the borderless vault work to exemplify the effort to structure space to alleviate the ambitious confusion generated by the inability to identify the fallen. The undefined boundaries of the vault allow for the enormity of the losses caused by the war to extend beyond the immediately apparent space of the memorial, suggesting that the full significance of the loss of life cannot be comprehended.

On the other hand, the erection of the sarcophagus gave memorial designer Quartermaster General Montgomery Meigs the ability to transform the grounds of Gen. Robert E. Lee’s house into a place that signaled the cost of his decision to resign from the U. S. Army to assume command of Confederate forces. The placement of graves in his wife’s rose garden displaced Lee from his home as much as it did the soldiers who lost

\(^{35}\) The famed “Tomb of the Unknowns,” also called the “Tomb of the Unknown Soldier,” in the nation’s capital was erected in 1921.

their lives in the war; Meigs’ produced place straddles the line between symbolizing the incomprehensible while putting forth a narrative of the Union’s complete domination of the Confederacy. Meigs’ memorial design links the national narrative of civic participation through sacrifice with the individual grief of bereaved families.

Not every memorial to the Civil War and the antebellum era involved dedicating large tracts of land to the memory of the dead. Other projects sought to promote singular interpretations of the key figures, events, and tropes of the antebellum era and the war through the erection of memorials that structured place with rigid borders and impenetrable faces, establishing jurisdictions of analysis that produced seemingly authoritative and definitive narratives of memory. Memorial societies such as the Ladies Memorial Association formed continuously from the beginning of the war to the middle of the twentieth century, each one focused on commemorating a different aspect of the war and its participants, both on and off the battlefield. For those memorials chosen to represent a larger section of the public, the stakes attached to the formation of a nationally relevant narrative were much higher and demanded a medium that would at once present a national consensus and protect against historical revision.

Monuments were a particularly attractive genre for Civil War memorials, mainly as a result of the presumed permanence of the historical interpretation. The use of allegory as well as familiar and traditional sculptural techniques quickly and efficiently conveyed the desired message to viewers. Conversely, particular sites designated as hallowed ground, such as the battlefields at Gettysburg, or the plantations of the former elite, were subject to the passage of time erasing evidence of the events that had occurred there. Once the grass had “done its work” the relics of sacrifice and heroism so essential
to construction of narratives of honorific sacrifice were lost.  

In *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves* (1997), Kirk Savage explains the popularity of monuments even in the face of less expensive and more portable form of memorialization—photography. The three-dimensional replicas of human faces and form conversed with nineteenth-century society’s obsession with scientific categorization of human beings; the promise of accurate documentation enabled sculpture to continue to demand popular interest even after photography became more widespread (8). The promise of verisimilitude was fundamental to the process of sense-making and narrative construction that was the impetus behind the erection of many monumental memorials. “Meaning had to be compressed into a narrow compass: the language of pose, gesture, expression, attributes, and accessories. When faced with the task of representing the significance of complex events, sculptors tended to condense expression into a few standard sculptural formulas” (66-7). The formulaic nature of sculpture led to certain techniques and motifs connoting particular meanings. Thus, the repetition of sculptural elements established a jurisdiction of analysis that inhibited revisionary theorizations, which became unthought or appeared to be nonsensical.

Savage recounts the story behind the creation of several sculptural memorials to emancipation, discussing the racialized politics of aesthetics as well as the economic and spatial forces working to direct what kind of memorial was selected and where such a monument would be located. Both whites and blacks recognized the imperative to construct a monument that would signal to posterity the import of emancipation;  

37 Sandburg, Carl. “Grass.”
consequently, designs for such a monument were solicited from artists around the world. Witnessing the erection of several Confederate and Union memorials to the common (read: white) soldier, several blacks, many of whom were former slaves, began a campaign to collect funds for the construction of a Freedman’s memorial to Abraham Lincoln. After former slave Charlotte Scott gave a five-dollar donation to her former master with the intention of helping to erect a monument to the recently assassinated Lincoln, the Western Sanitary Commission, a group run by whites, seized upon this sentimental story to commence fundraising for a monument dedicated to the slain president. Efforts to construct a permanent memorial which would put forth an image of Lincoln as the benevolent leader/martyr who fought to reunite a nation torn apart by the race question proved too appealing to resist culminated in the dedication of Thomas Ball’s bronze group in Lincoln Park, Washington, D.C. in 1876 (89-90).

The Commission considered many designs, eventually settling upon Thomas Ball’s “Freedmen’s Memorial to Abraham Lincoln,” a depiction of Lincoln waving the newly liberated slave to rise and claim his new status as a free(d)man. Significantly, Ball’s group shows the black man in a kneeling position, his manacles still attached, his body partially undressed. Ball’s rendering of the emancipated figure emulates Josiah Wedgwood’s iconic “Am I not a man, and a Brother?” design. Thus, Ball’s bronze monument preserves the meaning of emancipation as merely a continuation of black subjection and dependence on white paternalism. At a time when the nation was still trying to figure out how to accommodate the newly freed blacks within society, Ball’s group sought to lessen that anxiety by putting forth an image of a nation faithful to a promise of liberty while maintaining the dynamics of race relations present before the
war. Nevertheless, the story behind the construction of the memorial reveals how sculpture as a medium was intended to occlude and stabilize the precarious nature of race by producing place with rigid borders to inhibit the realization that narratives of race had no legitimate foundation.

When designing the maquette for the Emancipation Group, Ball eschewed the use of a black model, which he deemed not worth the discomfort of having in his apartment, deciding instead to self-model. Savage signals towards the import of Ball’s decision: “The old notion that the African body was intrinsically anti-ideal died hard. It is true that Ball began with a live model, presumably black, but rejected him in favor of self-modeling; the resulting physiognomy has some of the conventional cues of blackness familiar from visual representation (tightly curled hair, broadened nose and lips) but still remains racially indistinct” (81). That Ball would deem his own body to be on par with that of a former slave indicates the fictitious nature of race and servile status as an infallible method of distinguishing between whites and blacks. Yet the finished monument was expected to occlude this original tidbit, relying upon the ubiquity of racial stereotypes to convey the desired narrative to the viewers and on the three-dimensional rendering of both Lincoln and the newly emancipated slave to imply a faithful reproduction of reality. Unlike the photograph, where composition choices can be used to eliminate the borders between the temporality of the subjects, monumental sculptures present a seemingly immutable face and seek to deny the formation of new narratives of memory, unthinking the multiple facets of subjectivity that conflict with the preferred interpretation. Nevertheless, readings of monuments informed by ambitious confusion can reveal how later curators of memory sought to reconfigure the boundaries of space
and sculpture to manipulate temporality and create room for the unthought.

_The Known World_

In 1889, businessman Charles F. Gunther saw an opportunity to capitalize on the desire to give order to contested memories of the Civil War and purchased the Libby Prison, reopening it as a museum in Chicago after moving the old Confederate prison brick by brick from its original location in Richmond, Virginia.³⁸ Gunther claimed to be interested in offering a “fair” representation of the war (Hillyer 36). What does this say about the role of place in the representation of collective memory? Is it the fact that the museum was moved to the North that made it possible to separate fact from the romanticized “Lost Cause”? Or was the act of relocation, i.e., the way in which relocation signals ownership and control, enough to decouple the actions of the confederate army from the narrative in which they were customarily remembered by certain sectors of “New” Southern society? In moving the prison to the North, Gunther sought to destabilize the meaning ascribed to the site the prison originally occupied, thereby deconstructing the physical borders that shape the narrative surrounding the prison. In extracting the prison, Gunther revealed his belief in the impact of place on the construction of narratives of history; the relocation provided the opportunity to draft a new interpretation, to promote a new way of remembering the history of the prison. Later memorials, when read through a lens of ambitious confusion display the same methodology; contemporary artists destabilize the physical borders of the memorial to

³⁸ See Reiko Hillyer’s “Relics of Reconciliation: The Confederate Museum and Civil War Memory in the New South.”
expand its temporality and turn the accumulation of inert and often unthought subjectivities created through the project memorialization into a comprehensive treatment of history.

The relocation of Libby Prison serves as a prime example of the builders of structural memorials’ attempts to configure place to promote desired narratives of historical events and figures. Nevertheless, efforts to project meaning beyond the spatiotemporal boundaries of the memorial site often fail to account for the ways in which place determines how space and the objects/subjects contained therein can be read. *The Known World* relates the futility of producing place as a way to establish a legacy, for place simultaneously demands and delimits a narrative for its contents, and legacy involves the entry of unknown subjects into that place. Consequently, absent a reading of place informed by ambitious confusion, those new subjects must either conform to the original narrative or be labeled nonsense. Though it is by no means a relation of actual events, the novel does function as a memorial to an often footnoted or unthought element of slavery—the seeming paradox of slave owners who were themselves black.

Through my analysis of the book, I demonstrate that readings of place that do not incorporate an analytical posture grounded in ambitious confusion lead to the labeling of disagreeable subjects/objects as nonsense, and the subsequent need to unthink those figures to draft a cogent narrative. Contemporary narrative theory identifies narrative as an event in itself, an intentional act requiring at least two parties. Such a definition opens the possibility of reading monuments as dynamic utterances, examples of the static animation Jones presents in his work. Jones employs a syntax rich in subjects, but lacking verbs. Rather, he nominalizes actions and demonstrates how the act of
memorialization necessarily reduces animated subjects to a simple list of appellations. Jones employs specific syntactical techniques in order to alter the memorial’s temporality to a denser form that straddles the distinction between static past and animated present, all the while paralleling this temporal transformation with cartographical practices that betray the mutability of place even as they attempt to fix it in maps of “the known world.” This static animation, legible through a reading practice informed by ambitious confusion, not only illuminates new ways of reading innovative contemporary literary memorials to the antebellum south, but spatial and monumental memorials as well.

Henry Townsend’s attempt to build a dynasty is an effort to project his plantation into the future, while having its spatial significance—its meaning as place—remain the same. Jones makes apparent that the jurisdiction of analysis established by the production of place must be dismantled if one is to achieve the stability that only comes about with the preservation of the ability to reintegrate unthought subjectivities into the proffered narrative of memory. Jones’ syntax reveals the futility of attempts to present memory as a placid narrative free from disjuncture. Jones instead demands that his readers realize that memory always arrives fragmented and tempestuous, and only configurations of place that permit the coexistence of disjointed artifacts will survive. Ambitious confusion compels the analysts of memorial places to note how the elimination of verb clauses parallels the removal of physical boundaries to reveal new configurations that lead to more comprehensive memorial narratives that incorporate previously unthought elements.
The South that Wasn’t There

Michael Kreyling’s *The South that Wasn’t There: Postsouthern Memory and History* specifically targets the artifice behind literary memorials to the South. He traces the Old South through several literary moments, from Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* (1936) to Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) to Alice Randall’s unauthorized parody of Mitchell, *The Wind Done Gone* (2001). He defines the term “phantom memory” as “the ‘real’ imprint of a place/time never actually visited,” that which is remembered but never actually existed, but which signals loss nonetheless (119). *The Known World* is an exercise in constructing a memorial to a phantom memory, a byproduct of the ambitious confusion that seeks to adopt the tone of the subjunctive, illustrating what could (have) be(en). I build off Kreyling’s analyses to show that the concept of phantom memory elucidates the investment societies make in the ability of memorial sites to performatively fabricate the narrative of collective memory, to at once represent and determine a singular interpretation of a figure or event.

Fitzhugh Brundage defines collective memory as “not simply the articulation of some shared subconscious, but rather the product of intentional creation. It consists of those common remembrances that…[forge] identity, justif[y] privilege, and [sustain] cultural norms. For individuals and groups alike, memory provides a genealogy of social identity” (4). 39 Jones’ *The Known World* invites readers to link the project of memorial construction with the question the “knowability” of the world. The work to forge a national identity through a shared historical memory is shown to be inextricably

enmeshed in projects of spatial ordering and cartography. One cannot know one’s identity if one does not know the space in which one is situated.

Paul Ardoin writes: “Throughout, The Known World highlights the roles of space and place in establishing and perpetuating systems of thought, and when we approach the novel from that angle, we find sketches for a productive action of resistance against those systems that is rooted in aesthetic power and modeled by the novel itself… an aesthetics that resists linearity and the idea of space as stable, truthful, and natural” (638). The recurrent images of maps direct the reader’s attention to the process behind the production of place. Efforts to chart or “know” the world, to establish borders and ascribe meaning to the space and subjects contained therein necessarily eliminate the unknowable and unthink that which cannot contribute to the promotion of desired historical narratives. Jones exposes the fallacy of thinking that space and place are synonymous and reveals the processes that undergird the production of place, demonstrating the transience of place as well as the fabricated nature of the narrative it conveys. Rather, Jones posits new ways of configuring place, and, consequently, narrative, by embracing nonlinear structures, such as incomplete sentences replete with descriptions of various subjectivities. The layering of temporality and the disjunctive progression of time within the novel provide a model for the way Jones asks that we read place as an informant of narratives of memory. Ambitious confusion enables the deconstruction of seemingly fixed spatial boundaries of memorial spaces in order to craft

40 “Space, Aesthetic Power, and True Falsity in The Known World.”
a dense temporality that permits the inclusion of previously unthought elements of historical memories.

If place is produced to contain and control memories, then there is the necessary layering of temporalities—past upon present—that would ordinarily result in nonsense absent a reading practice capable of managing multiple temporalities. Jones signifies this in the structure of the book as well as in his examination of the accumulation of subjectivities that results from being memorialized. When slave patroller Barnum Kinsey dies after moving his family to Missouri, his son, Matthew, spends the night engraving his father’s history on a wooden tombstone:

He began with his father’s name on the first line, and on the next, he put the years of his father’s coming and going. Then all the things he knew his father had been. Husband. Father. Farmer. Grandfather. Patroller. Tobacco Man. Tree maker. The boy filled up the whole piece of wood and at the end of the last line he put a period. His father’s grave would remain, but the wooden marker would not last out the year. The boy knew better than to put a period at the end of such a sentence. Something that was not even a true and proper sentence, with subject aplenty, but no verb to pull it all together. A sentence…could live without a subject, but it could not live without a verb (374-5).

This scene exemplifies Jones’ call for a memorial temporality that undoes the effects of accrued subjectivities that result from being memorialized. To remember his father, Matthew attempts to distill his father to a collection of “things” that used to be. To underscore his father’s death, Matthew transcribes his memory into a list of verb-less subjects; failed memorialization (the memorial’s marker does not outlast the space itself) occurs when the memorialized subject is thingified, stripped of all signs of animation. Instead, Jones invites the reader to consider a new form of a textual memorial temporality, one absent of subjects but full of the vibrancy of verbs.
Jones punctuates each of Kinsey’s roles with a period, as though each were a full sentence unto themselves. Yet, if we accept the postulate offered in the last sentence of the passage, then we must acknowledge the action inherent in each appellation. Each of the listed roles involves the production of something else, opposing each to the final unproductive stillness of death.  

Sarah Mahurin Mutter remarks that the ability to produce undoes the dehumanizing effects of slavery. “We have seen the person — the ostensible subjective — denigrated to materiality, to objective thingness; might the process be reversed, so those materialities can be reraised, and elevated to transcendence… even if slaves are nouns, we must imagine them as nouns capable of linking actively to verbs... characters ‘destroy their status as objects’...by representing themselves as making subjects, as creators of material objects rather than as material objects themselves” (139). Thus, in order to counter the thingification inherent in failed projects of memorialization, those who wish to remember are better served by both eliminating physical boundaries of place (the eventual destruction of the tombstone) even as they emphasize the actions the memorialized subject performs. It is important to note that the subject positions listed on the tombstone all fall between the temporal span of two gerunds—“coming and going.” These nominalized verbs epitomize the dense 

41 This also speaks to the novel’s engagement with the principles of capitalism, which seeks to assign value both people and things in accordance with their ability to produce other goods.

42 However, as Kinsey was not a slave, one must conclude that Jones here contends that slavery’s violence touched both whites and blacks.

43 “’Such a Poor Word for so Wondrous a Thing:’ Thingness and the Recovery of the Human in *The Known World.*”
temporality necessary for proper memorialization. Between these two events—
grammatically unfinished even though they have already occurred in the novel’s
timescape—is the entirety of Kinsey’s life. Nevertheless, it is only when Matthew
attempts to delimit his memorialization with physical boundaries—the edges of the
tombstone—and thingification that his efforts fail.

An earlier scene in the novel underscores the fact that memory fails when the
actions of subjects are elided through nominalization. When William Robbins addresses
one of his slaves, he notes that he cannot recall her name, though his forgetting does not
trouble him. “It was enough that the name was written somewhere in his large book of
births and deaths, the comings and goings of slaves” (16-17). The final clause of the
sentence highlights the nominalization of the key events in the formation (and
destruction) of the subject. Unlike the passage detailing Kinsey’s memorialization,
Robbins’ records do not even grant the slave ownership of his own entry or exit. The
slave for Robbins is pure object; nothing in this sentence signals the existence of anything
but a one-dimensional temporality. Consequently, this form of memorialization is even
more futile than Kinsey’s tombstone. Kinsey’s tombstone exemplifies the inability to
project place with strict boundaries and a delimited accumulation of subjectivities beyond
the present moment. Throughout the novel Jones calls for an understanding of time
grounded in an elastically bordered notion of place to counter incomplete narratives in
(monumental) memorial structures. The dissolution of physical boundaries coincides
with the creation of a denser temporality based in the static animation of the memorial
subject. Always grammatically positioned as though they were still(-)in(-)motion, the
memorialized subject retains the ability to carry their meaning forward beyond the
present moment, just as the boundaries establishing the jurisdiction of analysis fall away and allow place to move into the future. In carrying both place and subject beyond their current moment, Jones preserves the stage upon which memorial narratives are produced and displayed. Sacrificing neither, Jones’ temporal manipulation offers a new method of reading memorial sites that applies to not only literary memorials, but structural ones as well.

**Siting Memory**

Many locations in the South offer tourist attractions that claim to present an “authentic” representation of the antebellum era. From restaurants like Mammy’s Cupboard, in Natchez, Mississippi, to restored plantations, these attractions capitalize on tourists’ desire to return to a time long past (even if that time never existed). For decades, the Destrehan Plantation, located twenty miles outside New Orleans, refused to acknowledge during the guided tours the contribution of slave labor in the construction and operation of the estate. Memorial sites attempt to negotiate complex emotions and affects through the navigation and ordering of space, superimposing structure onto space to create place determine narrative. However, the process of construction requires the omission/excision of those elements that would make the desired narrative incoherent—moments of nonsense. Nevertheless, by reading the rendering of space within the memorial with an eye for ambitious confusion, we can reintroduce the excised elements, such as the use of slave labor, to present a holistic picture wherein a disjunctive and nonlinear narrative of memory does not read as nonsense.

*White Papers, Black Marks: Architecture, Race, Culture* identifies three different scales of architectural engagement: urban, exile/in-between-ness, and detail/the intimate
(Lokko). Each scale signals a different level of socio-spatial interaction, necessitating different narratives in order to put forth and preserve the desired understanding of the history of the inhabitants. Restored plantation homes such as Destrehan occupy the latter two scales while marketing to the third. The exile and intimate scales work together to weave a narrative of undeniable remove while maintaining a nostalgic air of familiarity. The simultaneous occupation of these architectural scales enables critical visitors of the plantation to reintegrate the unthought aspects of the site—such as the 1811 slave rebellion—that were excised to promote the planation as emblematic of the idealized antebellum era. In breaking down the physical and temporal boundaries of place that anchor it to a specific scale, Lokko enables an analysis endowed with the concept of ambitious confusion that permits the reintegration of the unthought.

Construction of Destrehan Plantation began in 1787 and completed in 1790. A free mulatto carpenter, Charles Pasquet, was paid one hundred dollars cash, one male slave, a cow and calf, and one hundred bushels of rice and corn to construct the buildings. In 1811, the plantation was the site of the famous German Coast uprising, the largest slave uprising in United States history. Armed mostly with common hand tools, upwards of a hundred or more men marched from the sugar plantations towards New Orleans, burning down crops and houses along the way. While some slaves left their owner’s plantations to join the rebellion, many others either warned their owners of the planned attacks, or simply remained behind. Many planters sought refuge across the river in New
Orleans, a fact which, combined with the meager arms the rebels carried, led to the low body count of the rebellion—only two planters were killed. 44

Despite the use of six slaves to help build the Destrehan plantation, and the role the plantation played in the rebellion, up until the bicentennial anniversary of the uprising, plantation tour guides made no mention of the role slave labor played in the erection of the house. Since then, guides direct visitors to the replicas of slave cabins and a small exhibit dedicated to the rebellion, but neither is part of the official tour. Instead, the tour guides utilize the physical construction of the house to underscore a nostalgic narrative of family ties and keep the role of black labor on the periphery. In other words, the patron’s experience of the house’s architecture functions to erect physical delimitations on the subjectivities represented on the tour. Manikins and portraits are placed within particular rooms in order to contain the possible iterations of subjectivity that might threaten the museum’s narrative of familial interdependency and obligation with evidence of the violence of slavery and resistance to the institution.

Susan J. Matt's comprehensive study on the history of nostalgia in the United States offers useful insight on the changing attitude toward nostalgia and the possible ways of assuaging the sometimes paralyzing emotions it evokes. Thought of as a medical condition before and during the Civil War, doctors sought to treat nostalgia in soldiers either through the masculinizing experience of battle, ridicule from their peers, or, when all other methods failed, discharge. Although some homesickness was thought to evidence the proper alignment of moral sentiment and priorities, the prevailing medical

opinion was that, if left untreated, nostalgia could prove fatal. Advancements in industrialization and increased urbanization from the mid to late nineteenth-century made it easier for the homesick to return to their loved ones. Nevertheless, as Matt notes, a return home often yielded only the realization that the memories of home did not match the reality one encountered upon his/her arrival (484). 45 The collapse of space made possible by advancements in technology did not alleviate the issues caused by the temporal distance between the subject's idealized memories of home and the reality they find upon their return. Only a collapse of temporal distance could fully assuage the inherent quandary of nostalgic remembering.

Matt writes that the turn of the twentieth century ushered in a new era of rootlessness, when American attitudes toward homesickness shifted from sympathetic affirmation to a celebration of the globally mobile individual, whose ties to home could not be permitted to impede his travels and development. Even though displays of homesickness became a sign of puerility, nostalgia became an ever more lucrative emotion for the memorials that capitalized upon it. The South's redeployed role as icon of the national and individual home enabled the South to simultaneously maintain positions as the "griot" of American memory as well as a full participant in the modern economy. The transformation of nostalgia from a dangerous and debilitating illness to a catalyst for the construction of lucrative memorial projects exemplifies the way place cordons memory, crafting and containing narratives that do not always correspond to facts. Turning Destrehan, and the broader South, into a memorial to the imagined close-

knit family and pastoral lifestyle of the antebellum era, the River Road Historical Society confronted the problem of the plantation’s reliance upon the dissolution of its slaves’ family-ties. The erection of the plantation’s walls symbolized the reunion of estranged generations, their interactions facilitated by the service of content black laborers; place performs the ordering of embodied interactions and the movement through the rooms of the museum constitute the events that compose the narrative of nostalgic meditation on familial bonds.

“Flash—And Click—and Suddenness”

Though experiential memorials such as Destrehan have a profound influence on the collective memory of antebellum life, photographic memorials also employ techniques of spatial reconfiguration to fabricate desired narratives. Moreover, a reading practice informed by the theory of ambitious confusion reveals that the generation of static animation occurs beyond the literary memoryscape we saw in The Known World. Salamishah Tillet reads a photograph by Chester Higgins of a silhouetted figure standing in the “Door of No Return” located at Goree Island off the coast of Senegal as a similar project in collapsing the spatiotemporal borders of memorial spaces to put forth new narratives of democratic access to sites of slavery. She writes that the silhouette emphasizes the anonymity of the photograph’s subject in order to encourage the viewer to imagine themselves in that position (114). The silhouette erases the specificity of


the contents of the place framed within the photograph, destabilizing their meaning and opening possibilities for new narratives of memory. In other words, the technology of the photograph serves as a tool of ambitious confusion in that it enables the reconfiguration of the memorial space by permitting the superimposition of the present onto the space of the past. Just as in the novel, the dense temporality within the photograph creates a semblance of static animation—a stillness in motion—that enables more immediate and comprehensive remembering.

Tillet’s reading demonstrates the utility of technology in projects that seek to erect new borders of place to draft new narratives of memory. Higgins’ composition establishes three distinct lines at the top, bottom, and left of the frame. The silhouette blends into the right edge of the door, signaling the possibility that subject and space become enmeshed as space is assigned meaning as a site of slavery. Furthermore, the use of the silhouette introduces an element of anonymity that allows for contemporary viewers of any race to imagine themselves in that space, their subjectivity and identity as a free subject threatened by the photograph’s production of place, ascribing memorial significance to the site. Like the photograph’s subject, the viewer can be transported back through time and find themselves being turned into a slave. Through its unique claim to depict reality, the photographic medium evokes a feeling of “suddenness,” as though the image were nothing more than a vessel to bring the depicted to the viewer’s current location. The photograph eclipses the situational difference between the viewer and the moment captured on film, thereby removing place’s anchors to the present. Indeed, in titling the photograph “Door of no Return in the slave factory, Dakar, Sengal,” Higgins directs his readers to the way the production of place in turn produces subjects,
endowing them with new meaning. The captors who built spaces to hold their prisoners erected physical borders to outline their analysis of the bodies in front of them; in forcing once free subjects through the “Door of no Return,” the captors turned the site into a “factory” where slaves were the primary product.

Tillet offers the term “civic estrangement” to describe the feelings of isolation and limited access to civic institutions that black American citizens experience even after the Civil Rights Movement. She defines civic estrangement as the intangible aspects of citizenship, i.e., those aspects of citizenship that cannot be readily legislated. Tillet remarks that civic estrangement is partially evidenced by the inability to participate or be recognized in the civic myths—a form of collective memory—that convey American ideologies even as they unthink critical elements in historical narratives (6). Reading Doss’ concept of memorial mania through the lens of civic estrangement, one sees the increasing number of attempts to recover unthought elements of memorial narratives as efforts to rectify the perception of civic estrangement. Producing places for the civically estranged serves as a way to partially redress their exclusion from other civic institutions. In other words, granting space to a particular group, and allowing them to construct their own borders of place, establishes a jurisdiction of analysis that transforms the excluded subjects into legible subjects. Producing memorial place legitimizes a group’s history and drafts a narrative of inclusion that extends retroactively. Contemporary efforts to build memorials to the previously unthought aim to reconfigure societal strata through the reconfiguration of physical borders, resulting in the creation of a dense temporality that gives accrued subjectivities the appearance of unbridled motion despite being tethered to a particular site. Reading these projects with an analytical posture informed by the theory
of ambitious confusion, we see the power of place to determine a subject’s legibility. Moreover, as gleaned from *The Known World*, the distillation of the subject to a state of static animation within a memorial reveal the ability of a dense temporality to include formerly unthought elements of subjectivity while preserving an intelligible historical narrative.

Memorializing black bodies’ access to and presence within places of national significance figures heavily not only in the concept of civic estrangement, but also in the collective memory of the nation’s founding constitution. One example of a perpetually contested history is the story of Thomas Jefferson’s relationship with his slave, Sally Hemings. Tillet examines several iterations of memorials to Sally Hemings and her children—from William Wells Brown’s *Clotel; or, The President’s Daughter* (1852) to the more contemporary *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family* (2008) by Annette Gordon-Reed. The number of memorials dedicated to this story illustrates how important an accurate history of Hemings’ influence and presence at the founding moments of the nation is to blacks as they petition to assert their role in the American historical narrative. Tillet remarks that the artifacts (not including genetic evidence) attesting to Hemings’ relationship with Jefferson are sparse and circumstantial at best (21). To rectify the omissions in the archive several individuals created memorials to the legacy of Hemings, and her unique position that gives blacks a claim to participation in the founding of this nation.

Ambitious confusion enables a new posture of analysis of structural memorials; rather than merely articulating societal exclusion, ambitious confusion allows builders of memorials to reconfigure spatial boundaries to present more inclusive narratives of
memory. For example, Tillet writes that the 1992 play Sally’s Rape by Robbie McCauley uses the stage to revise the place of Hemings’ memory. The play “privileges interracial intimacy as a useful metaphor through which to explore the history of black non-citizenship and the contradictions of civic estrangement in post-civil rights America” (41-42). McCauley invites her audience to comment on their experience of watching the performance, breaking through the fourth wall and structuring a new space that turns the narrative event into a bridging of past and present. Ambitious confusion encompasses not only the persistent feeling of estrangement from the collective populace and national memory, but also the drive to rectify that fact through the creation of memorials that incorporate the unthought elements and integrate them into the broader project of fabricating a narrative of national epistemology.

Despite the generative insights offered by Tillet’s use of civic estrangement, I contend that concept proves too limiting for understanding the effects of ambitious confusion on the production and interpretation of memorials. As blacks enjoy greater participation in the democratic process, and with calls to identify the United States as a “postracial” country, the idea that black history continues to be marginalized and underdeveloped is consistently challenged by the presence of more and more projects designed to represent that history. This is where civic estrangement and ambitious confusion diverge. Whereas civic estrangement describes a feeling of removal from the conversations that construct, relate, and exercise national identity, ambitious confusion involves the work to insert alternative narratives into historical discourse, laying claim to previously inaccessible sites of civic participation and collective memory.
Stone Mountain

Stone Mountain—sometimes called the “Mount Rushmore of the South”—is located just outside Atlanta, Georgia and features the likenesses of Stonewall Jackson, Jefferson Davis, and Robert E. Lee riding astride horses carved into the mountain. The carving was completed by four artists between 1916 and 1972 and the mountain was purchased by the state of Georgia in 1963, significantly when the state was struggling to maintain its Jim Crow regulations. Present-day visitors to Stone Mountain Park enjoy a nighttime laser show projected across the portraits of the three Confederate heroes. In order to revise the narrative put forth by the compilation of the portraits portrayed on the mountain, the laser show includes not only homages to Georgia sports teams but also icons of Americana and portraits of contemporary national heroes, thereby shifting the narrative of Confederate strength, honor, and resolve to one of national coherence, obscuring the cause for which the original three figures fought with a guise of sacrifice and patriotism.

One individual whose legacy is leveraged by the memorial to insert Confederate heroes into the national repository of renown is Martin Luther King, Jr. King’s legacy of non-violence and commitment to civil rights casts a favorable light on the Stone Mountain Three whose motives have been vilified as racist, traitorous, etc. By “Kingifying” these three through an equation of their cause with King’s, the Stone Mountain curators lay claim to the same national respect that King enjoys. Although the laser superimposes modern images onto the extant design, the lasers mainly function to highlight the narratives supposedly already woven into the mountain’s design itself. Along with the icons of Americana, King’s portrait serves to underscore the idea of Lee,
Jackson, and Davis as integral figures in the movement for governmental recognition of individual rights and downplays their role in the continued subjugation of blacks. In other words, the imposition of the lasers on the surface of Stone Mountain erases the boundaries the builders of the memorial assumed were permanent and impenetrable. The use of the lights carves new meaning into the seemingly unmalleable stone. Indeed, at one point in the show the stone seems to break apart, rotate, and rearrange itself like a game of Tetris, signifying the mountain’s ability to change and fit itself into a new society. Advances in technology since the portraits were initially carved enable the reconfiguration of place to include a dimension added from outside of the original structure. The ambitious confusion that recognizes the controversy in heralding leaders of the Confederacy as American heroes leads to efforts to destabilize the permanency of place in order to allow for more malleable narratives of history. The superimposition of alternate portraits not only removes the physical borders of the stone’s face, but also transforms a previously static memorial temporality into something more dynamic. The monument assumes the level of animation we have already seen necessary to cogently project sacred places into a timescape beyond their original present.

Attempts to reduce the narrative of slavery to one of interracial harmony and the unquestioned performance of given roles are not limited to enterprises designed to eclipse the violent actions of those who fought to maintain the institution, but also extend to memorials that sought to dictate narratives of the slave’s themselves. The town of Fort Mill, South Carolina built a monument to “faithful slaves” and was one of few Confederate memorials to bring the topic of black labor into the public sphere. The monument’s sides featured depictions of both male and female slaves; a mammy tending
to a young white child and a man resting on a log surrounded by several sheaves of wheat. Savage notes that this memorial departed from previous Confederate memorials in that it not only highlighted the role of slavery, but also sought to equate the labor of both male and female black bodies (157). Nevertheless, even this attempt to redress unthought memories given legitimacy through collective nostalgia excised some aspects of the narrative of slavery in order to promote the idealized faithful slave. Notably, the actual labor of slavery is obscured by images of a contentedly resting man and the obvious affection the woman has for the child in her care (158). The monument attempts to relegate/regulate the presence of black bodies on the planation to the realm of supportive “family-like” relatives, rather than as coerced laborers.

By hiding the actual stress and violence of compelled labor behind a veil of familial devotion, the sponsors of this and similar monuments to the faithful slave hoped the memorial would not only pay homage to a bygone (though misremembered) time and people, but would also perform a didactic function in the contemporary period. McElya paraphrases the sentiment of one Daughter of the Confederacy: “Bemoaning the loss of what she believed to be the civilizing function of slavery, [Mary M.] Solari hoped that a monument to faithfulness might serve the same purpose for African Americans living under southern apartheid” (123). Solari and others’ belief in the power of the monument to not only commemorate the past but to also guide current and future interactions underscores the monument’s ability to capitalize on the structuring of space to draft narratives of memory. Ambitious confusion clarifies the effect of place on the construction of narratives of memory, the fabrication of nonsense, and the subsequent excision of the unthought. Furthermore, ambitious confusion helps to expand the
jurisdiction of analysis by destabilizing the physical borders of place; an analytical posture informed by ambitious confusion highlights the consequence of efforts to counteract the delimiting effect of the accrual of subjectivities inherent in memorialization. Restructuring the space of memorials and generating a dense temporality enables memorial sites to become unmoored from the present and to occupy both the present and the original historical moment.

Thus far, this dissertation has examined the processes behind the construction and treatment of subjectivity within contemporary memorials. The following chapter explores the significance of corporeality within the memorial. Although place can work to delimit the possible interpretations of a subject by labeling some interpretations as nonsense, the body still remains a crucial site of identification within memorials to the antebellum era. How does the body, always saliently vulnerable to threats of destruction ubiquitous in slavery, alter or determine contemporary memories of slavery’s legacy? Nowhere is this question more relevant than in memorials to the terror that permeated even the most pleasurable moments of enslavement. Nevertheless, despite the universal threat to integrity that the enslaved body endured, narratives of terror ironically rely upon the unthinking of the individual body not only to augment fear but also to spark the viewer’s empathy for the victim. Through readings of spectacular memorials that reintegrate the unthought body in narratives of terror, I offer ambitious confusion as a way to develop a reading practice that can help recover the forgotten victim of terror.
“You nightmare with open eyes”: The Unthought Body in Narratives of Terror

“Now that you've forgotten how you like your coffee and why you raised your pious fist to the sky, and the reason for your stunning African Art collection, and the war we fought together, and the promises you made and the laws you rewrote, I am left here alone to recreate My WHOLE HISTORY without benefit of you, my complement, my enemy, my oppressor, my Love”

--Kara Walker, Letter from a Black Girl

For the first time in American history, on 9/11 the world watched live as America came under attack. Contrary to initial suppositions, it was no accident that a plane crashed into the North Tower, and that others were disappearing from radar. Broadcast in real time, and replayed hundreds of times thereafter, millions witnessed the second plane crash into the South Tower. The second crash confirmed intent, but gave no clue towards the perpetrators. Reports came in, constantly revised, offering hypotheses of who was responsible for what was now undoubtedly an act of terrorism. As two more planes crashed into the Pentagon and Somerset County, PA, Americans were fixed to news broadcasts on radio and television. Without a group to hold responsible, Americans found themselves in the midst of a new-millennium project of narrative construction, the stakes of which threatened the nation’s collective imaginary.

The incessant replays of the crash of United Airlines Flight 175 into the South Tower served to highlight one of the most fundamental characteristics of terror—the imposition of vulnerability by way of delocalizing an event. Terror operates by democratizing the role of victim even as it attempts to divide communities through the imposition of seemingly stable though actually tenuous distinctions between the group
the perpetrators represent and the targeted group. By obscuring the particularities that
distinguish between the actual victims from the audience, terror occludes the victim’s
individual body even as it spectacularizes that body’s suffering. Consequently, terror and
its disseminated narratives rely upon compulsory reactions to its imagery; idiosyncratic
experiences of pain or violence undermine not only the message of fear but also the
attempt to superimpose homogeneity onto performatively created groups. Thus curators
of scenes of terror unthink the individuated subjectivity to augment the politicized fear
they deploy.

Nevertheless, though the discourse surrounding the memorials to the tragedy
signaled otherwise, 9/11 was hardly the first time that citizens turned terror into a catalyst
for an epistemological revision in order to forge a sense of national identity. Slavery
required continued reinforcements of the distinction between master and slave and much
has been written on the various methods masters employed to control the movement and
interactions of slaves, and to impose order within those intimate spaces where whites and
blacks were forced to interact. Indeed, abolitionist works like Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents
in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) commented on the extreme means used to control
movement and maintain hierarchies within the homespace occupied by both black and
white bodies. As Saidiya Hartman makes clear in *Scenes of Subjection*, scenes of
terror—spectacular and often didactic violence against one or more individuals, but
targeting a community—played a crucial role in the project of defining communities and
locating power.

Although displays of terror are ordinarily expected to come from the perpetrators
themselves, the 1838 narrative of escaped slave Moses Roper serves as an example of
how abolitionists leveraged graphic displays of the torture and violence of slavery to promote their cause. Despite the fact that most violence against the enslaved occurred within the relative privacy of the plantation, abolitionists like Roper spectacularized instances of torture and drafted chronicles of ubiquitous violence occurring throughout the institution, thereby turning an instance of torture into a narrative of terror. Roper’s illustrations of the terror visited upon him while in slavery exemplify the process of distillation of the individual victim to points of commonality between victim and witness, critical to the fabrication of narratives of terror. Though Roper attests that the violence he relates was inflicted upon him, the narrative’s illustrations undercut any claims to uniqueness by removing the individual features of his body to facilitate acquiring the reader’s empathy. Roper’s graphic illustrations, along with later photographs depicting the torture of (former) slaves, are in stark contrast to the more demure works that sought to evoke pathos in the viewer, squarely located in the genre of the sentimental to highlight the emotional violence of slavery and elide the physical to preserve a sense of the slave’s dignity and conform to nineteenth-century concepts of respectability. Although the body appears to be the central and inescapable element of depictions of terror authored both by perpetrators of violence and its opponents, I contend that even in

48 Important to note is the fact that this process of reduction to basal points of commonality facilitates identification with the victim for not just primary, but secondary and subsequent witnesses as well.

49 A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper from American Slavery.

50 E.g, Stowe’s depictions of violence in Uncle Tom’s Cabin veil corporeal suffering with Christian narratives of redemption through the Christ-like endurance of pain.
those images that most explicitly display the violence perpetrated against the enslaved necessarily unthink the individual body of the victim in order to draft and promote a narrative of terror.

The confusion resulting from the unthought individually corporeal experiences of terror led contemporary artist Kara Walker to craft memorials to the violence of the antebellum era that reintegrate the possible pleasures of the individualized body that were unthought to maintain a narrative of pervasive terror throughout the institution of slavery. I read Walker’s silhouettes, Cut (1998), and The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven (1995) as well as her more recent textual works included in Kara Walker: Dust Jackets for the Niggerati (2013), with an analytical posture grounded in the theory of ambitious confusion to illustrate how Walker uses parodic representation of scenes of spectacular violence within the context of slavery to create space for the unthought body in narratives of terror.

She adopts similar methods as those customarily used to draft a narrative of terror, including the distillation of the victim to those points of identity common amongst the targeted group and generating a semblance of the violence’s reproducibility, if not ubiquity. Walker dissolves the boundaries between subjects, blending bodies into startling transmogrifications and her parodic representation of the violence of war and slavery serves to collapse the temporal distance between the original act of violence and the current viewer, essential to the project of augmenting the viewer’s empathy. Nevertheless, parody preserves the integrity of the individual as it reintroduces unthought affective possibilities. Though I agree with Kevin Young’s assessment that Walker’s
works do not themselves craft or constitute a narrative, \(^{51}\) I submit that reading through the ambitious confusion behind Walker’s art reveals her assertion that reintegration of the unthought individualized body—the most basal element of subjectivity—is necessary for full comprehension of memories of terror.

**Pictures from another time**

While numerous scholars, from Orlando Patterson through to Saidiya Hartman to Christina Sharpe, and others, \(^{52}\) have remarked on the integral role of violence in the formation of (post) slavery subjects, this chapter studies the aesthetics and temporality at play in memorials of terror. Both perpetrators of terror and later analysts (lay viewers and historians) ironically fabricate narratives of terror through the elision of the body, usually for one of two reasons: either to instill fear by making the place of the victim democratically accessible, or out of a reluctance to compound the exploitation of the victim. Through my readings of Walker’s pieces, I argue that even as she disrupts the contours of the individual bodies to emphasize the interdependency inherent in definitions of subjectivity, Walker creates a space for the reintegration of unthought individual victim of terror, thereby exposing the fallacy behind projects of community formation based upon narratives of terror. Through Walker’s memorial projects

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\(^{51}\) Triangular Trade: Coloring, Remarkering, and Narrative in the Writings of Kara Walker, ” 2007.

catalyzed by ambitious confusion I develop a method of analysis of narratives of terror that do not rely on the unthinking of the corporeal subject to preserve coherence.

Each of the memorials I examine here share an investment in using repetition and reproducibility to erode the visual and/or corporeal boundaries between subjects. The delocalization of terror away from the individual body emphasizes the ability for the victim to be substituted by any other member of the targeted group; the removal of identifying characteristics provided subsequent viewers a point of entry to empathize with the plight of the slave. In 1853 British painter Eyre Crowe visited Virginia and witnessed a slave auction. His painting of that scene, *Slaves Waiting for Sale, Richmond, Virginia* (1861), exemplifies the strategies commonly used by nineteenth-century abolitionists to evoke pathos and facilitate empathy. The painting consists of nine slaves—men, women, and children—sitting on a bench while the auctioneer displays them to prospective buyers huddled in the doorway. In the left of the painting, a red flag signaling the sale of slaves peeps through a door. Crowe centers the black subjects on the canvas, with the three youngest women and the children framed by the gesturing arms of auctioneer. The right angles of the auctioneer’s arms echo the angles of the red flag flying outside of the doorway, and the vibrant whites of the enslaved women’s dresses, bright against the more subdued hues of the subjects’ skin, seem to blend the women into one another to form another banner, a white flag motionless in the auction room. This subtle allusion to—and near allegorization of—surrender underscores the slaves’ helplessness, and aids in the conveyance of a narrative of suffering even as it shies away from the spectacularization of the body commonly associated with the auction block. In *Slaves Waiting for Sale: Abolitionist Art and the American Slave Trade*, Maurie McInnis
remarks that Crowe’s compositional shift away from the auctioneer and would-be purchasers to the slaves themselves emphasizes the emotional toll of commodification (9). Crowe’s painting uses the bodies of slaves to erode the boundaries demarcating individual subjects and, in so doing, exemplifies the methods used by terror’s perpetrators and abolitionists alike to convey the horror of slavery through the elision of the individual.

I contend that, in response to the ambitious confusion generated by temporal distance from the original acts of terror, contemporary artists like Walker leverage terror’s promise of repeatability to simultaneously collapse and expand the temporal gap between the actual and potential victims. The distance between victim and audience induces the paradox of the eclipsed yet spectacularized suffering body. Walker’s ambitious confusion is evinced by her reliance upon parodic reproduction to underscore the absurdity inherent in the process behind the fabrication of narratives of terror. Parody functions as a tool of disarmament; reintegrating the body, laughter exposes the factions that render attempts at forging a singular community and consensus ineffective. I posit that the corporeal reintegration found in these parodies of violence undermines the faith placed in terror’s ability to distinguish between various camps through the occlusion of embodied particularities, instead enabling new analytical postures that permit the acknowledgement of corporeal idiosyncrasies.

In other words, if we understand terror to be the actualization of theretofore unrealized efforts at forging homogenous/like-minded communities, through the diminution of the particularities of subjects and places, then the parodic repetition of an act of terror can undo terror’s crystalizing effect by highlight the fallacy of the hypothesis
that suffering can be democratically experienced. Walker understands that the power of terror rests in its ability to be reproduced at any moment; consequently, her work illustrates how hyperbolic repetition can induce a state of “overtakelessness,” undermining the fear incited by terror’s potential to occur at any moment. Scholars such as Glenda Carpio in *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery*, have thoroughly explored the power of humor in contemporary black art and memorials to the atrocities committed in slavery. Temporal distance negates the obscuring of individual victims of terrorism, the distillation to common points of vulnerability; nevertheless, humor cannot always impose the temporal distance between present-day viewers and the original victims of terror necessary to ameliorate the threat of terror.

Furthermore, idiosyncratic postures of remembrance nullify the broad brush that burdens the contemporary black artist who chooses to create representations of slavery by demanding favorable images of black people—either as heroic resistors, or as innocent powerless victims. As Christina Sharpe notes in *Monstrous Intimacies; Making Post-Slavery Subjects*, the role of whites in the violence and pleasures of slavery is often elided by critics too willing to assume a homogenous assessment by a black audience, and to dismiss the significance of a white audience’s reception. By inserting parody into narratives of tragedy, Walker disrupts the work of terror by fracturing the imposed camps of victim and perpetrator, creditor and debtor (vis legacies of atrocities and the politics of reparation). Instead she provides a stage for the reintegration of the individual body, countering the spectacular eclipse imposed by the construction of narratives of terror.

53 Dickinson, F894.
Spectacular Secrets

In *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature*, Jacqueline Goldsby examines literary and photographic representations of lynching to illustrate how the incidents inform and function under the “cultural logic” of terror. She cites several societal forces that, together, worked to preserve and protect lynching as a form of didactic threatening: the fight to expand citizenship rights to women, people of color, and immigrants, secularized science and technology working within public and private life, and the “machinations” of capitalism. Goldsby asks that we break away from customary interpretations of the violence of lynching, ones that emphasize “southern provincialism” and seemingly “irrational” barbarity. Rather, she posits a reading of lynching as a “logical” practice which worked to reinforce culturally useful narratives of black personhood and subjectivity.

Goldsby’s exploration of the “cultural logic” of lynching ties the practice of spectacular violence committed against black bodies to the product(ion)s of modernity. She explains why she reads lynching as “logical”:

>[T]he ‘cultural logic’ of lynching enabled it to emerge and persist throughout the modern era because its violence ‘fit’ within broader, national cultural developments. This synchronicity captures why I refer to lynching as ‘spectacular’: the violence made certain cultural developments and tensions visible for Americans to confront…[C]rucially, since the lives and bodies of African American people were negligible concerns for the country for so long a time—cultural logic also describes how we have disavowed lynching’s normative relation to modernism’s history over the last century (6).

Lynching, then, serves as the site upon which the nation can display—and allegorize—the tensions inherent in the establishment of a modern identity. Goldsby’s work calls our attention to the cultural operations at work outside of the culminating moment of murder.
within a lynching. Lynching worked to buttress the burgeoning modernity of American culture, resistant to newly open intimate interactions between the races. Meanwhile, the technology available to memorialize lynching became increasingly modern as well; as the expenses associated with photography diminished, visual souvenirs of lynchings enjoyed greater circulation, even as more macabre relics continued to be preserved by the perpetrators. I focus my analysis on the memorialization of lynching in order to understand how terror operates by ironically eclipsing the suffering body even as it spectacularizes it.

I further Goldsby’s argument by honing in on the role of aesthetics in lynching memorabilia, examining how the artifacts of such horrific events can collapse the temporal distance between the original event and the moment in which it is remembered. I submit that terror’s effects are compounded when artifacts of the event can be faithfully reproduced. I conclude by positing an analytical posture grounded in the theory of ambitious confusion that does not necessarily seek narrative within examined works, but rather reads in the parodic repetition a way of recovering the unthought body and revealing the centrality of the corporeal in the fabrication of narratives of terror.

The survival of several different types of memorabilia reveals that perpetrators of lynchings were conscious of how the event was recorded. Photography was a favorite method of preservation, as it uniquely retained the ability to capture the event on different scales, from a close up of the victim, to a panoramic shot of the tens or hundreds in attendance. In Envisioning Emancipation: Black Americans and the End of Slavery, Deborah Willis remarks on photography as a medium that could capitalize on its claims of authenticity and ability to compress temporal distance to simultaneously reify racist
philosophies and witness the violence perpetrated to advance those philosophies. “Photographs of enslaved people defy easy categorization because they are both the record and a relic of the brutal racism and domination at the core of chattel slavery. Images of enslaved women and men provide compelling and haunting documentation of individuals otherwise lost to the written historical record” (4). The distance between viewer and subject within the photograph could either exacerbate the isolation of the victim, compounding his/her humiliation, or it could lend legitimacy to the unthought/unknown testimonies of the experience of slavery and its “haunting” legacy. In other words, photographs and their composition were critical elements in the performative announcement of lynching as a “culturally logical” practice.

Furthermore, the photograph is one of few types of media that can collapse the temporal distance between the viewer and the event. The camera can assume the stance of the viewer with a point of view shot that makes it seem as though the viewer were actually present at the event. Alternatively, the camera can work to isolate the viewer from those in the photograph, as often occurs when the subjects direct their gaze to the camera’s lens and stare in such a confrontational way that makes viewer assimilation as an inert bystander impossible. In these latter instances, exemplified by a photograph that depicts a nude black man covered in deep lacerations staring defiantly at the camera, the victim’s direct gaze precludes any attempts at empathy, compelling the viewer to remember their status as outsider.  

unthinking of his individuality in order to transform his death into an icon of lynching’s terror. Therefore, the disseminators of this photograph often included two others that depict the victim from behind, as well as a photograph of his corpse hanging from a branch. The almost ethnographic compositions of these last two photographs, refusing to acknowledge the personhood conveyed by the subject’s direct engagement with the viewer, reinforce the intended narratives of terror by undoing the unknown victim’s attempt to preserve his individuality.

Many of the surviving photographs of lynchings display mob participants openly facing the camera, posing, and, sometimes, smiling near the body of the victim. Others focus on the body of the victim(s), highlighting the deeds done rather than the perpetrators. The desire to record, to make use of newly advanced techniques and quality of photography in order to preserve memory of the lynching for posterity follows the “logic” of lynching as a form of terror and control. Terror requires dissemination to be effective. In order to assume a posture of conservative authority while not losing credibility by appearing primitive, terrorists use modern methods of dissemination such as photography in the early twentieth-century, and streaming short films online in the twenty-first. The forms of memorialization used to preserve the lynching’s didacticism, including not only photography but also the distribution of body parts amongst participants, take advantage of the flow of temporality and the level of individualization inherent in these media to convey a message of terror.

In other words, the photograph’s ability to be mass (re)produced, to be disseminated (for a short time, at least) through state-sponsored methods of communication (USPS) creates the effect of de-localizing a given lynching. The readily
available photographs of the murdered black body made the didactic spectacle of
violence accessible to a wider audience of (potential) victims, even as they attempted to
forge a community based on shared tenets of white supremacy. The images encroached
upon and touched the lives of those far beyond the scene of the crime, underscoring the
vulnerability of black people to white violence, the ability for whites to inflict pain and
terror with impunity. White subjects heeded the lesson as well, often performing the
ritual of lynching with little to no variation from the now familiar script—seize, torture,
hang.

The ritualistic nature of lynching, while in part performatively created by the
systemic categorization of some murders as lynchings and others as not, demonstrated the
practice of lynching as a spectacular event of remembrance. That is to say, the ritualized
practices of lynching served as a way for the perpetrators to write themselves into the
cultural narrative that lynching created. In performing those rites and then disseminating
evidence of that performance, whites were able to extend their assertion of power beyond
the town’s borders, asserting their place within a national narrative of white supremacy.
All the while, perpetrators of lynchings worked to unthink the individuality of the black
subjects they destroyed to posit their murders as episodes of terror. As Goldsby
remarked above, the black body is made negligible in these claims to the birthright of
whiteness. The suffering body functions merely as a channel through which white
terrorists could performatively articulate their own positions within the broader cultural
matrix. Photographic memorials of a lynching were used to compound terror as their
circulation made the threat more ubiquitous. Moreover, the medium’s ability to collapse
temporal distance through the promise of a faithful reproduction amplified the terror elicited by the spectacular destruction of black bodies.

Marianne Hirsch remarks that “[a]s we look at photographic images, we hope nothing less than to undo the very progress of time” (26). 55 Despite the knowledge that the photograph is always at least one step removed from the event and, therefore, unable to reproduce it exactly, the viewer of a photograph aims to comprehend an intrinsically unknowable event by allowing the promise of faithful documentation to transport him/her into the time of the depicted event, narrowing the temporal gap by taking advantage of the photograph’s ability to suspend and isolate a single moment. The suspension of that moment, stretched infinitely throughout the duration of the viewer’s gaze, enables the viewer to dispel any and all emotions the photograph might evoke becoming capable of objective analysis. At that point, the viewer unthinks the subjectivity of the persons within the photograph and turns them into mere conduits for theories of aesthetics and/or historiography. In other words, proponents of Bilderverbot claim that since the tragedy of the Holocaust and other forms of terror and spectacular violence are too sublime to be understood, the only consequence of any form of representation is a second victimization.

Similar arguments raised with regards to photographs of enslaved persons and victims of lynching claim that the display of the photographs amounts to a second subjugation. Such contentions highlight the power of photography as a medium of representation. Its reliance upon claims of accurate representation masks the complex logic undergirding the photograph’s composition. Purportedly documentary photographs

55 “Nazi Photographs in Post-Holocaust Art: Gender as an Idiom of Memorialization.”
capitalized on the assumption of faithful reproduction to proffer a narrative of lynching that was readily acceptable as truth, masking the unthinking of individual subjects in order to create an easily reproduced icon.

The circulation of lynching photographs as souvenirs demonstrates the fact that terror’s perpetrators intend the repeated production and viewing of the photograph to compound the violence and humiliation endured by the victim, as well as emphasize the didactic nature of spectacular violence. One postcard contained in the Without Sanctuary exhibit exemplifies how lynching reinforced the cultural logic amongst whites even as the act itself was intended as a warning for other blacks. The postcard, addressed to Dr. J. W. F. Williams reads: “Well John - This is a token of a great day we had in Dallas, March 3, a negro was hung for an assault on a three year old girl. I saw this on my noon hour. I was very much in the bunch. You can see the negro hanging on a telephone pole.” The author’s assertion that he was an active participant/spectator demonstrates how the spectacle of a body stripped of any and all identifiers save those that signal belonging to a group of undesireables serves as Charon’s coin to ferry the author into the camp of those in power, charged with maintaining the presumed though never certain status quo.

Walker’s works reveal how spectacular violence can be upended so that the unthought body is reintegrated while elucidating the process of narrative construction that excised the body in the first place. Reading across these memorials of terror, we glean how the processes of sense-making and narrative construction require the excision of particularities to suggest universal vulnerability even as the victim provides the fodder for the message to be conveyed. The project of sense-making—the effort to fabricate a narrative so comprehensive that it staves off ambitious confusion—necessitates the
distillation of the victim to democratically accessible points of identification. Rather than looking to Walker’s pieces as mere re-presentations of episodes of complicity and resistance, I argue that her silhouettes, as well as her textual and sculptural works, use parody to reveal the destabilization of markers of individuality at work in the articulation of narratives of terror. By illuminating these methods, Walker ironically avoids a pornographic representation of the suffering body even as she posits an analytical method that can reintegrate the unthought individual body.

An understanding of how spectacular violence is turned into a terroristic narrative reveals that the inclusion of the victims’ identities and—if known—the dates of their deaths, undermines efforts to augment the sense of democratized vulnerability. As modern-day terrorist groups such as ISIS well understand, the more the viewer can identify with a victim, the greater the impact of the terroristic act and the easier to repeat the narrative, crafting icons and rituals that help to form communities. Unless the viewer can imagine themselves as a substitute for the victim, the didactic message of terrorism is lost. The removal of names, or the uniform presentation and ritualized disposition of multiple victims all work in concert to reduce the temporal gap between the viewer and the depicted event. The possibility that the viewer could be the next target in this repeatable event exacerbates the fear. Therefore, one would assume that the use of shorthand identifiers such as stereotypes, the assumption of costumes, or the distillation of the individual to the most essential features of a human figure, would augment the effects of terror by making it easier for the viewer to imagine themselves as a potential victim. However, Walker’s parodic renditions demonstrate that the distillation to common points of access can actually enable the reintegration of unthought body.
Narratives of a Negress

Kara Walker’s iconic silhouettes have polarized art critics and patrons since she first emerged on the scene. The controversy surrounding her works been extensively discussed in other texts, and I do not intend to rehash the debate here. Suffice it to say that her critics, most famously Betye Saar, often read an unfavorable narrative in the works, supposedly betraying the assumed purpose of Black Art—to advance a positive image of black Americans and put forth a narrative to challenge the dominant histories of slavery. Contra Saar, I read Walker’s works not as (counter)narratives to those offered by other memorials to slavery, but as revelations of the methods integral to the project of fabrication of memorial narratives of terror. Decidedly unmoored from the project of somber memorialization, Walker’s artwork explores the often repressed side of memories of slavery: the disavowed corporeality and potential for pleasure within acts of terror and violence. Beginning with readings of Walker’s silhouette tableaux and continuing with a study of her more recent three-dimensional projects, I use Walker to illustrate how parody works to create space for unthought individual corporeality within narratives of terror.

Several of Walker's tableaux converse directly with canonical texts that deal with slavery and the antebellum south, such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Gone with the Wind*, and *The Clansman*. Walker intercedes in the conversation surrounding the narrative of slavery, her unconventional figures creating an uncomfortable cacophony of semi-historical voices. Most salient in her works is an unapologetic rejection of that conventional trope within canonical slave narratives-the undertell (Foreman 77).
Walker’s silhouettes contain little to no text and direct the viewer’s focus to her character’s bodies. The viewer sees only the profiles of the silhouettes, causing her to rely upon the position of the mouth to read emotions such as shock or fear. This centralization of the mouth underscores the tableaux’s concern with narrative and the integral role of the body in the articulation of narrative.

If slavery was defined by the control and commodification of the body, then Walker's works suggest that only by highlighting the pain and pleasures that the body can experience can we come closer to a full comprehension of the institution and its effects on the cultural understandings of black and white subjectivities. In doing so, Walker begins the process of reintegrating the unthought body into narratives of slavery without committing the same transgression of commodifying it. Reading through Walker’s return of the unthought body to the fore of the collective memory slavery, I show that the spectacularized pain of the victim can be used not merely as an instrument of terror but as the focal point of Walker’s unraveling of terrorist narratives. Her monochromatic works eliminate the interdependency of racial markers of identification, even as her silhouettes employ stereotypes to expeditiously suggest the races of the characters. Recasting all figures as subject to the degradation of caricature, Walker disables a primary tool in the construction of narratives of terror.

Darby English’s work on the methodologies used to read black art notes Walker’s investment in challenging generic conventions through the deconstruction of spatial boundaries.

Walker’s work…radically reconceptualizes landscape in order to invent a past capable of disrupting just such performances in the present…Walker, by reference to conceptualist interventions into the sanctity of the viewer’s space, explodes the
pictorial confines of landscape representation in order to situate the viewer squarely within it. In this way she renders landscape an always political conception of the world, one in which the witness function can never be downplayed nor quite depended upon to produce reliable testimony.  

Walker’s explosion of the generic and spatial borders of landscape art allows her to reposition the viewer as part of the event taking place in the tableau. Just as depictions of terror remove the boundaries that distinguish between the viewer’s temporal location and the original moment of violence, Walker reveals how incorporating the viewer and destabilizing the temporal distinctions between removed witness and culpable participant can surprisingly create a memorial practice that permits the reintegration of the unthought individual subject.

The tableaux’s temporal manipulation, while seemingly suspending the flow of time, actually relies upon the integration of the body to preserve the possibility of moving beyond the depicted moment. Once all the suffering bodies are distilled to common points of identification and the past is encapsulated in a material container, a more complete mourning of the legacy of slavery can take place. In other words, Walker demonstrates how the icon, typically employed as a shortcut to a pre-packaged historical narrative, can be employed to facilitate the mourning process by ameliorating the ambitious confusion brought about by an archive not reconciled to the narrative. The customary disavowal of the slave’s body in narratives of violence prevents the past from being transformed into something that can be no longer-something with the promise of a death, an assurance of eventual finality. Nevertheless, Walker demonstrates that she does not aim to bury the memory of slavery. Indeed, her work suggests that she hopes to

56 How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness, 22-3.
“freeze” the remembered moments and, by incorporating the body as a democratic locus of identification, underscore the ways in which slavery continues to be relevant in the present day.

Even as the posed silhouettes suggest animation, their suspended motion undermines the viewer's ability to distinguish the time of the image as past, to conceive of slavery as a time far removed from the present moment. This aspect of her work is perhaps most apparent in her self-portrait, entitled *Cut* (1998). The piece contains a single subject whose slit wrists and gleeful heel-click exemplify the paradoxical emotions Walker often portrays in her works. In *Seeing the Unspeakable; The Art of Kara Walker*, Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw reads the piece not as an unequivocal assertion of agency, but as a revelation of a puppeteer always potentially controlling the black subject’s movements. “The profile of a man with his hand raised can just be made out along the upper line of the silhouette. The man’s location under her skirt implies that not only is he servicing her in a sexual manner, but he is also controlling her movement” (133). The subject uses a straight razor held in her left hand to almost sever her hands from her wrists, causing fountains of blood to gush from her wrists and fall in two neat pools upon the floor behind the leaping woman. Cast in the now-familiar silhouette medium, cut black paper glued to a white background, the rudimentary tool used by the figure to enact her liberation (or her compelled self-destruction) highlights the work's self-awareness. Walker calls the viewer’s attention to the way the forces controlling the black body are hidden and only an ironically ecstatic inversion—a spectacular vivisection—can reveal those forces at work.
Moreover, leaping from the ground in jubilee, the figure suggests that Walker has found a way to escape the confines of having to represent the black body in intelligible ways. One of the challenges facing Walker as she constructs her pieces is the mandate to work within a framework of intelligibility in order for her audience to recognize the contexts surrounding the texts; her figures must straddle the line between mutable site of projection and readily-identifiable raced body. The incomplete suicide implies that Walker finds her cut-and-paste methodology to be an avenue out of the delimiting expectations imposed on a black artist, indeed, on any artist who contends with the issues of representing legacies of race. Through a piece grounded in the promise of faithful reproduction across multiple installations, Walker ironically reveals the fallacy behind relying on the body as a stable and persistent icon.

Moreover, the figure’s chosen method of escape not only calls to mind one of the few options available to enslaved persons, but also reclaims her handiwork as her own, proclaiming the possibility that she could pull it, and herself, out of the realm of commodification at any moment. Nevertheless, I do not mention this fatalistic trope to suggest that Walker’s silhouettes attempt to convey a particular narrative of the embodied black experience of slavery. Rather, I ask if a “negress” can use the tools available to her at the time to escape from a system in which her labor and her body are perpetually seen as a site of transaction? The figure's almost-severed hands imply that a seemingly self-destructive act is a means of removing her labor and corporeal capital from the delimiting sphere of black body as victim of spectacular torture, even as she remains precariously tethered to that sphere. The ecstasy of the figure evidenced by her raised arms and clicking heels sets the tone of the piece as one of joy rather than somber mourning. The
figure's sweeping skirt, and the animation it implies, suggests that she sees her act not as one of finality, but rather as the first step to a continuing, albeit different, mode of existence. The figure is not entirely divorced from the body, her hands are still tenuously attached to her arms, and the gushing blood underscores her embodied nature, retaining the corporeality integral to narratives of terror. Nevertheless, the implied movement from left to right suggests a narrative of progression, of development belying the otherwise static nature of the silhouette. I contend that this movement alludes to the attempts to decentralize the body in narratives of terror in order to focus instead on the remains—the evidence of deeds done, not of particular victims.

Despite all these signs of removal from the delimiting confines of a prescribed identity, Walker continues to subtly depict the ways in which she remains moored to expedient markers of identification and narrative construction. Although the woman's uplifted skirt and swinging braids imply continued movement beyond the current moment to extant or expected desire, the silhouette appears to remain within a traditional rectangular frame. Though the artwork is usually affixed directly to the museum wall without any borders around it, the piece itself offers three of four corners that identify the outlines of its invisible enclosure. The fonts of blood, the two pools of blood on the ground beneath the leaping figure, and her clicking heels are three points of reference to which the viewer's eyes are drawn as they take in the piece. Though the piece lends itself to being viewed as self-contained, a careful eye notices that the final corner of framing is absent, though the figure's arched back and uplifted breasts direct the viewer's gaze to the place in which one would be expected.
This absence helps to emphasize the figure's escape from the borders of a viewer-imposed enclosure. Even as the left-most points of the piece demarcate the top and bottom extremes of the silhouette, and her skirt identifies its right-hand border, there remains a single point of escape, through which it appears the figure might pass. Though the blood collected at the bottom left corner of the work implies the passage of at least a few moments of time since the initial cutting of the woman's wrist, the fact that the pools are not directly below the blood currently spurting forth from her wrists shows that the woman has moved from her initial position. Indeed, within the two-dimensional plane of the work, the two spots suggest not depth leading into the work itself, but rather form a trail of liquid footprints showing the path traversed by the figure as she rises toward the right. The simultaneous anchoring of the piece (the pool at the bottom) and unfettered movement of the figure towards its top demonstrates the paradoxes which ground and catalyze many of Walker's works. Walker reveals that a complete understanding of narrative construction must remain grounded in the body, and is not possible when corporeal idiosyncrasies are unthought.

**Didactic terror**

As Saidiya Hartman notes in *Scenes of Subjection*, the work of torture is not merely punitive, but didactic as well when an audience is present (51). In “The Law Only as an Enemy’: The Legitimization of Racial Powerlessness Through the Colonial and Antebellum Criminal Laws of Virginia,” renowned legal scholar Leon A. Higginbotham and Anne F. Jacobs note that even in the early 18th century, dismemberment of a slave was permitted as punishment for running away. Indeed, the legislature even provided for remuneration of a master’s financial losses if a slave happened to kill himself prior to
Such laws reveal that one purpose of punishment was not only to exact “justice” for an outraged master, but also to instruct other enslaved persons of the consequences of incorrigibility. So much was this the case that the government identified a compelling interest in producing icons from enslaved bodies to aid in the fabrication of didactic memorials of terror.

Spectacular punishments, whether meted out in the public square or on a master’s private acres, are key illustrations of the tenuous personhood of the slave. Hartman reads these events as evidence of the paradox within the laws undergirding the institution of slavery. She examines the societal machinations that orchestrate the reading of the (pained/terrorized) black enslaved body as a site of slippery subjectivity; the black slave is viewed simultaneously as an unfeeling piece of chattel and as a subject capable of “education” though corporal means (50-1). In acts of terror as well as abolitionist literature, these scenes of subjection have the effect of making the pain experienced by the victim palatable to observers. Hartman argues that the consequence of bridging the gap between the moment in which the pain is experienced and the position of the observer is to obscure the victimized subject him/herself. In other words, the body subjected to acts of terroristic violence becomes unthought as the observer phantasmically places him/herself as an actor within the event (19).

Walker capitalizes on this slippery subjectivity, exposing not only the fabricated nature of categories of identification, but also the fundamental absurdity of blindly accepting the proclaimed stability and veracity of those categories when they are grounded in the always transient and mutable body. If perpetrators of terror assume the ability to fortify the distinguishing aspects between seemingly distinct communities,
Walker’s works demonstrate that the most crucial aspect of terror, its ability to be reproduced at any time—has the capacity to unravel its own tightly woven narrative when the body is reintegrated. The fundamental paradox of terror and torture is that the victim is at once placed outside the social sphere and held up as a stand-in or an effigy of an entire community (Scarry 4). Ambitious confusion drives Walker’s response to this paradox; she replays the conjured memories of slavery over and over until they induce a memorial vertigo, allowing her to make sense of the complex reactions she (and others) have to memories of slavery.

As Walker commented with regards to *The End of Uncle Tom*, her silhouettes are about “trying to find one’s voice and having it come out the wrong end,” her representation of the icons of terror and subjection strangle the voice of terror (Shaw 49). Her irreverent homages to the violence suffered by enslaved bodies in fact offer a site of redress, where the threat of terror is ironically ameliorated by the absurdity of transmogrified embodiment and the narrative of vulnerability is replaced with an exposition of how one receives the inherited legacies of slavery. Reading through her work, one observes how Walker turns threatening repeatability into an expansive, dynamic revelation of the project of sense-making.

**Symbols of memory**

Walker grounds her works in the fact that an image can be repeated and held up as evidence of not only the occurrence of the event depicted therein, but also as evidence of similar occurrences in either the past or the future. Moving from the supposedly faithfully reproduced photograph to the simulacrum of the silhouette, Walker outlines the
process by which artifacts are turned into symbols. Thus, as viewers of memorials of
terror transform the photograph into an icon, it loses its temporal anchoring by
discarding—unthinking—any individuating markers in the image; in assuming a new role
as signifier of a concept, it sheds the temporal fixity that previously lent credibility to its
claim as evidence. David Bathrick notes the expediency of an icon as able to transcend
the barriers of language. “On the other hand, as much as images of the camps served
both an evidentiary and prosecutorial function after the war, the rapid narrowing of an
immense archive of Holocaust pictures to a reduced selection of ever-repeated images
helped transform their status from mere photographic trace to icon…to achieve the status
of a global language” (3, emphasis in original). Bathrick defines repetition as a
fundamental ingredient in the formation of an archive, as well as its metamorphosis into a
collection of images that can signify more than just their immediate content.

Walker’s silhouettes highlight this process of transformation. As the image
recedes farther and farther from representing a particular individual, the silhouette reveals
how we disaggregate an image through sequential displays and viewings, selecting only
those features that can expediently signify the concept of lynching, or terror. In making
salient the process of iconization, Walker forces her viewers to question the work
performed when analyzing photographs of actual individuals. What are the consequences
of turning an individual into an icon?

The icon and the photograph function in divergent directions: the photograph
relies upon similitude to index towards a particular original event, whereas the icon
extends the reach of its symbols to events that have been as well as those that could
potentially manifest in the future. “Icons have qualities that ‘resemble’ but do not
duplicate or match the objects they represent. As opposed to the indexical, iconic signs often express an aura of timelessness and a lack of spatial specificity. They claim implicitly to tell the whole story” (Bathrick 3). In other words, the icon maintains a temporal density; the original artifact is simultaneously fixed in a particular moment in space and time, yet its significance extends to the borders of a given zeitgeist. Walker’s seemingly expedient use of stereotypes in her works makes salient the process of distillation inherent in the formation of the icon.

Walker at once uses icons of black people as they were envisioned during the nineteenth century to gesture towards a particular historical narrative even as she reveals the fallacy of the icons’ claims to “tell the whole story.” Walker’s depiction of unthought postures of reception while experiencing violence and performing resistance in her works reveals the utility of the icon in the process of sense making. Walker manages to negotiate a reclamation of deleterious stereotypes by revealing their fractal density; even as the signifiers remain within their original racist contexts, Walker uncovers the unthought by highlighting the (black) body’s role in the process of narrative construction.

Walker’s works, her silhouettes as well as her later textual and sculptural pieces, lend a corporeality to the icon that previous creators of memorial projects sought to withdraw to avoid revictimization. The undertell seeks to avoid the shortcomings of “precarious empathy” outlined by Hartman (19). The concept of precarious empathy dictates that the suffering individuals be unthought by secondary witnesses to the event, and only by stripping them of their individuality can the witness ride the newly formed icon to a state of empathic identification. Hartman examines the various forms of resistance and the societal machinations that orchestrate the reading of the spectacularly
violated black enslaved body as a site of slippery subjectivity; outsiders could only imagine a slave’s subjectivity in as much as they were able to substitute themselves for the slave in their minds. In other words, the slave’s subjectivity was only defined when it was occupied by an already legible and comprehensible subject, one who merely assumed the mantle of enslavement for the brief duration of a thought experiment.

Hartman’s contention that analysis of this subject ironically entails the occlusion of the black slave body serves a prime example of how the distillation of the individual subject undergirds the transfiguration of violence into terror. The undertell sidestepped this secondary exploitation by refusing to disclose the details of violence endured. Consequently, graphic depictions of the horrors and pleasures of slavery were elided in order to preserve the dignity of the slave. Contrastingly, Walker inverts the method of narrative relation, opting instead to manifest the narrative corporeally; for those deeds done in and to a body, the history must be told in and through the body as well, if one is to gain a complete narrative.

**My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love**

Kara Walker’s 2007 retrospective exhibit, *My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*, features samples of her work in various media, including her signature silhouettes, as well as her watercolors, and some textual pieces. The juxtaposition of these various forms of media enables the reader to note the formal qualities of each piece as they work to illuminate the process of sense-making, the “recreat[ion] of [a] WHOLE HISTORY.”
The exhibit, as it was displayed in the Whitney Museum in New York City, opens with a textual piece, *Letter from a Black Girl*, a quotation of which serves as the epigraph to this chapter. Excepting the title, the letter is otherwise unsigned, and is addressed to a “hypocritical fucking Twerp,” simultaneously particular yet unspecific. The balance between the compulsion to fix and identify the individual(s) responsible for the speaker’s plight and the elusiveness of the guilty parties exemplifies the process behind the formation of historical narratives of terror, in which they must be at once distinguished from the target group and universalized so as to augment a show of ubiquity. *Letter from a Black Girl* towers in front of the viewer; its mammoth scale mocking the easily digested, manipulable intimacy of a personal missive. Walker’s epistolary introduction to the rest of the exhibit establishes her spatiolinguistic method of using hyperbolic representations to highlight the “monstrous intimacies” that form the basis of the legacy of slavery.

Nevertheless, Walker does not shy from usurping the terrorist’s signature method of conveying a narrative within easily reproduced and disseminated media. In “Triangular Trade: Coloring, Remarking, and Narrative in the Writings of Kara Walker,” Kevin Young argues that Walker’s textual pieces push back against the presumed intentionality of the narrative. “…I would argue that the index cards resist a narrative. It would be simple to say that they do so in favor of play—to say that their form is fragment—but that they would ignore the materials, and ultimately the message they provide” (42). Young calls the reader/viewer’s attention to a significant aspect of this understudied aspect of Walker’s oeuvre—he suggests that we look beyond the definitions
of the text, to look beyond language as a conduit of meaning, and instead note its capacity
to conjure, to call into being the unthought specters of individual subjectivities.

Kara Walker's 2002 collection *Many Black Women (Certain Types)* features
thirty-three index cards with typewritten text upon their lined fronts. Though the index
cards are unnumbered, the first card in the collection borrows from the title, reading
“CERTAIN TYPES.” Walker presents the rest of the cards so that as the reader
progresses through the collection, the phrases presented transition from “MANY BLACK
WOMEN...” to “SOME BLACK WOMEN...” Written entirely in capitalized letters, each
sentence on the cards draws a conclusion about black women. The matter-of-fact tone
lends an air of credibility to the clauses. However, their factuality is predicated on their
irrefutability, granted by the initial word “many,” which moves the sentence into an area
of certainty ironically dependent upon the evasion of definition. In other words, Walker
avoids categorizing black women even as the title of the piece suggests that as the
intention of the work. However, the pun on the word “types” points to another intention
of the work, to excavate the processes involved in the formation and accreditation of
“types,” as well as the role language plays in fixing and lending credibility to fabricated
types and categories.

The sentences Walker types on the cards range from common stereotypes
depicting black women as “welfare queens” or poor swimmers to more positive
statements such as “MANY BLACK WOMEN ARE LEADERS IN THEIR
COMMUNITY.” Walker makes spare use of punctuation throughout the collection.
While a few of the few index cards contain commas, only one sentence contains a period
“some black women believe they can heal the wounds of slavery by enslaving others.”
The period connotes the delimitation imposed by physical and linguistic enslavement, even as the rest of Walker’s diction preserves the possibility for multiple forms of existence.

By leaving open the possibility that “types” could be either a noun or a verb, Walker proffers multiple meanings for the word “certain” as well, which could be either an adjective or a pronoun. In other words, not only could the title refer to typology as a science of efforts towards certainty, but also could be identifying the actions of a subject named “certain.” Walker introduces the possibility that certainty could be embodied, could create, could communicate. Though, perhaps, Walker did not introduce this possibility. Just as in the silhouettes, Walker uses corporeality (or the idea of it, at the least) to illustrate how narratives are woven and taken as truth. Embodying certainty, Walker's subject reveals the fundamental role the body plays even in purely textual narratives. Moreover, Walker’s linguistic straddle echoes Jones’ syntax in *The Known World*, emphasizing the dense temporality necessary for comprehensive memorialization of an individual subject.

I further Young’s argument by suggesting that, rather than attempting to present a narrative in and of themselves, Walker’s textual pieces seek to represent the process by which those narratives are constructed. But what is the consequence of this evacuation of language, the removal of sense from what is supposed to be its almost invisible conduit? If language is all but ignorable when its message is clear, when it makes sense, then it becomes hypervisible when its purpose of conveying a sensible message is removed. Hypervisibility runs through the majority of Walker’s works, from her textual pieces to her “Grand Allegorical Tableau[x].” That is to say, rather than being concerned with
proposing a “WHOLE HISTORY,” Walker’s works are more interested in highlighting the vehicles and processes conventionally used to display and concoct historical narratives. In ways similar to Haryette Mullen, discussed in a previous chapter, Walker plays with both textual and visual modes of language emphasizing its capaciousness revealing the fallacy of believing in the fixity of the signifier.

One of Walker's more recent collections, *Dust Jackets for the Niggerati* (2013), contains several textual pieces, juxtaposed with charcoal drawings. Rather than function as museum wall text, as Kevin Young suggests the index cards might, these pieces are far more readily intelligible to the viewer, providing nuggets of information about the history of terror levied against the black body. Though some of the drawings were included in previous collections, albeit in different media, many of the drawings and the textual pieces allude to the terror of lynching, positioning the collection as a memorial to terror grounded in ambitious confusion. Indeed, one of the works is a direct quotation from Ida B. Wells' article “Consider the Facts,” first published on the front page of the April 14, 1899 issue of *The Atlanta Constitution*. I contend, like Young, that Walker's textual pieces do not purport to continue any particular narrative, even as these latter works employ a more complete syntax that would make the conveyance of a given message far easier than the index cards discussed above. Rather, Walker's compilation of images provides an answer to *Without Sanctuary*. Instead of reproducing photographs of actual victims of lynching, Walker compels the viewers of her works to acknowledge their complicity in the construction of culturally logical narratives of terror, even as she underscores through hyperbole the almost pornographic use any analysis of lynching photographs entails.
The textual pieces in *Dust Jackets* are all “unique” ink transfers on paper; through the adjective, Walker explicitly reveals the futility of expecting faithful reproductions even as typeface promises the ability to preserve and disseminate the same message ad infinitum. Much as terror relies upon the reproducibility of the act, the production of any narrative depends upon repeated utterances of the same text in order to establish it as immutable truth. Even as Walker samples from the foremost contemporaneous chronicler of lynching, whose works then, as today, help to identify the cultural matrix through which we must read these acts of terror, she identifies the impossibility of ever reclaiming the original text—the victim's body—used to create the narrative of terror.

Walker's quotation of Wells’ article reads in part as follows:

That[he]willbeexecutedbythe
mobthereisnopossibledoubt,
andthemobwhichisinpursuit
ofhimiscomposedofdetermined
men,whoareumasked...

Wewillstand
aroundandwaitfortheNegro
todiebutthewillneverDieto
theirsatisfaction

Though each individual letter is clearly distinct from its neighbors, given that the movable type renders the letters as well as the excess ink surrounding the relief, Walker presses the words together, forcing the reader to impose their own breaks. The act of reading thus echoes the act of disarticulation and Frankensteinian assembly inherent in
acts of lynching and subsequent dissemination of the news of the murders. Since the reader herself must construct the narrative out of the pieces she is given, Walker's ink transfers reveal the cultural work performed with each retelling of an incident. Though the body itself is not present(ed) in the textual pieces, Walker reminds the readers that too often it is used as a conduit for the message of terror, and that textual relations of acts of terrorism obfuscate the violence done upon the body in favor of presenting a polished narrative. As Mladen Dolar reminds us in “A Voice and Nothing More,” we often look through the words presented to us to take in the meaning behind them. Walker's presentation of a highly material text compels the reader to recall all the corporeal artifacts inherent in the construction and conveyance of the message.

In an essay included in the collection, Kevin Young refers to Dust Jackets as a "shadow book," intended as illustrations for books heretofore unwritten. In other words, Dust Jackets conjures the unthought even as it claims to avoid taking on the responsibility of presenting the unthought itself. Young's allusion to the shadow book suggests that viewers/readers of Dust Jackets are not accessing the authentic story of the events contained therein, that they receive only the "pale fire" of the narratives guarded by the "Niggerati." Who are the members of this society that supposedly controls the narrative legacies of other blacks?

If Walker's impertinent illustrations are intended for the writings of this group, then the name makes sense, as it refers to Wallace Thurman's diverse cadre of black artists and intellectuals from the Harlem Renaissance, including Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, amongst others. Though both of the "Niggerati's" journals failed due to lack of funding, Dust Jackets forces us to imagine the discourse such a group might have
presented. Moreover, the title of the work calls to mind the notion of the publication—and associated materialization and auctioning—of narratives of lynching and other acts of violence against black bodies, to borrow from Dickinson’s definition of publication. In *Dust Jackets*, Walker imagines an interplay between text and illustration, between display and consumption that evokes the history of the artifacts of terror collected in works such as *Without Sanctuary*.

Jennie Leightweis-Goff discusses the privileging the written word, of so-called “discursive violence” above the physical violence meted against black bodies, what she calls “mortification of the flesh” (9). One possible explanation is that language is more readily intelligible, and presumably less vulnerable to subjective interpretations, than a photograph or other pictorial representation of a victim. Language claims the ability to direct the reader's interpretation, to eliminate ambivalent excesses and crystallize one veritable narrative. Consequently, authors often privilege language over other memorial forms for the power to control what the reader receives. Of course, one of the effects of purely textual memorials is the unthinking of the body that was subjected to the violence, potentially becoming complicit in the same objectification of the individual that Hartman noted in her readings of the narratives of former slaves.

Walker’s textual pieces address this imbalance by highlighting the materiality of the text itself, bending and manipulating it to undo the action of unthinking the material, the corporeal, behind the message. Another of the text pieces included in *Dust Jackets* orients the letters upon the page so that the reader must not only read from the rightmost

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57 *Blood at the Root: Lynching as American Cultural Nucleus.*
column to the left, but must also contend with the final column of letters being oriented perpendicularly to the rest of the passage. The final lines of this piece read: “and after they had attached th [sic]/ rope to the neck.” The last four words all have their letters running parallel to the spine of the book, while the rest of the lines are horizontal. Just before these final lines, the rest of the passage describes how, out of a theoretical lynch mob, it took five men to bend the branch of the tree to attach the rope to the condemned man’s neck.

By rotating the letters in the final line, Walker evokes the perpendicular orientation of the hanged body to the tree branch. The reader’s mind conjures an image without presenting an actual body and thereby risking charges of re-objectification. Through this piece, Walker reintegrates materiality into a purely textual relation of a lynching. The text’s self-awareness does not allow the reader to “forget” the equally material body that serves as the piece’s referent. Another drawing in the collection, The Daily Constitution 1878, serves as a companion to this piece, alluding to an article in the eponymous newspaper that describes in graphic detail the catapult lynching of Charlotte Harris. Walker’s drawing depicts a black female caricature being flung into the air as the branch of the tree to which the noose is attached is released from its tension. Below, several others await the same fate; their respective branches heavily loaded.

The flight exposes the woman’s undergarments to the crowd below. Compounding the objectification and spectacularization of the woman, the exposure of her underwear underscores the current of sexuality, integrating the commonly professed reasoning behind the lynching of black men with the less discussed lynching of a black woman. Without Sanctuary contains a few images of lynched women; however, the
scholarly texts devoted to the subject are few. In retelling the story of Charlotte Harris in pictorial form, Walker demonstrates the license taken in any transliteration of an event. Moving from text to illustration, Walker manages to identify the issues of exploitation inherent in any graphic representation, even though she does not present an actual photographic rendering of the scene.

The textual piece described above recreates the fulcrum of the branch by abruptly reorienting the letters. It is the only artist-imposed break in the piece; just as in the other ink transfers, the letters in the piece are all adjacent, with the reader having to discern where one word ends and another begins. Again Walker demands that her viewers be active participants in the process of narrative construction. Memorials to the violence done against the black body often attempt to remove the abused body from view, to avoid the charge of potentially making pornographic use of the victim’s suffering. Despite the precarious empathy that results when tales of suffering are relayed without the unthought body in question the critics who deride work like Walker’s contend that the perpetuation of negative images merely continues the degradation of blacks. Walker’s silhouettes, sculptures, and even her textual pieces each capitalize on the various aspects of their respective media to reintegrate the unthought black body into scenes of terror.

A Subtlety

My reading of Walker reveals how she navigates these diverse forms of media not to produce a counter-narrative of African American history, but rather eschews the task

of historiography in favor of exposing the body’s fundamental role in making sense of violent archives. One of her most recent pieces, *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby, an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant*, which was on display for a short time in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn, NY in 2014, demonstrates Walker’s venture into a medium quite distinct from those that made her famous, but that still enables her to demonstrate the significance of, and the ability to preserve, the material beyond the original moment.

Displayed in a soon-to-be-demolished skeleton of a Domino sugar factory, Walker’s massive thirty-five-foot-tall sculpture was composed of a polystyrene foam core with a sugar coating. Like many of Walker’s grandiose pieces, *A Subtlety*, incorporates themes of classical mythology to underscore the epic proportions of the work. The centerpiece of *A Subtlety* is a sphinxlike figure with the head of a mammy, complete with stereotypical kerchief and bulbous lips. Surrounding the sphinx were fifteen “attendants,” young boys made of candy carrying fruit baskets, though by the end of the exhibit, only three remained intact.

Creative Time, a nonprofit with a mission of incorporating art in the public sphere, commissioned the piece. Walker stated in an interview with the *New York Times* that part of what drew her to the medium was sugar’s inherent impermanence (July 11, 2014). In contradistinction to the great sphinx of Ancient Egypt, *Sugarbaby* was conceived with a shelf-life in mind. Responding to the imminent demolition of the sugar factory, Creative Time’s commission afforded Walker the opportunity to create a piece
that reveals the integral role of the black body in the creation of historical narratives, as well as illustrate the willful forgetting that excises the unthought from the national conscious. The full title of the piece makes salient the relationship between black bodies and sugar production. Moreover, in making the sculpture out of sugar, Walker establishes a dialectic in which the black body is simultaneously producer of consumables and consumable in and of itself. The *Sugarbaby* makes no secret of the sexual overtones that undergird the relationships between white owners of sugar factories and plantations and the black labor they controlled.\(^{59}\)

More relevant to this study are the chemical aspects of Walker’s chosen medium. *A Subtlety* was conceived as impermanent. Ironically, the temporary work in fact highlights the permanent presence of the labor of black bodies, even as modernization aids in the process of willful forgetting that seeks to eclipse the role of black bodies in providing the commodities that make modernization possible. Walker’s sculpture follows in a tradition of “ephemeral” art; from mandalas to the medieval entremets or subtleties from which the sugar sculpture borrows its title. As much as these pieces offer in terms of their aesthetic merit, equally significant is their level of intricacy despite its inevitable destruction. *A Subtlety* adopts ephemerality to highlight the attempts of the broader society to consume the products of black bodies even as they erase the role black labor. In magnifying the subtle presence of black bodies, by underscoring the hypersexualization of black women and making the riddle of the contradictory servile and sensual archetype of the mammy the centerpiece of the exhibition, the destruction of

\(^{59}\) Much has been written about the sexual exploitation of enslaved black women, so I make no attempt to recount that sordid history here.
Walker’s sculpture in fact reveals more about how the history of black labor is preserved as the unthought.

As the sugar dissolves and is carted away, the elemental remnants of the molecules echo the continued yet less apparent presence of black participation in the industrialization of the nation. In other words, Walker’s chosen medium, at the most basic chemical level, functions allegorically as an illustration of how narratives are constructed out of the dissolution and occlusion of unthought black bodies. Moreover, Walker chose to preserve not only three of the candied “attendants,” which will be sold to and installed at various cultural institutions, but also the sphinx’s left hand, clenched in a fist with the thumb between the first two fingers. In an interview with filmmaker Ava Duvernay, Walker remarks that her ephemeral sculpture distinguishes itself from conventional monuments meant to carry forth a narrative to posterity, but also from similarly monumental sculptures by male artists. “I think that side of it, the disappearance of it, the absence of it, that's something the proverbial male artist isn't doing. The quintessential monument sculptors build something to stand for ever and ever or [create something] to be rebuilt and reconstructed in some other form. That's not what I'm doing” (“Q&A Kara Walker.”). Inserting gender into the discourse surrounding the production of temporary art, Walker raises the issue of the salience of black women in the production and preservation of legacy.

If the sexualized black jezebel and the maternal mammy archetypes are to be understood as caricatured paragons of black women’s role to “make generations” then it would stand to reason that black women’s entry into the field of monumental sculpture would appear contradictory, as monuments do not connote the dynamism and potential
for change inherent in reproductive acts. However, as noted in the previous chapter, and as Walker remarks above, monuments can in fact possess the elasticity necessary to incorporate the unthought. In building a work meant to signal the incessant presence of that which is thought to be temporary or forgettable, Walker directs the viewers’ attention not only to the unthought role of the black female laborer, but also to the futility of attempting to forget the intimate presence of black bodies in both public and private spaces. Despite attempts to occlude and dissolve the evidence, the elemental fragments remain.

Though many critics have tried to identify a narrative in Walker’s works, I instead look to them as illustrations of the process of narrative construction, of the project of sense-making that transforms the assemblage of the archive into history. This method of reading enables one to examine how Walker reincorporates the black body into narratives of the terror and spectacular exploitation, leaving room for the reintegration of unthought individual subjectivities while preserving the expedient utility of the icon as a memorial touchstone. The sugar sphinx exemplifies the dialectical relationship between blacks and whites throughout American history; at once consumer and consumable, the sphinx lays as sentinel until one arrives who can solve the riddle of the spectacular yet eclipsed body in memorial narratives of terror.

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“Call on me, and I will equalize”: Self-Defense Case Law and the Unthought Personhood of the Slave

“Be not afraid of any man;  
No matter what his size;  
When danger threatens, call on me—  
And I will equalize!”

--Slogan engraved on Colt Peacemaker Pistols c. 1875

“…for we see the spirit of the times by the legislative act…”

--Judge Henderson, *North Carolina v. Reed* (1823)

Within the last half-century, several scholars published works that look to the law as a site where antebellum society sought to work out the social position of the slave. The case law surrounding issues of slavery functions as a snapshot of how the slave’s personhood was conceived during the nineteenth century. The ability to be read through and within the law indicated the level at which one had access to the civic institutions that make personhood a valuable asset. Two of the most influential works, Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* and Mark Tushnet's *The American Law of Slavery 1810-1860*, focus on the law as a reflective cultural product, specifically noting the crimes that could be perpetrated against the body of the slave as indicative of the slave's “social death.” Indeed, the concept of “social death,” the slave’s necessary isolation from and inability to civically interact with the people around him/her, still serves as the backbone of the majority of contemporary scholarship on slavery, even as more recent scholarship challenges and adds nuance to Patterson’s theory. The appeal of Patterson’s theory is evident in its ability to function as a metaphor that makes clear the nonphysical violence suffered by those captive in slavery. However, the pithy maxim seems to have overextended its utility. In privileging the
concept of social death in the study of American slavery, scholars often unthink the personhood, both legal and social, that the slave enjoyed. In other words, the generative, though delimiting, theory of social death erases the avenues for civic participation that were in fact available to the slave.

In his oft-cited work, Patterson compares iterations of slavery in several different societies throughout the past few millennia. Through his study, among other insights, he arrives at “social death” as a quintessential aspect of the experience of enslavement. Slavery entailed “the permanent, violent domination of natally alienated and generally dishonored persons” (13). From the moment one becomes a slave, s/he is withdrawn from the customary societal interactions that identify one as a civic participant. Furthermore, this withdrawal extends beyond the immediate moment, reaching out to the slave’s past and future. The slave was both “[f]ormally isolated in his social relations with those who lived…and he also was culturally isolated from the social heritage of his ancestors” (5-6). The slave had no liberty to freely make use of his learned history or the experiences of his present. Rather, the slave existed in a state of “overtakelessness” (to borrow from Dickinson) brought on by living in the incremental now’s demarcated by the issue of each new order to be obeyed. The disjointed temporality of slave existence made establishing social and civic connections seem incomprehensible. 61

In a more recent text, The Law is a White Dog: How Legal Rituals Make and Unmake Persons, Colin Dayan takes a curious approach, arriving at the conclusion that individual must sacrifice himself and be resurrected in order to participate in the civil

61 Tushnet similarly looks to articulations and interpretations of the law as the axis around which the limits of the slave’s access to civic participation were constructed.
body. She distinguishes between social and civil death through an examination of two extreme modes of legal existence: the state of the slave and that of the felon. For Dayan, the slave and the felon represent two opposing states of exile—the slave is compulsively withdrawn from the social sphere whereas the felon is stripped of his/her right to property and the free exercise of the rights afforded to the citizen. These two extremes unthink the citizen and push him/her into a civil and social limbo that is nebulously defined as being neither of these states of extreme deprivation.

The trope of resurrection and of the citizen as a resurrected subject “possessing” the civil body distinguishes The Law is a White Dog as a text that attempts to move beyond the concept of social death as a definite and irrevocable occurrence. Nevertheless, Dayan’s study still maintains a focus on the punitive aspects of the law and hinges on an understanding of all subjects within the civil body as being dead in some capacity. I differentiate my argument from Dayan’s in that I treat the slave not as a subject “murdered” to further the master’s proprietary and pecuniary interests, but as a subject whose rights to civil participation remained intact despite his/her status as enslaved.

A survey of the field reveals that the majority of the scholarship attempts to reinforce a clear delineation between the acts of revolt and resistance the slave could and did perform in the private and social spheres and the slave's supposedly unsuccessful appeals to the law for redress. Consequently, these works unthink the legal arena as inaccessible to the slave, citing the few cases where slaves were denied legal justice as evidence of the slave's social death and civic estrangement. On the other hand, a posture
of ambitious confusion helps us recover the slave's unthought right to recompense under the law as an intrinsic aspect of the slave's personhood.

The law attempts to reflect societal opinion on an issue even as it moves to resolve and prevent conflict and circumscribe behavior. Legal scholars and social pundits alike often turn to the punishments prescribed by the laws as an index of how grave the society understood a particular offense to be. However, this assumption delimits the insight that can be gleaned from the reasoning articulated in the judges’ opinions. Therefore, I turn to the judicial opinions of landmark and lesser-known cases of the 1850s to illustrate the extent to which the slave’s personhood was recognized and exercised in the civic institution of the courts. Rather than merely demonstrating their logical deductions, these judges included commentary on the potential consequences of their rulings, crafting their holdings as a sort of textual monument, meant to stand and convey a particular message into perpetuity.

Consequently, I open the chapter with an examination of the right to self-defense as it was extended to the slave to demonstrate the legal recognition of a “rational mind”—of personhood—within the slave even as studies centered around a discussion of the punishments and tortures that could be meted out to an enslaved body elide the existence of a civically engaged subjectivity. British Common Law, as well as positive law, in these states established the criteria for self-defense as an affirmative defense to charges of murder and assault, requiring that both black and white defendants prove that their actions were reasonable and that there existed a real and imminent threat of death or great bodily harm. Self-defense then functions as a useful metric for outlining the law’s
recognition of the slave’s right to preserve his interest in bodily integrity and leverage that interest to articulate a legally legible subjectivity.

Just as Simon Gikandi and Audra A. Diptee push the limits of social death by studying how cultural artifacts reveal slave’s social participation, In “Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery,” Vincent Brown cites social rites and practices to argue against a monochromatic understanding of the slave as socially dead. He points to slave funerals as merely one example of moments of the slave’s social reconnection. He asks his readers to consider how these isolated moments of recognition of a slave’s personhood fit into the conventional narrative of the slave as “permanently…and generally dishonored.” Likewise, Michael Craton in Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies submits that a slave’s ability to garner a reputation and assume a place in a broader hierarchy negates Patterson’s postulate of slaves as “generally dishonored” and calls for attention to the varying degrees of degradation experienced by enslaved persons. Though Brown and Craton make important interventions in the discourse surrounding the subjectivity of the slave, adding nuance to our understanding of the plural subjectivities within slavery, they do not choose to engage those moments within the arena of the law wherein the slave’s personhood is identified. In maintaining the purview of their analysis to the slave’s delimited subjectivity within the social sphere, Craton and Brown do not account for the significant rights to civic participation that the slave did possess.

62 Slavery and the Culture of Taste, and From Africa to Jamaica: The Making of an Atlantic Slave Society, 1775-1807, respectively.
I focus my analysis on two cases that took place in North Carolina, the landmark
North Carolina v. Mann (1829) and North Carolina v. Will, a Slave (1834), which took
the tenets of Mann and outlined the contours of personhood that the slave could
successfully leverage in the judicial system. Given that both cases were decided before
Dred Scott, a close reading of the opinions through the lens of ambitious confusion
reveals the struggles and tensions through which the states and its magistrates had to
wade to arrive at a tentative reconciliation of the slave’s personhood and his status as
chattel until the Supreme Court’s ruling compelled abolitionists to seek other avenues
through which to realize their cause. Furthermore, even though the precedents set by
cases in North Carolina and elsewhere were wide-reaching, these cases also reflect the
legal and social impact of the recent rebellions led by Nat Turner and others in Virginia
and nearby regions within the south. Reading the opinions of the judges who ruled on
these landmark cases and using ambitious confusion as an analytical posture, this chapter
illuminates the legal reasoning undergirding the boundaries of the unthought personhood
of the enslaved black body in the middle of the nineteenth-century.

From this legal foundation, I turn to the poetics of Natasha Trethewey’s Native
Guard. Published in 2006, Native Guard arises out of Trethewey’s ambitious confusion
surrounding the collective and personal memories of black subject’s legally legible
subjectivities. Trethewey weaves lyrics told from the point of view of a member of the
Louisiana Native Guard with meditations on her mother’s violent death at the hands of
her abusive husband. Throughout the collection, Trethewey’s use of enjambment, meter,
and revision of traditional forms calls for a revision of conventional definitions of
evidence—that legally legible site wherein articulations of subjectivity are recorded.
Through my readings of the poems “What is Evidence?” and “Native Guard,” I submit that Trethewey argues for a new definition of evidence made possible through the densification of the law’s temporality. While the law usually admits that which can reflect and encapsulate a single event readily identifiable as a crime through a taxonomy of elements, Trethewey suggests that we instead view the organic and affective processes of decay and healing alongside textual recordings as instances of self-defense—efforts to defend and preserve the integrity of the subject and assert the right to civic participation.

As part of a set of recent challenges to Patterson’s theory of social death, several scholars enumerate the possible methods of resistance available to the slave.63 The majority of scholarship details episodes of less violent resistance, such as sabotaging crops or machinery, which slaves often performed as a subtle way of combating their exploitation. Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation, by Stephanie M. H. Camp, delves into the gender politics surrounding methods of everyday and extraordinary resistance to captivity. She traces how enslaved women helped to create “rival geographies,” spaces in which they opposed the confines—both physical and figurative—imposed by their masters. More extreme methods of removing oneself from base commodification were running away, suicide, or, as in the infamous Margaret Garner case, infanticide. Similarly extraordinary and infrequent were the acts of violent revolt that occurred throughout the colonies. Daniel Rasmussen’s American Uprising: The Untold Story of America’s Largest Slave Revolt not

63 For examples, see James H. Sweet’s “Defying Social Death: The Multiple Configurations of African Slave Family in the Atlantic World” and Simon Gikandi’s Slavery and the Culture of Taste.
only relates the details of the 1811 slave uprising in New Orleans, but also illuminates how and why this key event is often left buried in the archives as opposed to the more widely-studied rebellions led by Nat Turner and John Brown. Henry “Box” Brown's well-known and oft-restaged mailing of himself as cargo to freedom in Philadelphia serves as a fascinating example of a slave taking advantage of society's conception of him as movable property to utilize the civic infrastructure to attain freedom. In many canonical slave narratives, personhood is articulated through one of these methods, or from becoming literate. Few discuss the possibility of asserting personhood through a direct physical confrontation, meeting force with force. A notable exception, of course, is the Frederick Douglass and Edward Covey fight scene in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*.

Numerous articles and studies have been written on the fight's formative impact on the young Douglass, and its literary import in establishing the trope of enslaved black men gaining the sympathy of and a modicum of respect from their readership through the physical articulation of their masculinity. Nevertheless, the fight between the two men takes place outside of the legal sphere and, therefore, does not provide insight into the slave's legally recognized personhood and level of civic engagement. Douglass' encounter with Covey was certainly fundamental to his arrival at an awareness of his manhood and the establishment of a trope of physical resistance as a way for the enslaved black man to acquire a level of respect from his readership by virtue of his masculinity.64

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64 Notably, many abolitionist texts and propaganda shied away from relating stories of slaves physically resisting their masters and instead highlighted images of supplicant
In the same vein, I study occasions of claims to self-defense to illustrate the slave’s extant though unthought right to the preservation of life and capital.

I choose to examine self-defense since this particular style of resistance—the meeting of force with force—reveals and reflects the legal and social conception of the slave as a rational subject, able to participate in at least some civic institutions, such as the courts. The legal concept of the “reasonable” subject, a standard to which both slaves and free persons were held to determine culpability, is but the beginning of the complex and nuanced conceptualization of slave personhood within the law. Moreover, we need not look only to the sentences imposed on slaves or to the failed suits for freedom, a methodology that of course leads to the conclusion that slaves were socially dead. I dissect the phrase “self-defense” and demonstrate how conceptions of the self and notions of defense combine in this crucial yet understudied arena of enslaved personhood. While the previous chapter focused on the unthought significance of the enslaved black body when a victim of terror, here I contend that the defense of that body surprisingly reveals the legal parameters outlining the unthought socially and civically engaged personhood granted to the slave.

Self-defense illuminates the vertex of the conflicting interests of the uninhibited enjoyment of property and the ability of the enslaved body to labor productively. The slave’s right to resist “great bodily harm” subtly articulates the slave’s own proprietary interest in his/her body as capital, distinct from the master’s financial interest in the slave body as property to be dispensed with in whatever fashion the master chose. The legally or tortured slaves. Given the segregationist/racist attitudes of many white abolitionists, the reasons for this bias are clear and do not need to be rehearsed here.
recognized right to physical resistance demarcates the boundary between the master's seemingly absolute dominion over the slave and the slave's unalienable right to the preservation of life. In examining the case law surrounding the right to self-defense, judges sought to resolve these contesting interests, drafting artifacts that only exacerbate the confusion caused by the dissonant claims. Assuming a posture of ambitious confusion informed by Trethewey’s call for a revision of the definition of evidence, contemporary readers can gain a more complete understanding of the role and extent of the slave’s unthought personhood.

**Circumstances of defense**

North Carolina case law contained precedent explicitly establishing the legal recognition of the personhood of the slave dating back to 1771. Chief Justice Martin Howard wrote that the slave held naturally unalienable rights, which included the right to self-defense. Justice Howard went on to conclude that if a slave is held to be a reasonable creature, then the felonious killing of him/her amounted to murder (Morris 169). Justice Howard’s logic was somewhat circular, in that he maintained that if a slave were reasonable enough to have the malice necessary to commit murder, then one must extend the consequences of that ability to reason to all aspects of the law. Hence, one could be found guilty of the murder of a slave.⁶⁵

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⁶⁵ See Thomas Morris' *Southern Slavery and the Law, 1619-1860* for cases where white men were convicted of the murder of a slave. Morris also discusses the role of class as a dividing factor amongst white people, concluding that often the class of the accused determined whether s/he was convicted of a given crime.
Later cases in North Carolina forced justices to grapple with the consequences of Justice Howard’s opinion. They were compelled to attempt to reconcile their duty to respect these fundamental rights of the slave with the master’s similarly unalienable right to exercise control over his property. Often, this conflict was left to work itself out within the domestic sphere. In rare instances, the judges found it necessary to step into the private sphere, excusing their reach by citing the public’s greater interest in the outcome of their ruling, rather than admitting any attempt to defend the rights of the slave. The seemingly conflicting jurisdictions of the law and one’s “absolute” right to enjoy their property are best exemplified in the cases of *North Carolina v. Mann* and *North Carolina v. Will*. By examining these two cases we can see how the courts and the lawyers tried to reconcile these claims to the slave body. Having thus located the slave’s unthought personhood and access to civil institutions, I introduce *Native Guard* as an example of a memorial driven by ambitious confusion that calls for a redefinition of evidence to provide black subjects with greater legal legibility.

Arguably the most famous and most often cited of these cases is *North Carolina v. Mann* (1829). In this case, a slave named Lydia was leased to John Mann. When Lydia attempted to flee from a whipping, Mann shot and wounded her and was initially found guilty of battery. Upon appeal to the North or appropriate lessee had the right to forcefully compel the slave to labor or endure punishments. Justice Ruffin balanced the court’s duty to recognize the slave’s statutorily attenuated right to liberty with the

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66 *Somerset v. Stewart* (1772), though a British case, heavily influenced American jurists by holding that slavery was antithetical to natural states of liberty and, therefore, required positive law to support it.

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master’s unalienable right to the full enjoyment of his property. The ruling resulted in Ruffin’s reluctant concession that full submission of the slave’s will, however that submission be obtained, was necessary for the master to extract the full value of the slave’s labor. He ruled that the slave must be under complete control of the master in order to ensure the obedience necessary to exact the desired labor from the slave body. Justice Ruffin writes “the power of the master must be absolute, to render the submission of the slave perfect” (13 N.C. 263). At first blush, this portion of Justice Ruffin’s opinion appears to suggest that the state must not impose any limitations on the master’s authority, presumably because if the slave’s rights were recognized within the context of this delicate relationship, then there would be room and incentive for the slave to revolt, and a master could not appeal to the law for aid in subduing rebellious slaves. Notably, Ruffin’s opinion rested on the assumption that a master invested in a slave, and that the return on that investment could only be gained from the real products of slave labor.

Despite the license granted the master to devise ways to compel the slave to work, Ruffin’s opinion never grants masters the right to the slave’s ability to labor productively. In other words, though the master might be permitted to impose corporal punishment to extract the submission of the slave’s will, in purchasing a slave, a master does not obtain the right to disable the slave to the extent that s/he is no longer capable of performing those tasks that would yield a return on the master’s investment. That is to say, whereas the right to enjoy other forms of property was not curtailed in such a way as to compel an actualized return on investment—one could destroy one’s purchases as one saw fit—the holding articulated the slave’s right to preserve bodily integrity vis the recognition of a
whole body as a form of capital. If the slave’s value were based on her potentially productive body, then the slave’s life was valued on the degree of productivity. Hence, that the slave could turn to the law for redress from punishments that threatened to lessen that value indicates that the slave was endowed with the unalienable right to life, and that right included a level of civic participation that can be exercised through a capitalist market. Thus Ruffin effectively granted the slave a proprietary interest in her own body as capital by bequeathing to her the right to lawfully resist any and all actions that might reasonably result in the permanent rendering of the slave as unable to produce.\(^67\)

Furthermore, Justice Ruffin saw no distinction between the legal owner of the slave and one who leased or otherwise controlled the labor of the enslaved body. He claimed that since the ends were the same for the both the owner and the overseer or lessee, the extent of the authority granted to the person who had legal claim to the body of the slave should be equivalent; there were no “special” property rights with which the court must concern itself. Instead, the question hinged upon whether the excessive use of force would be an indictable offense if such force were used in the context of this type of relationship.\(^68\) In other words, Ruffin raises the issue of the significance of evidence in

\(^{67}\) Noteworthy here is that Ruffin did not rule that any battery committed against a slave must be reasonable, or even calculated to effectively compel the slave to labor. Rather, Ruffin writes that Mann committed a “cruel” and “unreasonable” battery, but that the offense was not indictable. One must then conclude that Ruffin attempted to respect the rights of one who holds an interest in the slave while acknowledging the slave’s right to take reasonable action to preserve his/her life.

\(^{68}\) N.B. While slaves were included under common law in North Carolina, courts in South Carolina held that slaves were subject of their masters and, therefore, not entitled to the protections of the state. The significance of jurisdiction helps to
determining whether the slave had acted in a legally justified manner. Ruffin’s opinion fails to perform the work of later memorials in that he does not seek to put answer this question and project his conclusion beyond the current moment. Conversely, Trethewey’s ambitious confusion led her to devise a memorial project that identifies the critical nature of evidence as a site of record under the law. While Ruffin’s juridical purview encompasses only the immediate moments before the event in question Trethewey’s revised definition of evidence enables the reintegration of the unthought methods of defense that include more subtle ways to preserve bodily integrity.

This juridical move, coupled with the fact that the slave at common law maintained some protection from attacks at the hands of third parties, i.e., those without a pecuniary interest in the slave, demonstrates the elasticity of social and legal conceptualizations of the slave’s personhood. What is made salient here is the extent to which proprietary interests in the products of the labor of the enslaved body outweighed the slave’s claims to his/her own proprietary interests in the ability of that body to labor in the minds of modern day readers of Ruffin’s opinion. Modern scholars who purport the slave’s position as socially dead are unthinking Ruffin’s careful articulation of the slave’s right to preserve his/her corporeal capital. Though it seems as if the slave’s right

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illustrate the role geography plays in the construction of personhood and the consequent accessibility of the law as an avenue for redress.

69 Slave patrollers, through the statutes established in many states, first in South Carolina and made more popular with the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, were granted a pecuniary interest in the slave by virtue of the reward offered for the return of the slave, even though many patrollers retrieved slaves without ever entering into a contract with the master directly.
to life is predicated on his value to the master, ambitious confusion as an analytical supplement to the reading of Ruffin’s opinion reveals that the slave enjoys rights that are unalienable and distinct from the master’s interest. The slave’s rights conflict with the master’s right to uninhibited enjoyment, yet the courts found that in that contest, the slave’s rights are of greater importance. Indeed, the slave’s unalienable right to able-bodiedness demonstrates that the purchase of a slave was far more conditional than is traditionally conceived. Not only can one not purchase the slave’s “soul,” but one does not even wholly purchase the rights to the body of the slave.

*State v. Will*

The holding of *North Carolina, v. Negro Will, Slave of James S. Battle*, outlines when the slave gains and loses the right to defense and how that moment signifies the legal recognition of the slave’s personhood. The 1834 case involves the slaying of a white overseer at the hands of a slave who fled from the corporal punishment being inflicted upon him by the overseer. The slave, Will, was shot after arguing with the overseer, Richard Baxter. Despite his injuries, which are presented in graphic detail in the court documents, Will was able to run approximately six hundred yards before Baxter caught up to him. The two struggled, along with another slave who was ordered by Baxter to apprehend Will. In the course of this struggle, Will drew his knife, moved to stab the other slave, missed, and fatally wounded Baxter (18 N.C. 121; 1834).

By first examining the definitions of the charges as they were initially leveled against Will, we can explore the contradictory logic that grounded the understanding of personhood acknowledged in the law as belonging to the slave. The opinion defines
murder as “…when a person of sound mind and discretion, killeth any reasonable creature in being, with malice aforethought.” The fact that a slave may be convicted of murder is nothing new, yet noticing that the crime requires proof that the killing was committed with malice aforethought makes salient the legal understanding of the slave’s capacity for reason, for one cannot commit the crime without being of “sound mind.” Therefore, the state’s evidence in the case necessarily shifted focus away from the body of the slave, leading to a corporeally divorced subject under trial. A successful claim of self-defense reintegrated the body as a legitimate site of subjectivity, the defense of which can be read as an articulation of the slave’s access to civic institutions. 70 Nevertheless, self-defense claims, in their emphasis on the immediate threat to bodily integrity cannot fully memorialize the various methods of defense employed by black bodies, thereby unthinking those defensive tactics that were illegible under the law. Consequently, Trethewey calls for a dense form of legal temporality that allows for the inclusion and legibility of previously unthought methods of self-defense.

70 The jury initially convicted Will of murder, but the case is unique in the body of self-defense cases in that Will’s counsel appealed the verdict not on grounds that the homicide was justifiable, but rather that Will lacked the “malice aforethought” element necessary to support a conviction of murder. The submission that a slave could possess the mens rea inherent in murder followed North Carolina v. Mann as an early articulation of the slave as more than a laboring body. Here again we see that theories of slaves’ social deaths result in the unthought recognition of the slave as a reasonable creature whose claims to personhood can be brought before the court and granted standing within this particular civic institution.
The explicit recounting of Will’s injuries demonstrated not only the court’s concern with accounting for and subsequently balancing the injuries sustained by Will and the overseer’s fatal wounds, but also the apparent necessity to spectacularize the suffering of the enslaved black body in order to make his right to force legible. In other words, the detailed recounting of Will’s injuries relies upon the “precarious empathy” Hartman describes to justify the slave’s actions, the reader eclipses the actual victim as they put themselves in his place while they decide whether his actions were reasonable in the eyes of the common man in the law. Trethewey calls the reader’s attention to how this limited perspective within the law continued beyond the nineteenth-century, always unthinking the work of physical healing and decay work as a defense against the spectacularization of corporeal suffering. Unfortunately, Will’s ability to continue his flight despite his injuries also has the effect of making his claim to a pecuniary and existential interest in the preservation of bodily integrity less credible, for the reader might not believe that the ordinary man—a formulation central to legal reasoning—could continue to physically exert himself after sustaining purportedly life-threatening wounds. In other words, the limited contours of the timescape legible under the law demonstrate how claims of self-defense unthought those actions taken prior to/instead of confrontational violence, making clear the gap that Trethewey’s ambitious confusion seeks to fill through the development of a dense temporality that can position unthought methods of defense as evidence.
Native Guard

When read with a posture informed by the theory of ambitious confusion, Trethewey’s *Native Guard* reads as a memorial to the black body’s extant albeit curtailed access to the courts as a civic institution. Ange Mlinko reads the collection as a memorial that seeks to link the history of the individual with the project of drafting and commemorating national historical memory. “Implicit in her project is [Robert] Lowell’s pinched notion that poetry begins with a psychological “I,” piquing prurient curiosity, then elevates that “I” beyond memoir by placing it a larger context of recovering cultural memory” (60). 71 This effort to weave the experiences of the individual into the fabric of national memory certainly undergirds much of Trethewey’s work, but it certainly does not reflect the full significance of the collection. Engaging different scales of memory, from the individual to the national, *Native Guard* responds to memorial methodologies that attempt to articulate the extent and consequences of black civic participation.

Trethewey explores the ways in which the history of black subjects are recorded and remembered. She turns to the law as a vertex of the text and the body as sites of record, as well as the judicial system as a metric of legible subjectivity. One particular poem, “What is Evidence?” addresses the question of how the actions of the black body in response to threats to its integrity or existence are made legible under the law. Trethewey devotes the entirety of the poem to answering the question posed in the title. The first eleven lines say what evidence is not; it is not the “fleeting bruises,” the false

71 “Reviewed work: *Native Guard* by Natasha Trethewey.”
teeth, or the fading textual document that serves as witness to the abuse suffered by the woman within the poem. Moreover, just as in The Known World, Trethewey rejects the notion that a physical marker with the dates that bookend the woman’s life can function as a legally legible memorial that would at once commemorate the life lost to violence, as well as serve as a point from which the victim’s subjectivity could be read and participate in the legal sphere.

Rather, the only evidence the victim can present that Trethewey identifies in the poem is the “landscape of her body—splintered/clavicle, pierced temporal—her thin bones/settling a bit each day, the way all things do.” This definition of evidence appears narrow at first; it seems as though Trethewey suggests the futility of challenging the law’s limited ability to allow the body to participate in the civic institution that is a trial. The victim’s body is described in a series of wounds: broken bones, blackened eyes, just as Will’s body was exposed and its injuries enumerated to form a collection of evidence that could be leveraged to facilitate the judge’s comprehension of the event. The dissection of the body at first seems to compound the violence of abuse and the finality of death. A closer reading of Trethewey’s diction and her use of enjambment, however, exposes her revision of the criteria that stipulate what can be read as evidence.

The final three lines of the poem illustrate how the law privileges a snapshot of the physical effects of violence when compiling a body of evidence. The enjambment between “splintered clavicle” underscores the fracturing of bone, as well as the matter that consequently spills over out of the line as a neat container. Nevertheless, the next phrase, “pierced temporal—,” leaves off the noun and leverages the em dash to create a semblance of continuity beyond the immediate moment of injury. Just as Jones called for
his readers to recognize a sentence as a state of doing that could exist without and beyond the subject, Trethewey pushes against the accumulation of thingified subjectivities that accrue through the processes of recording and memorialization.

The final line of the poem uses the comma as a caesura of sorts to oppose the two reading practices demonstrated within the poem. “Settling” connotes a process of movement that continues beyond the immediate moment contained within the poem, indeed, beyond the immediate moment recognized by the law as evidence or relevant to the case at hand. Contrastingly, “the way all things do” alludes to the collection of “thingness” that necessarily accompanies remembrances of the death of subject. When this thingness is the only aspect of subjectivity that can be read under the law, we fail to account for the ways in which the body’s processes of healing and decay work to defend against the fixing “second death” of being transformed into evidence. Thus Trethewey posits a form of static animation similar to that employed by Jones to craft a dense temporality that enables the reintegration of the dynamic body as a legally legible subject capable of unthought levels of civic participation and engagement.

The litany of injuries that comprise the majority of the poem speak to what Brian Reed calls Trethewey’s “post-soul poetics.” The repeated though revised syntax in the poem’s first three sentences are opposed to the fourth and final sentence in the poem, evoking a blues refrain even as it diverges from the traditional form. Nevertheless, even as these sentences graphically relate the physical injuries the victim suffered, Trethewey makes clear that the efforts to mask or heal from the abuse lead to exclusion from the

72 “The Dark Room Collective and Post-Soul Poetics.”
legal record. Therefore, Trethewey asks that her readers view the body not as a static “landscape” to be examined and subsequently entered into the record as unchanging evidence of a single irrefutable act, but rather as a dense and dynamic plane, with its own defenses against the often exploitative scrutiny of the law.

The woman works to preserve a semblance of bodily integrity by masking her injuries with makeup or through steadying her voice, hoping to performatively enact health and to control the narrative of her experiences. Trethewey reads these actions as instances of self-defense unthought from the legal definition since they do not occur within the timescape of a legally legible immediate threat. In the majority of self-defense case law, the definition and proof of immediacy satisfies the test of reasonableness. Even in cases where slaves stood accused of murdering their masters, time functioned as the expedient factor upon which the courts were able to hinge their rulings. Supplanting objective reasonableness with immediacy, of course, makes the duty to retreat all the more significant, for any possible method escape must be attempted lest the defendant be found guilty. “What is Evidence?” contends that the reader must reconfigure their definition of escape to account for the physical and psychological barriers to removing oneself from a threatening environment. Instead, a denser temporality that privileges

73 For more on the significance of time in cases of self-defense, see V. F. Nourse's article, “Self-Defense and Subjectivity.”

74 In many jurisdictions, present-day case law excludes an entire class of assertions of self-defense from the requirement that the defendant demonstrate that the threat to life or limb was immediate. Many judges and juries in cases where the victim has suffered from domestic violence have acquitted the defendant on charges of murder even when the deceased clearly posed no immediate threat to the defendant.
dynamism in evidence as a legally legible memorial, rather than a pot of the
disarticulated bones of subjectivity, illustrates the way in which the occlusion of injury
(whether through healing or the assumption of masks) can function as an effort to
preserve the animation of a living subject.

The abundant punctuation and verbs work to expand the poem’s temporality
beyond the instant legible under conventional theories of self-defense. Trethewey is
thereby able to reintegrate and reanimate the subject, granting access to the court as a
civic institution by altering what can be admitted as evidence—what no longer needs to
be unthought. Given that the subject is murdered at the end of the poem, Trethewey, like
Jones, requires a way of memorialization—of record keeping—that permits the
continuation of an action despite the removal of a subject. In revising the established
definition of evidence, Trethewey undoes the thingifying effects of being subject to the
law’s scrutiny. Just as nineteenth-century slave’s claims to self-defense challenge(d)
prevalent notions of the slave as a commodified subject who is therefore unable to
leverage subjectivity to gain access to civic institutions, Trethewey directs our attention
to the necessity of conceptualizing the judicial system’s foremost memorial site—exhibits
of evidence—as more than artifacts of specific moments, reading instead in the
movement toward an equilibrium of bodily integrity as a method of defense against
threats of annihilation.

“I’m told it’s best to spare most detail”

The eponymous poem in the collection exemplifies the formal structure of record
keeping that Trethewey’s revised definition of evidence demands. “Native Guard”
consists of a series of ten unrhymed fourteen-lined stanzas, evoking the form of the sonnet without being constrained by its conventions. Each of the stanzas is an entry in a journal written by one of the black members of Louisiana’s Native Guard. Although the journal is “near full/with someone else’s words,” the author decides to simply write his story atop of the previous owner’s. Similarly, the first line of each stanza echoes the last line of the previous entry, drawing a parallel to the “crosshatch” of history that the poem’s speaker notes.

The poem evokes several of the tropes familiar to the genre of the slave narrative, including a scene of rebirth upon a ship, an arrival at manhood through exercises in mastery, and the positioning of the act of writing as a performance and articulation of freedom. The speaker’s project of attempting to record his tenure in the Guard reveals the process of unthinking behind projects of memorialization. Throughout the poem, the speaker expresses his faith in the written word as an accurate record of what transpired. “I’ve reached/thirty-three with history of younger/inscribed upon my back. I now use ink/to keep record, a closed book; not the lure/of memory—flawed, changeful—that dulls the lash/for the master, sharpens it for the slave.” However, the trope of layering that pervades the poem demonstrates Trethewey’s argument that the work of recording history inevitably leads to the burial—the unthinking—of some stories in favor of others.

Even as Trethewey uses language to express her ambitious confusion surrounding the narrative of black participation in the Civil War she resists unthinking certain stories by generating a dense temporality that allows for the simultaneous examination of the multiple layers that comprise every historical narrative. In addition the echoes of the first and last lines of the stanzas, which create the sense of the past’s recurrence in later
moments, Trethewey here again uses enjambment to layer the speaker’s histories within the single moment of the lyric. The speaker’s body displays the history of his younger self, carrying traces of the past, yet not accurately retelling it, for the “lure of memory” inherently alters recollection.

Although the speaker portends to faithfully transcribe history, Trethewey reveals the always present tension between acts of memorialization and the necessary process of addition and excision that accompanies projects of memorial construction. “I listen, put down in ink what I know/they labor to say between silences/too big for words…They long for the comfort of former lives—I see you as you were, waving goodbye.” The speaker claims to know what his prisoners wish to say but cannot; his mastery of them is evidenced by his mastery of language, his ability to articulate the ineffable. In writing their memories, the speaker blends demonstrates the remembering subject’s straddling of temporality; he sees in the present what was before but is no longer. Conversely, those who “dictate” are granted only present tense verbs: “The hot air carries/the stench of limbs…Flies swarm…We hunger, grow weak.” The author, familiar with the process of burial and decay that makes all records transient when their temporality remains anchored in one dimension, denies these speakers the memorial’s capacity to project the past toward a future time. Their description of the “harsh facts of war” assumes the tone of traditional forms of evidence: static snapshots of a single instant. Trethewey already demonstrated the shortcomings of conceiving of evidence as a memorial with one-dimensional temporality in “What is Evidence?” The final stanza epitomizes her revised definition of evidence that enables the price of war to be “accounted for.”
The final stanza of the poem echoes “What is Evidence?” in that the first eleven lines are a list of broken and disarticulated subjects; the sentences are filled with nouns, but the only verb in the list that is not a participle is “take,” signaling the externalization of and divestiture of action that necessarily accompanies memorialization. The last three lines share Jones’ method of infusing a collection of verbs to reanimate the memorialized subjects. “…Beneath battlefields, green again,/the dead molder—a scaffolding of bone/we tread upon, forgetting. Truth be told.” Unlike in the novel, the poem offers Trethewey the use of enjambment to complement her fabrication of a dense temporality signaled by the transformation of the fallen subjects contained within these unthought memorial sites. The process of decay and the return of the landscape to its original state seem to go against the criteria that determine what counts as evidence, for it prevents the preservation of the artifact as it was in the original moment. Indeed, the speaker suggests that unthinking the remains of the dead is the communal sacrifice that enables a failed return to a state of un-knowing, of forgetfulness. However, within the expanded lyric time that Trethewey develops, the revised definition of evidence makes the buried histories visible once more.

Trethewey’s new way of managing memorial projects to preserve unthought modes of defense against the objectifying effects of being read as evidence enables black subjects to leverage their personhood to participate in civic institutions even as they maintain their bodily integrity and resist the spectacularization of their suffering. In linking the historiography of the Louisiana Native Guard with the tragic meditation of the trial of her mother’s murderer, Trethewey bridges two scales of memory in order to postulate a new way to draft legally legible artifacts of memory that provide for a more
comprehensive historical narrative. Her “crosshatched landscapes” serve as sites of memory upon which the black subject’s unthought access to civic institutions can be leveraged without sacrificing those subjects to a stultifying accumulation of inert subjectivities. Offering a revision of the definition of evidence generated out of ambitious confusion, Trethewey responds to the conventional theories of the black body’s experience of slavery as social death—estrangement from civic institutions. *Native Guard* follows a tradition of memorials catalyzed by ambitious confusion that work to destabilize the boundaries delimiting what we determine to be both legally and socially legible.

While my reading of *Native Guard* as a contemporary memorial does not address the full complexity of Trethewey and other’s memorial projects fueled by ambitious confusion is by no means comprehensive, I seek to carve a space in the extant scholarship where these legally legible articulations of resistance and self-/national-defense can be understood as reflective and constitutive of the black memorialized subject’s claim to personhood. Contrary to prevalent notions of the slave as socially dead and inert, with no possible avenues for redress or protection from prosecution, an examination of the slave's legally recognized right to defend him/herself against physical attacks, supplemented with a memorial practice that redefines what is acceptable as an historical artifact, presents a more nuanced picture of how the black body operated within both the legal and private spheres. Exploring the friction generated by these two seemingly conflicting jurisdictions produces an understanding of how the legal scaffold supporting the memory of black subjects constantly revises and shifts itself; the strain on the laws made apparent
within the opinions and poetry discussed here force us to call into question the myth of social death as the stable and entrenched foundation of the nation’s civic institutions.
Coda

I’m pulling open this mystery,
knotted flaws where a seamstress hurried
over her error…
Just this current of bygones exhausting its hold.
A neck hole that gapes for form, for the body it fitted
…for the order
begetting size and season. No memory unhooks
down the breastbone’s swell
and excuses me from today.

---“Dress,” Amber Flora Thomas

"Ambitious Confusion: Recovering the Unthought in Contemporary Memorials to the Antebellum South" examines the unthought as it resurfaces in contemporary memorials to the antebellum South to illustrate the formal and aesthetic strategies that determine in part the nation’s collective understanding of our most sacred historical figures and events. Through my readings of the memorials included in this study, I demonstrate that an analytical posture informed by ambitious confusion reveals new reading practices that shed light on the construction and representation of memory and its effect on the nation’s epistemology. Furthermore, ambitious confusion exposes the often hidden processes behind the fabrication of historical narratives.

The authors and artists discussed throughout the chapters each construct memorials that scrutinize the creation and reception of traditional narratives of history. The bold questions posed in their works challenge the conventions that delimit readings of memorials sites. Their engagement with the unthought elements of history resurrect buried voices and call for new ways of remembering that are elastic enough for the full inclusion of those artifacts that might disrupt a privileged narrative. Ambitious confusion
offers a reading practice that highlights the altered contours of analysis created in response to the gaps and elisions imposed by rigid demarcations of the core dimensions of analysis: time, place, body, and law.

Across the preceding chapters, I traced how ambitious confusion yields expanded perspectives by eliminating the borders erected to excise the unthought. This dissertation outlined some of the insights made uniquely possible by a reading method based in ambitious confusion. In an era tasked with recording and subsequently commemorating even the minutiae of everyday experiences, studies of memory and memorial practices require a method that can account for the copious amount of data that now forms the ever-expanding archive. Claudia Rankine's 2014 poetry collection, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, is one text that exemplifies the flexibility of ambitious confusion. Rankine, born in Jamaica, but who currently makes her home in Brooklyn, engages questions of migration, belonging, and community in her formally inventive work. *Citizen* combines formal and generic innovation to yield a collection that demonstrates the usefulness of ambitious confusion as a method of reading not just strictly memorial projects, but those that meditate upon the past to identify the origins of the current societal status quo.

Rankine challenges the conventions of the lyric genre through her use of direct addresses to the reader as well as her engagement with the space of the page and ambitious confusion makes clear her investment in using the prose poem to call attention to the interplay between the written word and the site of its inscription as it helps determine the contours of subjectivity and the subject's level of civic engagement. Ambitious confusion allows us to deconstruct the subtitle of the collection to determine what, precisely, is “American” about this extended lyric. The preceding chapters
outlined how ambitious confusion can identify the significance of the innovative
techniques and aesthetics of contemporary memorial narratives that compel us to
interrogate the legacies and the conceptions of individual and national identity inherited
from traditional histories of the antebellum South.

Grounded in ambitious confusion, future works hold the exciting promise of an
opportunity to tackle the generative questions surrounding projects of sense-making that
precede yet perform the fabrication of memorial narrative. These works will inherit the
benefits of a theory that engages multiple scales of memory, from the individual to the
national collective. If we understand narrative as a rhetorical event incessantly
performed and revised with each reception, then we see that ambitious confusion as one
of the few methods of reading memorial projects that can account for not only their
content, structure, and formal qualities, but also the positioning of the viewer in time(s)
and space(s) even as it can help identify the threads of collective memory used to weave a
national historical narrative.

Works like *Citizen* demonstrate the need for a reading practice that recognizes
that contemporary projects often uncover and reflect upon the remnants of the past that
continue to shape and inform present-day interactions. Moreover, ambitious confusion
permits a formal analysis that also concentrates on the sonic, linguistic, and materialistic
aspects of language as it is written and spoken in memorial projects. For poets like
Rankine and Mullen, the ambitious confusion that drives the creation of their texts
exposes the aural and linguistic qualities of language that is often unthought when it is
assumed to be merely an inert conduit of information. Ambitious confusion enables the
reader to examine how the revision of formal and generic conventions evidenced in the
text work to reintegrate the unthought memories that previously hung like specters around historical narratives.

A theoretical posture based in ambitious confusion requires that analysts note how the unthought functions as evidence within contemporary memorial projects. Proof of disavowal, the unthought invites readers to question an otherwise readily accepted fabrication of historical narratives. Ambitious confusion calls for readers to recognize the destabilization of the boundaries surrounding each dimension of narrative as a way to include and display the unthought as a new form of evidence. Moreover, ambitious confusion demands that future scholars pay sufficient attention to what they use as evidence for their own arguments and reflections.

In “What is evidence?” Trethewey asks her readers to move away from the notion of evidence as a static snapshot of a particular moment. By demonstrating how the reconfiguration of analytical borders can create space for the unthought in contemporary memorial projects, ambitious confusion also deconstructs the avenues of inquiry typically used to examine historical narratives. A more dynamic form of evidence, like the one suggested by Trethewey, would include not only the artifacts themselves, but also how reading those artifacts necessitates an interrogation of how mobilizing them as evidence inherently privileges some forms, genres, or texts above others.

In other words, ambitious confusion not only functions as a new way of reading contemporary memorials, but also as a new way of reflecting on the unthought processes undergirding the production and use of scholarship. By examining how we use texts to formulate and support particular theories or conceptions of art and literature, future scholars grounded in the theory of ambitious confusion can better identify and navigate
the unthought elements cast out of their own work. Instead of looking at these excisions as inevitable shortcomings, ambitious confusion suggests that we look at scholarship as a form of narrative itself, as a rhetorical event just as subject to examination as any other text. Consequently, one must acknowledge and scrutinize the structuring of the elements of narrative even within analytical texts.

Studying the interaction between analyst and artifact is not unique to ambitious confusion; for example, Brad Prager in “On the Liberation of Perpetrator Photographs in Holocaust Narratives,” asks contemporary analysts to set aside the issue of guilt or complicity in order to fully appreciate the intellectual possibilities enabled by a more objective posture of analysis. However, ambitious confusion permits an appreciation for the ways in which the very act of analysis often imposes artificial boundaries to turn an artifact into evidence. If we apply the concepts of ambitious confusion to generate a new method of scholarship that allows for the analysis of texts that cannot be confined within the traditional notions of time, place, the body, and the law, then we can witness the generative possibilities of more comprehensive collective and individual memorial genealogies.

As ambitious confusion underscores the fruitfulness of expanding the dimensions of narrative, future works might employ the theory to illustrate the significance of ephemerality when selecting and examining evidence. As suggested by the poem that opened this dissertation, “All is not lost when dreams are,” ambitious confusion reveals that acts of unseeing, disremembering, and rendering invisible cannot, and need not be thought to, remove the traces of the unthought or its influence on latter interpretations of historical figures or events. If the unthought can be reintegrated in contemporary
memorials and explored as a site of preservation, then ambitious confusion makes it possible to value the process of erasure as well as the process of memorialization.

Studying the productions of narratives that arise out of the construction (and the analysis) of memorials, ambitious confusion calls attention to the tensions that arise when one discounts the significance of ephemeral evidence. Whether that ephemerality was imposed, as in the momentary projection of images upon the face(s) of Stone Mountain, or an inherent aspect of the material used in the memorial (the soluble sugar of Walker’s *Sugarbaby: A Subtlety*), ambitious confusion does not allow the viewers of these works to participate in the unthinking of change and instability as potential foundations of analysis. Perhaps, then, the most promising aspect of the theory of ambitious confusion is its ability to open a new method of inquiry that challenges the investment placed in stability as a necessary criteria for something to be counted as evidence. Instead, ambitious confusion invites readers of contemporary memorials to dwell in the uncomfortable, to look at impermanence and disjuncture not with the fear that grounds “memorial mania,” but with an understanding that only the embrace of the transient, the ineffable, the uncontained, offers the prospect of enduring and faithful sites of memory.
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