Haunting the Canon
Landscape, Labor, and the Bible
in the Art of Bessie Harvey

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines Bessie Harvey’s artwork under the thematic groupings “landscape,” “labor,” and “the Bible.” I argue that she mines the fetishized aspects of United States history out of the physical landscape in order to foreground that haunting structures that are engrained in the land itself, depictions of the laboring body, and interpretations of the Bible. By applying the framework of “haunting,” I further situate Harvey’s body of work as a critical approach to the canonical history of the United States, the art historical canon, as well as the biblical canon.
Introduction: Haunting the Canon

“Haunting,” as it has been theorized within an expansive body of literature, is the means by which the dark undercurrent of modern existence shapes subjectivity, as it lies slightly out of view. It is a mode for understanding the forces that persist today and structure lives—such as oppression, dispossession, and repression—but are not fully evident or visible. Avery Gordon writes in her book, Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination:

Haunting is one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with (slavery, for instance) or when their oppressive nature is denied (as in free labor or national security).¹

In the case of hauntings, the ghost is not a resurrection of the lost object; it is a symbolic marker of it. The ghost is a figuration of the aftermath, the thing that survived despite the supposed death of its structure, stuck in a liminal space, its living referent unresolved. Thus, the ghost tasks its subject with either conceding to the delusional image of history and a perpetual haunted state, or combatting it as the ghost appeals. In other words, the subject must reinterpret history within the contemporary context in order to lift it from its haunted state.

On August 12, 1994, Bessie Harvey passed away at age sixty-five, seven months before she was included in what many consider the true dawn of an American artist’s career: the Whitney Biennial. Harvey first showed her art in galleries in 1984, nine years after she began sculpting and eleven years before her death. Her relatively short art career gained wide recognition from prominent museums and galleries—including the Whitney, the Smithsonian Museum, Artists Space, and DIA Art Foundation (in Group Material’s Democracy exhibition)—and she was also awarded the Tennessee Governor’s Award of the Arts shortly after her death.3

Despite her substantial representation in exhibitions and collections, the literature and criticism focusing on her work is limited, consisting of numerous short-to-mid-length articles and biographies in exhibition catalogs, excepting curator Stephen Wicks’ extensive essay in the catalog for the Knoxville Museum of Art’s 1997 retrospective of her work, Awakening the Spirits: Art by Bessie Harvey, which is largely informed by interviews conducted by Robert Cogswell. Much of the writing that delves into her work focuses on its visionary dimension or African influence, and few look into any one piece in great depth or with a critical lens situated within contemporary dialogue. Further, Harvey’s work is stowed away in most of these institutions’ storage warehouses, rarely on

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3 Faye Harvey, conversation with author, July 19, 2016, Maryville, TN, digital recording.
view. In a sense, her legacy has largely been lost to time. Her work haunts the art world, in her absence, as it awaits the proper recognition it deserves.

Harvey’s work parallels the haunting dynamic by positing the viewer as the subject of haunting and the art, or artist, as ghost. As such, Harvey refuses to decontextualize the sculpture from the time and place of its construction, and disrupts its complacent nature by alluding to a contaminatory history. As does the land, her material source, carry with it history, as does the black body, tainted by the means of representation thrust upon it.

The first chapter, “Subverting the Southern Landscape,” argues the case for reading Harvey’s figural work as landscape. She rejects the traditional genre of landscape painting and its erasure of human presence, foregrounding her subjects’ relationships to the land. This is furthered through the material significance of her use of wood to depict the body in anguish. Her wooden sculptures uncover the way in which African American history is bound up in the land and naturalized as so, and by doing so, offer hope for the subversion of these structures of oppression.

The second chapter, “Refiguring the Laboring Body,” focuses on Harvey’s depictions of laborers. Ranging from reproductive and domestic labor to manual and industrial labor, she highlights the rigidity of labor
roles for African Americans, tracing these limitations from fully coercive systems under slavery to more subtle, yet still coercive, systems since slavery. The majority of the chapter examines labor in relation to gender.

The third chapter, “Salvation and Blame in the Bible” focuses on what is perhaps Harvey’s greatest focus in her larger body of work: the Bible. In her depictions of biblical figures, she claims the prominence of people of African descent in the Bible, and further reads the scripture as an allegory for African American history, especially focusing on sections that offer hope for salvation. Her depictions of biblical women work to absolve them of the guilt that is placed upon them, and further works to displace that blame to their male counterparts (where applicable).

Throughout each of the chapters, Harvey, in a sense, also haunts the canons that she is in dialogue with: the historical canon, the art historical canon, and the Biblical canon. Her position as a black woman living in the South under and after Jim Crow lends to an understanding of history that is void from its common prominence. Harvey’s scenes of oppression under societal structures work to haunt the historical canon; they give voice to these narratives, allowing them to demand the resolution that has been denied of them. As a self-taught artist existing often on the periphery of the art world, she was not well versed in the art canon, and this posited her at a unique locus from which to subvert it. This thesis aims to highlight the facture that distances her work from
that of white artists whose work is blind to race or oppression, and therefore fundamentally disconnected from Western history. Her work haunts the gaps in the art historical canon, throughout her thematic variations. Finally, she haunts the biblical canon by situating it from the perspective of a black woman, perhaps the most underrepresented voice in literature surrounding the Bible.

Land, labor, and the Bible, in their haunted depictions, have all been instruments of subjugation against African Americans. Harvey engages with their oppressive applications in order to subvert them, haunting representation in and through these very themes in order to transform it. She cannot, alone, bring haunting to an end, but by uncovering the various ways in which it manifests, and enacting a reciprocal haunt upon the canons that aid in these forces of repression, she cedes to the ghost’s appeals, its desire to be recognized, and then transmits those appeals more broadly through her art’s own haunting presence.
Chapter One: Subverting the Southern Landscape

Land was historically and is still central to African Americans’ struggle for freedom and equality. The ancestors of a majority of people of African descent living in the United States were kidnapped from Africa—the land that Bessie Harvey believed was granted to them by God—and brought to the New World, to a vast expanse of land, which was itself stolen from its indigenous inhabitants. Coerced into enslavement thousands of miles and an ocean away from their homeland, black people were forced to cultivate the Southern landscape on plantations where they were subjected to harsh and inhumane labor conditions, performing figuratively and literally “backbreaking” work. Enslaved African Americans produced massive amounts of wealth through their labor, yet all the fruits of that labor were deposited into the hands of white people. The land itself thus became an instrument of domination in the hands of the powerful to control the enslaved population through the extraction of their labor to tend to that land.

In the immediate period following slavery, African Americans were trapped in a similar relationship with the land, often forced to work as sharecroppers, denied their rights to that land, earned through their

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4 Bessie Harvey, interview by Robert Cogswell, Alcoa, TN, October 6, 1989, tape recording, Record Group 340, Box 8, Folder 6, “Bessie Harvey” (General 2 of 4), TN State Library and Archives.

decades of forced servitude, and their deserved reparations of forty acres and a mule. To this day, landownership and regulations are racist, structured to oppress black people through practices like redlining and gentrification. This land—and most notably the trees that flourished there—was also literally a tool of execution of black bodies within the long history of extrajudicial hangings and later lynchings (which remained a common practice into the twentieth century)\(^6\) in the United States. Trees dotting the Southern landscape were implemented to enact violence, and, in the present, stand as markers of this violent past. Throughout this history, the land has in a sense also been held captive, usurped as private property by imperialists and forced to bear witness to the horrors of slavery committed upon it.

Harvey was born in Dallas, Georgia in 1929 and moved to East Tennessee at age twenty, in 1949 or 1950,\(^7\) where she resided until her death. She lived under Jim Crow laws for the first half of her life and learned of the gruesome reality that was life under slavery from people in her community. Therefore, she was painfully aware of the abuses and traumas committed in the South. However, Harvey found solace and relief in that same land. As a child, she allowed her imagination to run free in nature, providing her with an escape from poverty, and in adulthood, she

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\(^7\) Bessie Harvey, interview by Robert Cogswell, Alcoa, TN, March 3, 1989, tape recording, Record Group 340, Box 8, Folder 6, “Bessie Harvey” (General 2 of 4), TN State Library and Archives.
continued to retreat into the natural Southern landscape when she went fishing. In 1974, when she began making artwork,\(^8\) she reclaimed that land and spread it throughout her community as artwork. She picked out wood that had naturally divorced itself from the landscape—driftwood, fallen branches, and exposed roots—and employed this salvaged wood to tell both her own story and the stories of her enslaved ancestors who lived and labored in the Southern landscape.

Bessie Harvey is primarily a figural artist, but the landscapes she crafts—although always populated with figures—are as much subjects. Between roughly 1984 and 1989, she created a series titled “Africa in America,” consisting of approximately twenty works. The prominence of landscape in this series points to the importance of the land as the site of the narratives depicted and further alludes to the land as an active participant in these histories. With this series, which includes *The Hanging Tree*, *The First Washing Machine*, and *At Work*—all of which will be discussed in this thesis—Harvey moved away from her usual standalone single figures to more expansive scenes constructed in a landscape. These range from simple suggestions of a landscape like a twig representing a tree glued upon a plywood base, to more fully defined landscapes that hint at topographical variation, like the one in *The Hanging Tree*, alternately titled, *A Thin Line* (1984, Figure 1).

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\(^8\) Wicks, Stephen C., *Awakening the Spirits: Art by Bessie Harvey* (Exhibition Catalog) (Knoxville: Knoxville Museum of Art, 1997), 15.
As W.J.T. Mitchell has suggested, landscape is itself a medium. He argues for a postmodern concept of landscape that expands the conventions of the genre, which is canonically confined to landscape painting. Landscape painting simultaneously presupposes and negates the idea of landscape as an entity separate from its representation. Obviously, the landscape must exist first in order to be represented, but the rigid category of landscape in art is confining in its “emphasis on natural objects as subject matter,”9 because the landscape is not neutral nor devoid of subjects. Mitchell further insists:

Landscape is itself a physical and multisensory medium ... in which cultural meanings and values are encoded, ... It is a material “means” ... like language or paint, embedded in a tradition of cultural signification and communication, a body of symbolic forms capable of being invoked and reshaped to express meanings and values. ... As a fetishized commodity, landscape is what Marx called a “social hieroglyph,” an emblem of the social relations it conceals.10

Harvey’s work represents not the fictive, ideal landscape employed in the nationalist agenda, but, as Mitchell describes, the landscape as it is shaped by human presence and history, specifically that of African Americans. Harvey’s sculpted scenes uncover the power structures embedded in the “fetishized commodity” that is landscape in order to subvert them and return agency to the people whose histories are hidden within it, represented by the figures who populate her scenes, whose

10 Ibid., 14-15.
bodies are composed of physical traces of that landscape. By unveiling these narratives that are stowed in the landscape, Harvey also holds those who aimed to erase their presence accountable.

In *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*, Darby English justifies reading Kara Walker’s figurative silhouettes as landscape, as this thesis proposes in relation to Harvey’s work. Walker interlopes the tradition of landscape painting by utilizing its formal strategies while foregrounding the presence of figures. This subverts the primacy of land in traditional landscape painting by pointing to the erasure that landscape painting enacts “in its formerly dominant pictorial forms as well as its now ascendant ideological ones.”¹¹ The contemporary persistence of the imperialist ideology expressed in landscape painting necessitates both Walker and Harvey’s interventions in the genre in order to return the human presence and its convoluted relationship with the land to depictions of landscape.

Harvey crafted narratives out of wood from the trees from which black people were lynched, trees grown from the soil cultivated by their labor and stained with their blood. The history of slavery is literally ingrained in the trees and soil of the still lush, although dwindling Southern landscape, lending a metaphorical physicality to the ways in which slavery and other subjugative, racist structures have persisted in

the present in perhaps, although arguably not at all, more discreet forms. She retrieves her materials from the physical landscape, as it existed in the 1970s, ‘80s, and ‘90s, when she was making artwork, to depict the abuses that occurred in that same landscape historically, most prominently in *The Hanging Tree*, in order to draw out the cultural and social history embedded in the land. She draws this analysis further into the present with *Wrapped, Tied, and Tangled*, commenting on the oppressive forces thrust upon African Americans, which are naturalized, literally hidden in the landscape waiting to be mined. By returning to the past, using the Southern landscape as a vehicle, Harvey is not attempting to relive or simply represent the realities of slavery and its aftermaths in the United States. Rather, she represents landscape to point to the tense relationship between black subjects and that land, tracing the naturalized legacies of slavery that persist and shape black subjectivity in the United States in the present.

**Landscape as Witness/Landscape as Perpetrator**

Landscape is integral to *The Hanging Tree’s* narrative dimension (Figure 1). The scene consists of a jagged, cliff-like landscape constructed from a single chunk of wood upon which two parallel vignettes take place. On the left, a black man—his race denoted by black paint and clarified through Harvey’s commentary—is hung from the scene’s lone tree, rendered as a thin twig. Three wooden figures stand to his right,
witnessing the act. A silver strip of land, which divides the scene into its two sections, punctuates the center of the landscape. To the right of this silver sliver of land, a black woman nurses a white baby, evidenced by the hint of a paper white tone peeking out from its pink wrapping. Harvey contextualized the image depicted: “so she nursed a white baby to health, and in the meantime they was hanging her grandson because he looked at a white girl in admiration.”

Harvey acknowledged the tension between the two sides of the scene—the nursing woman on the right and the hanging on the left. She elaborated further:

So that caused a thin line. There's a thin line between these two [sides of the scene], which was four eyes, and the eyes was the eyes of God to me that was watching this all the time. And, down through the years, the old black people, even if they killed them, they still prayed and believed that God was going to make it better one day. And today is the better day. ... They won't hang her son now if he looks at somebody, and the white woman's milk is pure and good now, for her baby to grow on. But see, God is the one who done this. Integration didn't do any of it. That's what that piece was all about.

The leftmost section of the landscape, which contains the hanging, is painted a rusty almost burgundy red-brown along its sides. This hue of reddish brown suggests associations of blood, which, as it floats under the hanging feet of a young enslaved man, evokes the blood that has stained the Southern landscape, shed by the countless enslaved people murdered in the South under and after the institution of slavery. The brownish tint

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13 Ibid.
of the blood further implies that it is dried blood, indicating that this is an act violence confined the past, as Harvey noted, “they won’t hang her son now.” The lush green delineating the ground in the left section of the piece refers to the man’s youth, cut short by this execution.

The central section, bereft of figures, projects up into space, separating the violent hate crime on the left from the subtler act of violence—the black enslaved woman nursing a white baby—on the right. This outcropping, painted metallic silver, evokes the dead landscape of winter, and also suggests metallic particles in the soil ready to mine, referring to the aluminum smelting plants in Alcoa, Tennessee, where Harvey lived for the majority of her life. The spindly tree from which he hangs, bare of any leaves or blooms and therefore devoid of life, is a reminder of the routine presence of death in the lives of African Americans. Two pairs of eyes, rendered as cowrie shells appended along the central dividing section, suggest life within the landscape, countering its desolate appearance. However, in their amputated state, divorced from a body, with no means to move or speak, the eyes also suggest a witness trapped in the land, unable to intervene. Harvey explained that these are the eyes of God, which bear witness to the acts taking place on either side. She places them there to refer to God’s role in relieving the suffering of African Americans: “people think integration is what done this, but it’s

\[14\text{ Ibid.}\]
not. It’s the prayers and the eyes seeing and having mercy.”

She believed that all the good that came after integration, the shift into a period in which the woman’s grandson will no longer be hung for looking and the white woman can nurse her own babies, was a result of African American’s prayers rather than integration itself. God was a constant witness within the landscape who watched as all of these acts took place. In *The Hanging Tree*, his eyes are dormant, stuck in the landscape, observing and hearing prayers, but not yet fulfilling them.

Harvey’s words reflect those of freedmen in the immediate period following emancipation:

... O. W. Green and Clayborn Gantling emphasized that “[t]was only because of de prayers of de cullud people, dey was freed.” Former Louisiana slave Charlotte Brooks ... believed that “[w]e done the praying and the Yankees done the fighting, and God heard our prayers way down here in these cane-fields.”

And so, it is apparent that Harvey was not alone in her assurance of God’s role in the betterment of African American lives. God literally watched these acts occurring in *The Hanging Tree* from within the land over which the young boy’s blood ran, and eventually acted upon black people’s prayers to end slavery and, with it, this sort of violence; and so the young man’s blood has now dried. Harvey extends this metaphor into the twentieth century, referring to integration. However, countering the dried

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15 Ibid.
blood is a bright red patch of land situated below the grandmother figure, evoking freshly drawn blood. This suggests that the more subtle act of violence and coercion to which the woman is subjected—the exploitation of her reproductive labor—is not confined to the past, as will be discussed in the following chapter.

Acts 10:38-39 in the King James Version of the Bible reads:

How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with power: who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil; for God was with him. And we are witnesses of all things which he did both in the land of the Jews, and in Jerusalem; whom they slew and hanged on a tree.

Harvey would have read this verse many times, and the image of Jesus “hanged on a tree” surely filtered into her depiction of a young black man being hung. In a sense, all the black people murdered senselessly through the history of the United States were martyrs, as Jesus was, who were sacrificed in the journey toward liberation. As James H. Cone described, crucifixion “was a public spectacle accompanied by torture and shame—one of the most humiliating and painful deaths ever devised by human beings.”17 The cross and the hanging tree are parallel instruments of execution in this sense, connecting the suffering of Christ to the suffering of African Americans. To be linked to Christ in this way promises hope of a similar redemption and salvation, as Christ now sits at God’s right-hand in Heaven. “Christ crucified manifested

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God’s loving and liberating presence in the contradictions of black life,” and Harvey cements God’s grace by inserting His eyes to look upon this scene. So, as Cone writes, “while the lynching tree symbolized white power and ‘black death,’ the cross symbolized divine power and ‘black life’—God overcoming the power of sin and death.”

Each of the figures in the piece, excluding the boy being executed, seem to sprout out organically from the landscape, because the points where their legs meet the ground are either obscured by their clothing or mediated with putty. This forges continuity between their wooden bodies and the wooden base representing the landscape. God is embedded in the land, and these black figures appear to grow out of that same land, cementing the primacy of their connection to God and the agency they possessed and utilized through prayer to end slavery.

Aside from God, the land is, in a sense, the only unbiased witness of the forced labor that built our country; but simultaneously, the land is bloodstained as the site of slavery and executions of black bodies. As with history and memory, nor is landscape neutral; it is embedded with traces of forced labor and haunted by trauma. Trees and the landscape existed long before humans, and therefore bore witness, arguably impartially, to events that we conceive through the biased lens of history. Those same trees, however, were used as instruments to enact violence against black

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18 Cone, 18.
bodies with hangings and lynchings, so the land assumes the role of both witness and perpetrator.

When Harvey began making artwork in 1974, the formal system of slavery had been abolished for only 109 years, but to say that 1865 marked its end is fully untrue. Slavery, some historians argue, continues to this day, upheld through the very constitutional clause said to end it, the Thirteenth Amendment, and through Reconstruction policies, Jim Crow laws, systematic and institutional racism, labor roles, and innumerable other exclusionary forces. This haunting legacy of slavery in the United States, and especially in the South, has been mystified through nationalistic, pedagogical and other institutional and societal means. The landscape was cultivated by enslaved people, and the Old Money legacies that carry on today were built on the labor of black Americans, but the labor and pain exerted during the development of the Southern economy is fetishized in the national remembrance of history. Landscape painting exemplifies this erasure in historical remembrance as a genre defined by a lack of human presence.

Landscape historically has been used as an apparatus to support nationalism. W.J.T. Mitchell pondered the connection between landscape painting and imperialism: “is landscape painting the ‘sacred secret language’ of Western imperialism, the medium in which it ‘emancipates’,
'naturalizes', and ‘unifies’ the world for its own purposes?” In traditional western landscape painting, the landscape is mythicized as untouched and natural, “as transcending property and labor,” an infinite blank canvas upon which imperialist desires and aims may be projected. Human presence is usually void from these depictions, at once feigning a natural, unmediated encounter with nature—which in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, with widespread imperialism, privatization of land, and rapid industrialization was a slowly eroding possibility—and simultaneously erasing the presence of indigenous and Afro-diasporic populations and their labors.

Landscape painting often presents the landscape from a privileged quasi-aerial view, situated on a mountain or hilltop. Harvey’s sculptures are mostly small in scale and necessitate viewing from above. She forces the viewer into the privileged position of the land surveyor that is associated with imperialism and colonialism. In the case of a white viewer, the view from above would recall their and their ancestors’ complicity in the process of imperialism and colonization in which they stole land from its indigenous inhabitants and then privatized that land; in the United States this culminated with the establishment of plantations which came to form the crux of chattel slavery. Harvey expressed hope that her work would be displayed to educate black people

19 Mitchell, 13.
20 Ibid.,17.
in her community, and by figuring the scale of her work so as to predicate a view from above, she transplants the black viewer into the privileged position from which they have been historically deprived. Thus, the work plays a dual role, causing very different affective experiences depending on the social position of the spectator.

The small scale of the works and the resulting elevated perspective also places the viewer into a God-like position. Painters employed this technique in the nineteenth century American school of landscape painting, Luminism. Darby English explains:

\[\text{in the luminist construction of landscape, the painter is not author but witness. Deputized by God and underwritten by nation (often literally), his paintings are visual testimonies to the land’s fulfillment of His promise, testimonies upon which the viewer reflects.}^{21}\]

In a similar manner to the luminists, Harvey deferred authorship to God, stating: “I’m really not the artist. God is the artist in my work.”^{22} But while the luminists employed God-as-author as a means of framing control over land as a God-given right of the state and its people, Harvey defers her role as artist and author to God in order to foreground the all seeing eyes of God that looked over and from within the landscapes and eventually answered the prayers of the figures. Luminism was used as a visual tool to romanticize imperialism and colonialism and turned to the landscape as its subject, neglecting the humans who inhabit that land.

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^{21} English, 121-2.
The presence of light in landscape came to symbolize God and His will far off in the distance, which, when used strategically at the hand of the nation, became a justification for imperialism and is closely linked to the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny that drove American imperialism west, toward God’s light. Light is fleeting, and so the presence of God in luminist painting is temporal, symbolizing God paving the way for the imperialists to take over that land. Conversely, God is literally embedded in the soil in *The Hanging Tree*, nestled into the central strip of landscape, and so his manifestation is permanently grounded there as a constant witness.

**The Plantation as the Panopticon**

Although signs of the plantation home itself are absent from the landscape in *The Hanging Tree*, the narrative Harvey described within the scene situates it within the period of legal slavery in the United States. Furthermore, the three figures crowded together to the right of the hanging man, spectators of this horrific act, are all painted black, and are therefore presumably also enslaved. The black spectators cement this hanging within the bounds of the plantation, as opposed to public executions and lynchings performed before a white audience.

The scene takes place on a detached fragment of landscape with a precarious jagged base that gives it the appearance of a floating cliff, isolated so as to indicate the separation of the plantation from the outside
world. Achille Mbembe discusses how concentration camps during the Holocaust acted as sovereign spaces, existing in a “state of exception,”\textsuperscript{23} which were independent from the “normal state of law,”\textsuperscript{24} and the same is true of plantations. The physical boundaries of the plantation created a demarcated area in which the patriarch assumed the position of the sovereign ruler. The bounds of this sovereign space acted as a threshold within which certain acts, which were inadmissible outside of the context of slavery, were permitted, including forced labor, forced procreation, sexual assault, and murder. Further, within the system of chattel slavery, legal protection and basic human rights were not granted to the majority of the inhabitants, the enslaved workers, subjecting them to a figurative death, which often narrowly preceded physical death. The plantation was also optimized for surveillance, and in this sense, is akin to the Panopticon, Jeffrey Bentham’s prison model, which comprises cells arranged concentrically around an observation tower.\textsuperscript{25} The tower stands as a perpetual surveilling force and reminder of punishment, and therefore intended to affect constant obedience on the part of the prisoners. In the plantation, the plantation home with its wrap-around porches stands in for the central tower of the Panopticon.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 12-13.
The ground in *The Hanging Tree* abruptly projects up vertically to form a cliff-like segment of land, which would give those within the scene and unfettered view of the surroundings, and further, the scene would be visible from all around. The female figure’s fearful stare, as expressed by her wide, bulging eyes and open mouth, is directed past the bounds of the scene and suggests an outside gaze. Further, the man being executed hangs over the base of the piece, extending its limits beyond its visible form. These formal features hint at an extended field, perhaps populated by the overseers of the plantation and the remainder of the enslaved population that is not depicted. This implied location on the plantation in tandem with the suggestion of an unseen audience perhaps places the viewer out of view, within in the plantation home, along with the white executioners whose invisible, haunting presence lingers over the scene.

The piece’s cliff-like form mimics a stage, and the left section of the landscape extends up vertically, creating another stage-within-a-stage containing the more visceral depiction of violence. This section is roughly cylindrical, and serves the same function as the panoptic tower. In the Panopticon model, the central tower acts as a constant reminder of surveillance, so it, in turn, also warns of the punishment that will follow any misbehavior detected from within it. The left section of *The Hanging Tree* showcases this act of retaliatory violence as a reminder to the rest of the enslaved population, represented by the sample of three black
spectators, of the discipline that awaits any perceived form of resistance that might be detected by the surveillance force that lurks outside the depicted scene.

The central strip of land also projects up and contains the eyes of God, which stands to continue the panoptic parallels. The all-seeing eyes of God play the same role as the central tower in the Panopticon within the Christian doctrine. The ever-looming threat of God’s witness to one’s wrongdoing is intended to curb sin. God can see everything that happens on Earth, and the constant threat of his wrath is imbued in his role as constant witness. God’s latent disciplinary role would, in context of *The Hanging Tree*, be directed towards the white people responsible for the hanging, secondary to his role as the provider of salvation for African Americans.

Mbembe explained the importance of high ground (“hilltops and valleys, mountains and bodies of water”\(^{26}\)) in the strategic arrangement of colonial settlements, because of its optimization for surveillance. He names this organization “vertical sovereignty.”\(^{27}\) *The Hanging Tree* recalls a natural panoptic form in its abrupt height, towering over its surroundings as both a point of surveillance and a stage upon which punishment is enacted. In this way, the scene’s landscape exemplifies this exploitation of the land within the national agenda.

\(^{26}\) Mbembe, 28.
\(^{27}\) Ibid.
Unraveling the Naturalization of Structural Oppression

Bessie Harvey’s 1983 sculpture, Wrapped, Tied, and Tangled (Figure 2, henceforth referred to as Wrapped) evokes the human form, consisting of a single piece of found twisted wood with two plastic balls embedded as eyes. The wooden mass suggests a bean-shaped figure who is wrapped and tangled up in vine-like extensions coming out from its body, raising umbilical associations while also suggesting bondage. The figure is stained dark brown, and therefore, as with the majority of Harvey’s figures, presumably black, and affixed atop a rectangular wooden board. While this piece is not a depiction of landscape, it is a form found in and shaped by the Southern landscape, so is a material trace of the past and present Southern United States. In her use of naturally shaped wood to connote the bondage of African Americans, Harvey points to the naturalization of forces of oppression in historical consciousness.

Naturalization is the process by which social structures are ingrained so that they are seen as fact, feigning inherency. The term structure itself implies something rigid. Political scientist William H. Sewell Jr.’s expanded “theory of structure” aims to destabilize these edifices that seem to naturally determine social existence, such as gender, class and race, and also language, representation, nationhood. Sewell attempts to return agency to social actors who perpetuate oppressive structures that have become naturalized in their continual reproduction.
Structures are transposable and “can be applied to a wide and not fully predictable range of cases outside the context in which they are initially learned.”\(^{28}\) The ability to adapt these structures creatively and discretely to new situations, Sewell argues, requires an actor’s true knowledge of the structures, and knowledge connotes will behind action. Seemingly “impervious to human agency,”\(^{29}\) such structures, in their mystified state, dissolve any possibility of resistance. By uncovering the systematic ways in which structures are implemented, reproduced, and perpetuated, change is possible: agency is restored to the structurer and the structured, and further, the structured may become the structurer.

During Reconstruction, white people actively worked to regenerate the systematic disenfranchisement of African Americans begun during slavery through economically suppressive laws and the enactment of a process of forgetting the centuries of slavery beforehand, which simultaneously negated white responsibility in that history. Those in positions of power actively reshaped the structures that enabled the system of slavery, adapting them to the present by concealing them within new, but arguably similarly oppressive, structures. Thus, the process of naturalization, which was applied to soften the effects of the system of slavery, continued past its legal end. The systematic oppression of African


\(^{29}\) Ibid., 2.
Americans did not persist on its own, and rather, cognizant actors worked to continue it within the legal conditions of emancipation.

Stephen Wicks summarized Bessie Harvey’s explanation of *Wrapped*: “a small, brown figure with amber eyes is imprisoned in a web-like network apparently of its own making. ... Harvey insisted that the figure possessed the power to break its chains.” This implies that the web is self-inflicted, as evidenced by its umbilical quality, growing out of the figure’s abdomen. *Wrapped* is one of Harvey’s only unclothed single figures. Because of its vulnerable nudity and cord extending from its abdomen, the form suggests a baby, leading to a commentary on how black children are born into oppression, and how, further in the past, they were born into slavery in the hereditary system in the United States. Therefore, if the binding web was attached to the subject at birth, this inherited subjugated position in society, represented by the web, is not self-inflicted, and, in effect, nor is inequality the fault of those affected by it, as many white Americans believe. Saidiya Hartman identified the process by which, post-emancipation, freedmen were posed as indebted to the system that freed them—the same set of structures that, centuries earlier forcibly revoked their freedom. This white liberal rhetoric demanded that black Americans prostrate themselves before the power structures that oppress them, especially in their compliance with the discipline and structure of the free labor system, as to be discussed in the

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30 Wicks, 23.
following chapter. In essence, white power structures expected docility and obedience from black subjects in return for their freedom.  

The choice of words in the title is essential to Harvey’s subversion of the naturalized structures of oppression. Wrapped, tied, and tangled describe the arrangement of the web that confines the figure and the actions that put it there. Each verb corresponds to an opposite prefixed with un- that reverses its action: “unwrap”, “untie”, and “untangle.” One can easily imagine the first two actions, “wrapped” and “tied”, likely being performed in the order they are presented. For instance, a cord is wrapped into a bundle and tied around itself, upon which it is stored away. While out of sight presumably untouched, the third action occurs, and the cord is tangled by an invisible hand. This extended metaphor refers back to Sewell’s theory of structure, in which the agent, whose hand tangles up its subject within structures of oppression, is unidentifiable, his actions hidden from view. Structures are put into place often legally and visibly—as with slavery, for instance—and are further complicated, tangled up, as time runs its course and further structures are thrown into the mix. Left alone, these structures become increasingly entangled. Yet, they are simply tangled, not cemented, glued, or welded, and therefore, possible to undo.

The figure is bound in a rigid, seemingly inescapable web of roots, which slowly and sturdily wrapped around itself as it grew from nature.

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31 Hartman, 126.
Despite its hard materiality, wood is not unbreakable and nor are the figure’s bounds; the title connotes actions which are all reversible. Just as the metaphorical cord can be untangled, untied, and unwrapped, so can this web of bondage. Furthermore, after enough time has passed, divorced from a living tree, wood rots. Harvey’s rigid wood contrasts the postminimalist materials like hung felt and piles of candy, which transform over a period of hours or days in the exhibition space. *Wrapped* will likely remain in the condition it was created as long as it is kept in stable environments with appropriate temperature and humidity levels; if shifted into a space where these elements are unstable, pervious to physical factors, and therefore change, the wood would likely begin to rot, and the cage would fall apart. The cage feigns permanence in what is rather an extended process of decay, which would be expedited by severing the cage altogether. Because of its umbilical quality, growing out from the figure’s belly, to sever the cage would equate to cutting the cord, metaphorically freeing the subject from the structures which at first seem physically inescapable.

*Wrapped* is in dialogue with process art’s interest in the plasticity of materials. In his 1968 essay “Anti-Form”, Robert Morris rejects the idea of absolute form in the art object, and points to the value of art whose materials show the effects of process, gravity and time: he writes, “Disengagement with preconceived enduring forms and orders for things
is a positive assertion. It is part of the work’s refusal to continue estheticizing the form by dealing with it as a prescribed end.” He further advocates for a move away from rigid rectilinear sculpture toward a “direct investigation of the properties of these [non-rigid] materials.”\textsuperscript{32} In this sense, the author’s hand became subservient to the effects of gravity and time.

The twisted wooden form defies expectations of wood as a medium and is so complex, that it seems it would be a rare manifestation in nature. However, the curved vine-like outer cage appears fused to the inner core at several points, suggesting that the wood was found in its twisted form: Harvey’s daughter confirmed that Harvey did not manipulate the wood into this shape, noting that she likely found it in a creek or riverbed.\textsuperscript{33} So this figure and the extensions bound around it were shaped in and by nature. In a similar vein to post-minimalist sculptors’ interest in the effects of physical forces on materials, Harvey was concerned with ways in which gravity, water, and bugs shaped the wood she worked with, and she highlights the organic spontaneity of the sculptural form by juxtaposing it with a piece of industrially cut plywood as its base.


\textsuperscript{33} Faye Harvey, conversation with author, January 17, 2017, Maryville, TN, digital recording.
Harvey’s use of organic wood as opposed to industrially mediated materials like felt, molten lead, or plywood stresses a clear distinction between her work and post-minimalist sculpture. In her use of a fully natural material, wood, that clearly shows the effects of natural forces and processes to depict a black figure in bondage, Harvey establishes a physical link between the binding forces of oppression and natural forces. Her use of wood brings another layer of meaning to the title’s allusion to bondage through its material connection to the history of lynching in the United States. Black labor, blood, sweat, and tears are literally embedded in the Southern soil, and trees grew out of this soil. The same trees were instruments of execution for countless enslaved and emancipated African Americans.

Artists working in the 1980s and ‘90s, contemporary with Harvey, such as Felix Gonzalez-Torres, furthered this investigation into the effects of various forces on materials. Rather than a commentary on sculpture itself, Gonzalez-Torres’s work evokes these forces in the gallery to forge an analogy between the bending weight of physical forces and historical and social structures, which have, in some cases, equally visceral effects. Gonzales-Torres’s 1991 installation, Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.), (Figure 3), evokes the corner piling form of Lynda Benglis’ Quartered Meteor (1969, Figure 4), but substitutes lead with a piling of colorful individually wrapped candies, which the audience is invited to take and
eat. The candies stand in for the body of Ross, Gonzalez-Torres’s partner who died from complications from AIDS. As the audience pilfers the candy from the pile, slowly shrinking its weight, they participate in the symbolic diminishment of Ross’s body, which reflects the actual effects of AIDS on his body as his illness progressed.34

Rather than employing yielding materials that would sag and bend in the exhibition space due to the effects of gravity and time, Harvey plucks wood from the landscape, which has been shaped in advance by the same non-human forces which process art investigated. Her work does not, as in the case of Morris and other post-minimalists, enact a commentary on art production or the art object. Instead, like Gonzalez-Torres, her use of wood and its material connection to the Southern landscape links the physical forces that shaped it to systematic forces of oppression. AIDS is, in a sense a discriminatory disease, in light of its demographic effects, and similarly, trees are discriminatory weapons. However, the extremity of AIDS’ consequences during the 1980s was grossly multiplied by the United States’ government’s refusal to acknowledge it and, therefore, treat or prevent it. In the six years that passed between the first diagnosed case of AIDS in 1981 and Ronald Reagan’s acknowledgment of the epidemic in 1987, 20,849 Americans died.

from complications due to AIDS.\textsuperscript{35} This comparison foregrounds the agency of the state in perpetuating oppression. The United States government actively worked to oppress African Americans, legally, and turned a blind eye to extrajudicial violence against black bodies. While the state did not necessary directly enact this violence nor run the plantations—and neither did the trees themselves—they actively routed their power in favor of the white oppressors and against African Americans. The land became an instrument of control and violence because the state allowed it.

Trees do not grow in a vacuum: as they develop, they are affected by gravity, time and decay, and are also in the presence of human forces, which affect nature directly (deforestation, industrialization, and land privatization, for example) and arguably also indirectly via cultural formations. They do not cognizantly nor independently enact violence; only in the hand of human actors do they become a weapon. Harvey points to the way in which human structures that oppress people are also embedded in the land, by drawing out from it a figure which is born of the land, but also bound by it.

The title, \textit{Wrapped, Tied, and Tangled}, also merits comparison to Richard Serra’s \textit{Verb List} (1967–68, Figure 7), a foundational work for process art. This work on paper lists around one hundred verbs associated

with sculpture that imply a direct object to receive the action, such as “to wrap”, “to enclose”, and “to encircle”. These verbs invoke the aforementioned interest in forces such as gravity, and Harvey’s title implies the same sense of force. However, Serra’s verbs are all listed in their infinitive forms, presented as possible actions that may occur or be taken up by the artist. In contrast, Harvey uses the past participle form of these verbs, implying actions that have already been performed. *Wrapped* pushes the conventions of wood as a rigid material to showcase the effect of forces sort of frozen in time, in contrast to Morris and others’ interest in the way materials are shaped in real-time; this contrast between effects in process versus effects already cemented lends to a further symbolic reading of Harvey’s sculpture. The rigidity of the wooden form in tandem with the title’s past tense can be read as a critical analysis of the seemingly static and inherent forces of oppression that affect African Americans. Further, the infinitive verb form employed in Serra’s piece requires an active, willing participant to perform the action; Harvey’s past participle verbs imply actions already committed against a subject—the figure represented—by an unnamed perpetrator. This recalls Sewell’s “theory of structure,” which emphasizes that the agents who perpetuate oppressive societal structures are fetishized, hidden from view. In the way public consciousness and memory have been constructed, oppression, abuse, and poverty are seen as static forces that disproportionately affect
people of color, rather than conditions that are actively reinforced. The mystification of the forces that keep groups of people oppressed based on the color of their skin is just as binding of a force as oppression itself.

In its reference to bondage, Harvey’s *Wrapped* is connected to Melvin Edwards’ 1970 installation, *Then There Here and Now – Circle Today* (Figure 5), and his several other barbed wire installations in the 1970s that, in keeping with the concerns of process art, show the effects of gravity on a non-conventional art material; in contrast to Morris’s felt pieces (Figure 6) which are reflections on the status of authorship and chance, seen through a lens blind to race, Harvey and Edwards’ works specifically connote entrapment, and by way, the oppression of African Americans. Barbed wire is a material that is associated with agriculture and livestock, which was also used to keep humans contained against their will in concentration camps and now in prisons, which in the eyes of many critical historians and theorists, are understood to be a continuation of slavery licensed by the Thirteenth Amendment as a primary tool in the continued oppression of African Americans. Barbed wire is used to mark thresholds between public and private, between nature and property, and to restrict movement in and out; an inherent facet of enslavement is controlled movement: forced movement into the

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37 Ibid.
slave trade and limited movement under enslavement, within the bounds of the plantation.

The first patent for twisted wire with sharp projections was filed in 1860, so barbed wire was not likely used on plantations, but it is reasonable to assume it or something similar was fashioned as a barrier to keep enslaved people in by force. Barbed wire is intended to tangle up its prey, immobilizing them by ripping into their flesh, and its visual presence precedes the physical injury: its repetitive, sharp profile has become an emblem of private property, a deterrent to trespassing, a symbol of ownership, and by association, power: it is a violent material, as containment and entrapment are inherently violent, especially by physical, visceral force. The figure in *Wrapped* is bound up in a smooth wooden web with rounded knots replacing the sharp protrusions of barbed wire. The twisted cage appears a less violent form of bondage: as the case of *The Hanging Tree* illustrates, trees are unsuspected weapons, but history shows that they have a potential for violence even greater than that of barbed wire.

As farms proliferated the United States, situated within wide-open plains as opposed to the heavily wooded South, they necessitated a means of enclosing their livestock and keeping out intruders: barbed wire was their solution. Before barbed wire, nature was manipulated to perform the

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same function. Trees and bushes, especially thorny, sharp bushes, were planted to enclose land, and in this way, barbed wire is a *naturfact*, a technological innovation that mimics nature, because it formally imitates thorns.\(^{39}\) *Wrapped* is constructed not of a material imitating nature but from nature itself, and therefore, speaks directly to the land as a tool in systems of oppression.

Barbed wire was used to enclose increasingly privatized land as the landscape of the United States expanded west with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 and Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848;\(^{40}\) as Timothy Iijima noted, “the first privatization movement, from 1790 to 1920, put more than a billion acres of public land into private ownership.”\(^{41}\) This privatization allowed for the establishment of plantations, which perpetuated the justification for slavery as it deposited huge amounts of wealth into the American economy. Plantations were often surrounded by woods, which act as a disorienting labyrinthine barrier. Wood is also used in its mediated form as lumber to construct fences to contain property, whether material, animal, or human, and in the present, is often combined with barbed wire. Wood does not have the same violent physicality as barbed wire, but shares a similar history of violence hidden under its natural guise. Harvested wood was used to build plantation

\(^{39}\) Ibid.


\(^{41}\) Ibid., 37.
homes and slave quarters, and trees themselves, still in their natural
form, were used for lynching countless enslaved people and free African
Americans until disturbingly recently, with the most recent recorded
lynching, in 1981, during Bessie Harvey’s lifetime, two years prior to the
creation of *Wrapped* in 1983.42

The Southern landscape was the site of subjugation under slavery,
but the entire system was premised on the extraction of labor. The land
would not be embedded with the trauma that it is nor have been twisted
to the violent means that it was without the demand for labor that
compelled white Europeans to establish the global slave trade. That
demand for labor was generated through the reach of European
imperialism, which seized billions of acres of land, mainly in North and
South America, from its indigenous inhabitants. They then displaced the
indigenous inhabitants of Africa, dispossessing them of their own land,
into these new colonies to cultivate this stolen land. Therefore, the system
of slavery depended upon a perverse interlacing of land and labor.

42 Neil Conan. “The ‘Last Lynching’: How Far Have We Come?” Talk of the Nation,
/transcript.php?storyId=95672737.
Chapter Two: Refiguring the Laboring Body

Bessie Harvey left school in the fourth grade, in the mid-1930s, and entered the wage labor workforce to help support her family after her father’s death. In 1992, looking back on decades spent laboring in the domestic sphere, she created a series of self portraits titled *Seven Days of the Week* to depict her weekly work routine as a child in the form of seven figures, one named for each day of the week:

Monday was wash day. Tuesday was ironing day. Wednesday was the day we delivered the clothes to the white people. Thursday was cleaning day. Friday was yard day. Saturday was grocery day. And on Sunday we all went to church.

This evidences how, from an early age, Harvey was fully immersed in domestic labor roles. Harvey continued to work in domestic labor positions until 1979, when she retired from her position as a housekeeper at Blount Memorial Hospital after she slipped and hit her head on the job while cleaning up a boiler explosion. She then devoted her newfound free time to her artwork. Shortly after this shift, Judy Higdon, who saw Harvey’s artwork when Higdon’s father was a patient at Blount Memorial, visited Harvey at her home to inquire about her art. Higdon was the first person to tell Harvey she was an “artist”, a title she had not previously considered for herself. Harvey did not sign her early artwork; her

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43 Wicks, 14.
44 Ibid.
daughter recounted: “She started, after a while, when she realized what she was doing or what she was told she was doing, she was asked to start signing and dating the pieces . . .” Harvey enacted a transformation when she began signing her artwork.

The artist’s signature is a formalized marker of an object’s status as art, and in turn of the maker as artist. Signing her artwork was a necessary formality for Harvey’s entry into the canonical art world, and in a way, cemented her new status as an art worker. Like many of her fellow so-called outsider artists, including Thornton Dial, Harvey crossed a threshold from manual laborer to artistic laborer, a turn that informed her artwork as she labored making it. For the majority of her life, Harvey labored publicly in the dual manual-domestic role of her paid domestic positions, and privately in the domestic sphere, mostly single-handedly raising eleven children. She turned to work as an artist full-time after retiring from her job. She therefore experienced the realities of each of these different labor spheres firsthand; her roles as maintenance worker (as a housekeeper at the hospital), as mother, and artist are not distinct, and rather layer upon each other to inform her identity and, in turn, her artwork.

Harvey’s artistic career, spanning from 1974 to 1994, coincided with expanding conceptions and critiques of work. In the art world, labor came

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45 Faye Harvey, conversation, June 6, 2016.
to be a central focus in American art after World War II, building on Duchamp’s pre-World War I investigations that, via the readymade in particular, challenged the singularity and role of the artist. In the 1960s, artists working in the context of minimalism, conceptual art, and pop art turned their attention to the role of the artist in the capitalist workforce and aimed to deconstruct the specialized and privileged category of artistic labor altogether. As the United States shifted from an industrial economy to a more abstract post-industrial information economy, artists enacted a reciprocal and subversive shift in their own sphere, critiquing the characteristics of labor in late capitalism by appropriating its strategies. 46 Carl Andre, a railroad worker turned artist, brought the materials and forms from his manual labor profession into the canon, presenting stacks of bricks and railroad ties as fine art.

Harvey similarly appropriated materials, techniques, and subject matters that were tied to her differing labor roles, as a mother and maintenance worker. Her work is mostly constructed out of found wood, which she cleaned and smoothed before painting and adding craft and found materials, such as shells, “googly eyes”, and packing peanuts. She made miniature clothing for her figures, drawing on her experience laboring in the domestic sphere. Further, her many portraits of domestic and manual labor bring these labors that are often obscured and made

46 Julia Bryan-Wilson, Art Workers: Radical Practice In The Vietnam War Era (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 1-5.
invisible—that of the housekeeper, the custodian, the factory worker, the sharecropper—into view.

Harvey began making artwork shortly after the formation of the Art Workers’ Coalition in 1969, which continued the investigation of artist as worker developed through the twentieth century.\(^47\) Around the same time, with the rise of the feminist movement, artists like Mary Kelly, Merle Laderman Ukeles, and Martha Rosler turned attention to the domestic sphere and, through their art, brought to light the more concealed forms of labor historically performed by women.\(^48\) Harvey’s work coincided with these movements and she personally labored in these spheres—manual, domestic, and artistic. Harvey situated her numerous investigations of labor under a close lens of race and gender, informed by her personal experiences and inherited oral histories, gained by growing up black and female in the South under Jim Crow laws.

**The Hanging Tree and the Enslaved Laboring Body**

The historical relation between labor and race in the United States is dark and extends back centuries before the proper establishment of the American Republic. Millions of people were forcibly brought from the African continent to the New World to labor for the profit of white Europeans. Through this dispossession, displacement, and enslavement, those subjugated under the slave trade were also subjected to “social

\(^47\) Ibid., 1.
death,” a process using domination and force as means to alienate and dehumanize people by severing their geographical and kinship ties and employing coercion so as to completely disenfranchise the subject; Orlando Patterson argues that social death is a foundational aspect of enslavement because it reduces people to the labor they provide.\textsuperscript{49} Slaves were forced into this isolated space on the plantation, an entrapment intensified through the act of kidnapping and subsequent extreme geographical and epistemological displacement into a Christian imperialist society. Those subjugated within the institution of slavery were forced to labor in the productive sphere encompassing manual and agricultural labor—both skilled and unskilled—and in the reproductive sphere, where women’s physical reproductive labor—such as birth and nursing—as well as emotional labor like nurturing were extracted for profit.

*The Hanging Tree* is divided into two sections by *A Thin Line*, as the alternate title names it, which is rendered visually as a silver outcropping of land stretching across the center of the landscape; Harvey’s daughter described this as the line between love and hate,\textsuperscript{50} dotted with the eyes of God. Hate is presumably manifested in the hanging and love represented by the black woman nursing the baby of her oppressor. But, love and hate—and power—are really ingrained on both sides of the composition. On the left, a young man is executed for his accused love,

\textsuperscript{49} Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982),1-2.

\textsuperscript{50} Faye Harvey, conversation, January 17, 2017
because his existence as a being capable of this emotion threatened the stereotype of the “black [man]’s imagined insatiable lust for white women;”\textsuperscript{51} this stereotype is one strategy for enacting social death and key to preserving the white man’s domination, and, so, the white master resorts to murder to both silence this man and to cement his image within this stereotype, in this spectacularized death which is preceded by social death. The black woman, his grandmother, extends love through her sacrifice to nourish another’s baby—this act is by-definition, within the coercive system of slavery, nonconsensual—and is simultaneously repressed on the basis of her supposed aptitude for reproduction.

With this juxtaposition, Harvey illustrates the perverted twisting of life and death that Foucault theorized as biopower and Achille Mbembe further builds on with his theory of necropolitics. Biopower proposes an asymmetrical relation of sovereign power over its subjects where the state maintains the “power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death,”\textsuperscript{52} implying that an individual’s right to live is not inherent and therefore at the will and whim of the state. Mmembe’s concept, necropolitics, furthers this idea, proposing that the state, rather than allowing its citizen to live, produces “new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the

\textsuperscript{51} Cone, 7.
status of living dead.\textsuperscript{53} ... Slave life, in many ways, is a form of death-in-life."\textsuperscript{54} 

On the left, the implementation of violence is a reminder of the power the master holds over slaves—he controls their right to life because he possesses the power to kill them. Harvey juxtaposes the man who has been exiled by way of death with his grandmother whose physical body is exploited to supply life to the master's baby. Under the American system of chattel slavery, the slave’s body and life essentially belong to the master because they have been subjected to a tripartite loss of humanity: “loss of a ‘home,’ loss of rights over his or her body, and loss of political status. This triple loss is identical with absolute domination, natal alienation, and social death (expulsion from humanity altogether).”\textsuperscript{55} The second loss, that of rights over one’s body, is most explicitly relevant to the woman figure in \textit{The Hanging Tree}: the master controls the woman’s physical body, pilfering her breast milk away from her own children for the benefit of his white child, forcefully controlling her means of reproduction.

\textit{The Hanging Tree} illustrates the extent to which slave women’s bodies were controlled and taken advantage of by slave masters and their families, by portraying an enslaved woman nursing a white baby. Harvey described the piece in an interview:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{53} Mbembe, 39.
  \item \textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 21.
  \item \textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
I heard the older people talk about in the slave times, see I wasn’t there then, but I heard them talk about how the white woman’s milk wasn’t strong, and sometimes their babies died because the milk wasn’t strong, and the nanny, she had babies so often, her milk never dried up. She always had milk, so she nursed the white baby to health. And in the meantime, they was hanging her grandson, because he looked at a white girl in admiration…and they hanged him for it. . .\(^{56}\)

This depiction of nursing shows how extensively the limits of forced labor were expanded: not only was the enslaved woman presumably being exploited for her manual productive labor, but also for a substance literally produced by her body; white slave owners extracted literal sustenance and nourishment for their children from enslaved women. In light of this, it is clear that the entanglement of flesh and commodity under slavery was especially complicated in the sphere of reproductive labor, which encroached upon the physical body, epitomizing white slave owning families’ perverse dependency on slaves.

In her 2004 book *Laboring Women: Gender and Reproduction in New World Slavery*, Jennifer L. Morgan traces the evolution of gendered and racialized conceptions of black women that have persisted in differing forms through and since slavery. In the late seventeenth century, American colonists instigated a shift toward race-based hereditary slavery, inspired by Portuguese colonists in Brazil. They replaced religious difference with racial difference as the qualifier for one’s enslavement, and therefore transformed enslavement into a genetically inherited

\(^{56}\) Bessie Harvey, interview, March 3, 1989.
status. European literature had been kindling the flame of racism that allowed for this shift for some time; travel logs by European men especially were laden with exotic tales of indigenous Africans and Americans which began to construct a myth of difference which centered upon women and their bodies. Specifically, the non-white woman’s breast became the object of ogling and hyperbole at the core of this myth. A 1670 publication wrote of African women, “if [their babies] cry out for the teat, they throw their breasts over their shoulder and let them suck.”\textsuperscript{57} These tales of naked women with sagging breasts filled the European imagination before the majority’s first encounters with enslaved Africans, and, “by the eighteenth century, English writers rarely used black women’s breasts or behavior for anything but concrete evidence of barbarism in Africa.”\textsuperscript{58}

The wet nurse figured in \textit{The Hanging Tree} evidences the way this European obsession with the black woman’s breast evolved under slavery. Initially, purported barbarism justified enslavement in European eyes, but later, the supposed superior childbearing capabilities of black women, constructed from the exotification and hyperbolization of the black female body, came to be of use on a very personal level of reproductive labor. As evidenced by Harvey’s anecdote quoted above which notes the perceived difference between white and black women’s breast milk, black women

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 40.
regularly nursed white babies on the plantation. By inserting this binary
of love an hate onto The Hanging Tree, and associating the black woman
nursing a white baby with love, Harvey highlights the paradoxical value
placed on black women’s milk, which came to be valued by the
descendants of the people who created the myth of the savage African
woman whose breasts sagged so extremely that her babies could suckle
over her shoulder. African women, demonized for returning to normal life
the day after childbirth in seventeenth century travel logs, were forced to
do just that on the plantation after they were forcibly taken from Africa.
Enslaved women were forced to physically nourish white babies over their
own kin who would eventually become slaves (if they were born after the
establishment of maternal descent, which worked to keep black children
in slavery).59

The dress worn by the woman featured in The Hanging Tree
partially obscures the structure supporting her weight so that her
positioning seems precarious, as if she is about to topple backwards. Her
eyes are wide and averted outside of the scene, away from the baby
nursing on her breast, away from her grandson’s murder. The expression
on her face is one of shock, disbelief, or extreme fear, plausible emotions to
experience during a time like this. The figure wears a long faded royal

http://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/yjlh/vol5/iss2/7.
blue dress made of what appears to be a thin cotton fabric, patterned with light pink flowers, with a matching headscarf. Flowers and the color pink are associated with femininity and fertility, and her body and head, the site of knowledge and identity within the body, are enwrapped in these symbols. This points to the essentialized role of women as child bearers and nurturers, which, within a misogynistic and patriarchal society, strategically overshadows women’s autonomy of mind by reducing them to their reproductive facilities.

The back of thin cotton dress is soiled brown and appears caked with dirt as if the woman had lain in the mud. The stain suggests the more ‘in the dirt’ manual labor that women were forced to perform in tandem with reproductive labor. In a reading more fitting with the violent act on the opposite side of the scene, the brown stain appears as if her dress is soaked with blood, dried to a rusty brown matching the base on the leftmost section of the landscape. A bloodstained back within the context of slavery most explicitly brings up images of lashings. The reddish brown seems to radiate out from the point where the woman’s body meets the wooden form that supports her, as if she has sat in this position for so long that it has bore a bloody wound into her back. The rusty color implies dried blood, alluding to the extended period of time that has passed since the wound’s opening. While the dried blood implies trauma confined to the past, as indicated on the left side of the
composition, the bright red patch of ground situated below the woman figure suggests a continuing flow of blood, seeping out from below the dried upper layers. Harvey makes apparent here, with this slowly effected wound, the continual trauma that is generated by the naturalization of black women as domestic laborers and providers of reproductive labor. The pervasive stereotypes of the docile black woman, which have been actively constructed and perpetuated by white people over several centuries are not only oppressive in their invention, but continually affect and injure the people who are subjected to them, so that the metaphorical wound in their backs can never heal.

Alternately, the presence of blood could be a marker of her fertility, evoking menstrual blood. To be drenched in menstrual blood is a hyperbolic visualization of the reproductive labor that was extracted and stolen from black women under slavery. Their reproductive capacities were used for the personal benefit of the household that owned them, nursing the children of the patriarch, and more broadly to perpetuate the institution of slavery in the United States by producing more slaves, born into the system. Black women’s breast milk and fertility were in this sense stolen from them and their babies to benefit white people and to continue the system of slavery to which they were subjected. The multiplicity of meanings that stem from the presence of blood in the scene—the result of violence, the symbolic wound bore over time, and
menstrual blood—points to the way in which the exploitation of reproductive labor is perhaps equally as visceral as physical abuse.

The piece highlights the ways in which black women have come to be naturalized in this role of deeply intimate servitude. The figure of the mammy in the history of visual culture came out of a long process of essentialism cementing the link between black women and domestic labor, which began during slavery and was adapted into and through Jim Crow laws into the present. The woman in *The Hanging Tree* fits all of the criteria for the stereotypical depiction of a mammy: her face is simplistic and round, painted dark brown, with wide eyes and a bright red mouth, and she wears a dress and the iconic Aunt Jemima-esque headscarf while breastfeeding a paper-white baby figure. Mammys epitomize the way in which black women were posed as ideal domestic laborers and came to be associated with a nostalgic image of the “Old South”. Mammys were characterized through their connection to white children, and, so, the white baby latched onto the mammy’s breast became one of her basic visual markers.

By characterizing the female figure in *The Hanging Tree* in this stereotypical way, and further, by placing her on the right side of the composition, which is cut in half by the silver strip of ground in the center, on the “love” side of this binary of love and hate, Harvey begins to unravel

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the complexity of the mammy figure and the relationship between race and motherhood. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders breaks down the “understanding of the mammy as an ultimate representation of maternal devotion,” noting that the dominating romanticized narrative of the close, loving relationship between a mammy and the white children under her care is not substantiated from the perspective of black women, but rather a construction by white people. Wallace-Sanders traces the mammy figure that came to shape in the post-Civil War imagination to pro-slavery novels, which emphasized the mammy’s loyalty and connection to the white family, citing the case of Granny Mott in The Valley of Shenandoah, who purportedly nursed three generations of her master’s family. This example shows the dark reality of the exploitation of slave women’s reproductive labor, and the way in which that reality was perversely twisted to campaign for the continuation of slavery. Enslaved women were forced to neglect their own children, who were also enslaved, by law, in order to care for and nourish the white baby. Wallace-Sanders explains: “her love for her charges becomes more sublime, more extraordinary when it surpasses her love for her own flesh and blood, children who are owned by her master, or at times by the young charges themselves.” So even further than simply requiring that she divert her breast milk to the white baby over her own, the white imagination posed this as a positive, even

61 Ibid., 13-14.
62 Ibid., 17.
63 Ibid., 18.
poetic arrangement. By cementing and romanticizing black women’s devotion to the white children she nursed, pro-slavery advocates feigned a sense of kinship and intimacy between black and white people that they purported was only possible under the plantation system.

Harvey’s decision to project the binary of love and hate onto this scene and to place the mammy figure on the side with love plays upon the way mammies are constructed in American memory and pop culture. The issue of love in this history is complicated by the racialized roles that defined the relationship a mammy would have had with a child under her care. Love erases the ideology of white supremacy and colonialism that fed the image of the mammy, and at the same time, love was central to the characterization of the mammy. The muddling of love and hate within this composition complicates this idea by uncovering the strategies of domination and subjugation that are shielded by this projection of love and kinship. The mammy’s labor power, both in her role as nurturer and wet nurse, is twisted read as love, when coercion really negates the possibility of love in this narrative. At first glance, a portrait of a nursing woman expresses love and physical connection. However, the fact that it is a white baby, and further, the woman’s dress is stained with blood, foils this image and brings to light the coercion that informs the image of the mammy.
Women as Machines: Domestic Service and Reproductive Labor under Jim Crow

As her daughter recounted, Bessie Harvey worked as a domestic for most of her life, cleaning homes, washing clothes, and ironing for households before working as a maid at Blount Memorial Hospital until her retirement in 1979. She married at fourteen and raised eleven children, so, whether at home or at work, she was perpetually laboring in the domestic sphere, as were the majority of black women in the South at this time. In fact, in 1940, when Harvey was ten years old, “60 percent of Black women worked as domestics.” In their essay, “Defining Appropriate Labor: Race, Gender, and Idealization of Black Women in Domestic Service,” Melissa E. Wooten and Enobong H. Branch describe how black women came to fulfill the “idealization” of the domestic servant in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, an evolution of the stereotypes, constructed during the transatlantic slave trade. Black women were posed to embody the perfect domestic servant because they were represented as docile and obedient, traits which an 1872 New York Times article attributes to slavery: “Slavery was an excellent serving school beyond doubt, though a mighty bad moral school . . .” These traits, which were survival tools under slavery, so not to be seen as insubordinate,

64 Faye Harvey, conversation, June 6, 2017.
65 Melissa E. Wooten and Enobong H. Branch, “Defining Appropriate Labor: Race, Gender, and Idealization of Black Women in Domestic Service” Race, Gender & Class 19, no. 3-4 (2012), 294-5.
66 Ibid., 300.
reinforced the power dynamic of the subservient domestic servant and built up the stereotype according to which black women were physically and mentally predisposed to work as maids, housekeepers and nannies. With the emergence of more social roles for white middle-class housewives in the early twentieth century, they increasingly hired other women, mostly black women, to perform social reproductive labors in their homes, such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for children in a return to the social organization of labor roles under slavery (the white “woman of the house” and the black mammy). In her essay, “From Servitude to Service Work: Historical Continuities in the Racial Division of Paid Reproductive Labor,” Evelyn Nakano Glenn writes that,

\begin{quote}
Domestics were employed to clean house, launder and iron clothes, scrub floors, and care for infants and children. They relieved their mistresses of heavier and dirtier domestic chores. White middle-class women were thereby freed for supervisory tasks and for cultural, leisure, and volunteer activity or, more rarely during this period, for a career.\(^{67}\)
\end{quote}

In the twentieth century, black women working as domestics carried out the duties of social reproduction for white families. A century and a half earlier, in the Antebellum South, the exploitation of black women’s labor was intensified, encompassing physical reproductive labor including nursing and childbearing. Post-slavery, the exploitation of black women’s reproductive labor in the domestic sphere took on a less extreme form that

was nonetheless still widely systematized and legally enforced through racist laws and administrative barriers which evolved to continue to oppress black people despite the official abolition of slavery.

Centuries earlier, with the rise of the transatlantic slave trade, a transformation of ideology and rhetoric was needed to frame people of African descent as inferior in order to support the power dynamic necessary to institutionalize slavery. Colonists took this objective further by not only posing black people as inferior, but also attributing both physical and moral characteristics to them that would pose them as specifically suited for the types of labor they would be forced to perform under slavery. Morgan maps the way in which, between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, black women were constructed as savage, monstrous, unfeminine beings, and their inferiority was extended to their entire race. One of the key strategies in cementing this myth of difference was the fabrication that black women did not experience pain during childbirth and therefore were not children of God according to the biblical narrative in which God punishes Eve and all women for original sin with painful childbirth. By constructing this idea of black women as non-Christians, essentially reduced to the characteristics of livestock, who do not fit into God’s definition of womanhood, white culture posed them as ideal laborers both in the productive sphere, because of their physical

\[^{68}\text{Morgan, 47.}\]
resilience, and in the reproductive sphere, because of their extraordinary childbearing abilities.

In tracing the lineage of representations of the black woman, Morgan explains how they were fit into the language of industrialization, capitalism, and the institutionalization of slavery:

African women were materialized in the context of England's need for productivity. The image of utilitarian feeding implied a mechanistic approach to both childbirth and reproduction that ultimately became located within the national economy. Whereas English women's reproductive work took place solely in the domestic economy, African women's reproductive work could, indeed, embody the developing discourses of extraction and forced labor at the heart of England's national design for the colonies.69

Constructing the image of women of African descent as “mechanistic” child bearers was a multistep process utilizing physical and cultural markers of difference to create a sort of mythic being with superhuman reproductive abilities. By equating black women to machines, colonists could prove that they were naturally suited for forced labor.

Harvey’s 1986 piece, The First Washing Machine (Figure 8), is a small sculpture consisting of a wooden plank base supporting a single figure: a woman dressed in a white floral dress and matching headscarf washing clothes by hand using a washboard in a small metal wash bin on wooden legs. Clothes are draped along a clothesline stretched between two spindly trees behind her, and a cauldron filled with cloth sits to her left, resting on a pile of kindling. The title is ambiguous as to its referent,

69 Ibid., 187-188.
either referring to the system of devices situated around the figure, to the figure herself, or perhaps to the combination of the woman and devices. The woman’s hunched body, together with the laundering tools, forms a circuit. Her two arms extend past their bounds to form the two handles of the washboard, which rests in the wash bin, down the four wooden legs supporting it, which mirror the woman’s hunched posture, through the plank base and back up the woman’s legs into her body. In this way, she formally becomes one with the devices of laundering, acting as the motor which supplies power to the inanimate devices. So, the (black) woman’s body together with the washboard and bin form the first washing machine.

If this circuit formed through the combination of her body and the devices is read as a feedback loop, it symbolizes the perpetual cycle of black women as domestic laborers: “African-American women were forced into domestic work generation after generation, sometimes with mothers and then daughters or nieces working for the same white families.”70 And, so, as if part of a feedback loop, black women essentially reproduced domestic laborers for the white families they served, to be sucked back into the cycle, a reflection of the way in which slave women’s babies born into slavery sustained the slave population after the importation of slaves

was banned in America.

Harvey’s *The First Washing Machine* can be seen in relation to a larger tendency in late twentieth century feminist art focused on depicting and critiquing the essentialist conflation of women with their domestic roles. Martha Rosler, Louise Bourgeois, and Linder Sterling each figured their own hybrid woman–machines in the 1960s and 1970s to highlight this inequality,71 and *The First Washing Machine* is Harvey’s contribution to that discourse. The title of her piece is essential to its meaning here, pointing out the societal view that women, especially black women, are natural domestic machines, a modernized evolution of the colonial depiction of black women as reproductive machines. In Linder Sterling’s “Pretty Girl” (1977, Figure 9), a series of collages rendering women as machines, each image consists of an appliance or household machine—ranging from a washing machine to vacuum cleaner—pasted onto a nude woman’s body, in place of her head. The head is the site of thought and reason within the body, and the face is the site of affective expression and marker of individuality; identity is shaped within the brain, and the face is a symbol of identity. By implanting the machine where the figure’s head would be, Linder equates their identity to that machine, and further negates all of their brain capacity and free will by replacing it with a

programmed object. In *The First Washing Machine*, the washing tools seem to extend from the figure’s body like prosthetics, and, so, the figure’s identity is not subsumed by the machine, but rather comprises an integral part of the machine.

That Linder’s figures are all nude furthers their objectification: the woman becomes a sexualized washing machine. A domestic appliance replaces her head, and therefore brain, while her nude body remains. In Harvey’s rendering of the washing machine, the woman is clothed and not sexualized. Therefore the figure is not objectified in its nudity, but rather, purely on the basis of its labor power.

Despite the formal relations between Harvey and the aforementioned artist’s work, there is a gap between the experiences of white and black women in the domestic sphere. These white artists created their works to critique the association of women with the kitchen and domestic labor in the home, but as Harvey’s work insists, black women had long been performing this labor twofold, in the home and in the public sphere, selling that same labor for insufficient wages. *The First Washing Machine*, as it shows a single black woman washing laundry by hand, employs the same strategy by forging together woman and domestic appliance to highlight the objectification to which women are subjected in the domestic sphere. Harvey’s piece, however, also reveals the extended period in which black women have been laboring within this objectifying
framework, conflated with machines. By naming this figure the “first,” Harvey traces this lineage back to the time predating washing machines. The figure is slightly hunched forward, and her stature hints at how arduous this labor is. Black radiates out from the points where her thin wooden legs meet the wooden base, and it appears as though they are almost burnt into the wood. This suggests the woman has been standing in this position for so long that her feet have blazed through the ground below her, trapping her in this position, as though they are welded or melted in place.

Saidiya Hartman discussed manuals written to guide freed slaves after emancipation in her 1997 book, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Hartman unpacks the language in this quote from *Advice to Freedmen*: “Put your trust in God, and bend your back joyfully and hopefully to the burden,” writing,

> Yet the bent back readily invokes supplicance, obeisance, prostration, and humility and bespeaks the utilization of the body as a laboring machine. Just as the lowered eyes, stooped shoulders, and shuffling feet were the gestural language of enslavement, the bent back similarly articulated the domination, violation, and exploitation of the postbellum economy.\(^2\)

The figure in *The First Washing Machine* bends forward, her bent back epitomizing “the body as a laboring machine,” which Hartman traces from the antebellum to postbellum South in the body itself, or rather, the postures expected of it by the systems of domination. Harvey's reference to

\(^2\) Hartman, 135.
this prostrated physicality, in light of Hartman’s discussion, epitomizes the constructed image of the docile domestic laborer, and in this, foregrounds docility as an integral component of the ideal (black) domestic laborer.

Harvey’s treatment of the raced and gendered circumstances of domestic labor also drew upon pop cultural references, especially after her retirement in 1979, when she spent much of her free time watching television. Harvey’s undated metal sculpture titled *Sally the Robot* (Figure 10) is based upon Rosie (Figure 11), the television family, the Jetson’s beloved humanoid robot. *Sally*’s ruffled headpiece resembles Rosie’s, and possesses a similarly cylindrical head, albeit oriented vertically as opposed to Rosie’s, which is turned horizontally. Sally has small metal ears constructed out of the same chicken wire as her head, mirroring the antenna-like projections extending from either side of Rosie’s head. They have similarly robust abdomens, Sally’s rendered in red to contrast Rosie’s blue, perched upon a triangular base. Each of the robot-maids’ faces are simplistic, consisting only of beady round eyes and a wide open mouth.

The idea of a robot maid essentially connotes a slave: an obedient, fully programmable producer of free labor without the capacity of independent thought. In his 2015 book *Imagining Slaves and Robots in Literature, Film, and Popular Culture*, Gregory Jerome Hampton argues
that the Jetsons takes place in the quasi-antebellum South, and that Rosie epitomizes the characteristics of the mammy figure serving a white family.\textsuperscript{73} Rosie is beloved by the Jetsons as she maintains their home and raises their children. In the first episode of the series, aired in 1964, “Rosey the Robot” (the spelling of her name was later edited to “Rosie”), Mrs. Jane Jetson is overwhelmed with her house duties, which consist of pressing buttons on a series of machines to automate cooking, laundry, ironing, and even taking the children to school; she goes out to shop for a robot maid to ease her workload, but due to their high prices, settles for a worn older model who the salesman describes as “still eager, isn’t she? But of course, very H·O·M·E·L·Y.” Mrs. Jetson graciously decides to buy Rosie, and upon hearing her decision, Rosie celebrates.\textsuperscript{74}

Hampton describes a later episode titled “Rosie Come Home”, in which a malfunctioning, defiant Rosie runs away from the Jetson household because she feels undervalued. This aspect is eerily reminiscent of a runaway slave tale, in which questions of morality are projected onto the subject’s fully justified desire for freedom from an oppressive system. Rosie is unable to survive in the outside world, because of her outdated software, and after a failed suicide attempt, returns to the Jetsons where she is warmly welcomed home and promptly receives a new master

\textsuperscript{73} Gregory Jerome Hampton, \textit{Imagining Slaves and Robots in Literature, Film, and Popular Culture} (2015), 12.

\textsuperscript{74} The Jetsons, “Rosey the Robot,” September 23, 1964, written by Larry Markes and Tony Benedict.
cylinder that returns her to her normal obedient self. The notion of
docility here is key to the antebellum metaphor. During reconstruction, as
Saidiya Hartman elucidates, freedmen were basically set up to fail, with
few economic opportunities and criminalization through vagrancy laws,
which required that black people enter into coercive contracts in order to
avoid imprisonment. No matter their desires, black citizens were forced to
labor in the few spheres they could permeate, namely manual, industrial,
agricultural, and domestic, likely under white employers and overseers. A
robot maid would presumably negate any possibility of resistance to
oppressive labor and social structures, and Rosie’s defiance is posed as a
problem inherent to her, which must be disciplined and fixed.

In this narrative, Hampton writes, “Rosie has proven herself to be a
beloved member of the Jetson family but has also accepted her status as
permanent domestic servant with no hope or desire for freedom.
Consequently, [this episode] is the narrative of the contented machine
unable to transcend its domestic wiring.” Further, it illustrates the same
sort of tension between love and hate epitomized by the mammy figure in
*The Hanging Tree* as illustrated in the preceding section of this chapter.
Rosie is beloved by her owners but she craves freedom; unable to

Harvey’s Sally wears a chain around her neck where Rosie dons
another ruffled piece of fabric. The chain is knotted around a metal ball,

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75 Hampton, 12.
resembling the weighted balls chained to shackles used to restrain prisoners, a real object which has developed into an idiom, ball and chain, used to denote something that holds someone back.76 This object hangs from Sally’s neck rather than her ankle, placing the load on her shoulders rather than tethering her to the ground, as is the intention of the ball-and-chain historically. By resituating this symbol where a necklace would be worn, Harvey emphasizes the manual burden of housekeeping work as well as the physical and metaphorical burdens to which women working as domestic laborers were subjected. Further, the immediate recognition of the ball-and-chain as a more neutral object, a necklace, suggests the mystified ways in which legacies of slavery continue into the present. The ball-and-chain would not necessarily fully immobilize her, but would make it extremely difficult to move, referring to the myth of social mobility. The chain placed around a neck also conjures representations of lynching and torture committed against black Americans.

Sally’s head is built out of chicken wire, a material used to enclose domesticated animals as its name suggests. This refers to the equation of black women with livestock that was propagated by white colonists. Sally bares her teeth as she grins widely, in an almost painful expression, conveying the resentment that black women were expected to hide with a  

smile, as with the mammy figure, and simultaneously plays into the animalistic conception of black women historically. The use of fencing also denotes entrapment. As Wrigley describes, “barred from entry into white-collar work, and educated in segregated, underfunded schools, African-American women remained trapped in domestic work.”

Black women were confined within domestic labor roles that required them to be subservient and respectful to white people, and, so, Harvey’s use of chicken wire in depicting this objectified, mechanized housekeeper shows perhaps how inescapable rigid gendered and racialized labor roles were. The placement of a fencing material on the head emphasizes how white people aimed to bind and limit black women’s mental capacities, which is perpetuated in public consciousness through the conception of “appropriate labor” as Wooten and Branch describe, and as well as in practice through intimidation and force, and further through limited or nonexistent educational opportunities.

From the Plantation to the Factory: Depictions of Industrial and Manual Labor

In addition to her investigations of domestic labor, Harvey also portrayed manual and industrial labor, mostly performed by men. Some corners of the Southern landscape, during and post-slavery, underwent industrialization; one of these was Alcoa, Tennessee, the town where Harvey lived for the majority of her life and throughout the entirety of her

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Wrigley, 321-2.
artistic career. The Aluminum Company of America—Alcoa, Inc.—bought seven hundred acres of farmland on the Little Tennessee River and established an aluminum smelting plant there in 1914; the town of Alcoa was incorporated in 1919. Although Harvey never worked at the Alcoa plant, nor likely entered its heavily secured premises, she knew many people who were employees and would have been very familiar with its visual appearance. Her house and church were right off of Aluminum Avenue, almost next door to the main Alcoa facility, and four miles away from McGhee Tyson Airport, which is the main airport servicing Alcoa and Knoxville. Harvey’s practice was situated, in other words, in the middle of a hybrid natural-industrial landscape, and it was here that she salvaged the materials for her work. She got much of her wood during fishing trips to a lake in nearby Louisville, Tennessee, and in addition to the wooden pieces for which she is best known, Harvey made many sculptures from found metal. In fact, her first visionary encounter with an object occurred in 1972 when she found a metal object in her garden in which she saw an “Egyptian face,” an event that she saw as a sign from God which stayed with her two years later in 1974 when she began making art to bring out the spirits she saw as trapped, not only in wood, but in metal and industrial objects as well.

79 Faye Harvey, conversation, June 6, 2017.
80 Wicks, 15.
At Work (1989, Figure 12) is one of Harvey’s most elaborate metal sculptures, consisting of a rusted metal base with a smokestack-like projection extending up on the right side of the scene, dotted with four red circles aligned vertically. Five figures are situated on this vertical form. One, at the very top, holds five silver disks and sits in a chair. Two figures stand on an intermediate platform on the smokestack, each holding a silver disk: the figure on the right has a half-spherical metal object over its face, which perhaps represents a welding mask or a misplaced hardhat. Two additional figures stand at the base of the tower. One dressed in what appears as a maid’s outfit, holds a small broom. The other holds another silver disk, with a welding mask or hardhat on his forehead, and stands behind a basket or wheelbarrow spilling over with translucent pink spheres. To the left of the smokestack, a circular portion is cut out of the “ground”, creating a hollow that evokes a mine or pit, around which a figure pushes a wheelbarrow, filled with brown debris, perhaps meant to suggest bauxite ore, the raw material from which aluminum is made. A black-wheeled object suggestive of digging equipment sits at the far left of the scene. All of the figures are black with bright red mouths and “googly eyes”, except the maid figure who has a round yellow face and a white abdomen, representing an apron, also with “googly eyes” but no red lips, and a round metal button appended to her forehead.
Upon emancipation and the industrial revolution, formerly enslaved people transitioned from one form of coercive manual labor under Chattel slavery to another, wage labor, which increasingly included industrial labor under the racialized postbellum labor market. There are no sources specifically investigating the racial dimensions of labor at the Alcoa plant in Tennessee, but studies of other metal industries in the South detail the segregation that was enforced in them, which is not surprising under Jim Crow laws. Henry McKiven’s study of iron and steel workers in Birmingham, Alabama looks at census data from 1875 to 1920, roughly the first half of the Jim Crow period, to show the breakdown of unskilled laborers. Over an eight-year period between 1880 and 1888, the percentage of black unskilled laborers increased from fifty-eight percent to eighty-eight percent, with percentage of white unskilled laborers decreasing the same thirty percent.\(^{81}\) Forced into unskilled labor jobs, regardless of what skills they did possess, black laborers performed tasks requiring the most strength and stamina while being exposed to dangerous and in some cases toxic conditions.\(^{82}\) Black Southerners also worked as skilled laborers in ore mines, in part because mining companies had employed slave labor previously, so freed slaves were already trained in the mining process, and mining jobs were not desirable to white workers because of the dangerous and harsh conditions. These limited job

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\(^{82}\) Ibid., 46.
options coupled with the economic necessity to take them is an invocation of necropower.

Harvey’s smokestack form closely resembles a blast furnace (Figure 13) in its cylindrical form that narrows toward the base, punctuated with a platform midway. The figure seated atop the tower holds five metal disks, which could represent metal to be loaded into the top of the furnace, and therefore the figure would fill the position of “top filler.” McKiven discusses how the top fillers of furnaces at iron plants in Birmingham were almost exclusively black, because white people refused to fill this role due to the constant threat of injury. McKiven details this role:

Top fillers, virtually all of who were black, worked at the top of the furnace, eighty to one hundred feet above ground, distributing iron ore around the circumference of the furnace hopper. Working under conditions of extreme heat and always exposed to the elements, they risked asphyxiation from toxic gases as well as death from explosions or a fall.83

If the tower is a furnace, the red buttons vertically dotting its surface could represent hearths, openings for loading or ventilation, with the red demarcating the high temperatures inside.

The rusted base of At Work recalls the rust colored ground in The Hanging Tree, a reminder of the blood stained soil of the Southern United States. Blood contains iron, which carries oxygen through the body, a metal that, when it comes into contact with oxygen, rusts, just as this piece has. The figures’ bright red lips along with the red circles dotting the

83 Ibid.
smokestack conjure associations of blood once again. Mining is an incredibly dangerous occupation, subjecting its laborers to harsh conditions and an imminent threat of injury, so the constant reminders of blood reflect the reality of the trade.

The figures, with their black skin and exaggerated red mouths are evocative of black face. Whether this is an intentional reference is unclear, but through the appropriation of a racist stereotype inserted into a portrait of manual labor, Harvey is perhaps commenting on the racialized dimensions of labor in the South after the end of slavery in the United States. Black face is a stereotypical, racist depiction of black people developed by white people to project their constructions of blackness onto “black” bodies while those living within actual black bodies were silenced. It is a form of domination through representation, which, well into the twentieth century, worked to perpetuate reductive and parodic images of black people in pop culture. Similarly, confinement to limited, physically demanding, subordinate jobs is a form of domination that works to suppress black people economically and socially as a continuation of subjugative labor under slavery.

The tall vertical form evokes the tower at the center of a Panopticon, Bentham’s prison model, which he also advertised for industrial contexts. David Brion Davis describes the Panopticon model as “a virtual caricature of the planter’s ideal”, and further argues that the
“Houses of Industry” developed in England in the late eighteenth century were essentially refined and enlarged plantations which applied the “Panopticon principles of surveillance, regimentation, and division of labor.”\textsuperscript{84} The singular figure on top of the tower fills the role of the supervisor with an unobstructed view of the workers situated on the platform and ground below him. By placing a black figure as the supervisor of the industrial site—a position, which, within the racialized hierarchies of the industrial sector, would have been limited to white workers\textsuperscript{85}—Harvey breaks down the barriers between the surveillance force and its target. The tower subverts the power dynamic inherent in the Panoption, and furthers the investigation of the plantation-as-Panopticon in \textit{The Hanging Tree}, as explored in the previous chapter.

Harvey forges a link from the enslaved, female, laboring body in \textit{The Hanging Tree} to the free, male, laboring body in \textit{At Work}, with the depictions of women-as-machines fitting thematically halfway. She foregrounds the effects of representation of black laboring bodies historically, both through visual culture and rhetoric. The question of representation is relevant again in her biblical work. Harvey reinforces positive biblical representations that speak to the strength and salvation of black people, and also challenges the way in which women are

\textsuperscript{84} David Brion Davis, \textit{The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 456.
\textsuperscript{85} McKiven, 123.
demonized within that same narrative, again subjected to projected identities, imagined by men.
Chapter Three: Salvation and Blame in the Bible

As a visionary artist—an artist whose work is directly inspired by visions from God—Harvey credited God as the source of all of her creations. Her children refer to her as a prophetess.\textsuperscript{86} Harvey said of God’s role in the creation of her artwork:

He uses the hands that he gave me with his spirit in the hands and in the mind and in the heart and just in me. He’s all in me, and he expects me to bring it out, so that I can tell the world today that he is my life and he the artist in my work. \textsuperscript{87}

As a devout Christian believer, she often retreated into the bathroom at her home for hours at a time to read the King James Version of the scripture and spent all of every Sunday at her church worshipping.\textsuperscript{88} She knew the bible cover-to-cover and especially as interpreted and preached at her majority-black home church in Alcoa, St. John Missionary Baptist Church, located on a street posthumously named Bessie Harvey Avenue.

Many African Americans were introduced to Christianity under slavery as part of the white Christianizing mission, but simultaneously, the reading of the Bible under white Christianity was manipulated to justify enslavement. As mentioned in the previous chapter, white Europeans crafted the rumor that black women do not experience pain

\textsuperscript{86} Faye Harvey, conversation, June 6, 2017.
\textsuperscript{87} Bessie Harvey, “God is the Artist,” 158.
\textsuperscript{88} Faye Harvey, conversation, June 6, 2017.
during childbirth, and therefore are not descendants of Eve. This and other similar propagandistic tales rooted in the Bible were used to project difference onto the bodies of people of African descent and pose them as degenerate, immoral non-Christians in need of saving both through the biblical doctrine and white paternalism, as an extension of Christianity.

During slavery, the Bible provided hope for salvation. As Daniel L. Fountain writes in his 2010 book, *Slavery, Civil War, and Salvation: African American Slaves and Christianity, 1830-1870*, “freedmen commonly viewed emancipation as either the fulfillment of biblical promise or as the answer to decades of prayer.”89 The Bible is filled with tales of the underdog overcoming obstacles, of freed slaves and overthrown evil leaders; it provides countless examples that offer hope of justice, via God’s judgment and will, for those subjected to systematic injustice. Enslaved people took the Bible, which was forced upon them as a tool of domination, and resituated it in their favor to create a new narrative for salvation. After emancipation, the Bible offered hope in the new, but eerily familiar, context of Reconstruction. Fountain argues that the Bible held unprecedented weight in African American communities postbellum, because its prophecies of salvation, and therefore its validity as a doctrine, had been confirmed.90 As evidenced, from the forced indoctrination under

89 Fountain, 97.
90 Ibid.
slavery to the present, African Americans have interpreted the Bible in relation to their own struggles.

Harvey crafted numerous biblical figures and scenes, and her choice of subject matter within that field is neither comprehensive nor random. She culled from the infinite pool of symbolism that is the Bible to curate a more specific narrative with a lens tailored to her experiences as a black Christian. Each figure or scene that Harvey chose to depict is in some way either especially relevant or sympathetic to the history of African Americans and people of color living in slavery and diaspora more broadly. Ranging from the very beginnings of biblical humanity with several renditions of Adam and Eve all the way to the end times described in the Book of Revelation (and more specifically, from the birth of sin in Genesis to its relinquishment in Revelation), Harvey highlights the prominence of Africans in the Bible by giving all of her figures black skin. In his article “On Failing to Make the Past Present,” Stephen Best argues, “the idea of continuity between the slave past and our present provides a framework for conceptions of black collectivity and community across time.”

Within this view, Harvey’s black biblical figures are a furthering of her aforementioned investigations into the legacies of slavery. Tracing parallels of subjugation, enslavement, and liberation through her selective themes and figures, she curates a biblical narrative that champions hope

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for salvation of the oppressed. Within this distinctly black view of the Bible, Harvey further develops a feminist reading of the roles biblical women play, highlighting and countering traditional depictions that work to demonize women. All of this is rendered in wood sourced from trees, which play key roles throughout the Bible, but most notably in Genesis.

**The Bible as an Allegory of Black History**

Harvey planned to depict Moses throughout his life; whether this came to be is unclear, as photographs of only two pieces figuring Moses, *Moses and the Serpent*, 1988, and *Book of Law*, 1988, are published. Whether or not this came into fruition, her intention speaks to the importance she placed on his narrative. Moses is an especially important figure in black Christianity because of his role in leading the Israelites in their Exodus out of slavery under the Egyptians. The Egyptian pharaoh, in an attempt to quell the power of the people of Israel and eliminate any source of resistance to his power, ordered all male babies in the land be killed. Infant Moses was taken in by the pharaoh’s daughter’s and protected from the pharaoh’s genocidal reach. His life symbolically reflects that of African Americans, as his strength was suppressed from birth. Yet, Moses overcame the obstacles thrust upon him and brought God to free his people, and declared, “remember this day, in which ye came out from Egypt, out of the house of bondage: for by strength of hand

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92 Exod. 1:22-2:10 (King James Version).
the Lord brought you out from this place.”⁹³ This linkage to Moses and Exodus was useful during slavery, as it “gave the slaves a communal identity as a special, divinely favored people’ and foretold of their future deliverance.”⁹⁴ But the focus on Moses within black Christianity did not cease with emancipation; that Moses remains a significant figure, as evidenced by Harvey’s special interest in him, points to recognition of the continued legacies of slavery by contemporary black Christian communities, and further, to the sustaining power of prayer and biblical prophecy for true emancipation in the future.

*Slaughter of the Innocents* (1985, Figure 14) a quasi-pyramidal, cone-shaped form composed of a tangle of bodies, painted black, impaled upon a yellow spike, and splattered with bright red blood. The figures together form an amorphous blob, almost as if they have melted together, where each becomes indistinguishable from the next except for their distinct heads, which convey terrified expressions. Their eyes bulge out dramatically from these simplified, bald, round black heads, and their wide white mouths suggest screams. The form upon which they are impaled features a violently sharp tip facing upwards, which tapers into a wider base, mimicking the shape of a nail.

The title and imagery refer to the biblical story of King Herod’s quest to kill Jesus Christ by ordering the death of all infants in

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⁹³ Exod. 13:3, (KJV).
⁹⁴ Fountain, 95.
Bethlehem under the age of two.\textsuperscript{95} The holy figure, Jesus, is taken into exile in Egypt and protected while countless other children, “the innocents” are put to death at the hand of the leader of the state. Harvey’s figures are probably babies, judging from their bald heads and in keeping with the biblical account. The title, \textit{Slaughter of the Innocents}, is imbued with symbolic potential, which is amplified visually: a mass of bodies, tangled together so that the number present is illegible, are violently pierced through their backs and suspended upon the spike.

Harvey’s decision to render the bodies with black skin suggests a reference to the persistent physical violence committed against innocent black people throughout the history of the United States. The graphic nature of the piece, and the elevated position of the bodies, as if they are presented for viewing, is reflective of the way violence against black bodies is documented and circulated as in the history of state-sanctioned public executions and extralegal lynchings in the United States. This again, in its spectacularized rendering, raises associations with depictions of Christ’s crucifixion, as \textit{The Hanging Tree} did. Harvey never depicted Jesus Christ directly,\textsuperscript{96} because the Bible prohibits the production of “any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above.”\textsuperscript{97} This event in the bible, the massacre of the innocents, is, in a way, a forewarning of what is to come for Jesus. These innocent murdered babies

\begin{footnotesize}
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  \item \textsuperscript{95} Matt. 2:26 (KJV).
  \item \textsuperscript{96} Faye Harvey, conversation, January 17, 2017.
  \item \textsuperscript{97} Exod. 20:4 (KJV).
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
are also martyrs, who were sacrificed in the effort to kill Jesus, and therefore aided in his survival, enabling him to evangelize God's word before he was eventually martyred himself. Further, these infant martyrs pose the innocent black people who have been murdered in the Southern landscape as martyrs towards the eventual salvation of African Americans. Without God's salvation to liberate African Americans, Harvey would not have been able to spread her work throughout the world as she did, and, so, her own evangelization was enabled by the countless black martyrs who came before her.

As opposed to Peter Paul Rubens' 1611 rendering of *Massacre of the Innocents* (Figure 15), there is no trace of the perpetrators in Harvey's version, again alluding to the way in which perpetrators of violence are made invisible in historical memory. Nor are there any adults protecting the babies in Harvey's version. The infants are abandoned upon the spike in their bloodied state, symbolizing the abandonment of black people by the United States government. Rubens painted this version two years after the establishment of what would be know as the “Twelve Years Truce” in 1609, which temporarily halted the Eighty Years War, The Netherlands’ fight for independence from Spain, which spanned from 1567 to 1648. This war was largely fought in Antwerp,\(^8\) the city where Rubens

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\(^8\) Randall C. H. Lesaffer, *The Twelve Years' Truce (1609) : Peace, Truce, War, and Law in the Low Countries at the Turn of the 17th Century* (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2014), 1-2.
resided until 1600. Rubens’ *Massacre* was likely in response to this widespread violence in his birthplace, as was Harvey’s *Slaughter*. Although abstract, Harvey’s sculpture is bloody and viscerally violent, while Ruben’s rendering is largely devoid of blood. Further, her substitution of “Slaughter” in place of “Massacre” used in the other titles emphasizes the violent physicality of the act.

The composition inverts the Renaissance triangle compositional structure, replacing the stability of the conventional compositional device with a dynamic yet precariously top-heavy sense of weight. The force with which these bodies were impaled is apparent, and the vertical drips of blood continue this illusion of movement. The dramatic bulge of the figures’ eyes, making it clear that this image is meant to represent the action in progress, further enforces this dynamism. Their blood drips down, bright red as if it is still wet. This in media res rendering emphasizes how hatred and violence towards black bodies was still actively perpetuated and carried out when this piece was created in 1985, decades after the widespread end of public lynchings.

In Harvey’s 1989 pairing of figures, *Samson* and *Delilah, Samson* (Figure 16) is fashioned from a curled piece of wood, his body ambiguously twisted up around the heap of severed black hair—perhaps human hair or curled yarn—he cradles in his lap. A spraying of glossy black paint

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designates his face in which are nestled round shiny eyes and a protruding mouth filled with gold teeth. He wears a gold earring and resting upon his head like a hat is a bird’s head with a large yellow beak.

Harvey declared that “the black man is about the weakest man on Earth according to what God said for man to be like, but he’s really not like that.” 100 This is perhaps a reference to Samson, the biblical Judge who possessed great strength, which resided in his hair: he was able to break out of any bonds until he trusted in Delilah, allowing his hair, and therefore strength, to be taken from him so that he could no longer “shake [himself] free.”101 The Philistines gauged the now-weakened Samson’s eyes and enslaved him.

Harvey connects this biblical tale to her ancestors in Africa who, long ago, were strong and mighty, but because “Africa has been under a thing”, namely colonialism and the enslavement of its inhabitants, people of African descent are now weakened. Like Samson, Africans were once strong and powerful, but through these processes that they have been subjected to, “everything has been taken away from them that God has blessed them with;” everything in this case refers to their homeland in Africa, their “home, given by God,”102 and by way of the loss of their homeland, they have experienced a simultaneous loss of their freedom.

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100 Bessie Harvey, interview, October 6, 1989.
101 Judg. 16:20 (KJV).
102 Ibid.
Like Moses, God prophesied Samson’s birth, and again, like his biblical predecessor, he was tasked with liberating his fellow humans. Essentially, God sold the people of Israel into slavery under the Philistines to punish them for their worship of false idols, and after they were thoroughly penitent, he brought Samson to initiate their salvation.  

But, Samson succumbed to temptation and lost his strength at the hand of Delilah—one of the biblical seductresses who Harvey figured, as discussed in the following section—on behalf of the Philistines.

The large bird head atop Samson’s head, where his hair, which he cradles in his lap, would have been, is perhaps symbolic of freedom. In her sculpture, *Poison of the Lying Tongues*, Harvey placed an “escape bird” on the figure’s head, symbolizing the mind as the spirit by which one can escape the curse of the lying tongue. The bird upon Samson’s head directs its gaze up, toward God in Heaven, and away, towards refuge. Samson is often viewed as a failed hero who succumbed to the temptation of women, but despite the loss of his strength he still managed to kill the leaders of the Philistines in his final prayers to God. The bird head atop his head and it is not spotted as in other pieces by Harvey, and therefore does not represent an unclean mind. Rather it is coated in glitter, which Harvey employed to emphasize a figure’s Africanness, supporting the

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claim that she is connecting the loss of Samson’s strength to people of African descent.

The bird has no body or wings, so it cannot fly away on its own, but perhaps because its head sits where Samson’s mind rests, Samson’s body acts as the bird’s body. And, so, when Samson died, his soul escaped like a bird from a snare.105 People of African descent, who Harvey has linked analogously to Samson, appear in this weakened state. The bird evidences hope for their salvation and escape from slavery, and, by way, the return of their strength

Absolving Biblical Seductresses

Many of the biblical women whom Harvey selects to render were subjected to demonization and blame in the scripture, a trend that her sculptures tend to invert or confound. Delilah (Figures 17 and 18), Samson’s companion piece, is formed from a similarly amorphous piece of wood, although her body is a more jagged and angular counter to Samson’s curves. Her face matches Samson’s, demarcated by a patch of black spray paint; their faces differ though, as she has plastic “googly eyes” and a mouth full of sharp white teeth. Available photographs show a hint of a second mouth on the left side of her head. Delilah reaches one arm vertically into the air, triumphantly flaunting a pair of coins, and in

105 Ps. 124:7 (KJV).
the other hand, she grasps a small pair of scissors. Her body rests upon a jagged chunk of wood, as if she is seated.

Delilah is often painted negatively, because she convinced Samson to reveal the source of his strength and sold his secret to the Philistines, upon which she received a sum of silver. She profited from Samson’s downfall by deceiving him, but the blame placed on Delilah erases Samson’s agency in his decision to reveal his status as a Nazarite. Harvey does not pose Delilah as an innocent party. Rather, Delilah grins joyfully as she raises up the scissors with which she cut Samson’s hair and the coins she received for doing so. Delilah is perhaps guilty in that she cut his hair, but she did not resort to elaborate trickery in order to do so. As Samson’s mistress, Delilah employed her sexuality, upon which much biblical guilt placed on women is based, in order to make Samson vulnerable. When she cut his hair, she humbled him by undermining his strength, which he had previously flaunted. She further targeted his misogyny—flaw that plagues biblical women (via the men who possess it) throughout the scripture. He told her his secret that he had never revealed to anyone, indicating that he did not see her as a threat. While Samson’s body is curled up, conveying his shame in his allowing Delilah to sever his hair, Delilah’s body is open, her arms raised and chest pushed outwards expressing confidence and pride in her success. Susan Ackerman deducts that, because Delilah is not identified as a Philistine

nor an Israelite, her societal position is anonymous, but this underscores her independence, a trait that is rarely attributed to biblical women. In her independence, she operates outside of the structures of patriarchy, which is an impressive feat given how male-centric the Bible is. The blame Delilah is subjected to is based upon her freedom from male domination, so by posing Delilah as proud and Samson as shameful, Harvey inverts the common moral notions assigned to biblical men and women.

As with Delilah, Eve, the first woman, is burdened with guilt; she is charged with succumbing to the seduction of the serpent to defy God’s word in eating the forbidden fruit. Her action is said to have cursed all of humanity with original sin. In the biblical account of Genesis, when chastised by God, Adam displaces all blame in the eating of the forbidden food upon his female counterpart claiming, “The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat.” God asks Eve, “What is this that thou hast done?” to which Eve responds, “The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat.”

Harvey made at least four versions of Adam and Eve, a few of which are rendered as conjoined double structures combining Eve on one side and Adam on the opposite, and the remainder are complementary pairs of figures. Harvey’s 1990 version, Adam and Eve (Figures 19 and 20)

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108 Gen. 3:12-13 (KJV).
is a dual-sided figure resting upon a horizontally sliced section of a tree trunk, stripped of its bark and painted a washed green. The piece is fashioned out of a tall slender cylindrical piece of wood, which splits into two sections midway to form the figures’ legs. Figure 19 clearly shows the “Adam” side of the figure, while Figure 20 renders Eve and enables a fuller understanding of the physical relation between the two figures. They possess similar faces, both featuring round white eyes with black pupils, a nose demarcated by an ovular hole bored into the wood, and a protruding mouth filled with white round beads as teeth. Despite the similar materials and techniques, Eve’s expression is one of happiness or contentment while Adam’s side-glancing eyes and slightly downturned mouth express fear or disgust. Small rounded shiny black objects are appended to form Eve’s breasts and pink glitter marks her navel and vagina; green glitter frames Adam’s penis, which juts out from Eve’s hip. Both figures have a crown of glitter painted above their faces, Eve’s rendered in green, and Adam’s in pink. The top of the piece is jagged, appearing to be a headdress or another sort of head covering, painted with white and yellow spots and dashes of glitter. Harvey stated that she added glitter to her figures to make them African, and, so, with this addition in tandem with the figures’ black skin, she claims the African roots of Adam and Eve and therefore all of humanity.

In Harvey’s version of Adam and Eve, however, the artist has figured Adam’s penis as a serpent by appending a pair of green eyes to the tip of the wooden projection. By conceiving of Adam’s penis as the serpent, the instrument of seduction that brought about the Fall of Man, Harvey counters the biblical representation of Eve as sinner and seductress of Adam and, instead, implicates Adam, or rather his phallus, as the responsible party who led Eve to eat the fruit. In Harvey’s reading, the phallus—and by extension, the man—is the root of original sin. Therefore, men themselves, at the very beginning of biblical humanity in Genesis, also initiated fledgling structures of patriarchy, namely God’s condemnation of women an eternity of painful childbirth and submission to their husbands. Perhaps reinforcing this reading, Adam’s penis is spotted with yellow paint; in relation to her 1987 piece, The Poison of the Lying Tongues (Figure 21), Harvey explained that the spots dotting the bird placed atop the figure’s head represent an unclean mind. So, here, the spots could mark Adam’s phallus as similarly unclean or immoral. The head covering atop the figures’ shared head is also spotted with yellow and white paint, indicating that both Adam and Eve possess unclean minds. When the first humans ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, the knowledge they gained, especially the knowledge of evil, made their minds unclean. However, this uncleanliness in rooted in the spotted snake-as-phallus, the instrument of seduction in the original sin.
By refiguring the blame placed on biblical women, Harvey extends the themes relating to gender discussed in the previous chapter back in time. The same process of projecting identities onto the bodies of women occurred in the Bible, and in the canonical understanding of it, as it did during slavery and Jim Crow through representations of laborers. Her allegorical readings of the Bible similarly extend her subversion of the naturalization of oppression, of which the landscape is perpetrator, but also witness, alongside, God. These selected biblical vignettes concretize her own expressions of hope and salvation, because they root from the most authoritative source, in her eyes, God.
Epilogue:  
God in the Wilderness

Bessie Harvey declared: "Trees is soul people to me. I have watched trees when they pray and I have watched them when they shout, and sometimes they give thanks slowly and quietly, they praise God."\(^{110}\) She believed trees were animate and they spoke to her.\(^{111}\) Her connection to trees is clearly evident in her material use of them. Prominent trees in the bible include the Tree of Life—which is mentioned in the very first and very final sections of the King James Version of the Bible, in Genesis 1 and Revelation 22—and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, which bore the forbidden fruit.

"The wilderness" appears often in the King James Version of the Bible. Important meetings between prophets and apostles and encounters with God often occurred there. For example, in Exodus 4:27, "and the Lord said to Aaron, Go into the wilderness to meet Moses. And he went, and met him in the mount of God, and kissed him.” Harvey sourced her material from the wilderness, although the term surely connotes different meanings in the pre-industrial, biblical setting versus the time period Harvey worked in, but the idea of refuge in nature is applicable in both contexts. Harvey herself admittedly found solace in nature throughout her life. When she saw a piece of wood which would become an

\(^{110}\) Wicks, 14.
\(^{111}\) Faye Harvey, conversation, June 6, 2016.
artwork, God revealed to her, through visions, figures and narratives in the wood: and, so, nature was the site of her visionary experiences.

Thomas Rundel explores etymology and context of words translated as “wilderness” in the Bible, noting that, rather than referring to a wooded area specifically, the wilderness more broadly refers to expanses of land between settlements. The wilderness is therefore a liminal space, existing between established things, itself in a state of flux. Liminal space is a threshold, the in-between, the intermediate, the transitional, and in this way, peripheral and perhaps obscured. Haunting occurs in the sort of liminal space between history and memory, between the present and the past. Rundel writes, “Liminality in its truest meaning can be the broadening of political and social change and of the reversal of hierarchies. It can be the basis for change, individually and socially.”

Harvey went into the woods to convene with God, and there she gathered her materials. She shaped the physical materials from nature according to spiritual guidance from God in order to bring out these unresolved narratives. By returning to them, acknowledging their haunting presence, within the liminal space of the wilderness, Harvey draws upon that transformative power to fill the space in-between histories, in the gaps of the canon, the haunted areas of modern subjectivity.

112 Ibid., 5.
Appendix

Figure 1. Bessie Harvey. *A Thin Line or The Hanging Tree*, 1984, from “Africa in America” series. Painted wood, wood putty, cloth, rope, shells, found objects, 23 x 23 x 18 in. (58.4 x 58.4 x 45.7 cm). Courtesy of Faye Harvey.
Figure 2. Bessie Harvey. *Wrapped, Tied, and Tangled*, 1983. Stained wood, plastic eyes, 21 x 7.5 x 7.5 in. (53.3 x 19.1 x 19.1 cm). Courtesy of Glady Faires.
Figure 3. Felix Gonzalez-Torres. "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.), 1991. Multicolored candies, ideal weight 175 lb. (79.9 kg), dimensions variable. © The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation.


Figure 6. Robert Morris. *Untitled*, 1970. Felt, 74.5 x 178.5 x 1 in. (189 x 453.8 x 2.5 cm). National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Felton Bequest, 1974 © Robert Morris/ARS, New York. Licensed by VISCOPY, Sydney.
Figure 8. Bessie Harvey. *The First Washing Machine*, 1986, from “Africa in America” series. Painted wood, wood putty, cloth, aluminum, beads, wire. 11 x 15.625 x 7.125 in. (27.9 x 39.7 x 18.1 cm). Courtesy of Glady Faires.

Figure 9. Linder, “Pretty Girl” (detail), 1977. Courtesy of Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London and dépendance, Brussels. © the artist, 2015.
Figure 10. Bessie Harvey. *Sally the Robot*, n.d. Metal, found objects, 36 x 11 x 9 in. (91.4 x 27.9 x 22.9 cm). Courtesy of Glady Faires.

Figure 11. “Rosie the Robot” from *The Jetsons*. 
Figure 12. Bessie Harvey. *At Work*, 1989, from “Africa in America” series. Metal, found objects, 35 x 25 x 9 in. (88.9 x 5.1 x 22.9 cm). Courtesy of Glady Faires.


Figure 15. Peter Paul Rubens, *Massacre of the Innocents*, 1611-2. Oil on oak, 55.9 × 71.7 in. (142 × 182 cm). © The Thompson Collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario.
Figure 16. Bessie Harvey. *Samson*, 1989. Painted wood, found objects, 22 x 17 x 17 in. (55.9 x 43.2 x 43.2 cm). Courtesy of Glady Faires.
Figure 17. Bessie Harvey. *Delilah*, 1989. Painted wood, found objects, 36 x 25 x 15 in. (91.4 x 63.5 x 38.1 cm) Courtesy of Glady Faires.

Figure 18. Bessie Harvey. *Delilah*, 1989. Painted wood, found objects, 36 x 25 x 15 in. (91.4 x 63.5 x 38.1 cm) Courtesy of Glady Faires.
Figure 19. Bessie Harvey. *Adam and Eve*, 1990. Wood, paint, putty, glitter, beads, 39 x 14 x 11 in. (99.1 x 35.6 x 27.9 cm). Collection of Tennessee State Museum. Photo by author.

Figure 20. Bessie Harvey. *Adam and Eve*, 1990. Wood, paint, putty, glitter, beads, 39 x 14 x 11 in. (99.1 x 35.6 x 27.9 cm). Collection of Tennessee State Museum. Photo by Author.
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