AT THE HANDS OF PERSONS UNKNOWN:

PHOTOGRAPHY AND HISTORICAL ERASURE

A THESIS

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After the 2017 Charlottesville Riots, with the debate over confederate monuments at a roar, I began to interrogate the notion of monument, in both its physical and metaphorical forms. I wanted to look at what forces of oppressive power like these had already erected, leaving other forms of monument in their wake. I began to deconstruct the idea of 'monument,' looking instead at the various structures and systems that hold the weight of history in the landscape of the everyday. I began to see these monuments all around me: bail bond offices, city street corners, bits of wrought iron bars spanning windows on houses and stores. The design of spaces attracted a type of curiosity, a desire to interrogate and understand more holistically how and why these spaces came to be the way that they are today. The more I dug into the histories, the more pronounced their inequity became. Arguably, every space that we inhabit or interact with has been constructed at some point upon a foundation of inequality, fear, and power. In our modern version of America, this system favors, predominantly, an Anglo, affluent, male demographic. In trying to confront the notions of White Supremacy and oppressive power, I was inherently led to sites of racial violence, and ultimately lynchings. Looking at these events, and their unfortunate frequency was an integral part of interrogating this system. The tactic of lynching was overwhelmingly white-employed—used to subjugate any perceived subordinate class—African-Americans, the Italians, Jewish, Irish, women.

As a middle-class white woman, I am acutely cognizant of my own privilege, and openly acknowledge my discomfort in treading into such topics. I don't make the choice to work with these issues lightly, and I have contended with how my positioning within the work continues to evolve as the work progresses. What feels important and necessary to me is to confront sites of racial and class violence—places of rioting, lynchings, redlining, forceful eviction, wrongful imprisonment—at their source. To acknowledge the commonness of these events, as well as their current manifestations, is to see how these acts speak to larger, often invisible but very real, forces that radiate outward in all

directions. Regardless of your positioning in the world, the forgotten aspect of these spaces can be jarring. If silence is the enemy, erasure has become its tool.

F. 1

The more I researched and tracked down sites, the more I realized they were all around. Left to be forgotten out in the open, history becomes absorbed into the landscape of the mundane—in

courthouses, post offices, neighborhoods, strip malls. The sites that I had read about on paper, so drenched in violence that you'd imagine the blood still remained, were often so unremarkable in real life that you would never know, or imagine, that anything had ever happened there. Where a man had been brutalized, people were buying coffee, or mailing letters. Where the earth had been torn open, a patch of wildflowers blossomed.

Aesthetically, the work plays into photo-historical canons and tropes that mimic this redacting of history. Shot on B&W film, the images harken back to historical archives and collections, tying together the past and the present moment. Borrowing in part from the 'New Topographics' era of photography in the 1970's, the images utilize a visual and mimetic language of the mundane and overlooked. In using this form, the images speak to the act of erasure itself. On face value, they are straightforward, direct, often unassuming. However, this is the device at play in this series. The bank door becomes a symbol of power, of capitalism, of aggression, wavering between monument and mausoleum—its dual face both impressive and morbid. In another image, an oak trunk wrapped in thin, silver strands of tiny plastic stars sits playful yet elegiac, bouncing bits of light against the shadow of its rough-hewn bark. A car edges between two worlds, separated only by language and stigma: the suburb or the project.

F. 2

The choice to work with a 120mm rangefinder camera and fixed lens provided a physicality to the production of this work that was not possible with other means of image making. Being unable to rely on certain tools to do things, like zoom into a scene, forces the body into a more intimate and vulnerable encounter with the world. In the distance between myself and a subject, I had to physically bridge the space—to enter, and inhabit, and engage. This was a crucial and fundamental part of the process, in a work that begs for a re-examination of the spaces we inhabit and our interactions within them. The choice to work with film also invites in an element of time, of

slowing down, into the production of the work. Images aren't seen immediately—they sit latent, in the mind and memory, for some time before developing into their physical form. The time between releasing the shutter and seeing an image, sometimes many months apart, allows for a different conversation with time and memory. Images are no longer tied to an experience that just occurred, but rather to the memory of it. Shaped by the morphing hands of time, the mental image that you held begins to shift. Forgotten images can ignite a sheer excitement that may not have been present with any immediacy after they were taken. Seemingly important images don't always hold their own weight against time.

Visually, the images in this work feel wholly in place with those of historical archives. The skies seem muted down—tinged with smoke, tinged with a patina of time. Brickwork gleams silver and pale. You can still see within the shadows of this world. The sun, thought present, falls a bit less joyous, more somber. It errs on the side of elegy, it wavers into meditation. However subdued the tone may be, the work still possesses a movement, a spirit to it. In one progression, we see the hanging gold tinsel of a used car lot in double—one still, the other blowing about. This language, this doubling, reads like a slow cinema. It creates a breath, a cadence, and a presence in the work. As photographs are locked motionless in time, these progressions still elicit movement.

F. 3

This is a visual mechanism of the work—repetition, multiplying, doubling, breathing—that marks each object with an element of time and use. In *Shredded Flags I-IV, Bowdoin-Moore House*, a series of four images, we see the American flag hanging from a post on the siding of an historic home in the Sugar Hill neighborhood of Wilmington, South Carolina. Yet, the flag is shredded along its stripes, whirling around the flagpole like wild vines. As the images progress, we see the flag lift and flail in the wind, like tattered ribbons, swelling high and ultimately lowering back down, in what feels like a softened breath. It is important that these images not be read merely as a form of quadriptych though—they are paired together in language, not as objects themselves.

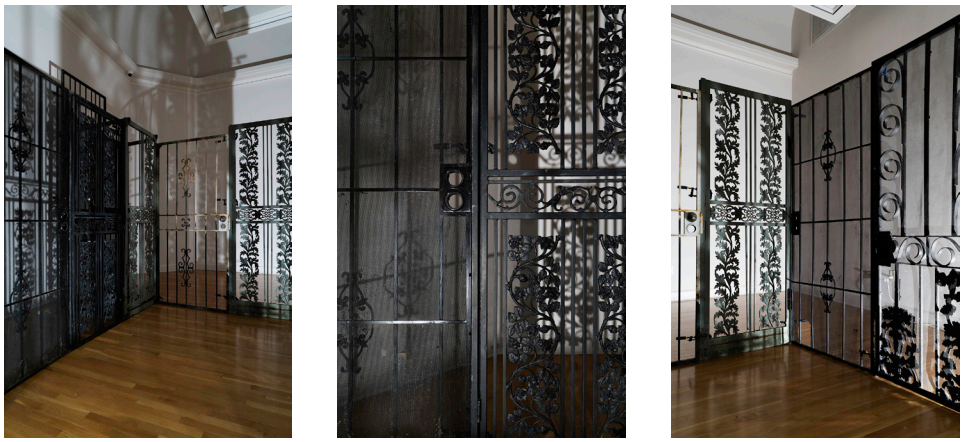
In *Double Vision*, two sections of iron gate, spray painted silver by its previous owner, are stacked on top of one another, leaning vertically against the wall. Their hinges and braces keep just enough space between them so that their visual form appears doubled. In that doubling, the wears of

time show—designs bent out of shape in one section but not the other. It's like a slightly warped reflection, highlighting the marks and wears of its own history.

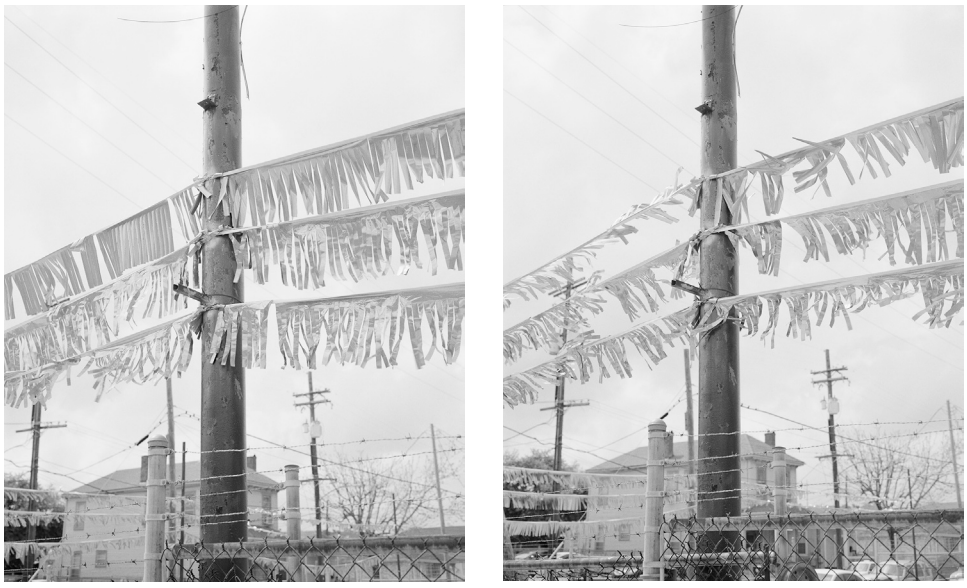
F. 4, 5

In a larger-scale, site-specific installation piece, titled *American Yard*, security doors create a room of shadows, intervening within the architecture of the gallery. Making the room smaller, one enters into something of a three sided cage, about 70" wide and 100" long. Above and along the room behind the doors, the shadows of their ornate iron decoration are thrown and layered across one another. Again, the wear and life of these objects is heightened. They bring with them their own history of use—as barriers, boundaries, and fences. In the framing of the doors, we see added screw holes, dented doorknobs, cut sections and rusted edges. One door, with screen so worn and windswept that only a few inches of frayed silver remain, calls back to mind the images of the car lot

tinsel blowing in the wind. In this way, the language of the doors both stems from, and re-informs the photographs.



F. 5



F. 6

To make the work, I had to first research and find many of the sites that I was interested in—clearing dust off of old information, and piecing together clues to questions that had not yet

been answered. In my research, I dug through a range of data: images from the Library of Congress, newspaper archives, historical society websites, books, and even image folders on sites like Flickr where people posted their own attempts or excursions. Google maps, satellites, and street views became a tool for cataloguing and narrowing in on sites less specific. At times, I would find conflicting information, providing me with various locations for one event, sometimes miles away from one another. When this occurred, I would dig further, piecing together information from images (if any existed), cross-referencing news articles from regional and national papers.

Ultimately, I would arrive at the sites that I could confirm, or explore entire radiuses of areas where something was said to have occurred. In this work, this accuracy is both incredibly integral and somewhat moot. I sought out the exact sites, yet when I arrived, I catalogued and then wandered. I tried to look at a thing from many different angles. I retraced the steps of stories and histories. I followed leads, I followed my gut, I followed what locals told me. The truth is that as important as every site is, and as clear as I am in the need to document the actual place—down to the coordinates—it's the air in the town that matters. In some places, you can feel the threshold of the county line, like a shift in weather. You can feel the faces change. There is something about the South that is at once indistinguishable and unforgettable. It is mutable; it is history, shifting. It is so alive with the past, in a way that many places are not. All of us are tied to our history, tied to our roles, tied to our place. The best that we can do is to face it, to face ourselves, directly and without excuse.

It is evident that, as sites, the places that I've documented are already somewhere on the path of the long forgotten, made common by their status as unmarked sites. Structurally, these sites are failing too. As with all things, a building can only stand so long, and this work serves not only to

uproot an overlooked history, but also to preserve an index of these sites, as their physical forms come dismantled. The act of preserving is something photography lends itself well to, where physicality fails. It's another attempt at bracing a crumbling building, of holding on to something significant.

F. 7

It is a way to give voice to something unspoken, to make significant the forgotten, to unearth the act of erasure itself. This act—of looking *for*, of looking *at* a thing, and actually seeing it

for the whole of what it is—can be so unshakably profound. In the act of looking, of seeing, we rely on the instinct of our senses, the things that we believe to be true. As palpable as that experience is, it often conflicts with our capabilities of articulation. Language provides a veil over this experience, sometimes heightening, sometimes undermining, that which is true. It can be used as a tool for knowledge, empowerment, or poetry, as much as it can be weaponized for contempt, complacency, denial, and fear.

Culling from newspaper articles of publicly acknowledged lynchings, the title *At the hands of persons unknown* is a direct reference to the criminal permissiveness that was afforded by white-owned newspapers to the privileged white class—of white vigilantism in particular. White newspaper articles describing lynching events—whether publicly announced and planned, or undertaken by enraged civilians—often described these events as being conducted "at the hands of persons unknown." This exact phrase, echoed for decades in many white-owned papers throughout the country, speaks to the allowance of such violent terror—a protection of the white majority by the white majority—in failing to name murderers in acts that were perceived as "fair justice" by the ruling class. This act of protection for those committing these crimes speaks directly to the enormous imbalances of power that exist and continue to play out in this country. While the work seeks to bring forward these forgotten sites, sites of erasure, the title too implies a reckoning with this system. The title aims to unearth within the work these acts perpetrated by "unknown hands," as a way to point towards an unjust society.

The title toys also with the notion of what is to be visually expected of the work. To those aware of its reference, it churns up a dark and violent history and a whitewashing of murderous crimes, yet the images depict the more seemingly banal—post offices, factories, marshes. To those

unaware, It references a human presence, not much of which is felt within the images. Whether one knows the reference of the title or not before approaching this work, one may be surprised to find images differing from their expectation. This is intentional—a way to force the viewer into shifting perspective and assumption of what is being seen, to dig deeper into the background of the work, the history embedded in all of the spaces that we inhabit, and the actors within our social systems.

I think of this role as that of "active viewership," a compulsion to drive others towards intentional curiosity, discovery, and consumption, in a moment when images are so readily and immediately consumed. These images could be viewed on a surface level, but their depth and heft lie so much deeper, offering a bottomless well of history to be contemplated, confronted, and discussed by those who are willing to be active agents in their own engagement. These images aren't meant to be didactic tools, to be absorbed and understood fully on first glance, but rather as a poetic means to grapple with our shared history—images meant to unfurl slowly before you.

To visualize this invisible force, I looked into data maps of the things that I was feeling around me. Maps of incarceration rates by state,[1] documented lynchings.[2] EPA designated Superfund Priority sites,[3] gun shops,[4] and organized hate groups,[5] all paint a picture of an America fueled by elite power, fear, and suppression. I researched and created maps of the things that I could not find maps for—schools with prison pipelines, hate group headquarters, banks with histories of redlining. The eastern coast of the United States is overwhelmed by these visualizations, swallowed up in a frenzied sea of terrible data, stretching like a virus. During American Industrialization (1870-1916),

the South appears plagued alone. During the Great Migration (1916-1970) it traveled northward, sweeping across New England to Chicago.

Felt on a national level, these changes occur in the local, as well. In a moving and impassioned Ted Talk, investor and activist Stephen DeBerry lays out the fundamental factor for why the east sides of cities are almost unequivocally more impoverished, more racially diverse, and infrastructurally neglected.[6] The underlying principle is as simple as it is devastating—wind patterns move polluted air eastward in almost every city spanning the United States. As Industrialization took hold, more privileged citizens no longer wanted to live in the path of this pollution, so cities forced their more vulnerable communities— the disenfranchised, the poor—into these spaces.

DeBerry's talk lays the groundwork for a form of segregation that is not often discussed, which I refer to as 'environmental segregation'. This practice, though commonplace during industrialization, happens with just as much frequency today. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency keeps track of land sites deemed too toxic to exist upon. These sites, known as EPA SuperFund National Priority List (or NPL) sites, are often the byproducts of over-stripping, of land that has been so heavily polluted that it can no longer safely contain or provide. At these sites, large fences are erected around the perimeters, with federal signs warning any at these edges not to come in contact with the soil, water, or run-off present on those grounds—as if the site is completely contained within this thin chain-link chalk line. However, these signs flank only the most polluted sites on their list, those falling under active 'Superfund National Priority' status. And even at these sites, the desire to avoid simultaneously invites an opportunity to prey. Developers often parcel out neighboring lots, erecting shoddy new homes or housing projects, aiming to entice those who can not afford property elsewhere in the city.

Much like the economy surrounding city courthouses and prisons—used car lots, cheap cell phone shops, bail bond offices, and thrift stores—this economy feeds off of those who share a vision of a better life, but struggle to afford it. On some sites, Federal, State, and local governments have attempted to profit off of this otherwise undesirable land, often building low-income housing units or neighborhood schools. In New Orleans, one such school—the Robert R. Moton Elementary School—was erected upon land formerly known as the Agriculture Street Landfill. The school was surrounded by designed neighborhoods, targeting low-income buyers. The school faced many problems over the years, in large part owing to its former landfill status. Due to the hazardous environment and health effects to its students, the school was shut down, and now stands graffiti-laden and crumbling, surrounded at the sidewalk border by spans of chain-link fence. In the neighborhood, residential soil samples of two dozen houses showed toxic levels of arsenic and benzo(a)pyrene—both carcinogenic substances. A block away, the Agriculture Street Landfill site finally fell under EPA Superfund NPL status, and the fences came up. In 1994, A civil judge ordered a settlement of $12 million dollars be paid by the Orleans Parish School Board to nearly 1,500 students who attended the school.[7] The lot, the old landfill, is still sitting vacant, with the wild Louisiana vegetation rising over 6' high, stretching like a sea of vines and grasses, with only one lonely metal-roofed structure rusting, untouched, in the humid sun.

The violence, the current polarity in our country, the scars inflicted on the environment, the injustice, erasure, and silencing—it all felt interconnected. It was all part of the scaffolding for the same invisible architecture. Everything around me seemed touched by this larger structure, and it left a residue of its hand, a trace of having been there. It appeared like a form of delicate and fraught

poetry—in the space between the image and its past. Brutality lay buried, hidden, under layers within picturesque landscapes, empty streets, waving car-lot tinsel in the wind. It appeared like a vacant house, being swallowed up by wild vines—beautiful, but dangerous, hollow, and unstable.

F. 8

Invasive plants, introduced through acts of colonization, run rampant throughout the South, choking out everything else in their wake. The fact that many of the main invasive species introduced into the region during the 18th and 19th century are of Asiatic origin is a testament to the lineage of Imperial Colonialism that had already proliferated throughout Europe and the Anglicized West up until this point. Prized as decorative, ornamental delights, these plants symbolized the exotification of distant colonies, and the power of Western Europe to obtain and assimilate these plants into their own gardens and culture. Born from a tradition of colonial control and resource

consumption by European and Anglo connoisseurs, the vines, in metaphorical fashion, continue the work of their introducers—suffocating the natural landscape in a tangled sweep of blind dominance. That many of these plants have specially adapted means of rapid growth is a fitting emblem of the chokehold of colonialist power over the South. *Dolichandra Unguis-Cati*, commonly named Cat's Claw, for instance, has specialized "claws" of thorny protrusions, literally grasping anything it can in a barbarous clench. Cat's Claw, though, can not compete with the better-known epidemic of Kudzu throughout much of the Southern United States. Able to grow up to a foot a day, Kudzu is legendized for its rapid growth, often referred to as the "vine that ate the South."

Plants have a special way of being both incredibly durable and easy to overlook. To anyone in the South, the myths muse over how fast one of these vines can grow:

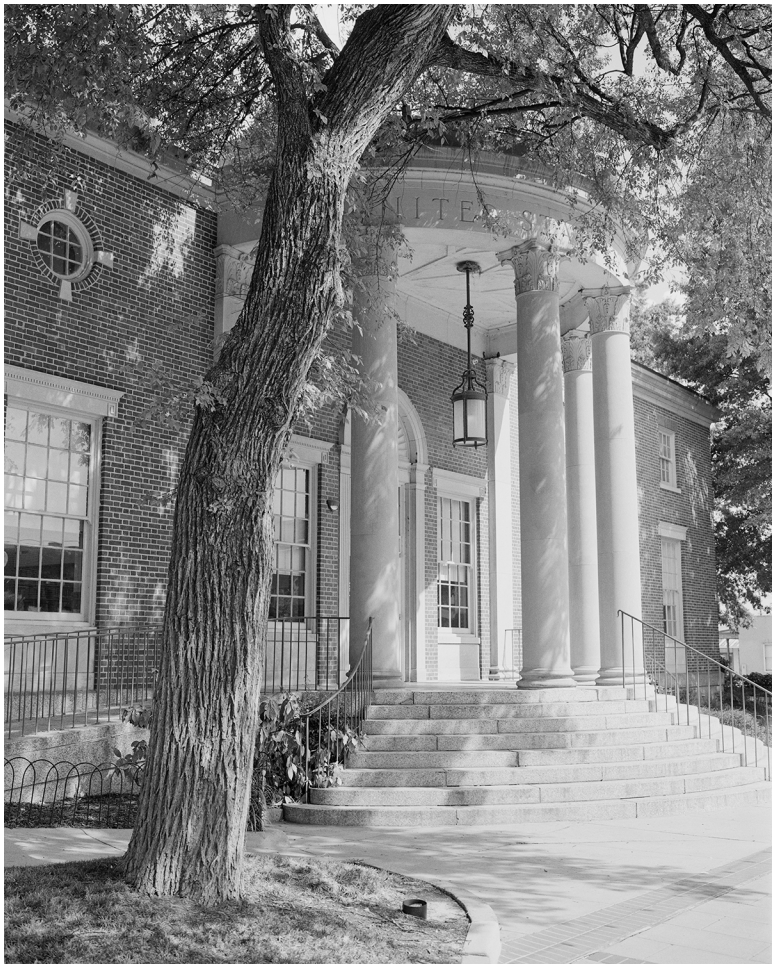
> That you must close your windows
> At night to keep it out of the house
> The glass is tinged with green, even so
> As the tendrils crawl over fields
>
> The night the kudzu has
> Your pasture, you sleep like the dead
> Silence has grown Oriental
>
> —James Dickey, from *Kudzu*. 1963.

This ability, for something to take hold with such inconspicuous immediacy, is a fitting metaphor for the invisible, durable scaffold. It permeates everything; it absorbs everything, it feeds off of everything, if left unchecked. The places in this work are permeated by this hold, tangled in a wild history.

F. 9

In *Igbo Landing, St. Simon Island*, the sublime nature of the landscape easily conceals its stormy history. Both real and mythologized, this photograph looks out from the edge of a marshland framed in dense vegetation toward Igbo Landing, a site made fabled as both a mass suicide and slave rebellion. As story has it, the Igbo, or Ebo, people were being brought by boat from Nigeria in through Savannah, Georgia, to be purchased and distributed as slaves. Placed on a small boat headed for St. Simon Island, the newly enslaved Igbo captives are said to have risen up from their confinement, forcing their captors and crew overboard to drown in the marshes. It is believed that the boat then ran aground in the shallow waters and the Igbo took to the marsh, drowning themselves, as a means of resistance, in what some historical scholars such as Terri Snyder refer to as a "deliberative, collective suicide." [9] In Nigeria, the story of the Flying Igbo carries similar variations, with fables of enslaved Igbo peoples growing wings and rising up into the air to fly home to Africa.

The weight of that strength in defiance, the gruesomeness of the act itself, lies under the surface of a marshland that beckons with silver grasses waving.



F. 10

In *E 5th & N. Main Street, North Little Rock*, the banality of a United States Post Office building, though beautiful in its ornate historical style (complete with a rotunda entryway supported by Grecian columns, and porthole windows designed into the brickwork), is interrupted by the foregrounding of a stately Live Oak tree. The tree feels grand and striking, if not somewhat imposing—its trunk spanning the height of the frame, with leaves blanketing the front entry of the building in dappled shade. This site is insidiously quiet, unremarkable, save for its potential

architectural appeal. What one could easily not know is that this is the site of a lynching of an African American man, Henry James. In 1892, James was accused of assaulting a five-year-old white girl, and his body hanged by a telephone pole at the corner of 5th & Main Street, where the United State Post Office Building stands.[10] Today the building serves as a public library, and there is no visible acknowledgment of what occurred.

This image stirs up another thread of this work—the role of government in this power structure, and our understanding of its positioning within the law and order of society. From local to federal, the images touch upon various forms of governmental power and its relationship to this structure of systematic oppression, through its ties to capitalism, wealth, and privilege. It also implicates various forms of government in their participatory roles of erasure, often as harbingers of tactics utilized against the disenfranchised as a means to attain political or capital gains.

Discriminatory bank lending practices have often suppressed and excluded people based on race, ethnicity, or gender. The practice of redlining utilizes a redraw of mapping to determine to whom, and under what terms, banks will lend money.[11] By creating boundaries around intentionally segregated communities, banks have been able to discriminate in lending that they determine to be 'higher risk,' coinciding with and perpetuating the marginalization of these communities. This is especially felt in the South, where freed people, following Reconstruction (1863-1877), found themselves disenfranchised yet again under Jim Crow.

F. 11

The images in this work were made throughout the American South, a region so deeply steeped in violent tension, dark history, and mythology. In making the work, I focused on the earlier history of white supremacy and the Confederacy within the South. Beginning with the originating seven "Confederate States of America" [12] formed under the Montgomery Convention, I traced that ideology in those most formative and tense years, leading up to and during the Civil War (1861-1865), as a basis for informing my travel and research. Spanning Louisiana, Texas, Arkansas, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida, the work depicts a South that never fully embraced the fate it was handed. It is significant that the work is rooted here—the region within which America seems to be able not only to contain but also reflect

outward its more sinister nature. As a point of origin, the region has acted as a mirror within which we see our most vicious, least forgiving, traits.

Within this zone, and then moving along the Northeast following the Great Migration, we see the consequences of a region unwilling to let go of its bigoted and hateful ways. Utilizing data from the Southern Poverty Law Center, the Equal Justice Initiative, and various other sources, I began to compile sites of headquarters for what the SPLC recognizes as "organized hate groups." One such location is the American Family Association, a 'church' operating out of Tupelo, Mississippi, whose mission is to uphold "traditional family values." [13] The group is notorious for being anti-homosexuality, racist, and anti-Semitic.

F. 12

When I arrived to photograph the American Family Association headquarters, I became immediately nervous. Aside from my own starkly opposing values, I was struck by the fact that the organization had purchased the entire block, and had erected buildings flanking both sides of the street, with an elaborate system of security cameras and notices of surveillance. On top of that, they had removed all of the sidewalk from the entire block—something that had been present on every other block of Tupelo up until that point. I drove by once, trying to take a quick initial glance, and circled the neighborhood, parking in a vacant lot a block away. As I started noticing people walking back and forth between the buildings, I sat in my car longer. All of the people I saw were white men, entering "employee only" signed doorways, wearing matching shirts. All of the cars in the parking lot, though different makes and models, were white. After ten to fifteen minutes, I mustered the courage to walk down the center of the street, in broad daylight, and photograph their building. The low, flat building stretched on, with only a front sign and a high radio tower reaching above.

I also photographed the private residence of Don Black, the founder of StormFront, the first ever organized hate group site on the internet.[14] His unassuming home lies on a quiet corner in Palm Beach County, Florida, nestled back into the lot by thick vegetation. Not more than five minutes away, just over one short bridge, sits the front gate of Mar-A-Lago. Don Black and many other Supremacist leaders, seem to operate their groups via a system of websites, audio sermons, P.O. boxes, and encrypted electronic currency as a means of protection. If someone wants to attend the annual meetings of the Klan, they have to exchange a series of forms on paper via P.O. box with the organizing Ku Klux Klan chapters. If you want to support a "church," or subscribe to sermons online, you need to pay via Bitcoin. Again, this raises a conundrum over the facilitation of these groups via something like the United States Postal Service, a governmental entity, as well as the role of ethics within the free market.

F. 13

Documentary by nature of the subject, this work doesn't fall purely into the category of "documentary," instead it borrows from that history as a means to a more open-ended dialogue. This work is about eliciting conversation, feeling, emotion, not purely informing. In bringing this work into a physical form, sequencing becomes an essential part of the process. In envisioning this work in its final iteration, a book, I've employed similar decisions into the space of the gallery. The images are meant to flow in a non-linear path, following neither chronology nor narrative.

Working with the architecture of the gallery, it was important to introduce sculptural elements as a way to disrupt and intervene within the design of the space. I wanted the physicality of the exhibition space to reflect and enhance the tensions already present within the work. In *Holding*, the viewer's entry into a back room, a continuation of the image sequence, is barred by two iron

security doors floating in front of the doorway. The doors, standing vertically, parallel, about a foot apart from one another, create a blockade of sorts. You can still enter the back room, but you are

F. 14

forced to navigate your body differently to gain access into that space—there is a discomfort. I wanted to create within the gallery, and with the audience, this tension between the body, access, security, and architecture. As the work questions how history plays out, and the powers within it, this piece questions the self. It signals an invitation to re-examine our own roles within this space of the work. *Holding* serves as a way to bring the viewer back to their own body, their own interaction with place.

This relationship to the body, to the self, and to an acknowledgment of our own participation within these systems, lies within the heart of the work. In the words of Bryan Stevenson, Director of the Equal Justice Initiative, "If we create spaces where we resurrect the truth, we can change the iconography of the American landscape; we can get to something that feels more like freedom; and we can achieve something that looks more like justice." [15] I hope that this work can help to hold that space open, for truth and dialogue, and shifting perspective.

FIGURES

1.	*Black Eyed Susans, Ruffner Mountain, Birmingham, AL.* 2018 Archival Pigment Print, Framed		20"x16"
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12.	*American Family Association Headquarters, Tupelo, MS.* 2018 Archival Pigment Print, Framed		25"x20"
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14.	Installation views of *Holding.* 2018	Iron security doors, steel	36"x80"x20"

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BIOGRAPHY

Allison Beondé is a visual artist exploring issues around power, history, place, memory, and culture in the American narrative. She holds her BFA from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in partnership with Tufts University. She has received a Traveling Fellowship through the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, a Light Work Grant, and an Artist Grant through The Canary Lab at Syracuse University. She was a recent fellow at the Constance Saltonstall Foundation for the Arts, in Ithaca, New York, as well as a finalist for the Michael P. Smith Fund for Documentary Photography through the New Orleans Photo Alliance. Her works are in the permanent collections of: BNY Mellon, Pittsburgh; Light Work, Syracuse; and the Newcomb Art Museum, New Orleans. She will be receiving an MFA from Tulane University in May 2019.

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