

classi**FICTIONS**

Adrienne Vetter
Bachelor of Fine Arts, University of Wyoming, 2005

*Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of Master of
Fine Arts*

School of Art and Design
University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, Michigan
2009

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By:

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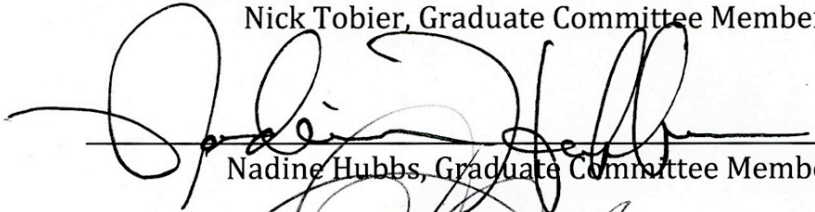
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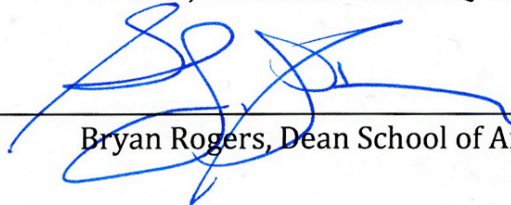
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ABSTRACT

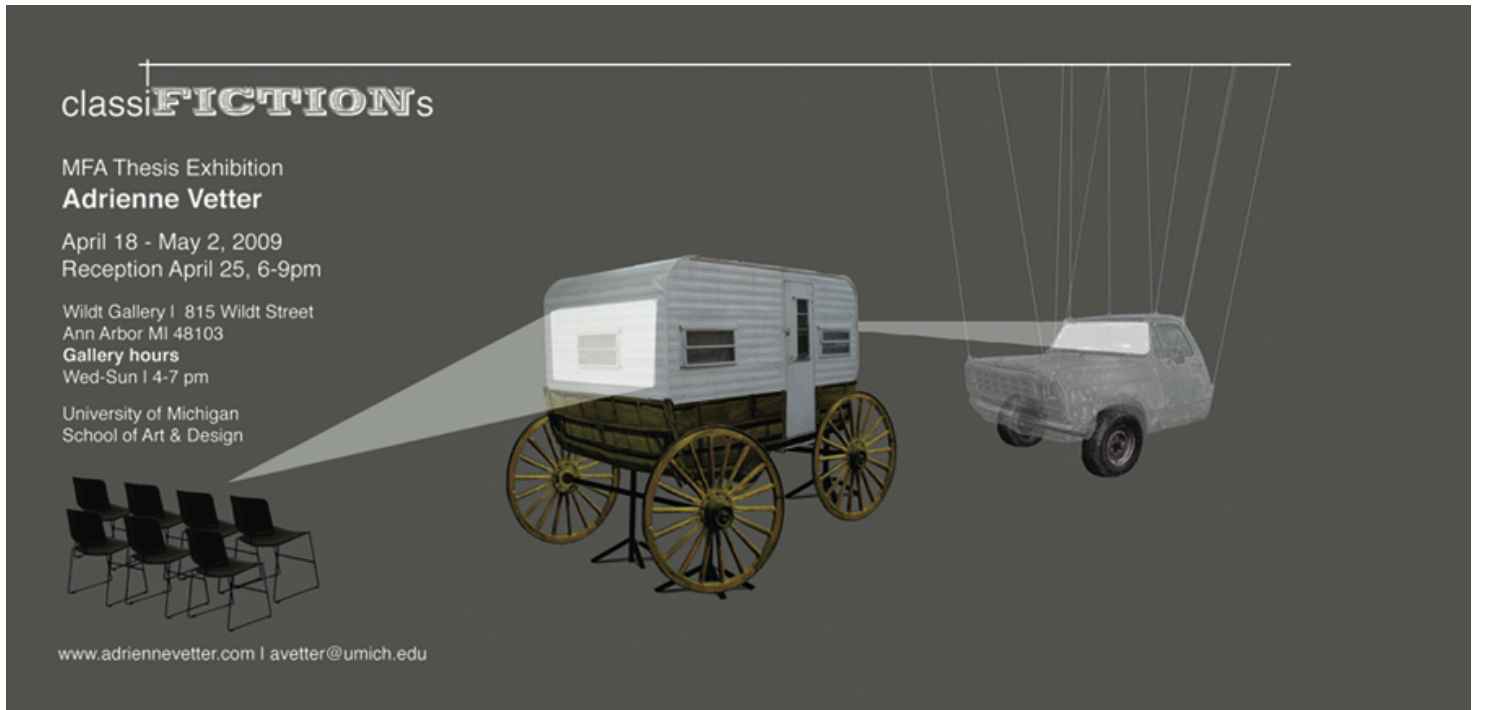
This is a written thesis meant to dissect, document, and to share through textual form my physical creative thesis work: a large-scale, interactive art installation titled "classiFICTIONS." which examined mythologies of class and the American West through video projections, audio narratives, and hybrid contraptions on wheels.

KEYWORDS

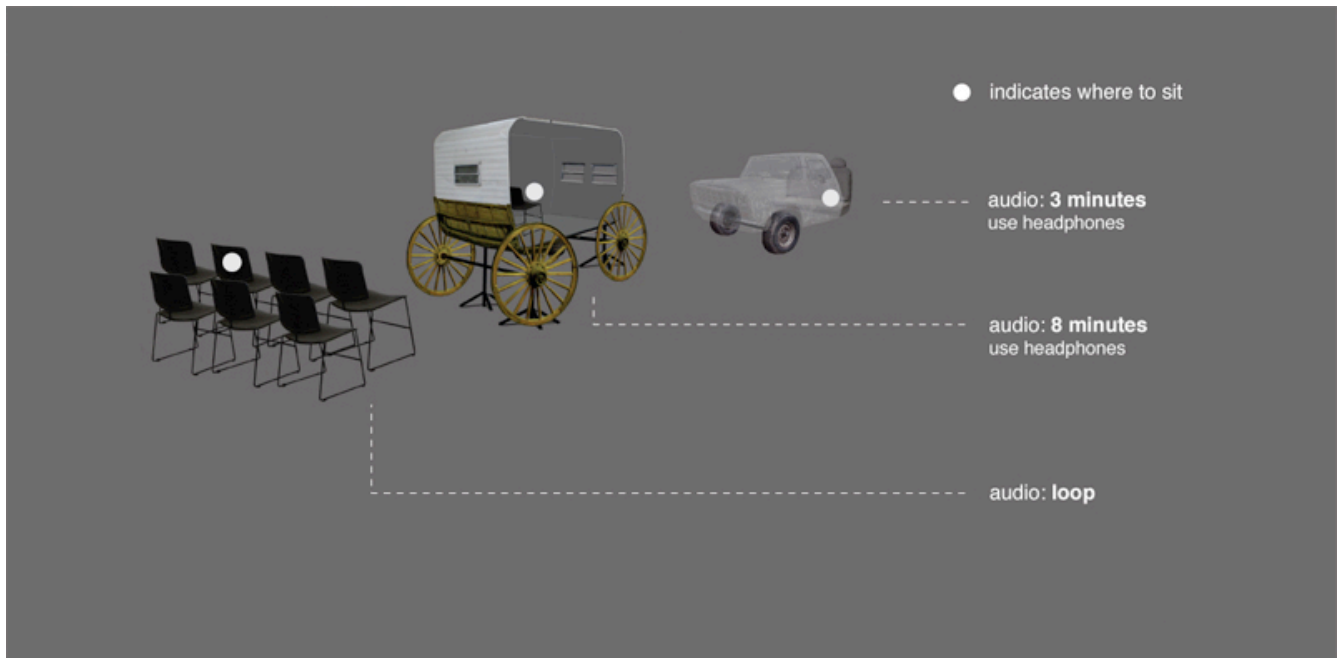
Installation, sculpture, multimedia, assemblage, new media, video art, video projection, architecture, American West, mobility, class, critical race studies, critical whiteness studies, Native American studies, Northern Arapaho, Wyoming, massacre, appropriation

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classiFICTIONS Show poster/postcard



Sign posted with the work, indicating how to experience the installation and the length of audio clips

“THE MAPS I DRAW ARE NECESSARILY ANCHORED IN MY OWN DISCONTINUOUS LOCATIONS.”¹

I am writing this paper as an academic. An academic who is aware of the power and benefits made available to me through the use of institutional discourses, settings, and resources – an academic who is not always comfortable with that awareness. The languages and luxuries the context affords its members have been seductive. I entered an echelon that offers me the power to *create* representations rather than merely *consume* them.

I am writing this paper as an adult who remembers what it felt like to be a teenager living in a trailer house, going to “Free Food” to supplement my single-mother’s groceries, and having the generic or secondhand version of almost everything. I remember what it felt like to be in a class position where I felt trapped, like I had no power to ever be able to go anywhere, do anything, and that perhaps I was looking at a future like my father’s existence, one tied down by his work-week as a cement mason and his fears that if he asks for a single day off work he will lose his job.

I am writing this paper as a white person who reflects on race and continues to have life experiences in spaces between all-white and mixed-race families. I am white, and parts of my lived experience – labeled ‘redneck’, ‘white trash’ and located in the rural state of Wyoming – often leads others to assume that I’m supposed to be racist and ignorant of diversity. Yet, I grew up in a predominately white town on the Wind River Indian Reservation (a location which draws attention to its own history of colonialism). I grew up the child of a white woman who dated black and brown men after divorcing my blue-eyed, blond German farm boy father. In fact, my mother remarried (and later divorced) a Northern Arapaho man and I have many people in the reservation community I consider close family.

I live in the intersections and borders between this Arapaho family, my mom’s white Wyoming ranch family, and my dad’s white German farm family in Illinois. And acknowledge the fact that the ranch my mother’s family owns and in which I hold shares is located on land in southern Wyoming which is rightfully the Arapaho and Cheyenne tribes’ according to the Treaty of Fort Laramie of 1851.

The force behind the making of classiFICTIONs was my drive to create a space to investigate and think about all of these intersections, relationships, and how they are negotiated and controlled—visually. These matters weren’t merely cerebral; they were emotionally-charged with my own autobiography. This project was also an attempt on my part to explain or interrogate past experiences and the way they have been shaped by histories that have been suppressed, skewed, or that I simply had no previous knowledge.

¹ CHANDRA MOHANTY, *FEMINISM WITHOUT BORDERS*

I. THE EXPERIENCE: Looking, Listening, Feeling

My intention was to create a space where art *viewer* becomes *participant*.

The participant enters a large, dark gallery and is confronted by hybrid contraptions on wheels, flickering video, and the low hum of voices speaking. There are black audience chairs, a camper on wagon wheels, and a Dodge Ram truck, each connected through the projections of moving images onto and between them.



A sign that says:

This installation is designed to accommodate ONE person at a time.

To experience the entire installation, please wait a turn, or set aside time during the regular gallery hours.

The running time for the audio is as follows:

Chairs: random loop

Camperwagon: 8 min.

Truck: 3 min.



A participant encounters a group of black chairs facing a podium projecting a movie onto the corrugated white metal siding of the back of a camper trailer. The participant moves to find a seat in the group, something people are used to doing when chairs and a movie screen are placed in front of them. However, this very conditioned response is complicated in this case: of the seven black chairs, all but one have speakers set into their seats issuing snippets of words, sounds or murmuring voices. The chairs are an institutional choir, each with its own voice. The words spoken are a mishmash of theoretical terms from postcolonial, postmodernist, feminist, critical whiteness, and critical race studies:

“post- post- post-
 modernism” “colonialism”
 “fantasies of the colonizer”
 “dirty” “hegemony” “the
 inherent trap of
 representation” “mobility” “the subject” “backwards” “historical revisionism” “infantilization”
 “fetishization” “lone white rugged male individual” “infantilization of...native” “noble” “savage”
 “projections” “ideology of hygiene” “detritus” “intergenerational debris” “genocide” “mobility”



“subject” “mobility is the subject” “in question” “false binaries” “post” “post” “post” “modernism” “the inherent trap of” “assimilation” “the inherent trap of” “representation” “authority” “I question your use of...” “critical whiteness” “appropriation” “hegemony” “fantasies of the colonizer” “cosmopolitanism” “this is the truth” “meaning is given to the present by making the past consistent with it” “historical revisionism” “problematic” “producing knowledge” “myth”

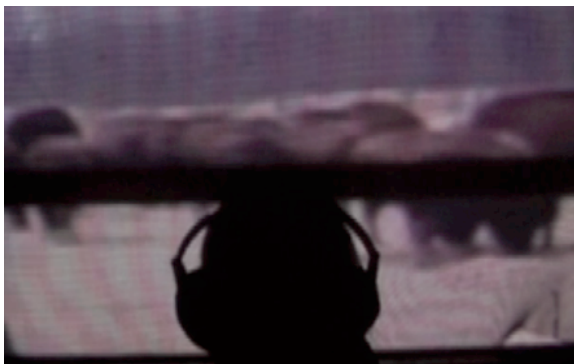
The voices range in tone from seductive, sexy, disgusted, and bored, to ominous. At some points they all speak at once, creating polyphony. There are six chairs and the audio emerges from three different mp3 players, so there is a great deal of random overlap. As the participant sits and listens to the audio while watching the video on the back of the camper, inevitably their brain forces connections between the words and the image. Sometimes, the words almost seem to sync up to the movement of the actors' mouths in the film, or in pairings that make sense, like “lone white rugged individual” with John Wayne’s character walking off into the sunset, or “genocide” or “fantasies of the colonizer” during a clip of violence in the dramatized version of the Sand Creek massacre seen in the film Soldier Blue.

What the movie is projected upon is striking: a white camping trailer that is elevated, mid-air and seems to tower above the audience of chairs. Its lower half has become a wooden box wagon, complete with four spinning old wagon wheels.





The camper door is open, revealing an all-grey space interior, a single spotlight chair, and a pair of headphones on a stand.



As the participant sits down and picks up the headphones, the light turns off and an audio clip begins:

Both speakers:

On November 29, 1864

Left speaker:

Over 400 peaceful Cheyenne and Arapaho women, children, and elderly members of the camp were brutally murdered at the Sand Creek Massacre.

Oral history of Southern Cheyenne Chief Laird Cometsawah

“I think there were 35 braves and some old men, about 60 in all...the rest of the men were away from camp, hunting...”

Account of George Bent

“Colonel Chivington himself asked me if I would ride out with Lieutenant Colonel Bowen [after the massacre] and see how many chiefs or principle men I could recognize.” “...I saw the bodies of those lying there cut all to pieces, worse mutilated than any I ever saw before; the women cut all to pieces...With knives; scalped; their brains knocked out; children two or three months old; all ages lying there, from sucking infants up to warriors.”

Testimony of John Smith, United States Indian Interpreter

On November 29, 1864

Right speaker:

“Over 500 to 600 warriors were killed in the Battle of Sand Creek. There were about 1200 Indians; of these about 700 warriors...I am not aware there were any old men among them.”

Testimony of Colonel Chivington

“From the best information I could obtain, I judge there were five hundred or six hundred Indians killed; I cannot state positively the number killed, nor can I state positively the number of women and children killed. Officers who passed over the field, by my orders, after the battle, for the purpose of ascertaining the number of Indians killed, report that they saw but few women or children dead, no more than would certainly fall in an attack upon a camp in which they were. I myself passed over some portions of the field after the fight, and I saw but one woman who had been killed, and one who had hanged herself; I saw no dead children. From all that I could learn, I arrived at the conclusion that but few women or children had been slain.

Testimony of Colonel Chivington

The above is an example excerpt of audio (note the full length of the audio is 8 minutes)

The audio in the camper has yet another discourse, one that I associate with the “historical tone” of PBS documentaries. I achieved this tone by taking excerpts of testimony from documents created by an investigation carried out by the Joint Committee of the Conduct of the War regarding the Sand Creek massacre shortly after it happened. About eight different voices developed out of my research, and I went back to Wyoming and asked some of the men in my mom’s family to read for some of the parts—a process which led to very interesting conversations with them. The final audio clip is divided into mono clips, so that I could place testimonies saying one thing on the left speaker and testimonies saying something else on the right speaker, leading to a kind of back-and-forth juxtaposition that suggests how history is *constructed*. We are used to history books and other documentation about historical events being told from a unitary voice. At some parts of the clip inside the camper I myself also serve as a female narrator, which also adds a little bit of a twist.

After the audio clip ends, the participant puts the headphones back on the hook, the light turns back on, and she or he exits the camperwagon—perhaps taking extra care not to trip descending down its blocky steps made from sawed-up railroad ties.

Facing the camper, there is one structure/vehicle left: an old red Dodge Ram pickup.





On the wall next to the red pickup, there is a quote, a block of white text on the dark wall:

One of the finest things about being an Indian is that people are always interested in you and your “plight.” Other groups have difficulties, predicaments, quandaries, problems, or troubles. Traditionally, we Indians have had a “plight.”

Our foremost plight is our transparency. people can tell just by looking at us what we want, what should be done to help us, how we feel, and what a “real” Indian is really like.

Because people can see right through us, it becomes impossible to tell truth from fiction or fact from mythology. Experts paint us as they would like us to be. Often we paint ourselves as we wish we were or as we might have been.

Vine Deloria, Jr Custer Died for Your Sins

From the front of the camper, a projector bulb light glows like a single white eye between its two front windows and its trajectory inscribes the same jerkily moving film clips being projected onto the windshield of the truck.



The driver's side door is open, inviting the person's entrance. As the participant settles into the seat, smells the musty, distinctive odor that seems to be the scent of all old trucks.

Near the ignition, above the radio, there is a pair of headphones, which, when picked up, begins an audio recording.



The listener hears a single male voice telling a story which ends in laughter. As the story is goes on, you realize from the details that the voice must be that of an Arapaho man, and this is a story of Arapaho people. The story ends in laughter.

Note: I chose not to transcribe the audio of the story out of respect for the oral tradition of storytelling in Arapaho culture. Although the man who tells the story is a family friend and gave me permission to use the audio recording in my artwork, in general, like many tribes, the Northern Arapaho have experienced many instances of white researchers coming to the reservation to “gather” information “about” Arapaho culture and “real” Indians. Understandably, Arapahos are careful about what information is shared, how, and what it is used for. Primarily, knowledge is relational, meaning a person usually has to have spent time and grown some kind of relationship to have certain kinds of information shared with them.

II. THE EXPERIENCE: Video

What is involved in hybridity? A mixing, a juxtaposition of “difference.” As one way of thinking about organizing the information of the world around us, I prefer a fluid hybridity over binaries. It is not this *or* this – but this, this, this *and* this, and maybe this, as well.

What does it mean when I take clips—of shooting bows and arrows, of violence, of experiencing of land, of interactions between people, animals, places, architecture—what happens when I juxtapose, various clips depicting these from the movies *Deliverance*, *Soldier Blue*, and *The Searchers*?



I chose clips based on very subjective, broad and intuitive senses while watching and editing the video – and although I could have made a thousand versions, or *mixes*, I ended up with a mix that, for me, highlighted the boundaries of whiteness depicted in these films. Characters in *Deliverance* wear the outdoorsy clothes of city people weekending in the “wilderness.” They smoke pipes and talk in a markedly different way than the “locals” who live in the woods of the river they’ve come to canoe. They talk about “junk,” “genetic deficiencies,” or “these people” in relation to what are meant to be read as rural, white “trash,” whites *other* than them) (Hartigan 1995)

I chose the two other movies – *The Searchers* and *Soldier Blue* – not because they have “real” Indians in them—because they very obviously do not. These films are, rather, white peoples’ representations of what they *think* Indians are, look like, and act like. (Deloria P. 2004) These representations of Indians are revealing in terms of white people’s thoughts about themselves as well, since both films use Native Americans as a foil to whites to shore up the boundaries of whiteness. Interestingly, the actors who are seen to be crossing those boundaries are white women, which McClintock, in the book *Imperial Leather*, discusses in terms of how the ideologies of race, gender, and colonialism intersect (McClintock 1995)

In a way, all of the films I chose are representations of whiteness and how whites think of themselves *in relation* to others. This paradigm is certainly not limited to whites and can be relevant to the interactions of many social groups, but I chose whiteness as a place to start because I am white and have an interest in interrogating my own position as a white person in a world still influenced and structured by racialized definitions of who can be accorded what level of humanity.

The way in which I created my video mix had both intentionality and a randomness. I deliberately chose to crop certain sections of video, but when I put them all in a loop, I allowed a random pattern to take shape. Certainly when the video is coupled with the audio, the technology itself randomizes and takes decisions out of my hands in a good way; meaning, I think that the viewer is allowed the space to make associations between the two, the three, the four, and how they relate to each other in the entire picture. It is the introduction of chance.

For example, we’re very used to having meaning made *for* us in our media. The audio makes sense with the video, in a Hollywood film the script is written, acted, what a viewer sees is cropped with deliberate camera angles, etc.) But I’m interested in situations where something seems out of place, “wrong,” or incongruous. To me, these are the borderlands. If I put the words “Indian” and “white trash” together, what associations does the brain stretch for? The word “cosmopolitanism” is heard in conjunction with two men with bad teeth and a gun in the woods appearing on the video screen. What happens in the viewer’s mind?

If I put John Wayne in a traditional racist Western from the 50’s next to a clip of Candace Bergen in buckskin in a revisionist Western from the 70’s—what happens? What happens if the next clip is John Voight giving the hairy eye to “dirty” whites living in “junk piles” in the woods? Or Burt Reynolds shooting a bow and arrow, immediately followed by Indians on horseback, chasing John Wayne through the dust and red plateaus of a desert?

One of the most dynamic aspects of the installation is the interaction of media *within* this unreal realm: the video loop is 13 minutes and the *exact same* loop plays on the projection on the camper and the projection on the truck. From the position of the chairs at the beginning the viewer is able to see the entire picture, full-screen on the back of the camper. The image from this projector goes through

the back window and only that window-sized portion of the movie (significantly cropped) splashes onto a blank wall inside the camper. It is this cropped, blurred image which the viewer watches while listening to the historical-toned massacre audio, all the time feeling self-conscious because the silhouette of their head is blocking the bottom part of the video. The camper projects the same video onto the pickup's windshield, but the image is warped, wrapped around its curved surface and when the viewer sits within the cab of the truck the entire image is flipped backwards.



The picture a viewer sees is different according to each position they sit in. It is the same image, the same story loop, yet it changes radically according to how the structures crop or warp it from its original square screen.

“I WRITE IN THE CONVICTION THAT SOMETIMES IT IS BEST TO SABOTAGE WHAT IS INEXORABLY TO HAND, THAN TO INVENT A TOOL THAT NO ONE WILL TEST, WHILE MOUTHING VARIETIES OF LIBERAL PLURALISM” ~ GAYATRI SPIVAK²

Gayatri Spivak is a scholar known for her critique of the institution from within, and although I wouldn't appropriate her term of 'subaltern' (a term used in postcolonial studies to refer to persons who might be considered outside of the hegemonic power structure) to employ in the defense of my own lived experience—I *do* find many of her arguments, like the one quoted above, to be powerful and useful in thinking about my own work.



² Gayatri Spivak. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present*, p. 9

III. THE EXPERIENCE: Process

The process of working involved a code switching between very different activities and modes of inquiry: research and conceptual development interspaced between periods of intense hands-on building and media making (video and audio.) Dialogue with the non-art people in my life, here and in Wyoming, also played an important role in my project as it unfolded.

Each new work seems to have strong connections to work I've created in the past. This project stems from recurring issues my abiding interest in how large-scale sculpture can affect the viewer, along with a conceptual questioning of stereotypes which have affected my own life experiences. With *White Trash Beautiful*, my first large-scale installation (2006), it's size was incidental and I primarily thought of it as a way to talk about the *exterior* appearance of a thing contrasted with an *interior* reality; it was a reworking of the "don't judge a book by its cover" saying.

This element is still present in my current work, but I also have expanded to think of sculpture on a large scale as a way to impact a viewer through their body. I heard Vito Acconci speak at a conference a few years ago and was struck by his assertion that conceiving of architecture-as-sculpture is an important way to bring art into public life.

Why work in installation or at such a large scale? This has been one question I've sought to answer for myself. A person stands in front of a painting on a wall, looks *at* it, and sees it as outside of them and as a representation of reality. One isn't supposed to touch the painting, one is meant to *think* about it. It engages one sense (sight.) The interaction is kept at a cerebral level. A 3D sculpture is made and suddenly the attention comes off the wall, slides into the middle of the room onto a pedestal, and the viewer is forced to walk their body around it in order to see it in-the-round. However, there is still the act of looking *at*, being *separate from*. I am not satisfied with this experience of art and its allowance of passive observation, which is what has driven me to blow up the size of the sculpture to encompass the viewer's body *inside* of it. I want a person to become part of the sculptural environment. When a person is inside of the camper, the projection on its exterior splashes onto them as they in turn sit and watch another projection in front of them. When a person sits in one of the bank of chairs watching the projection, they enter the visual field, and become part of it. Other people then watch them watching. When they sit inside the truck and watch the projection, they are put in the position of the Arapahos telling the story and are physically asked to see from that perspective. This is my three-dimensional version of what Adrian Piper asserts when she says, "You are part of this" or "it is *our* problem" (in her 1988 installation *Cornered*.)

I make these intriguing, hybrid structures with the knowledge that I must entice the viewer, someone who is used to passively looking to consume information, into *wanting* to be inside of the artwork. It is one way I can impart a very layered, complex message. If the viewers are being given the information in multiple formats – visual, aural, tactile – they are more likely to be deeply affected by it. It becomes *experiential* knowledge.

Because this project was conceived as large-scale installation – which required a large space, extremely time-consuming labor, etc – I had to find a way of working out my ideas in a virtual sense. I began making collages in Adobe Photoshop, from both appropriated images and my own photographs.



This way I could answer a question like, “What would this camper look like if it was suddenly on wagon wheels?” without actually having to cut up the camper, weld structure, build wagon wheels, and assemble the entire object.



As I printed them out, these collages became works in their own right, hyper-real hybrid contraptions floating in a glossy photographic field like a car in a showroom. As I added more and more layers to the installation mockup in the Photoshop program, the work became a virtual installation, where structures that in real life would be 9 x 15’ and 1500lbs could be moved at whim with a single hand and a mouse click. Similarly, a viewer’s attention could be directed by the crop or zoom dictated by the computer or camera – something that is very hard to try to control in the real,

3D space of an installation. An action that takes 30 seconds in Photoshop – putting wooden sides on a wagon, for example – in real life, takes several days and a knowledge and skill in woodworking and operating shop tools. I took on the

challenge of translating these two vastly different ways of working and made realizations of their respective advantages, similarities, and uses as I went along.

“Why not just continue doing these collages, or turn these images into an animation?” others challenged me upon hearing my plans to construct the physical structures. It was a worthwhile question and one I frequently asked myself (most frequently, in fact, when I found myself bone-tired after working physically in the shop for several days straight with what seemed like little progress.) The answer always came back to my belief in the power of the physicality—of feeling surrounded, feeling textures under the skin of one’s hand, smells (of materials, like wood and engine oil), of directing the behavior of a body by asking a person to sit their body down



inside of a space hoping they will sit through audio or video past the point when the usual gallery-goer simply walks away.

THE IDEA OF MAKING SCULPTURE THAT *WANTS* THE HUMAN BODY IN IT, A SPACE THAT *DESIRES* HUMAN INTERACTION. THIS IS ACCOMPLISHED IN AN INSTALLATION WHERE “...EVERYWHERE THE PRESENCE OF THE BODY IS FELT BUT NOWHERE IS IT IMAGED.”
~ HELEN MOLESWORTH

I should also discuss my “repurposing” of objects which were pre-existing and made by others before me, such as the camper, the wagon wheels, and the school chairs. In the introduction *Part Object Part Sculpture*, Helen Molesworth writes about the history of readymade objects and their association with the artist Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp’s readymades have been primarily discussed in terms of industrial production and their meaning has been associated with them having been made by machines originally. Molesworth takes a different perspective and instead asks what the meaning of objects incorporated into sculpture might be if we think about them as materials which harbor the human touch, or as objects which have had relationships with human bodies. She



suggests, then, that “[T]he viewer is often caught in a web where the threads of the psychic and the phenomenological intertwine” (Intro) For me, my use of the objects I find is very deliberate: the school chairs which make their appearance as disembodied academic voices in this installation were chairs I bought at the University of Michigan’s property disposition and were, I imagine, chairs that hundreds upon hundreds of university students sat in for years. The wagon wheels under the belly of the camper are wheels I bought from my uncle’s neighbors down the road of Highway 230 in Wyoming.

These neighbors travel to auctions at ranches and property throughout the state and surrounding areas to buy old wagon parts. I do not know the specific history of the wheels, beyond that they were probably on a farm wagon. But the metal of their casings and axel sleeves was heated on a forge and shaped by a blacksmith in a way that is not done anymore in the U.S. beyond probably Amish communities, and the wood is weathered from a hundred years of sitting outside. The camper is of a make and model I searched for months to find, with its oval shape, smaller size and rounded edges. Combined atop the wagon wheels, people – usually women – have often told me it reminds them of Cinderella’s magical pumpkin carriage coach. I bought the camper from a young man who worked at an aluminum plant in Coldwater, MI, who was getting rid of this recreational “hunter’s special” because he was about to get married and his fiancé was unhappy about it sitting in their yard.



“CAN THE LANGUAGE
OF ‘AMERICANISM’
BE DISENTANGLED FROM ITS ROOTS IN WHITE SUPREMACY, CONQUEST, AND
XENOPHOBIA?”³

My answer is no, it’s woven into the fabric and needs to be untangled, examined, acknowledged, grieved, before change is possible. I think there is a danger in prematurely celebrating the ‘end’ of oppressions (insert McClintock quote) before acknowledging them.

Someone told me once that they thought my intention in making my work was to talk about things people don’t want to talk about.

A person knows about a society from their particular locations within it. “Instead of learning conceptual categories and then, through fieldwork, finding the contexts in which to apply them, those of us who study societies in which we have preexisting experience absorb analytic categories that *rename* and *reframe* what is *already* known” (Narayan 32) When I entered higher education and took a seat in ‘the academy’ I did not cut my roots or stop being a member of my previous communities and I did not leave my personal experiences at the door. In fact, I feel like my allegiance to these communities were strengthened and the meaning of certain events of my life only deepened.

Narayan talks about how when she became a scholar she learned *words* (terms) to label *experiences* she’d had in her everyday life. Perhaps this is part of what is usually thought of as coming-to-consciousness. bell hooks, too, asserts that theory should be a part of the everyday lives of anyone (the construction worker, the teenager, kids, housewives, etc.)—because it is a consciousness-raising tool for *survival*. Furthermore, I’ve felt the need to share my knowledge with those people in my family who have helped support my educational aspirations to get it. Narayan also makes the argument that, “By translating professional jargon into ‘the language of everyday life,’ analysis can also be made intriguing to audiences who would otherwise be compelled only by narrative” (Narayan 32)

³ Paraphrase – Robin d.G. Kelley , *Identity Politics & Class Struggle*

IV. THE EXPERIENCE: Influences

I collect pieces of other artists' work and the ideas of cultural theorists like a magpie; assembling shiny, useful bits that catch my eye and resonate with my feelings. I weave them into the structures of my own work.

Many of the artists I've found inspiration from are contemporary African American women artists such as Kara Walker, Betye Saar, and Adrian Piper. These artists deal with histories of racial oppression and make work that exemplifies *intersections* of race, gender, sexuality, and class.

Kara Walker takes the American imaginary of "masters" and "slaves" and, in the form of rich, black silhouette cutouts, creates implied narratives which break down the victim/perpetrator binary and manage to depict a more nuanced, complex and ambiguous version of America's history of slavery. In my work I try to tackle similarly sensitive aspects of American history in the form of genocide of American Indian people.

Betye Saar's work I see as directly related to mine in that she addresses stereotypes, specifically in the form of marketing. She is known for her assemblages, which undermine the stereotype of black women as subservient 'mammies' (like the Aunt Jemima figure) by taking the images and inverting their meanings.

"It's one thing to be a wolf, but to really get shit done, one has to be a wolf in sheep's clothing." Adrian Piper's work is compelling to me because she uses the harsh experiences of being a light-skinned black woman who can "pass" for white to critique whiteness. I imagine her calling card work as stemming from the recurring experience of being in a crowd of white, intellectuals standing around talking in an art gallery or some other institutional event – perhaps after a lecture. After experiencing enough racist comments about black people made in these contexts by whites assuming she was white, Piper made cards to intervene in the situation. <insert image of calling card example> Another work of Piper's, *Cornered* of 1988, challenges the white gallery visitor to examine the very real possibility that (considering the laws that classified a person as black if they had *one* drop of black blood) they themselves may be, in fact, black.

Jimmy Durham is a contemporary Native American artist who has received some recognition in the art world while making work focusing critically on the "disjuncture between Indian peoples' history in the nineteenth century and the fictions of the frontier" (Mulvey 66) As my own project progressed, I referenced his sarcastic, but sometimes humorously acidic, sculptural objects juxtaposed with written text. Durham's objects play on the idea of white consumption of "authentic" Indian-made paraphernalia and use text from historical sources (Indian agency writings, documents from battles and events, and writings about Indians by psychologists, anthropologists, etc.) One of the aspects I enjoy most about Durham is

his own reflection on his position as an American Indian artist and how the art world boxes and packages artists they see as having “special interests” into corners. When he first began making work that told emotionally of situations happening on the Rosebud Reservation during that era of the AIM (American Indian Movement) around 1982, Durham came to a realization about a misreading happening with that kind of work:

[T]hey were very popular, people liked them very much. I felt very insulted; I saw the weakness of doing that kind of work. It looked like the art crowd of New York was being entertained by the sorrows of my people and I was the agent who allowed them to be entertained. I felt that I had betrayed my own folks and betrayed my own struggle because the work was popular (Durham 13)

Coming to the University of Michigan, I can identify with Durham’s statement. Making heartfelt, sincere work I came to realize that it was too easily consumed by the audience I was dealing with because it didn’t have a component that critiqued their own positionality as the *consumers* of it.



There are two Canadian artists who have each influenced my work in different ways. Kent Monkman is an artist of Cree descent who deliberately appropriates the colonial imaginary of cowboys and Indians, Indian princesses, and the like to instigate dialogue about the role of sexuality and forms of dominance in colonization.

Kim Adams is a Canadian sculptor who assembles large-scale structures and is inspired by architecture and vehicles in much the same way as I am. He uses many prefabricated



buildings and elements to create bizarre, colorful worlds. Adams also collects a kind of ‘research library’ of folk architecture which inspired me to start my own research library leading up to this project.



Kim Adams. Research image.



Adrienne Vetter. Research image. (On I-80 in Wyoming between Pine Bluffs and Cheyenne)

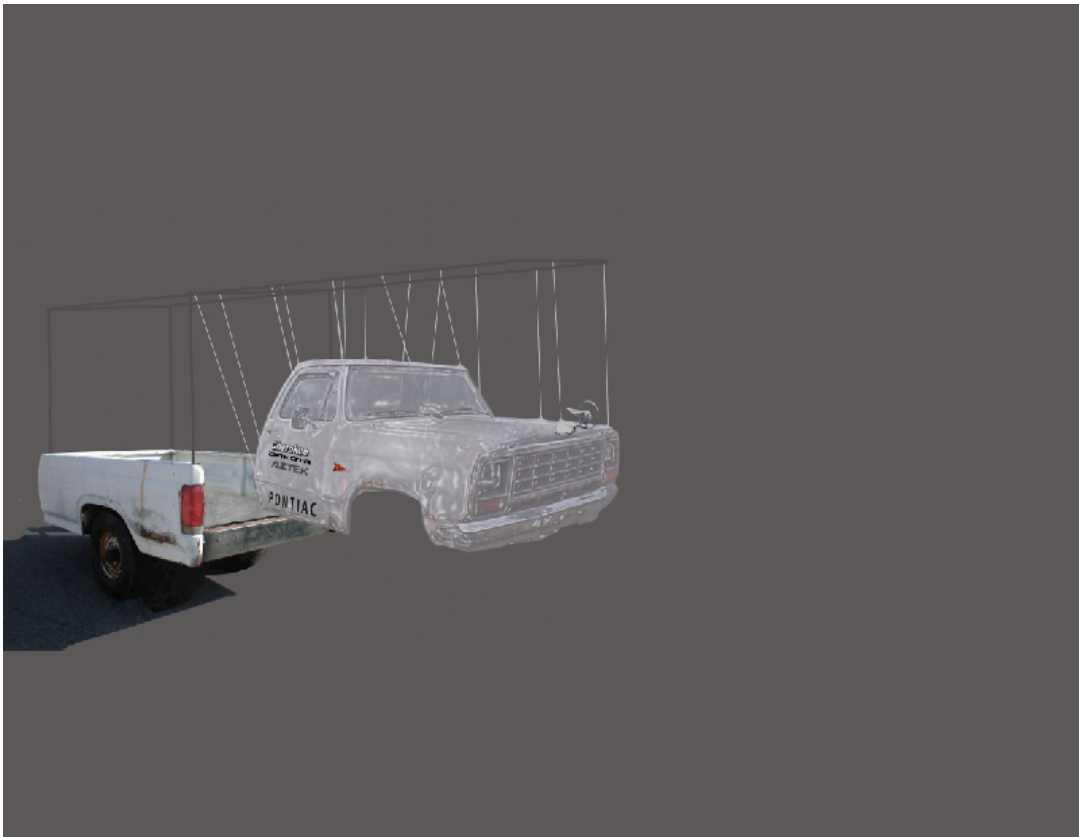
When I use the words “folk architecture” I’m talking about a kind of hybrid, do-it-yourself architecture that shows a resourcefulness, creativity, or ingenuity with limited or cheap materials. For example, I grew up in a place where it is not strange to see two different trailer houses which a family has taken, put together, and cut the center walls out to make one, wider, larger structure.



I'm drawn to the ephemeral appearance of Korean-born artist Do Ho Suh's fabric houses and the way they can speak to experiences of displacement of home. Although I ended up making a decision to use an actual pickup truck in the installation, my original design (seen in the collage below) was a fabric or clear plastic truck structure suspended from strings.



I wanted the structure that housed the narrative of the Indian perspective to reference the displacement indigenous people of America have continually experienced as a result of colonization. An anonymous chief suggested to one Congressional commission sent West to keep the peace (to steal land) a nice solution to the white man's logistical difficulties: 'I think you had better put the Indians on wheels, and you can run them about whenever you wish.' The successive waves of white colonizers pushing tribes farther west, gold rushes, treaty breakages, armed conflicts, up to current day government legislation designed to displace in more subtle cultural ways, have all been issues I've thought about while making this work.



Artists who have continued to influence my use of installation and stories are Pepon Osorio and the artist team of Ed & Nancy Kienholz.

I remember entering the University of Wyoming Art Museum when I was just beginning to study art seriously as an undergraduate in 2002 and walking into another world: the museum had Pepon Osorio's *Badge of Honor* on display and it blew me away.

Two rooms sit side by side, each as different from the other as can be imagined: On the right is the fantasy bedroom of a teenage boy, filled with objects – the walls are papered in baseball or basketball trading cards and overlaid with posters of sports stars and Bruce Lee, family photos abound, and the floor is covered in mirrors which double the images of all the bought memorabilia of the teenage variety. On the left, in stark contrast, is an empty white jail cell. The rooms are meant to be sites for a healing dialogue between an incarcerated father and his son and in each room is the projected image of Nelson Sr. and Nelson Jr. and the viewer listens to a twenty-two minute, very emotional conversation synchronized through video between them (<http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/osorio/card1.html>)

There are many works by Ed and Nancy Kienholz I admire and people often see my way of working with assemblage and refer me to the Kienholzes' sculpture and installation pieces. <insert images of Kienholzes> I had a similar experience to that I described above, when I went to the Weisman Art Museum in Minneapolis, MN and walked into the full-scale *Pedicord Apartments* by Nancy and Ed Kienholz. It is based on an old apartment building in Spokane, WA and when you walk down a dim, brown hallway and step near each apartment door, a sensor triggers sound from inside, leading you to lean your ear closer to the door to hear sounds like a tenant watching a baseball game on tv, a dog barking, or the muffled sobs coming from one apartment. It leaves you feeling vaguely voyeuristic and wanting to know more about the people who live there.

V: THE EXPERIENCE: Theoretical Basis for classiFICTIONS

Ideologies of race, class, gender, sexuality—these ideologies are constructed to justify the colonization and subjection of certain groups of people by others. Primarily we think of the dominant group as white, Western, male-oriented, hetero-centric, imperialist, capitalist power.

What is at stake in the venture of colonialism—and capitalism—is land, resources, and labor.

Ideologies are constructed to explain why certain people can be treated differently than others, why some people can be the “haves” and other people the “have nots.” Ideologies and mythologies (like the American Dream, for example) explain the inconsistencies in our social worlds.

American Indians were fetishized by whites as violent savages (which made it okay to kill them if it was a “kill or be killed” contest), then romanticized as vanishing “noble savages” or infantilized as childlike to the ways of white society (which made it okay to make decisions for them) and then thought of as assimilated to white culture, their mystical ties to a nature we nostalgically think of as being destroyed cut (which then makes it okay to appropriate what remaining “culture” they are seen to possess in the act of “saving” it.) (Smith 2005) Oftentimes, Indians are also thought to be lazy and reliant on the government for handouts (which leads to a kind of rationalization which blames *them* for their apparent poverty.)

Ideologies are not static, they change over time.

Poor and working-class whites have been fetishized as violent, hyper-sexual or as having sexual perversions, dirty, “rednecks” (the origin of which is a white person who works outside a lot and has the skin above their neck darkened by the sun), hillbillies (meaning they live in rural areas and are closer to agricultural or ‘wild’ nature and animals), racist, homophobic, and they also are subject to similar charges of being ‘lazy’ and reliant on government assistance as I described above.

As it was exhibited as part of my MFA thesis exhibition, *classiFICTIONS* became an experimental installation, where structures laden with video projections and audio recordings created a world in which a viewer might suspend belief. Even if it was only temporarily, the work created not only a *physical* space in which to enter, but also a space for contemplation. Perhaps a structure like the camper persuaded people to bring their bodies into a place that their minds were not yet ready to enter.

Thank you

It's Monday, March 15, 2009 and I'm sitting on the side of the highway, broken down along I-80 in Wyoming near Elk Mountain. I came back for the weekend to do audio recordings to use in my thesis project, which many people – Mike and Iva Redman, Ryan and Mack Gambler, Lane Lindley, Tage Benson, Justin Benson – helped me record or facilitate the recording of. I wouldn't have been able to travel without my mother – Lorinda Lindley –loaning me her car to drive the four hours between Laramie and Riverton. Yet, it is the day I'm supposed to drive from Riverton to catch my flight out of Denver and I'm about to miss my flight because the car's overheating. My uncle is speeding on his way to come pick me up and drive me to be handed off to my dad, who has driven up from Denver to meet and take me the rest of the way to the airport – all in hopes that I make my flight back to Michigan, school, and my thesis work. My uncle picks me up from the side of the road– we just leave my mom's car on the side of the road 'cause my mom's cousin Tage, who runs an auto electric shop in Laramie, says he'll come get it later in the evening.

My family—specifically my mom, dad, Colleen, Mike and Iva, Lane, the Benson family, and Grandma Beth Swanson
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