

Undoctrination

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of Master of Arts in Art

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University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, Michigan

April 21, 2022

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April 2022



2022

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

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Azzaro, Nick MFA '22

The Dilemma of Archie Bunker

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to Marianetta Porter for not holding back and always being honest. Your ability to reflect and see so many things at once is awe-inspiring. Your ongoing support means the world to me.

Thank you to David Chung for being the leader of our cohort and allowing for such dynamic and enriching critiques. I'm going to miss Fridays.

Thank you to Dr. Larry Gant for being open to working with me and offering your honest feedback and support.

Thank you to Osman Khan for lending an ear and always offering insightful advice, even before I was admitted to the program. I'm not sure I can put into words how much our talks meant to me.

Thank you to Audrey Bennett for being so supportive, from Ypsi High to Stamps and beyond.

Thank you to Ron Eglash for your support, insight, and periodic comedic relief.

Thank you to James Cogswell for being you. Your energy is one-of-a-kind and becomes contagious.

Thank you to Endi Poskovic for our conversations. I never walked away without learning from them.

Thank you to Jennifer Metsker for somehow being able to read all of our writings and not lose hope in humanity. I know we didn't meet much but when we did it really helped.

Thank you to Dr. Lynn Kleiman Malinoff for getting me involved in public education and supporting me every step of the way.

Thank you to Dr. Benjamin Edmondson for your support and for trusting me when I barely trusted myself.

Thank you to Lynne Settles for being one of the greatest teachers I've ever known.

Thank you to my cohort-mates, Ellie, Georgia B, Kristina, Martha, Natalia, and Razi. We covered a lot of ground and there's nobody in the world I'd rather "fuck shit up" with.

Most of all, thank you to my wife, Yen, and my son, Tai. I would not have been able to complete this program without you. Your never-ending support and understanding are what got me through this. For real. I love you, Yen. I love you, Tai.

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Keywords

Racism, education, perception, indoctrination, undoctrination, white-wash, privilege, stereotype

Abstract

In a letter to his father, Nick Azzaro explains the question he's looking to answer, which is: *How can artwork and engagement counteract the impacts of racism, privilege, and unequal distribution of resources in the American public education system?*

Both are white American men who disagree on whether or not race plays a role in experience in the United States of America. Azzaro, who taught in an underserved public school district, argues that Black Americans are held to a perception of being academically low achieving, and oftentimes “failed forward”, which leads to a perpetual cycle of challenges. However, this perception is a manufactured one as systemic hurdles for Black Americans, and other non-white Americans, have been in place since the Reconstruction era. His father believes it's almost entirely based on bad choices and poor parenting, which becomes evident through the included dialogue.

Throughout the letter he offers ways to counter such systems, such as how other artists are engaging communities and working with the youth to create opportunities where change can happen. He concludes with his thesis work, titled *Undoctrination*, which is what the letter is ultimately about. *Undoctrination* is the unlearning of the white-washed history and manufactured perceptions that allows for the acceptance and perpetuation of oppression in America's underserved public schools.

Azzaro's hope is to use his own experience as an example to instigate others who look like him to have these difficult conversations.



Dad,

We had a great gathering on Easter this year and it almost felt “normal” but that’s because our conversations were only surface level. I also sense we both recognize the limited time we have left. That said, I don’t think you realize how much our disagreements on race and politics have influenced me.

For an entire year out of my two-year MFA program, I was exactly half your age, which is something that only occurs once in the lifetime of a parent and child. I find it wild we can share that but little else from this experience. I'd like to explain what I've been working on and realize these are things we'll never again talk about face-to-face because we both want to continue seeing each other. I'm also unsure if this letter will ever be read by you.

The question I've been looking to answer with my work is: *How can artwork and engagement counteract the impacts of racism, privilege, and unequal distribution of resources in the American public education system?* To answer this, let's first define racism and privilege in this country.

I agree 100% with author Ibram X. Kendi that "(r)acism is the marriage of racist policies and racist ideas that produces and normalizes racial inequities."¹ According to him, a racist is "one who is supporting a racist policy through their actions or inaction or expressing a racist idea", while an antiracist is "one who is supporting an antiracist policy through their actions or expressing an antiracist idea."² We'll talk about inaction a few times throughout this letter.

I've noticed nothing seems to get you more riled up than talking about white privilege, so I want to be crystal clear I'm not saying you had it easy or that any white American does. I know I wouldn't have the life I do without your sacrifices. But we, as white Americans, do have a different experience than non-white Americans that's advantageous almost 100% of the time.

This is normally where our conversations go off the rails. I understand our family dynamic has always been to avoid uncomfortable situations, which I thought was unique to us but have learned it's not. In fact, it's

1 Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped From the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2016), 18

2 Kendi, *Stamped From the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, 13

very much a white American thing. It's a large contributor to what Dr. Robin DiAngelo calls white solidarity, which "is the unspoken agreement among whites to protect white advantage and not cause another white person to feel racial discomfort by confronting them when they say or do something racially problematic."³

Not calling someone out is an example of inaction, therefore me not challenging something you say because I don't want to make you feel uncomfortable is equivalent to me being a racist. Understandably, when I have made you feel uncomfortable it hasn't gone well. When I've instigated conversations about race and politics you become visibly agitated and respond with things like, "They just need thicker skin!", "They kill way more police than police kill them. ALL LIVES MATTER!", and "Don't you think they had slavery in Africa?"

I understand what I'm saying must be jarring. I know you've recognized for a while now that we see things differently. I couldn't tell you exactly when our division began but know I started to question things as soon as I left Waterford over 20 years ago. A part of me is deeply saddened when you say you wish we could talk and joke like we used to. I remember the person I was, but he only exists in memory now.

I want to be clear, I am not doing this research or making this work for you. Or, better yet, just for you. The reality is, there are a lot of "yous" in this country. Largely, if not entirely, white Americans who can't, or worse won't connect the actions of the past with the circumstances of the present. That's the group I want to challenge, and our conversations have become my proving ground.

I've been reading and collecting comments from articles about race from conservative-leaning websites for years. Although those making the comments are only virtual avatars to me, I know they're real humans because you say many of the same things.

3 Robin J. DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 119

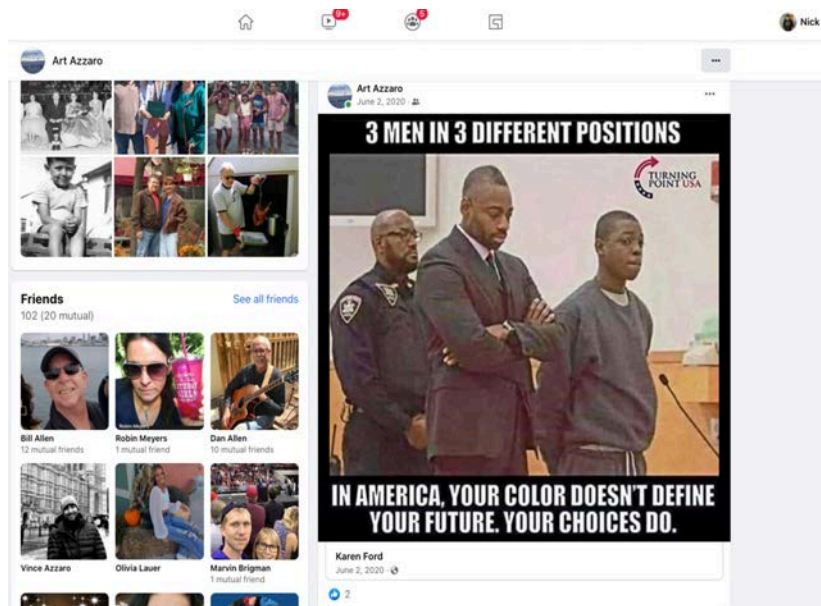


Figure 1. Facebook screenshot from Art Azzaro's home page on June 2, 2020.

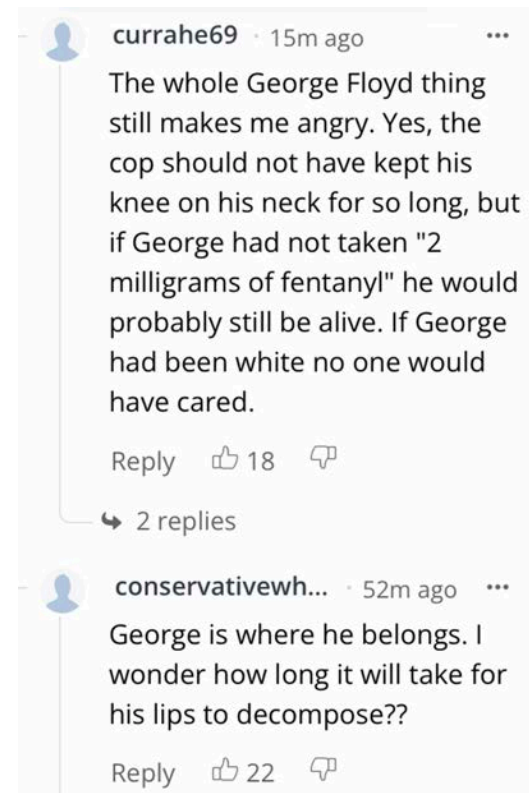


Figure 2. Screenshot of comments from Fox News article taken on March 31, 2022. <https://www.foxnews.com/us/nyc-man-shot-point-blank-head-walking-residential-street-video>

My concern is the lack of critical thought or challenge from you and the “yous”. Our prisons are indeed filled with Black Americans but how can you believe one group of people is that prone to violence and poor decisions? Doesn’t that seem odd to you? I know what One American Network, Newsmax, Fox News, and the memes on your Facebook timeline tell you but have you ever tried to verify any of these things yourself?

I will say it again, *you* alone aren’t the reason I’m creating work, it’s the system that resulted from your beliefs, actions, inactions, and voting habits. The students I worked with in Ypsilanti were born into circumstances based on the questions you didn’t ask and the challenges you didn’t bring to a system that affected their parents, grandparents, and those who came before them.

In 2016, when I told you I was going to photograph an Easter egg hunt being put on by a Black fraternity, you looked at me with honest and almost resentful eyes and said, “Black fraternity? There aren’t any *white* fraternities!” Even though I knew the answer, I still asked if your fraternity allowed Black members. Unsurprisingly, that didn’t seem to change your mind.

During our heated talks, you regularly say things or ask questions I find frightening but not shocking. The best example is, “How come *they* can use *that word*, but we can’t?”, which I thought I did a good job responding to. However, when you told me my middle-school-aged nephew asked *you* that question, I was terrified, both by the thought of such a young man wondering such a thing and, more so, by the thought of you responding to him.

You brought it up in an attempt to justify your argument, which is heartbreaking. Unfortunately, though, it’s understandable for a young, white male growing up in the United States of America to ask such a question but it *must* be met with a clear response.

That word was applied to a group of people who never asked for such a word to begin with. Yet they were branded with it. Since before arriving to these shores, they haven’t been able to escape it. They have the unconditional power to take it and make it their own, and that’s what’s happened.

More importantly, why do you care if you can or can’t use that word?

When I call you Archie Bunker from *All in the Family*, it’s the most light-hearted way I can call you a racist. I know it’s Carrol O’Connor playing a character that calls out and challenges the stereotypical white American man, but I think you actually do prefer the character over the actor. Meanwhile, when you call me Perchik from Fiddler on the Roof, our roles are reversed.

O’Connor had this to say about Bunker, which I’d love to hear you respond to:

Archie’s dilemma is coping with a world that is changing in front of him. He doesn’t know what to do, except to lose his temper, mouth his poisons, look elsewhere to fix the blame for his own discomfort. He isn’t a totally evil man. He’s shrewd. But he won’t get to the root of his problem, because the root of his problem is himself, and he doesn’t know it. That is the dilemma of Archie Bunker.⁴

What I’m doing now and what I’m challenging others who look like us to do is to question what we’ve accepted as fact, or the norm, and challenge systems that don’t result in racial equity, rather than blaming it on fabricated differences.

Also in 2016, I think candidate Trump perfectly summed up your perception of Black Americans when he said:

⁴ Arnold Hano, “Can Archie Bunker Give Bigotry A Bad Name?”, *New York Times*, March 12, 1972, <https://www.nytimes.com/1972/03/12/archives/can-archie-bunker-give-bigotry-a-bad-name-archie-bunker-and-bigotry.html>, accessed April 2, 2022

“Tonight, I’m asking for the vote of every single African American citizen in this country who wants to see a better future,” Trump told the crowd. “What do you have to lose by trying something new, like Trump?” he asked them. “You’re living in poverty, your schools are no good, you have no jobs, 58% of your youth is unemployed, what the hell do you have to lose?”⁵

His statement acknowledges the acceptance of a perception that all Black Americans are poor, uneducated, and jobless. I can’t prove it but am 99% certain Black Americans are the reason you’re against socialized healthcare. Your belief is that everything can be achieved through hard work and you’re against what you call handouts.

I think Carol Anderson, the author of *White Rage*, hit the nail on the head when she wrote:

Second- and third-generation Polish Americans, Italian Americans, and other white ethnics seethed that, whereas their own immigrant fathers and grandfathers had had to work their way out of the ghetto, (B)lacks were getting a government-sponsored free ride to the good life on the backs of honest, hardworking white Americans.⁶

When can we talk about the effects of slavery and how it’s never entirely disappeared but only changed names over the years? When can we talk about Black codes? When can we talk about Jim Crow? When can we talk about the Southern Manifesto? When can we talk about the school-to-prison pipeline and mass incarceration?

Do you remember what you said to me when I brought up you telling

⁵ “What do you have to lose? Donald Trump appeals for black vote”, *The Guardian*, August 19, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/aug/20/what-do-you-have-to-lose-donald-trump-appeals-for-black-vote>, accessed April 8, 2022

⁶ Carol Anderson, *White Rage* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 101

me you couldn’t vote for Obama because he’s Black? You said, “Well, I come from a different world”, which you’ve fallen back on multiple times. That’s your catch-all justification for statements even you realize are racist, which I find to be the most un-American thing anyone can say. This country is, or should be, about progress and moving forward, not living in the past.

When there were calls to *Make America Great Again*, I whole-heartedly agreed with 75% of that statement. I’m fully on board with making America great. Who wouldn’t be? It’s the *again* part that’s an impossibility because America has never been great for every American. And the best way to make America great is to put way more time and resources into the education system, which is responsible for the future of this country.

But, as it is, our public schools are skewed to benefit certain communities, often white, or at least not Black, by way of funding, access to resources, and more. Before you counter, just consider how something like school-of-choice works. In theory, it’s designed to give parents the choice to put their children in the schools they feel are the best for them. However, the less white the student population is in a school, the fewer white families will send their children to that school. This allows for a majority non-white school to exist within a majority white community. Thus, we can argue that school-of-choice leads to segregation.

As you know, I worked for Ypsilanti Community Schools from 2013 to 2020, first in an afterschool program, then as the district photographer for the central administration, and finally as the photography teacher at the high school. The photo program I led was successful largely because of the very real conversations about politics and current events I had with the students, rather than simply teaching them how to use a camera. Whether it was about mass incarceration, police shootings, or the ever-present confederate flags sprinkled throughout Ypsilanti, my students responded and created honest and powerful imagery.

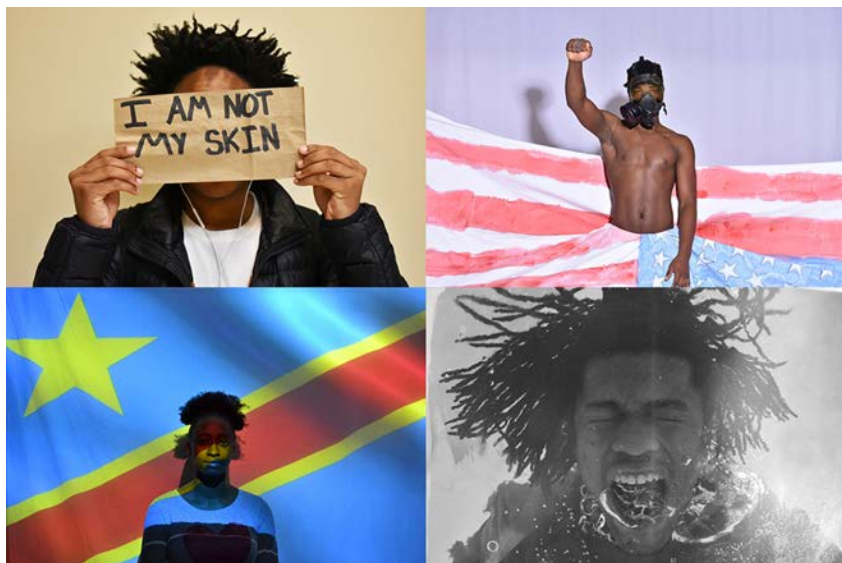


Fig. 3. Photos created by students at Ypsilanti Community High School from 2017-2019.

Each semester I had between 100 to 120 students on my roster divided among six classes. Two weeks in I'd ask each class the same question: what's your perception of Ypsilanti? The two most common responses were "ghetto" and "misunderstood". It was the latter response I'd run with and build from. "Who or what is misunderstood?", I'd ask. "How? What do you want people to know?"

To outsiders, the community of Ypsilanti is perceived as being majority Black with high crime and underperforming schools, much like what our perception of Pontiac was like when I was growing up. However, it's not that simple.

All three communities that make up Ypsilanti, which are the City of Ypsilanti, Ypsilanti Township, and Superior Township, are all majority white according to the 2020 census.⁷ In fact, every community within Washtenaw County is majority white and has been for quite some

⁷ "United States Census Bureau", accessed March 20, 2022, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/ypsilanticitymichigan>

time. Because Washtenaw is school-of-choice, parents can send their children to neighboring districts, which is why the student population of Ypsilanti Community Schools is mostly Black. It's basically an academic white-flight.

This is the kind of questioning I'm talking about and here's why it matters.

Ypsilanti has almost 8,000 school-aged students that live within the district boundaries but, once again because of school-of-choice, only a little over 3,000 attend their community schools. The loss of almost 5,000 students means the loss of state funding and almost fatally affected the district in 2012, when Ypsilanti Public Schools had to consolidate with Willow Run Community Schools, which has also happened in other districts such as Flint, Pontiac, Detroit, and many others across the country.

Students and parents in Ypsilanti and similar communities know this. They know they're an undesirable district and they also know what the people who've abandoned the district look like. They look like you and me. Yet, many of the staff also look like you and me. In fact, the question we were most often asked by parents was, "Why are there not more Black teachers?"

Let's use the University of Michigan's Stamps School of Art and Design's MFA program, which is the program I'm about to complete, as an example. According to the Office of the Registrar's Ethnicity Reports, student admissions from 2000 to 2021 were made up of:⁸

- 39 MFAs who self-identified as Asian
- 24 MFAs who self-identified as Black
- 26 MFAs who self-identified as Hispanic

⁸ "Ethnicity Reports," Office of the Registrar, accessed March 20, 2022, <https://ro.umich.edu/reports/ethnicity>

2 MFAs who self-identified as two or more ethnicities

1 MFA who self-identified as two or more underrepresented minorities

7 MFAs who self-identified as unknown

333 MFAs who self-identified as White

72 MFAs who chose not to disclose this information

The white student to non-white student gap is significant. I'm certainly not implying Stamps turns away non-white students, but I am saying that many potential non-white candidates don't exist because of the systemic failures in public education. How many have been allowed to underperform simply because that's the outside expectation? *That's* why there aren't more Black teachers, Black art students, and so on.

I say all of this so you understand I'm not simply making accusations and complaining that things aren't easy and life is unfair. At a young age, many of my students had a disadvantage because of numerous structural hurdles presented to them and their families that affected them throughout school and beyond. This ends up compounding and translating to generational trauma.

Please consider this; when our country was still young, the Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves went into effect on January 1st, 1808. This meant the importation of a human for the purpose of slavery, from a domestic or foreign ship, was a federal crime. But slavery continued in this country. In fact, it thrived because something far more sinister was happening; slaves were being produced domestically.

I can't think of a less human way to phrase it.

When a person is removed from the life they know, they'll never forget what they had. In this case, freedom. A free human brought across an ocean and bound to servitude will never lose their will to fight. They'll never willingly stop resisting and just accept their new life. They'll never truly forget freedom.

But a person born into servitude doesn't know freedom the way someone forced into it does. A person born into servitude doesn't have the same urge to fight and resist. There is no freedom to be reclaimed.

This, I argue, is similar to the negative perceptions that Black Americans are born into in this country. You and I will never know what it's like to not be white, but I do know that I have an advantage for being white, and you should know this too. I've never been profiled or bullied because of how I look. I've never felt things weren't marketed towards me. I've never been othered or felt out of place.

Microaggressions like these can infiltrate every aspect of one's life. I saw how they negatively affected my students' social, academic, and athletic performances. I've seen students fail tests before taking them. I've seen student athletes lose games before playing them. They were mentally defeated because the expectation was for them to fail. It's as if these stereotypes, which are nothing more than manufactured projections turned into systemic barriers, became self-fulfilling prophecies.

Couple the above with the need for a district like Ypsilanti to produce more graduates and better grades overall, which are both attached to funding, and you get a perpetual sequence of negative events. At my building alone, we were regularly encouraged by the administration to find ways to pass our students. "If they're sitting at a 58% or 59%, find a way to bump them to a 60% or above," is an example of what we were told during our all-staff meetings.

Certainly, this allows the student to pass and helps the school maintain a certain academic standing, but it doesn't actually help anyone. It's called "failing forward" and it's one of the most harmful things that can happen to a student. They'll graduate but how well can they read or do basic math? What skills did we send them away with? When they're in the real world, what happens to them?

Sadly, many do *exactly* what's expected of them; they can't get out of

their communities, they get stuck in low paying jobs with no upward mobility, they commit crimes and go to prison, or worse. They justify the stereotypes that were created for them before they had a real chance to disprove them.

Do you see why I take this so seriously? Can you connect any of the things you've said, the jokes you've made, the way you've voted, or what you've perpetuated through inaction to the lives of Americans who don't look like us? From afar, you see thugs that only make bad choices but in my classroom, I saw problem-solvers who found ways to persevere in a world set up against them.

This creates an interesting intersection where we agree and disagree at the same time. We agree that a community like Ypsilanti is underserved and as a result has a more negative perception. But we disagree on the origin of such a scenario and disagree that creating more opportunities in communities like this *would* make America great.

You see a handout and I see an opportunity for equity. Archie and Perchik.

This is what led me to working in education. I used photography as my vehicle, until it was no longer an option.

I got into photography over 20 years ago, largely because of you, and in my time with it I've seen it turn its back on artists twice. The first time was when the commercial industry transitioned from film to digital and placed 10-to-30-year veterans at the same level as college grads, and then again at the start of the COVID-19 lockdown when my students could no longer be in the classroom. I understand every medium goes through changes like this and it's not unique to photography but that doesn't make it less brutal to witness.

In March of 2020, I realized just how delicate our program was when we went into lockdown. As nice as our cameras were, they required humans to operate them. On top of many other challenges, most of

my students didn't have computers or internet at home, so worrying about getting cameras to them was trivial. School districts like Ypsilanti Community Schools operate at such a fragile level to begin with that any situation that causes a deviation to daily routines, especially a global pandemic, can have crippling effects that halt learning and have devastating long-term consequences. All of this is by design, I argue.

My students won the county-wide school photo competition two years in a row and I'd bet my life we were headed for a third. Right before lockdown, two of my students won a national photo competition as well. All because of imagery that was 100% them. Watching our award-winning program go from helping build engagement and confidence to distant, social-emotional check-ins via Zoom will always haunt me.

What continues to give me hope is the flourishing art community I witnessed while in the high school, led by the art teacher, Mrs. Lynne Settles. She's the person I credit the most with inspiring me to want



Fig. 4. Student Losany Doumbouya and Student Jesse Jones' photo, *Above the Rim*, won PDN's national high school photo contest in 2019.

to be an artist, activist, and educator, as I saw her give everything to creating spaces of opportunity for students who otherwise wouldn't have any.

I didn't even realize how strongly I felt about her influence until I got choked up saying just that during a recent presentation. It was the first time I'd ever said those words out loud, and they really had an effect on me. I bet she could spark more change within you than I ever will.



Fig. 5. Photo of Lynne Settles (at Left) with the group of students she brought to see the premier of the *Black Panther* in 2018.

Lynne is Black and I am white. Interestingly, Lynne and I were both born at Pontiac General Hospital in Pontiac. Expectedly, though, Lynne grew up in Pontiac and went to Pontiac schools and I grew up in Waterford and went to Waterford schools. We had vastly different but largely expected experiences only for our paths to cross decades later.

I've spent a lot of time thinking about what resources she had to offer her students. Plain printer paper and whatever scraps of other paper could be accumulated, a bin of old colored pencils, markers, and crayons, old tempera paint and watercolors, glue, old magazines, and

other hand-me-down type materials. While her art room never looked in need, our high school, and schools like it, don't have budgets for the proper art materials that neighboring schools do. This again comes down to how schools are funded and that whole flawed mess.

I'll never forget the assistant principal wheeling around a large cart and distributing cartons of printer paper to each class at the beginning of each year. These cartons were meant to last the entire year and any more paper needs came from out-of-pocket. Art usage or not, it's tough to stretch a carton of paper for an entire school year. These simple materials have been burned into my memory like a post-traumatic trigger.

Not a day went by at the high school where students didn't feel safe in Lynne Settles' room. They could be creative. They could be loud. Hell, they could just be there to take a break from their other classes. Most importantly, they could be themselves. AND they were celebrated for it.

I know that sounds simple and should be the norm, *but it is not!*

I often struggle or even fail when it comes to fitting into an existing format, like interviews and presentations. I almost always try to fulfill what I think the expectations of others are, which is rarely, if ever, successful. I definitely have that in common with my former students.

Lynne Settles gave the students a voice and let them communicate through creativity, which is also what I use art for. My strengths are in translating statements and information into visuals, collaborating with other artists, problem-solving, and working with my hands. Art has become my preferred method of communication.

The other people who influence me do so because they collaborate with the community at some level as well. Their artistic styles, which range from painting to working with found materials to ceramics to photography, are almost secondary to me. That said, I'd still love to share their work with you. I've been chasing the idea of being an artist

and also a teacher for quite some time and I greatly admire those who do it.

I'm fascinated by artist Titus Kaphar, who you might dislike for the same reasons I like him. Much of his work de-whitewashes history while adding more accurate context. Behind the Myth of Benevolence, for example, depicts a seated Black woman, who represents Sally Hemings, coming out from behind a portrait of Thomas Jefferson inspired by Rembrandt Peale's painting from 1800. The canvas with Jefferson's portrait has been loosened and is half off the frame which exposes the woman.

Certainly, you know Thomas Jefferson as one of this country's founding fathers, as a main contributor to the Declaration of Independence, and as a former US president. Sally Hemings, however, maybe not. She was a mixed race, fair skinned slave owned by Jefferson who is said to have had an ongoing sexual relationship with him, although calling it a relationship would be misleading. Kaphar painted her with darker skin to represent all the Black women, like Hemings, whose stories will never be known.⁹

Kaphar was born on the Westside of Michigan but now lives near New Haven, Connecticut, which is one of the reasons I recently went out there aside from it being your hometown. New Haven is where he chose to establish NXTHVN, which is an art space that describes itself as "a new national arts model that empowers artists and curators through education and access to a vibrant ecosystem".¹⁰

That's huge to me. Kaphar isn't someone who *needs* to be involved with education, rather he's someone who *wants* to. And he has the reputation and means to yield something that can produce real change

9 Victoria L. Valentine. "National Portrait Gallery: Titus Kaphar and Ken Gonzales-Day Explore 'UnSeen' Narratives in Historic Portraiture," Culture Type. (2018), <https://www.culturetype.com/2018/03/28/titus-kaphar-and-ken-gonzales-day-explore-unseen-narratives-in-historic-portraiture-in-new-national-portrait-gallery-exhibition/>

10 "NXTHVN", accessed March 8, 2022, <https://www.nxthvn.com/about/>



Fig. 6. Titus Kaphar, *Behind the Myth of Benevolence*, 2014 (Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York) <https://www.culturetype.com/2018/03/28/titus-kaphar-and-ken-gonzales-day-explore-unseen-narratives-in-historic-portraiture-in-new-national-portrait-gallery-exhibition/>

in the lives of young, underrepresented artists.

Kaphar's approach isn't changing history overnight but rather filling in the gaps and reconstructing it. In an interview with Mary Louise Kelly on NPR's All Things Considered, he had this to say about confederate monuments, which I think is a great idea:

In the same way that the WPA did, we bring in contemporary artists, we have them make sculptures that exist in the communities that they live in, we present those sculptures in the same community squares where these Robert E. Lee sculptures exist, we pull these Robert E. Lee sculptures down from the pedestal, bring them at the same level as these new contemporary works, and we force these works to engage one another.¹¹

I know talking about confederate monuments is another touchy subject with us but doesn't what he said make sense? How many times have you shown me the slides from your trip to Stone Mountain and how many times have you actually thought about who the men on that mountain are and what they fought for?

As an undergrad, I met Detroit artist Tyree Guyton on his block and was blown away by the amount of work and care he put into it in an effort to bring social change. Guyton is the creator of the Heidelberg Project, which I know you've heard of but don't think you've ever been to and uses art as a form of protest. As my work often uses low-cost materials found in public school art programs, I appreciate that 99% of what he's used is found and existing materials. I may also be leaning

11 Mary Louise Kelly. "Meet The MacArthur Fellow Disrupting Racism In Art," All Things Considered. NPR. (2018), <https://www.npr.org/2018/10/04/654476095/meet-the-macarthur-fellow-disrupting-racism-in-art#:~:text=Gallery%2C%20New%20York.-,%22Behind%20the%20Myth%20of%20Benevolence%22%20depicts%20a%20black%20woman%20behind,a%20portrait%20of%20Thomas%20Jefferson.&text=They%20are%20works%20by%20the,familiar%20images%20and%20remakes%20them.&text=%22The%20truth%20of%20the%20matter,other%20end%2C%22%20Kaphar%20says.>

that way with my future work.

He, along with his grandfather, began turning their street into an art installation by converting the abandoned buildings into visually loud attractions so they were less likely to attract crime related attention. "The Heidelberg Project's vision is to inspire people to appreciate and use artistic expression to enrich their lives and to improve the social and economic health of the greater community", and that's exactly what's happened.¹²



Fig. 7. Photo of The Heidelberg Project from 2004.

I do wonder if you'd see it that way, though. I can almost see you giving me a sideways look to say without saying that this place is an eclectic dump. Would you even consider what would have happened to the neighborhood and community if Guyton hadn't created this work? If you saw in the news that several teens overdosed or were shot on

12 "The Heidelberg Project", accessed on March 8, 2022, <https://www.heidelberg.org/history>

Heidelberg Street in Detroit, would you have said, “Damn. Someone should have turned that street into an art installation.”?

Sadly, based on past experiences, you’d probably say something like, “Why aren’t they protesting and marching for this? Where’s Jackson? Where’s Sharpton?”

Today the *Heidelberg Project* is known all over the world and has the Heidelberg Arts Leadership Academy, which is a free in-school and after school arts program for students. Understand, like Kaphar, Guyton didn’t have to create the *Heidelberg Project* to be a successful artist. Rather, he wanted to bring positive change to the street he grew up on and used art as his vehicle.

Do you remember me telling you about Southside Chicago artist Theaster Gates? I was fortunate enough to spend time with him and document the early stages of the first house of his *Dorchester Project*. At the time, I was impressed how his role at the University of Chicago augmented the acquisition of out-of-use materials, such as books from a closing books store and glass slides from the school’s archive.



Fig. 8. The *Dorchester Project* before and after, 2009-2011.

Gates’ approach was refreshing to see as he was able to utilize his academic connections without compromising his artistic process. In fact, at the time, his university connection likely helped legitimize and secure his vision.

Similar to Tyree Guyton’s approach, Gates purchased the abandoned house that sat right next to his own and worked to make it a community art anchor, with resources for young artists and eventually a full-on residency. Along with a handful of other workers, Gates did much of the physical labor stripping it down and reconstructing it, largely with repurposed materials.



Fig. 9. Jamel Shabazz, *Rolling Partners*, Downtown Brooklyn, 1982, <https://aperture.org/editorial/why-jamel-shabazz-is-new-yorks-most-vital-street-photographer/> Figure XX. Title

I know this seems small, and I can almost hear you say, “Yeah, but what about all the other abandoned houses?”, but this was actually a pretty big deal. A lot of stars have to align when it comes to rebuilding something to code, especially for public use. Gates had a vision and put in the work, all so people in the community and other potential artists can have a space.

I showed you the book of Brooklyn photographer Jamel Shabazz a while back, which I recall you liking. Shabazz has been capturing scenes of community for the last four decades and his work is truly one of a kind. Many people are now interested in what we could call Brooklyn culture or fashion, but Shabazz started documenting it when nobody cared, and he never quit. However, what people don’t see in his work is his other profession which he’s now retired from. Shabazz was a correctional officer on Rikers Island, which gave him two levels of engagement with the community and two opportunities to work with and alter trajectories.

That is vital.

Shabazz “served the full 20 years on the force with the understanding that he could best help his community working within the belly of the beast.”¹³ Photography was his therapy and also a tool to help the youth in the community who wanted an outlet other than crime. Shabazz penetrated the system and used it to his advantage.

That said, he, as a Black man, wasn’t immune to the systemic flaws that existed in the same system he was using to connect with others.

“I always had to be on guard in civilian clothes because in the eyes of any police officer, (B)lack or white, I was a potential “perp” (perpetrator of a crime) regardless of just completing 16 hours on the job. I have felt

13 Miss Rosen. “I was a black corrections officer during the American crack epidemic”, *Dazed*, June 1, 2018, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/art-photography/article/39792/1/jamel-shabazz-photographer-black-corrections-officer-american-crack-epidemic>, accessed March 6, 2022

the hateful gaze of law enforcement officers who have shown disdain for me purely based on the colour of my skin.”¹⁴

Once again, you and I never have and likely never will experience that and that is the privilege I often talk about.

Similar to what I was doing yet with a slightly different approach was artist Tim Rollins, who, in his early 20s, was hired by “the principal of Intermediate School 52 in the South Bronx, to develop a curriculum that incorporated art-making with reading and writing lessons for students classified as academically or emotionally “at risk.”¹⁵ From there, the K.O.S., or Kids of Survival, was born. What started as creating work related to a particular reading while it was being read, turned into creating work directly on the pages of the writing, and so forth.

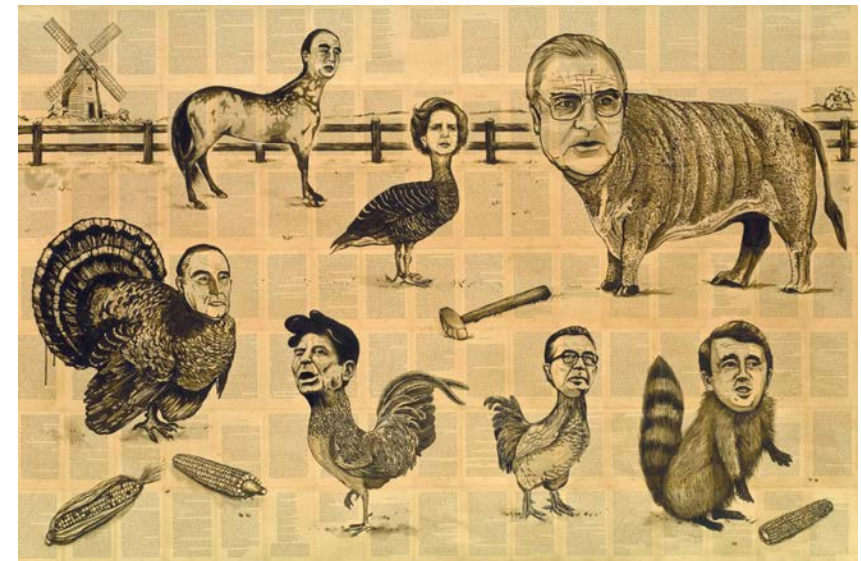


Fig. 10. Tim Rollins and the K.O.S., *Animal Farm*, 1989, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/jan/12/tim-rollins-obituary>

14 Miss Rosen. “I was a black corrections officer during the American crack epidemic”, *Dazed*
15 “Frye Art Museum”, accessed March 20, 2022, <https://fryemuseum.org/exhibition/3315/>

Rollins later explained the “why” to his overall approach, which I can absolutely relate to:

To dare to make history when you are young, when you are a minority, when you are working, or nonworking class, when you are voiceless in society, takes courage. Where we came from, just surviving is ‘making history.’ So many others, in the same situations, have not survived, physically, psychologically, spiritually, or socially. We were making our own history. We weren’t going to accept history as something given to us.¹⁶

Does this come off as liberal complaining to you? Should they have just worked harder to survive?

Ben Passmore is someone I think you should read but know you never will. He’s the author and illustrator of *Your Black Friend*, which is a comic that can be accessed online for free. I very much appreciate how didactic his work is and anyone who’s seen my work will fully understand why. Passmore uses a comic to deliver an informative story about what it’s like to be Black in this country and successfully makes something for people who don’t look like us to relate to, while also calling us out and informing us.

The above artists are also activists and that’s why they inspire me. There are certainly visual works that also inspire me and aim to challenge societal norms without the collaborative aspect.

David Hammons’ *How Ya Like Me Now?* depicts a larger-than-life Jesse Jackson as a white man. The original public showing of this was actually attacked with a sledgehammer and destroyed. When it is shown now it’s surrounded by a row of sledgehammers, reminding and

¹⁶ “Frye Art Museum”, accessed March 20, 2022, <https://fryemuseum.org/exhibition/3315/>

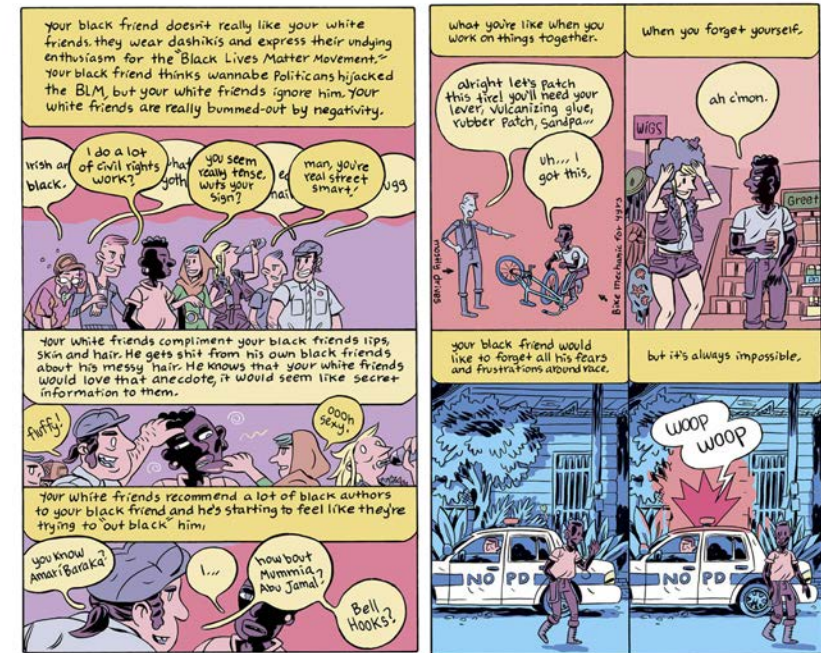


Fig. 11. Ben Passmore, *Your Black Friend*, 2017 <https://www.silversprocket.net/2017/09/19/ben-passmores-your-black-friend-wins-ignatz-brick-for-outstanding-comic/>



Fig. 12. David Hammons, *How Ya Like Me Now?*, 1988, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-painting-jesse-jackson-white-man-provoked-sledgehammer-attack>



Fig. 13. Paul Rucker, *Storm in the Time of Shelter*, 2014, <https://paulrucker.com/portfolio/storm-in-the-time-of-shelter/>

possibly tempting the viewer to engage with it. I like this piece for those reasons but also feel an attachment because you used to bring Jesse Jackson up fairly regularly in jest. I've begun to retrofit those memories with this image.

Paul Rucker's *Storm in the Time of Shelter* reproduces Ku Klux Klan robes using nontraditional materials. This makes me think of the time a Black Santa Claus showed up at Archie Bunker's door and you gave a real gut laugh at awkward silence.

Travis Somerville is a white artist from the South whose work also challenges those who look like us. This piece, titled *Sing Out America*, reminds me of the time you introduced me to Al Jolson's music.

I have no idea how the above work will sit with you, but I hope my explanations provide enough context. This is similar to how I approached you over a year ago when I wanted to collaborate directly with you. I wanted your voice in my work so it's not one-sided. I wanted to give you a chance to explain your views in a very public way, not so I could say you're wrong but to learn from you and move forward together and hopefully inspire others who look like us to do the same.

It was about three weeks after the insurrection at the Capital that I sent the first of what would be several emails. This was also the first time I shared and explained the work I'd been making in this program.

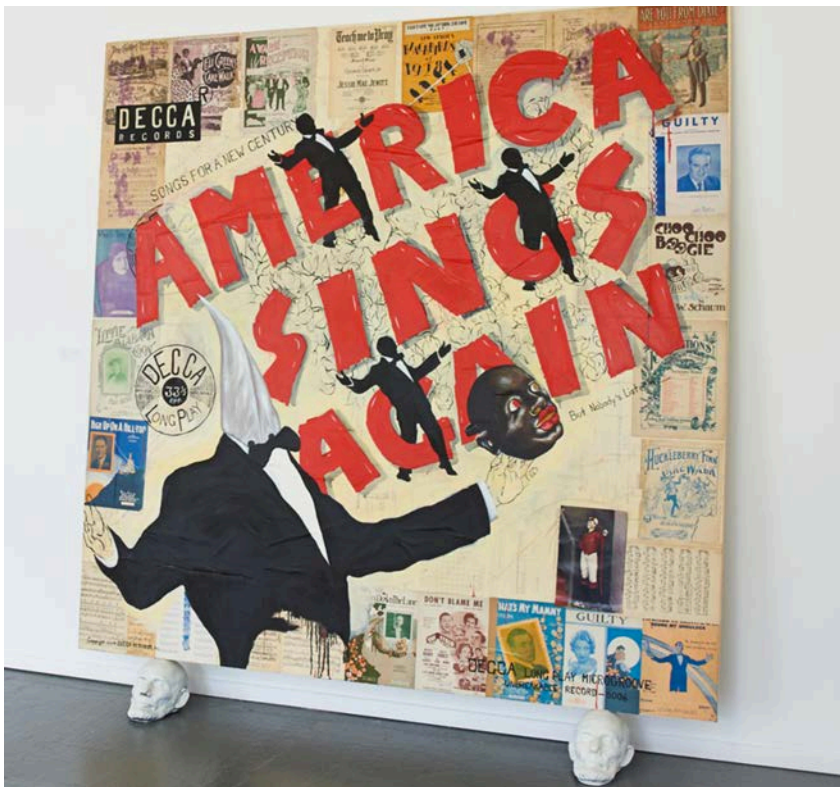
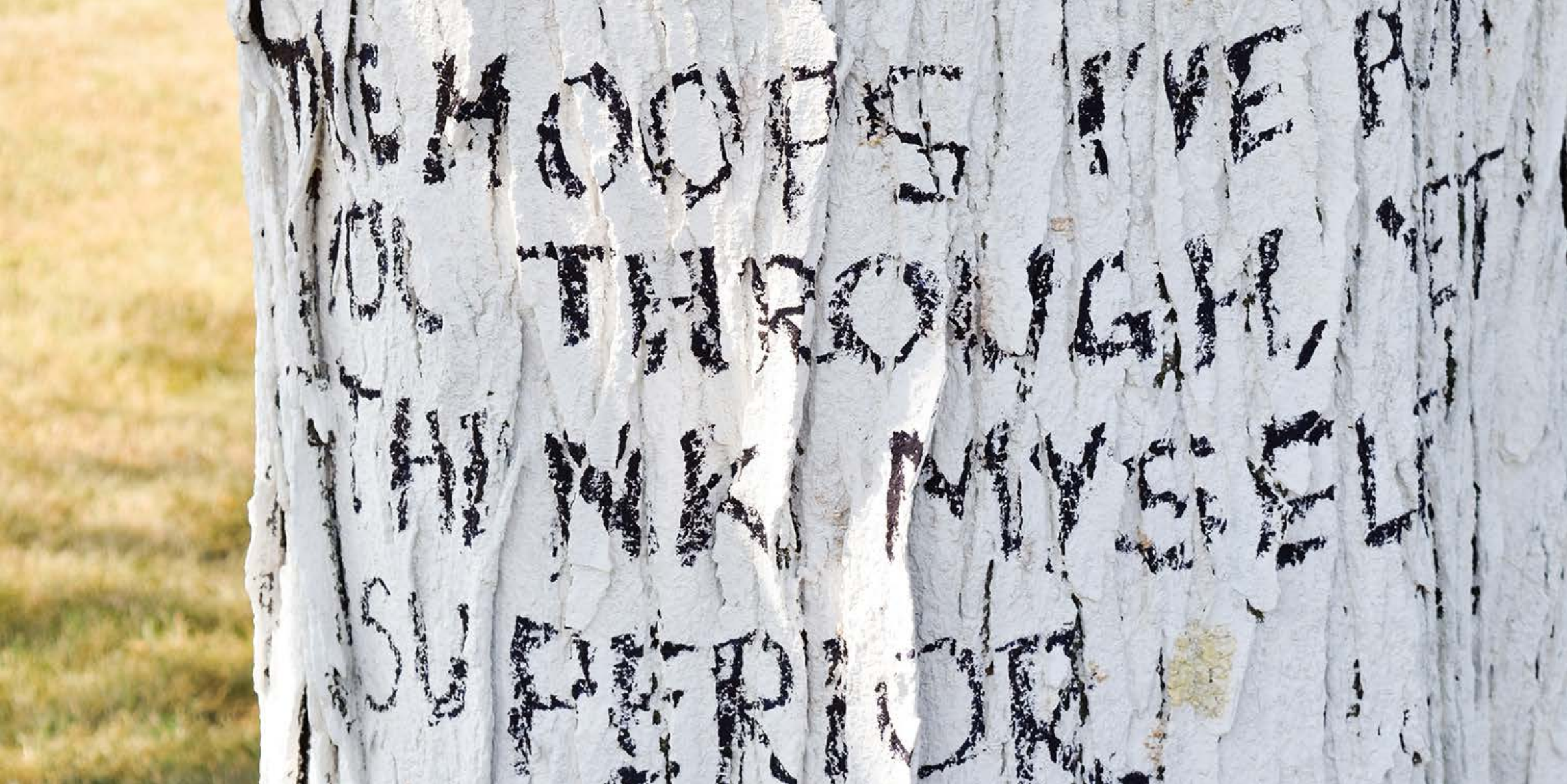


Fig. 14. Travis Somerville, *Sing Out America*, 2009, <http://www.mauscontemporary.com/artists/travis-somerville/>



January 27th, 2021 at 8:48 PM

As I said, I'd like to work on a project with you, but would first like to explain what I am and have been working on. By no means is there an expectation that you have to agree with me on any of this. Also, I have to reference politics below, but it's meant for context only.

Over the last fifteen years, I've become more and more aware of social issues in this country, specifically, ones felt by those who do not

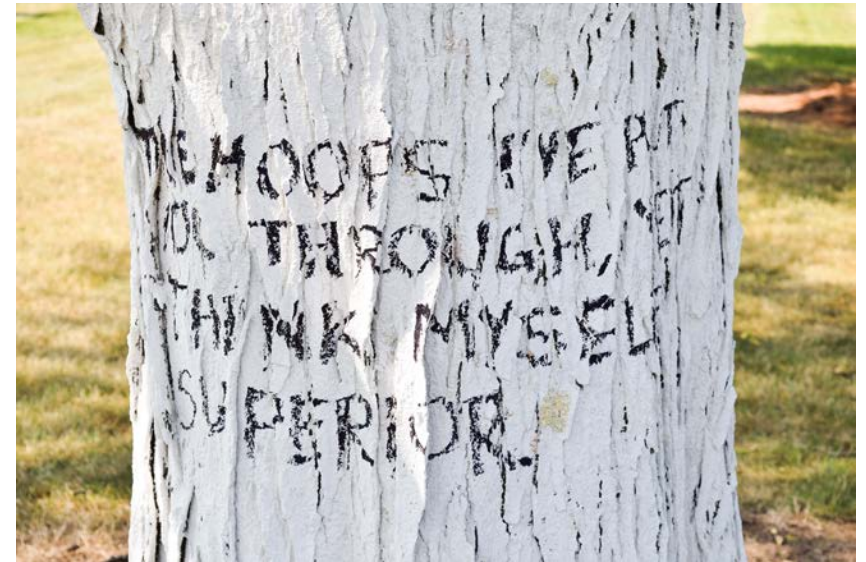
look like me. Some I've researched and some I've witnessed firsthand. Working for Ypsi schools confirmed a lot and also taught me a lot. This country does not and has not offered the same experience to every American. The opportunity gaps that exist (school resources, housing and job inequalities, food insecurities, etc) lead to achievement gaps and allow for the perpetuation of manufactured stereotypes. Therefore "perception" plays a large role in my work.

The first project I created last semester was called *Rhytidome Proclamations* and is ongoing (rhytidome is the outermost layer of bark on a tree). For this project, I painted trees white about 5 or 6 feet high in public places in Ann Arbor and Ypsi (latex paint causes no harm to the trees) and then added a message to each one.

The hoops I've put you through, yet think myself superior.

The hoops I've put you through, yet question your protests.

The hoops I've put you through, yet call you the violent one.



Figs. 15, 16, 17. *Rhytidome Proclamations*, 2020

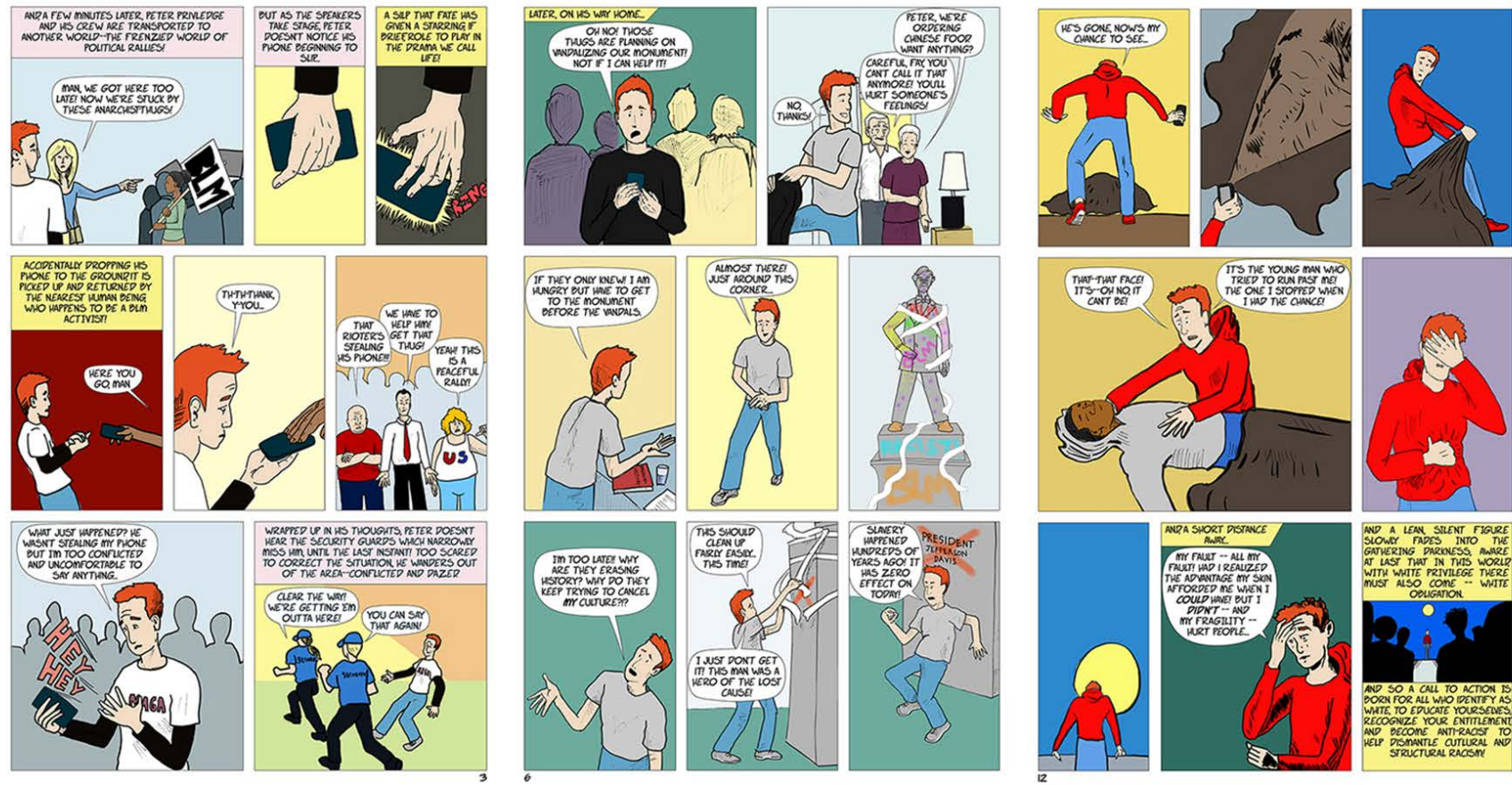


Fig. 18. Astounding Fancy #15, 2021

The white paint is a direct reflection of my skin and the messages are meant to serve as acknowledgments. The “hoops I’ve put you through” refers to a noose while the second part of each statement, “yet think myself superior” represents flawed thinking and privilege.

My second project was a reimagining of the first appearance of Spider-Man, which was a comic called Amazing Fantasy #15 from 1962. For mine, I retitled it Astounding Fancy #15 and recreated each page with my own illustrations, basing the story on Peter Privledge and his journey realizing the effects of white privilege (which is loosely based

on my own experience). This is still a work in progress but my intention is to print off several hundred copies and strategically leave them in areas known for having high foot traffic. I’ll likely build a receptacle, like a newspaper dispenser, to call attention to them. Inside each is a live email address so those interested can communicate directly with Peter (me).

Here’s the original comic from 1962 for context.



Fig. 19. Steve Ditko and Stan Lee, *Amazing fantasy #15*, 1962, https://archive.org/details/Amazing_Fantasy_vol1_15_201607

Last semester I read from many books and articles, including:

- *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*
- *Stamped From the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*
- *The Origins of the American Civil War* (the American Civil War plays a large role in my studies too, as there seem to be differing beliefs as to how it began and why it was fought)
- *African American Men as "Criminal and Dangerous": Implications of Media Portrayals of Crime on the "Criminalization" of African American Men.*
- *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs*

The classes I chose this semester outside of the art school are Sociology 560: Power, History, and Social Change (for which I have to read about 200 pages a week and it's kicking my ass) and Psychology 808: Contemporary Theories in Cultural and Structural Racism. The rest of

my classes are in the art school and have to do with creating work, which is where I want to collaborate with you.

In past conversations, you've mentioned that you're disappointed with some of my beliefs and choices and have also said you wished we could still joke like we used to. What I want to do is record an interview with you, where I ask questions like, "how do you feel I've changed", "what do you miss" and also things like "how do you feel about confederate monuments". I would show you all the questions ahead of time and you could also prepare questions for me to answer, if you want. There's even a possibility for you to include past photos, but I can explain more based on your interest.

Once we're finished, the recording would be played back and looped at a physical show at the art school and I would create several sculptures to accompany it that represent how I've changed.

Although this would be focusing on our differences, I feel it would be a way to become even closer, so we both understand each other more and possibly create a way for other families in this country to do the same. I know I've changed and am not the person I once was and I'm trying to not let that be a bad thing. My perception growing up was that all black people were violent criminals and it took me to be curious enough to ask why that is to actually generate a change within me. Needless to say, I've asked "why" a lot over the last fifteen years which has led to more research and ultimately questioning many of the systems built into this country.

Sorry this is so long. I could say more but will wait to hear back from you. Take as much time as you need to think about it.

I love you, dad.

Nick

January 28th, 2021 at 9:47 AM

Not sure where to start, but I'll say "No" to an interview. When you become a champion for a real cause, like the Native American, I will sit down with you and do whatever it takes. It took me 1-1/2 hours to write these two sentences, but that's how I feel. Not sure where we go from here. As far as you thinking when you were younger that all black people were "violent", if that came from me, I'm sorry. I probably told you to watch out for snakes also, but I didn't mean **All** snakes were bad. Think I've said enough for now.

love you,

Dad

January 28th, 2021 at 10:24 AM

Sorry! I apologize for making it seem that way. My perception was based on a lot of things, like the news, friends, and other family members as well. It absolutely cannot be traced to one person. As a kid, I alone came to that conclusion.

In response to where do we go from here, we simply continue talking. Not wanting to do the interview is totally fine. And I also agree that discussing the experience of any indigenous peoples, like those who were on this continent before us, is incredibly valid. For now, however, my focus is elsewhere.

How about this, would you be open to rounding up old photos of me so that I could include them in a project/show? Therefore I wouldn't be including your voice through recording, but I would be including your view or perception through images you captured. If you're up for that, anywhere from 2 to 10 digital photos per year would be great.

I also don't want you to hold back. Like the time over the summer when

you typed up an email but decided to wait a few days to respond. I'm not trying to make you angry, I promise, but I absolutely want to know how you really feel. This is not me trying to change your mind, but rather comparing two opinions; one of a human who has seen 39 years of life compared to that of another human who has seen 77 years of life. It can be said with 100% certainty that you know more than I do and, as my father, you definitely know me better than almost every other human being on the planet.

No answer or response you can give me will ever be wrong. I'm simply trying to better understand more about you and your 77 years. This goes well beyond just an art project for me, as I want to talk with you more and become closer despite having differing opinions.

Love you,

Nick

January 29th, 2021 at 6:59 AM

What is the purpose of the photos ?? How are they gonna be used ??

January 29th, 2021 at 10:47 AM

My plan would be to print and frame them and then put them up on the walls of one of our studio galleries where my grad studio is. This would be for my critique process which is where my cohort (made of nine 1st and 2nd-year students) reviews the work and gives feedback and criticism. It would only be viewed by my cohort and a handful of professors.

The logic for showing past pictures of me (as in pictures from when I lived in Waterford) is to show a person that may no longer exist. They have a great deal of power coming from you because they depict the

person you remember and highlight times when we agreed on almost everything. Again, I cannot be the person I am without you.

I don't want to push too hard, but have one last question about a discussion. Would you be open to interviewing me and asking any questions you wanted? Your response about what's a real cause versus what's not only makes me want to ask more questions (which I'm not proposing to do). I promise I'm not attacking or accusing you of anything, I genuinely want to know your views.

January 29th, 2021 at 3:40 PM

If the pics are for an "art/photo" project, that's fine, I can do that. If there to depict you as some privileged white kid with clean clothes, shoes and combed hair, I AM NOT on board with that. I don't want any part of that! You weren't privileged, you were fortunate enough to have two parents that cared and didn't mind working for a living to provide for their own. That's NOT privileged, that's what everyone is suppose to do, both white and black. It's called responsibility.

You said you want to know my views, hell, you should know them by now. I am not a racist. I do not dislike non-white people. I don't like bad people, no matter what color they are, white, black, yellow.....

January 29th, 2021 at 3:56 PM

Understood, and I do know your views and who you are. We have differing opinions and I'm interested in figuring out why. That is all. The photos would be used exactly as I said, not to point out a difference in life experience between me and someone else, but rather to show my origin and the person I used to be as documented by the person who's had a tremendous impact on my life. I promise. This project is about me and my experience which you are a very large part of.

On a side note, not a day goes by that I'm not thankful for having both you and mom in my life and for the life you both provided for me. I certainly do feel fortunate.

-

Every time I reread this exchange it brings back a rush of mixed feelings, although I wouldn't change my approach. For someone who accuses others of being too sensitive, you get exasperated fairly quickly anytime you feel the word racist is directed towards you.

Our next set of emails followed the work I made with the photos you shared.

-

March 3rd, 2021 at 10:31 PM

I wanted to share the project your photos were involved in. You shared about 130 and I found an additional 75 existing 4x6s, so there were 204 total. They were all framed and hung on the wall, which took about 2 hours (as I'm sure you know). They were opposite the notes you used to leave me while in the middle there was a mold of myself made out of plastic wrap and packing tape. The rocks represent the conversations we've had and those I'd like to have.

Thank you again for sharing your photos with me. I am open to talking about our differences if you're ever up for that but have no expectations in place. I love you and don't want our relationship to change.

Nick



Figs. 20, 21, 22. Collaboration with my dad, using his photos and handwritten notes.

March 4th, 2021 at 7:02 AM

Thanks for sharing. Is this, or will it be, open to the public ??

I hope the the rocks don't mean our conversations were "heavy" on you heart.

March 4th, 2021 at 2:00 PM

This show was not open to the public. In fact, it was only up for four days for my class. Our conversations are definitely heavy because they're ever-present and have overlap with other aspects of life but I wouldn't say heavy on my heart. I feel a weight because these are things that make me, me, and you, you, and we almost can't talk about

them.

How about this. Would you be open to talking with me about the Seminoles? Or any aboriginal group, I just chose the Seminoles because of what you're reading.

March 4th, 2021 at 3:44 PM

Yes, we can talk, but, I think we are light-years apart. That doesn't mean I'm against minorities, I just don't think I owe them. Saw something recently that really stuck with me;

"Lives matter, if you have to put a color in front of it, you're the racist."

-

We're still light years apart, dad, and now seemingly have an unspoken agreement never to talk about these kinds of things again. This series of emails, however, helped me finish *Astounding Fancy #15*.

Comics and superheroes, specifically Marvel, played a very large role in my life growing up, as you know. I chose the first appearance of Spider-Man because Peter Parker was introduced as a flawed, young white man. After acquiring his superpower, he's forced to accept the responsibility that comes with it and his inaction results in the death of his Uncle Ben.

The idea of retrofitting Parker's experience with a more current scenario seemed obvious, as there are many parallels. My cell-for-cell reconstruction of the original is an oversimplified way of informing the viewer about white privilege, like Ben Passmore's *Your Black Friend*. Instead of being the shy, outsider that Peter Parker is, Peter Privledge is a popular, athletic young white man who has never had to consider other perspectives.

In the middle, I included a note from the editor which speaks directly to

you and the "you" of the world, and challenges all who look like us to end white solidarity. It takes up one full page and is based on the above emails as well as other talks we've had.

This was me arguing with the voice I hear in my head that constantly counters my recent work. Your voice.

-

Folks,

I truly believe we all want the same thing. But until we acknowledge that in OUR country, THE United States of America, not all citizens are treated the same way, our country will never be great. I'm not calling you a Racist, as I truly believe you don't wish any ill will on anyone, however, it's our collective acceptance, silence, and/or denial of cultural and structural racism that I'm challenging.

Hundreds of years ago there was a population of people brought here against their will and forced into slavery for the benefit and profit of their owners. Some Americans believed this was the natural way of humankind. So much so, in fact, they were willing to create their own country and fight against the same American flag that we honor today. I'm referring to the Confederate States of America, of course.

When the American Civil War ended and the Confederate States of America surrendered and the Thirteenth Amendment was passed, this should have been the end of slavery in this country. However, contrary to what you believe, members of the Confederacy, or as I call them the first American domestic terrorists, were allowed to rejoin the Union AND hold office AND erect monuments!!! Slavery turned into Jim Crow law. Jim Crow law turned into structural norms, media manipulation, and mass incarceration.

Granted it seems hard to fathom I can link something that happened hundreds of years ago to the experiences of Black youth today, but,

hell, you still deny we have an advantage.

Let me break it down for you. White privilege is the inherent advantage possessed by a white person on the basis of their race in a society characterized by racial inequality and injustice. White fragility is the discomfort and defensiveness on the part of a white person when confronted by information about racial inequality and injustice. Together they've allowed the perpetuation of manufactured perceptions of non-white people and helped maintain a structure of oppression.

White privilege is real. Of course that doesn't mean you've had an easy life! Of course that doesn't mean you've been given a bunch of free stuff! What it does mean is that you haven't been followed while shopping. You haven't been judged before even opening your mouth. You don't fear for your life during a traffic stop. There isn't one ugly word I could call you that has the power to resurrect hundreds of years of abuse and hate. You dodged all that with the agility of a superhero!

Tell you what, if you can prove to me the exact time when every American started receiving equal treatment, I'll buy you lunch! You can reach me here: peterprivilege@gmail.com

It IS the obligation of every white person to acknowledge, educate themselves, and alter these circumstances by talking with other white people and ending white solidarity. You won't be helping "other" people, you'll be helping American citizens.

Face front, true believers!

Peter

-

The finished, printed comics look impressive. I think you'd like them, minus all the content, of course. This project provided a path forward for me. A way to project my research while making the statement I wanted.

I wanted to go further and make them even more public facing, though. Following the recommendation of several of my professors, I ended up having three of the comic pages printed to 4' by 8' and then mounting them to quarter-inch plywood using Roman brand 543-Universal Wallpaper and Border Adhesive. While these also looked impressive, this treatment couldn't have been less unsuccessful. The pieces were confused, out of place, and potentially misleading.

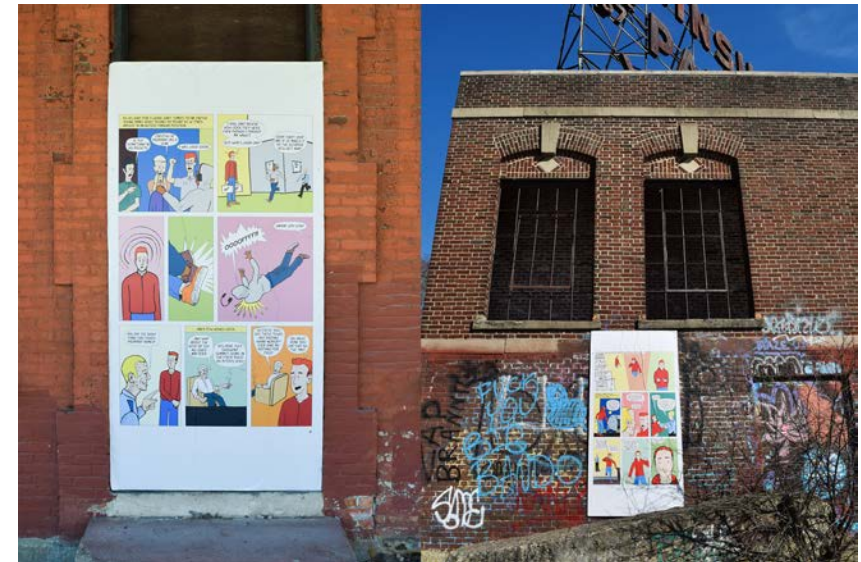


Fig. 23. Large Astounding Fancy #15 pages in public.

The only thing keeping this project from being a massive failure was learning what not to do. The three pieces of 4' by 8' quarter-inch plywood with comic pages mounted to them now lie face-down in my studio and serve as the floor so I can be as messy as I want. *There* they are successful.

While I felt strongly about my research and statement, I wasn't satisfied with my work. It wasn't until I spent time in New Haven last summer that I really found my footing. I went out there armed with a few ideas as well as the addresses and locations from your childhood that



Fig. 24. My studio with the 4' by 8' comic panels lying face down.

you provided and began searching for inspiration.

As mentioned earlier, I chose New Haven partly because Titus Kaphar's NXTHVN is there but more so because it's where you were born. You were already such a large part of my work, even without being directly involved, this location just made sense. In the three weeks I was there I covered a lot of ground and did feel some sort of connection to you, at times imagining you were there with me or even imagining you as a young boy running around. After some thought, I decided to create the next installment of my work about Peter Privledge.

It began as storyboarding and writing a script and I once again pulled from our conversations. This time, I created two new characters to interact with Peter Privledge: Suprema-Fist and the Brave Flyer. Suprema-Fist is a supervillain who believes circumstance is the result of actions alone and skin color plays no role. The Brave Flyer, whose real name is Demetrios Ypsilantis, is a superhero based on the youth I had the honor of working with in Ypsilanti. His name comes from the



Fig. 25. The duplex my dad grew up in.



Figs. 26, 27 (following page). My hotel room where every bit of space was used for illustrating, painting, and drying.



Ypsilanti Braves and the Willow Run Flyers and his power is the ability to change perceptions.

I'm not calling you Suprema-Fist but will say you do think circumstance is the result of actions alone and skin tone doesn't play a role. This was my way of pitting your words against what I witnessed firsthand at the high school.

I converted my small hotel room into my studio and spent almost two weeks drawing, painting, and writing, some days not even stepping foot in the hall. While some things were still being decided, there was one definite: the work had to be installed in a visible, public space. This meant I'd have to make my own adhesive.

If I told you, it was an episode of the 3 Stooges from a 3 Stooges-marathon you recorded on VHS that introduced me to wheatpasting, that might cheapen my entire story. However, at probably 5 or 6 I'll never forget how intrigued and curious I was watching Curly repeatedly dip his brush into a bucket of milky looking water and seemingly scrub paper on the walls. I had no idea what he was doing and ultimately it was

just a prop for the episode, so it didn't matter. Decades later I still carry this image and curiosity with me but only recently explored it further.

I was given a book by my primary adviser, Nick Tobier, called *The Street Art Manual*, which came with me to New Haven. In it, among many other things, is a recipe for wheatpaste along with instructions on how to use it and not get caught. It says:

(Y)ou can make your own 'wheat paste' glue using just white flour, sugar and water. Add 750ml water into a pan and bring to a simmer. Put 3 tablespoons of wheat flour into a bowl and gradually, add 4 tablespoons of cool water mixing until it forms a runny syrup. Add the mixture to the simmering water in the pan. Make sure you stir it constantly to avoid it going lumpy and boiling over. After 2 minutes, turn off the hob. Add 2 tablespoons of sugar for extra sticking power and let it cool before pouring it into a sturdy container (ideally with a lid) ready for your bombing

mission.¹⁷

I spent about four hours standing at my small hotel kitchenette cooking and stirring and alternating between two small pots and eventually made about six gallons of wheatpaste.



Figs. 26, 27 (following page). My hotel room where every bit of space was used for illustrating, painting, and drying.

I put a lot of care into scouting where to install what would be a nearly 70-foot-long linear comic before confidently choosing an underpass on Grand Avenue between New Haven and Fair Haven. I remember you talking about taking Grand Avenue between the two so thought of it as a way to have a conversation with a younger you.

All in, it took about three hours to install and was a lot of fun. During the installation, many people stopped to ask questions or make comments. All were positive with the exception of three, white-appearing construction workers who said I was racist against white people. That's when I knew this installation was successful. It wasn't even fully up,

¹⁷ Barney Francis, *The Street Art Manual* (London: Laurence King, 2020), 54



Fig. 29. *Suprema-Fist* refuses to believe circumstance plays a role in outcome and attacks the *Brave Flyer*.

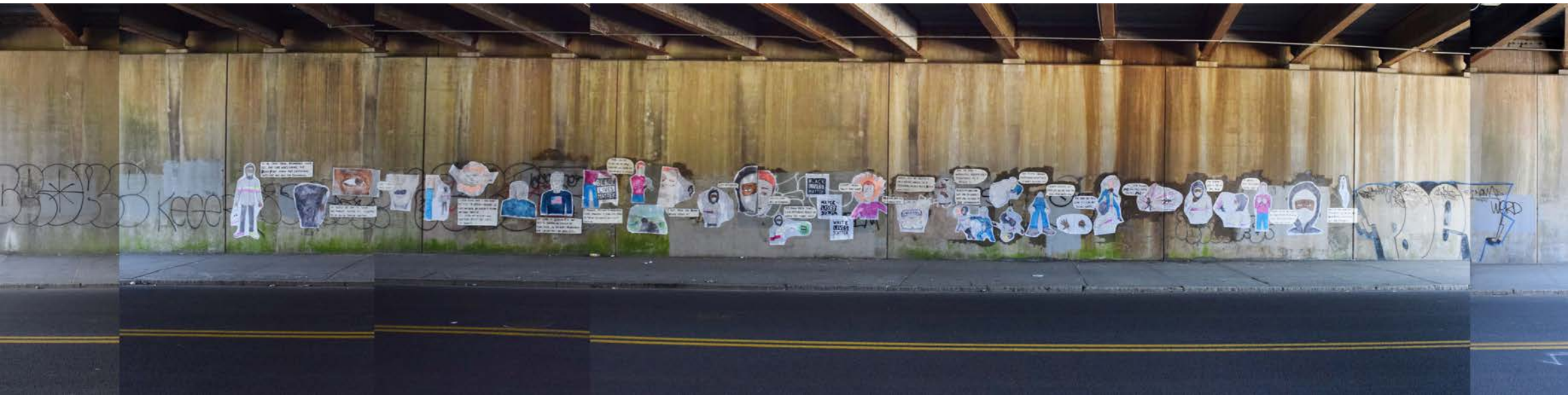


Fig. 30. An Unexpected Bridge: Peter Privledge Meets the Brave Flyer, 2021, composite made from multiple photos, <https://www.nickazzaro.xyz/unexpected-bridge>



Fig. 31. The Brave Flyer challenges Peter Privledge's perception.

and it was already challenging people and starting conversations!

I also realize this is the first time you're seeing this work and hearing about what I actually did in New Haven. I'm sorry I couldn't tell you before, but I didn't think you'd ever speak to me again, the same way you don't talk to your sister.

I find it really interesting to think this process I'm so attached to now originated for me in the same city as you. I completed this project on my own and the motivation and confidence it provided is still going strong.

I've also since perfected my wheatpaste recipe. What I use now is the

result of constant testing to get the consistency and stick I want. I usually make between three and four gallons at a time in the 5-gallon stainless steel pot you used to deep-fry turkeys in. The entire process of making and working with wheatpaste reminds me of teaching in my



Fig. 32. Retired 5-Gallon deep fried turkey pot now used for making wheatpaste.

classroom. So much prep and forethought go into the process which ultimately yields a short window for success.

It can take up to three hours to prep the ingredients, mix them, and cook them. There's no downtime as it must constantly be stirred to avoid lumps and burning. Once the mixture thickens up, it can be removed from the heat and left to cool, which, depending on the quantity, can take between four and six hours. From the time it's cool and ready to use, there's about a three-to-five-day window to use it before it goes bad, depending on the air temperature, and you will know when it goes bad.

From start to finish, I put in around 15 to 30 hours of work with the glue knowing it will not last beyond 120 hours at most but probably closer



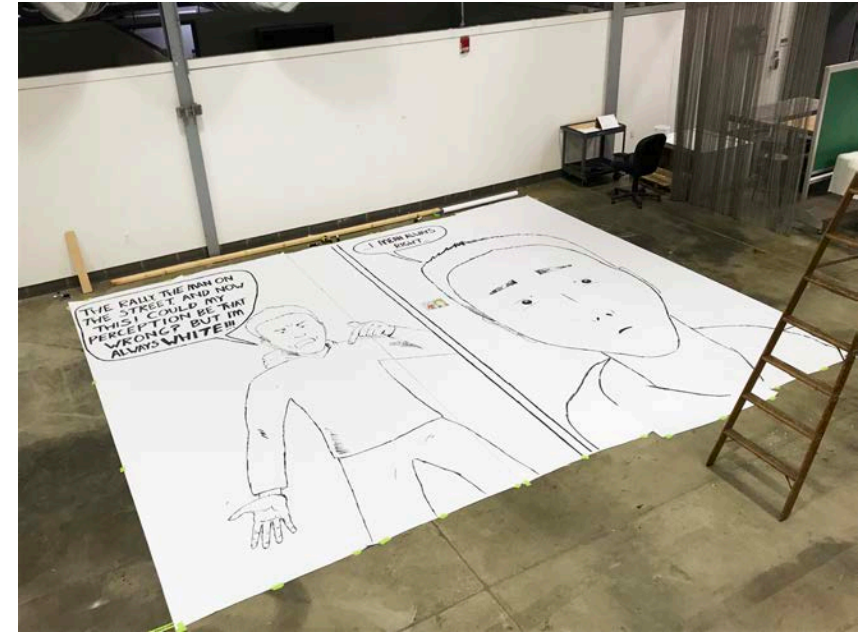
Fig. 33. Expired wheatpaste.

to 72 hours. Then I have to start over again.

All that aside, I very much like this process. As an introvert who's likely undiagnosed obsessive-compulsive, like you, I imagine, I like that it's repetitive, physical, and simple. It's quite therapeutic for me, actually. But, most of all, I like that it's accessible, meaning the materials are affordable and easy to make and it allows for unrestricted applications.

The second time I used it can be seen in *Peter Privledge and the Birth of the Hātriot*, which again is inspired by our interactions. This piece was a 16' by 20' layered narrative made of ten separate 4' by 8' frames. Instead of entirely pulling from our conversations, though, it's also based on my projection of how someone who thinks of themselves as a patriotic, well-meaning American, can become a close-minded, seemingly hate-filled anti-patriot.

The base layer was pulled from my *Astounding Fancy #15* comic. It's the moment where Peter Privledge shouts, "The rally, the man on the street, and now this! Could my perception be that off? But I'm always white!!!" In the comic, he corrects himself in the next cell and replaces



Figs. 34, 35. The making of *Peter Privledge and the Birth of the Hātriot*.

Fig. 35. *Peter Privledge and the Birth of the Hātriot*, 2021 <https://www.nickazzaro.xyz/the-birth-of-the-h%C4%81triot> (following page)

THE RALLY, THE MAN ON THE STREET, AND NOW THIS! COULD MY PERCEPTION BE THAT WRONG? BUT I'M ALWAYS WHITE!!!

WHY ARE THEY ERASING HISTORY?!!?

FINE, I'LL WEAR MY MASK!

AND ON THAT NIGHT THE HĀTRIOT WAS BORN...



EXIT



Figs. 35, 36, 37. *The making of Peter Privledge and the Birth of the Hätriot.*

“white” with “right”, but in this version he never corrects himself and continues down a path where white equals right which leads him to becoming the Hätriot.

Once again, aside from the content, you’d have been impressed by how this all came together. From mapping things out on the floor to selectively applying wheatpaste to working with such large objects in a small space.

I’m very proud of this work and wish I could have shared it with you. It led to even more exploration with wheatpaste. Peter Privledge and the Birth of the Hätriot was very large but only two-dimensional. I wondered what three-dimensional work would look like and if the paper could support itself?

The Manufactured Classroom answered my questions and became my gateway drug. By creating a classroom of school desk forms made only from paper saturated in wheatpaste, I could now make a more direct yet less didactic statement about public education.



Fig. 38. *Manufactured Classroom, 2021*

Again, you would have appreciated the thought process and experimentation for making this happen. I certainly have you to thank for our untraditional and at times eclectic way of problem-solving. I started with a desk I acquired from Ypsilanti Community Schools and then covered it in plastic drop-cloth so my wheatpaste saturated paper wouldn’t stick to it. I then added piece after piece of 8.5” by 11” printer paper to the plastic covered desk until it was almost entirely covered.

I mentioned earlier how valuable and versatile printer paper was at the high school so I thought it was important to use it here. Its whiteness also reflected the white-washed history taught in public schools, especially considering the challenges many white parents bring to Critical Race Theory. Yet another reason is the fragility of the structures created by the paper, which accurately mimics the fragility of our district, especially at the start of the lockdown.

Most of all, though, the paper was forgiving and allowed for modifications. In this case, I was able to cut Ku Klux Klan robe-like eye holes in areas of the desks that came to points. Because the eyes ended up being closer to the floor, they were more of a discovery for the viewer



Figs. 39, 40. The making of Manufactured Classroom.



Fig. 41. The eyes in the desks looking back at the viewer.

rather than an immediate recognition. This allowed me to imply with little doubt that there is racism hidden within the public education system.

I made 16 of them and they showed in a classroom formation at the end of October last year. This is without a doubt one of my most effective projects and something I learned a great deal from. What I didn't expect, though, was how much more life I could get from their deaths. Because they're made from affordable materials and are easy to reproduce, destroying them is a logical step. That in mind, I began burning them in my backyard, which was reminiscent of burning leaves when I was growing up.

I found the fires to be both haunting and beautiful and the images created were eerily similar to that of cross burnings. This briefly led me back to photography for a more polished documentation, which I imagine you can appreciate.

While I created several other projects after the desks, I think you get the picture. It's my final thesis project I want to tell you about which is titled *Undoctrination*.



Fig. 42. Test burnings in the backyard.



Fig. 43. The death of the paper desks.



Undoctrination (noun)

1. The unlearning of the white-washed history and manufactured perceptions that allows for the acceptance and perpetuation of oppression in America's underserved public schools.
2. The acknowledgement in public schools of the intentional yet veiled systemic failures such as resources gaps, schools of choice, and failing students forward.

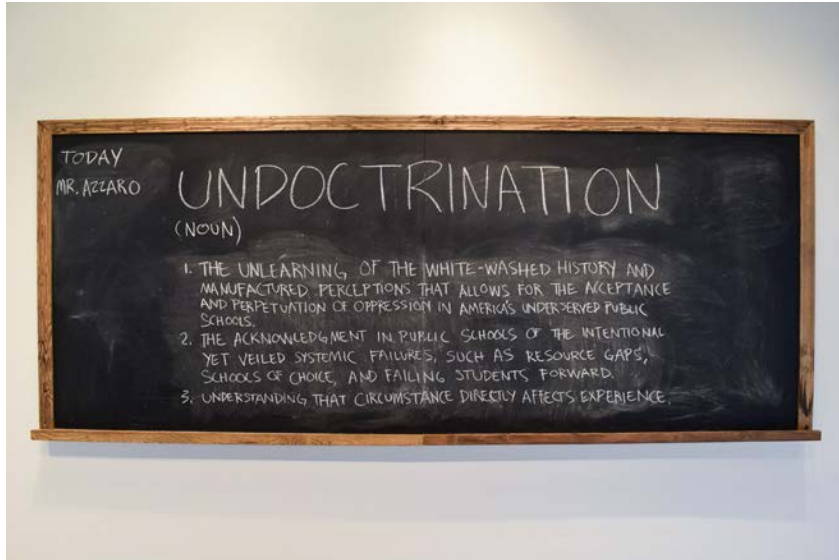


Fig. 44. The chalkboard I made for the definition of *Undoctrination* as part of the *American School Desk* installation.

3. Understanding that circumstance directly affects experience.

Undoctrination is what this entire letter is about, dad.

Undoctrination is the word many conservative leaning outlets use any-time someone challenges our white-washed history with things like Critical Race Theory or acknowledging how many non-white Americans aren't credited for their work in the creation of this country. To them, and likely to you, people like me are trying to indoctrinate the youth with anti-white, anti-American rhetoric.

Undoctrination is my play on that word. We can't change overnight but do have to begin unlearning the illusions and fantasies we were told about the origins of this country. That will help to unite us. That will make America great.

The work I made for this show included nearly all the research and experience outlined above and employed the same methods. Using over 2,000 sheets of printer paper and almost eight gallons of wheatpaste,



Fig. 45. *The American School Desk*, 2022.

I made an even larger desk to make an even larger statement, which sat across from the chalkboard. Because of the size, it wasn't immediately apparent it was a desk from inside the gallery, but that was part of the discovery process. And like the smaller desks, this one had several sets of eyes slightly hidden throughout, some near eye-level. Being next to the window allowed it to engage with people on the outside.

However, unlike the smaller desks, I let this one slowly collapse over time, which accurately commented on the fragility resulting from structural racism.

Next to the chalkboard was a "break-in-case-of-emergency" box which held a single match. This piece was a custom build made from wood, a piece of glass, and a dangling hammer to fit the installation. In a nod to David Hammons' *How Ya Like Me Now?*, I offered viewers the chance to interact with the desk and actually burn it down, as I've so often done myself. Sadly, nobody did.

The piece that had the most of you and me in it though, was my flag



Fig. 46. One set of eyes within the American School Desk.



Fig. 47. The American School Desk collapsing on itself.

piece which was based on the one I gave you.

Do you remember the conversations we had during the summer of 2020? Do you remember asking me what I'd do if I saw a man attacking an elderly woman on the street? Without hesitation I told you I'd intervene.

Do you remember what you asked next? You asked, "If you saw a man burning an American flag on the street, what would you do?" I hesitated and you said, "Stop right there. That says it all. *That's* where I went wrong raising you."

That was one of the boldest things I'd ever heard you say. And I disagree. I think you raised me right, which is why I'm here now writing this letter.

The flag I gave you used the same methods I used in all the above work. What's unique is that we each see two different pieces. I see the



Fig. 48. The "Break in Case of Emergency" box as part of the American School Desk installation.

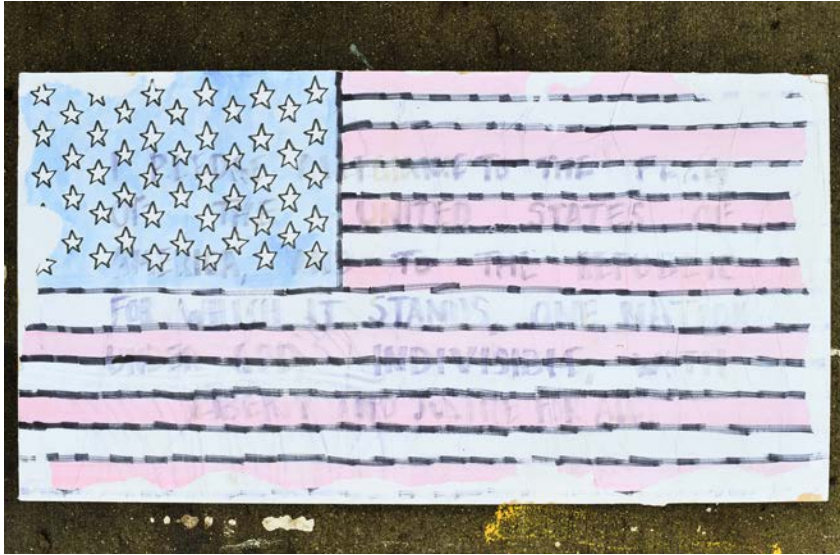


Fig. 49. The precursor to *I Pledge a Credence*.

pledge of allegiance written on a large white piece of paper, which is very fitting, covered by a tattered flag that's trying to cover the fact that the pledge doesn't apply to every American.

You see something patriotic, something that means something from a time that was marred with asterisks. You can look at this flag and say these words and retreat to the illusion you've always known.

The version I made for myself and for this show goes one layer further. Beneath both the flag and the pledge lies the confederate battle flag, as many of the policies and laws we have today originated or were inspired by former members of the Confederate States of America.

Do you understand how all the above relates to you, me, race, politics, and education?

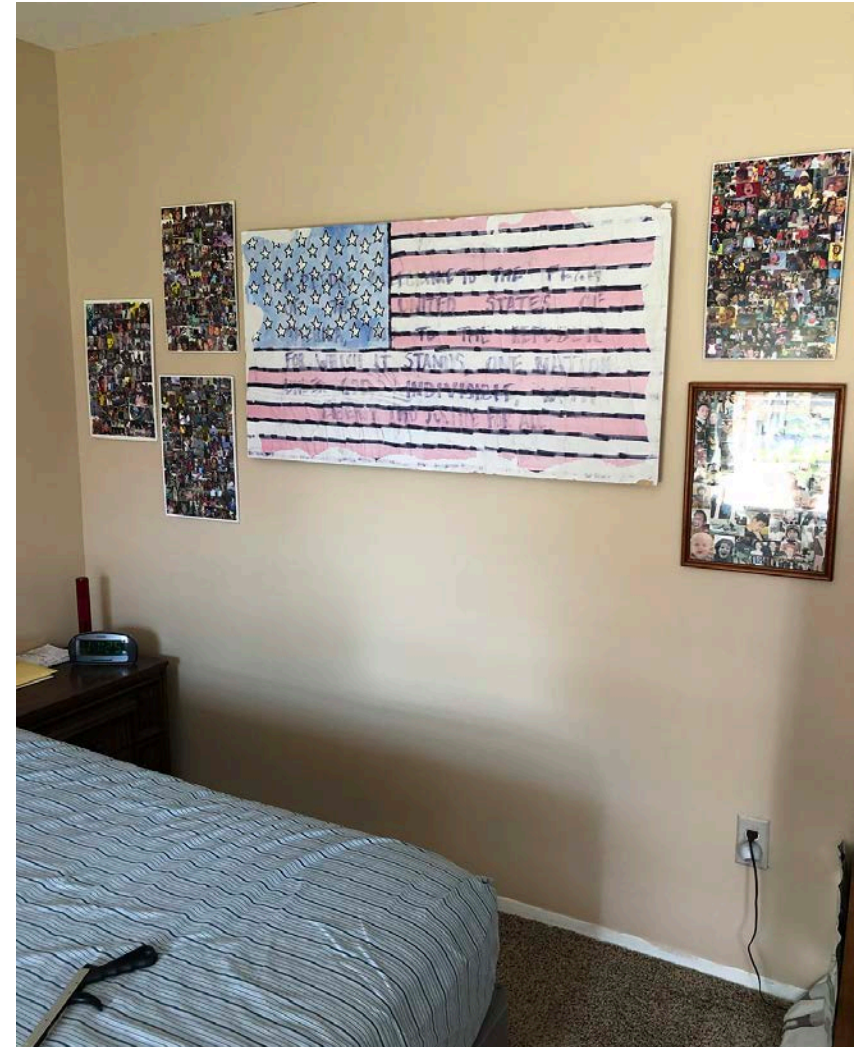
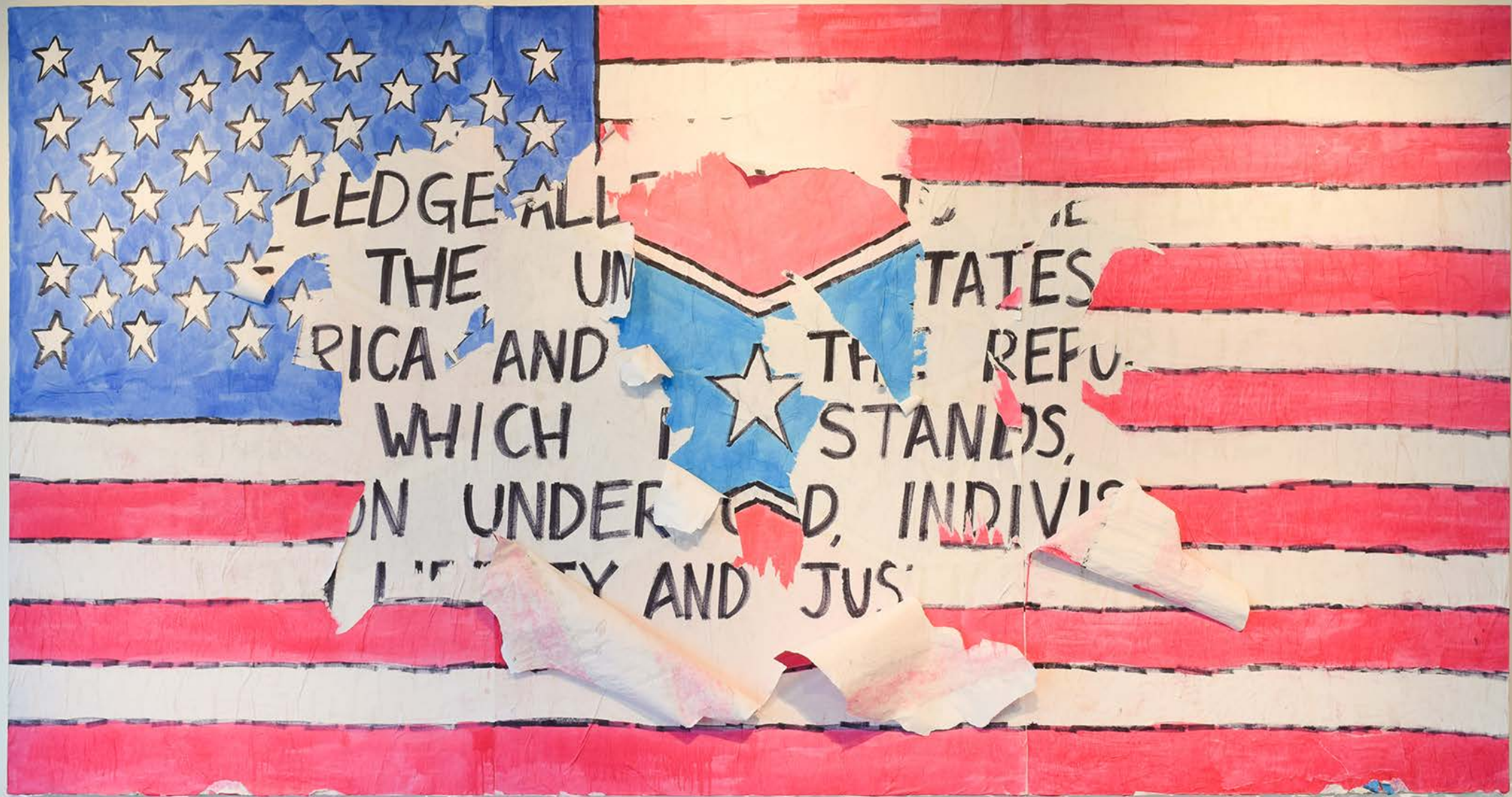


Fig. 50. The precursor to *I Pledge a Credence* on my dad's wall.

Fig. 51. *I Pledge a Credence*, 2022 (following page)



WE PRODUCE ALL THE
THE UN STATES
ERICA AND THE REPU
WHICH STANDS,
ON UNDER GOD, INDIVIS
LIBERTY AND JUST

Today, I'm not a photographer, or illustrator, or any one thing. My art is about creating change, so it's become more of a "by any means necessary" process which is evident in some of the people I mentioned above.

Working with wheatpaste and accessible materials has become a vehicle to both creating more charged work as well as collaborating with younger artists. This process is allowing me to develop expanded practices such as site-specific installations, object-making, performance, and community engagement. Simply put, I'm starting conversations. If we do nothing, you and I will be fine. Nothing changes. Nick from Waterford will still joke with you, and you don't have to watch anything you say. You'll always be right and anyone who challenges you is either too sensitive or trying to get something for nothing. The students I used to work with will continue to live in the perception that forces limitations.

I firmly believe "there is no such thing as a not-racist idea, only racist ideas and antiracist ideas".¹⁸ Therefore, I don't want to do nothing. I actually want to make America great. For everyone. Creating work using accessible materials means just about anyone can do it. Nothing gave me greater joy than telling every one of my photo students that they took a great photo, because anyone *can* take a good photo. My ability to offer genuine, positive reinforcement to someone who may not get it that often can easily create confidence that spills into other areas of their life.

Working with paper, markers, cheap paint, and wheatpaste gives even more students that opportunity. Whether they're illustrators, painters, writers, builders, or just about anything else, this process allows them to share their voices. And the accessibility allows it to exist almost anywhere, without the concern of losing something monumental, even

¹⁸ Kendi, *Stamped From the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, 20

if the size is monumental.

I know I can't change your or the "you" minds and that's okay. My objective is to work with future generations and create conditions where change is more likely to happen.¹⁹

You and I are going to have to unlearn a few things, but I hope we can do it together.

I love you, dad.

Nick



Fig. 52. Azzaro family photo taken on Easter Sunday, 2022.

¹⁹ George Couros, *The Innovator's Mindset* (San Diego: Dave Burgess Consulting, Inc, 2015), 8

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