

Amariah Talley-Woodson

22 July 2024

FURSCA 2024

### ***Revelating Genesis: a Lesson in Contextualized Communication***

Over the past eight weeks, I have used my time as a FURSCA grantee to develop my creative research project *Revelating Genesis*. The three key components of this project are a woodblock print, a collage, and the accompanying research that shaped both. The print – carved into a two-foot by four-foot wood block – had the purpose of confronting the viewer with the history of white supremacy as we have been taught. The collage – also two feet by four feet in size – would contrast the print as a more realistic depiction of the colonization, exploitation, and oppression that drives the narrative of American history. Additionally, I began to draw on imagery from the Christian Bible to develop the visual language of the artwork due to its (mis)use in white supremacist rhetoric.

The initial goals of *Revelating Genesis* were to offer validation to those aware of our collective oppression while engaging with and confronting those still in denial. While my artwork alone cannot bridge the gap between our current enfeebled and inadequate education system and the intersectional ideal that holds diverse historical narratives in equal weight, my hope is that *Revelating Genesis* can help people recognize that we are all being exploited under the system of white supremacy. All of us – those farthest removed from the wealthy, patriarchal, cisheterosexist norm *and* those who conform to the norm and gain privilege from their proximity to it – are oppressed by white supremacy.

Much of the summer FURSCA session was dedicated to research. Of the books my advisor and I gathered, I was able to complete *Paradise Lost* (John Milton), *Freedom is a Constant Struggle* (Angela Davis), *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)* (Dean Spade), *Darkly: Black History and America's Gothic Soul* (Leila Taylor), and *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* (Audre Lorde). To further my understanding, I'm excited to continue my readings including *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* (Harry M. Benshoff), *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (bell hooks), *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (José Esteban Muñoz), and *The Body Keeps the Score* (Bessel Van Der Kolk, MD).

As of right now, the only completed design for the visual art portion of *Revelating Genesis* is the woodblock print. Taking inspiration from my readings of Genesis (NIV), Revelations (NIV), and *Paradise Lost*, it successfully uses biblical imagery to depict the narrative of white supremacy we have been conditioned to accept as truth. Though the collage is still early in development, my current vision and recent thumbnails involve more subtle biblical motifs and a heavier emphasis on the concept of the monster as the social “other.”

The print is modeled after stained glass windows that narrate biblical stories. Read from bottom to top, it is an adaptation of Genesis and Revelations through a white supremacist lens. In the bottom panel, nude figures in the Garden of Eden (the utopian garden where G-d makes the first humans) either

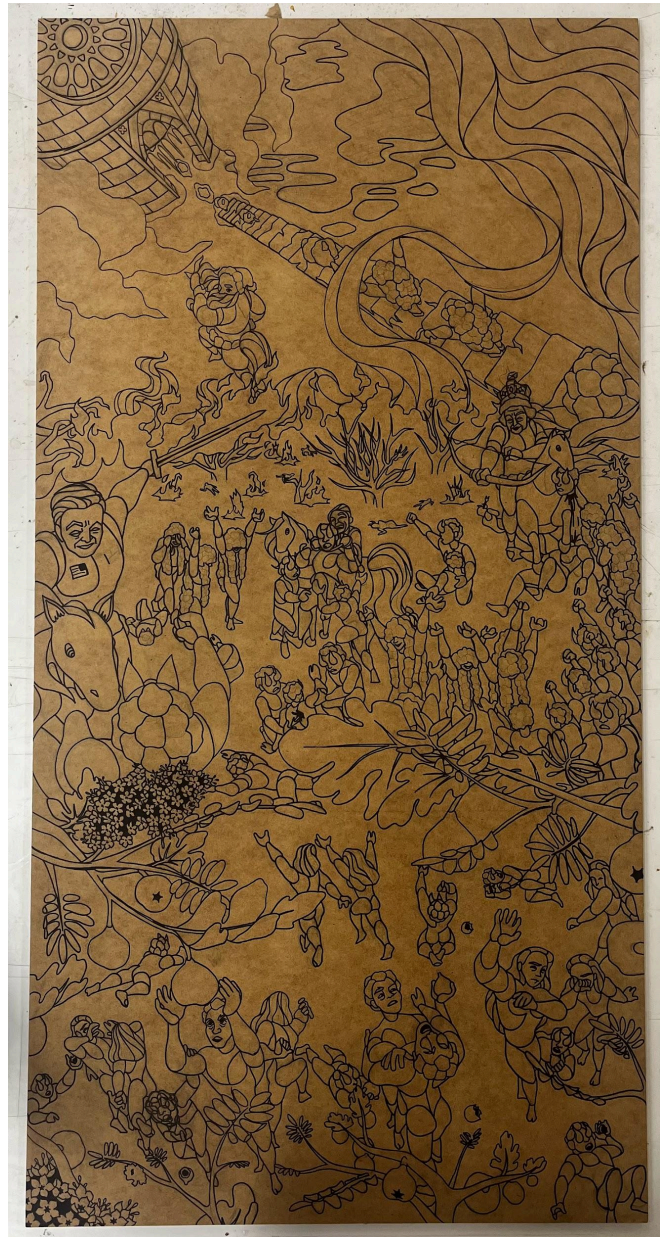
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run from or reach out to eat the fig-like fruit growing from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. In the middle panel, three of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (the agents of chaos that G-d unleashes to begin the end of days) rake through the throngs of people, slaughtering those who have eaten the forbidden Fruit of Knowledge as the rest of the crowd cheers. The final panel shows these spared people as they march along a steep staircase into the open doorway of a cathedral submerged in water. Once I have completed carving this wood block, I will cover it in ink and send it through a printing press to create the printed (and reversed) image on paper.

The most decisive visual communicators in this composition are the horned figures in the first panel, the horsemen in the second and third, and the cathedral in the top panel. In St. Jerome's translation of the Hebrew Bible into Latin, when describing Moses' appearance after talking to G-d on Mt. Sinai, he intentionally used the translation "horns" instead of "rays of light" emitting from Moses' face, reinforcing the antisemitic stereotype of Jews having horns. Here, the horns are used to represent the enlightenment of the people who eat the Fruit of Knowledge, simultaneously making them seem monstrous and worthy of fear in this narrative. The horsemen here are modeled after comforting figures in American popular culture that have contributed to our oppression with subtle violence: Ronald Reagan, father of "trickle-down" economics; Jimmy Fallon, a self-proclaimed apolitical; Queen Elizabeth II, the head of a global imperial power; and Santa Claus, the omniscient surveyor. The chaos in the first two panels act as a diversion from the real monster of the piece, the cathedral. Its large circular window is made to resemble a large eye, the doorway arching above the water yawns like a mouth, and the majority of the structure is hidden below the dark water. Though it



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may appear as a paradise or kingdom in the clouds, it is a beast shrouded in smoke and fog, waiting for its ignorant flock to walk into its open maw.

Monsters have been used throughout the history of media to represent what the dominant culture considers “other” or “wrong.” The traits that distinguish these monsters from the dominant culture are tied to stereotypical attributes of real-world pariahs, such as women, queer people, immigrants, or people of color. The monsters I have created for this piece – the figures with horned eyes – are not a real threat and show no hostility towards the smiling figures. Still, because they are different – because they have chosen knowledge in opposition to the dominant culture – their violent suppression is justified and celebrated.

Initially, I was going to represent a “true” history of white supremacy. I realized, however, that my understanding is also incomplete in many ways because of the shortcomings of our educational system. I have a different perspective than many people still fueling the institution of white supremacy, but I still do not have the full picture. Instead, I have depicted how we are taught to view our oppressive environment, and how a complacent mindset encourages us to remain ignorant, moralizes violence against social “others”, and denies recognition of how we are being exploited.

This project is an amazing addition to my artist portfolio. My first series, *Cult of the State*, explored women’s bodily autonomy through the lens of Nazi Germany at a time when the objectification of the female body was particularly explicit. *Revelating Genesis* is an instrumental next step in using my art as communication, and has taught me more about the ways in which people engage with my work. Founding my artwork in research allows me to better articulate my thoughts and provides viewers with the context to communicate with the piece effectively. I greatly look forward to presenting my work at the Elkin Isaac Student Research Symposium. To ensure that viewers unable to attend the presentation can engage with the piece as intended, I will attach a statement about the research to my artist’s website.

The research I’ve done over these past eight weeks has reshaped how I envision liberation. I have learned to engage with a new audience, and I better understand our collective oppression. While it is not my “job” to humanize human beings, I have taken it upon myself to communicate – as best I can – that the fires in your peripheral are closer than they appear. I am incredibly grateful to my advisor, Professor Emmeline Solomon, the Albion College Art and Art History Department, and the Foundation for Undergraduate Research, Scholarship and Creative Activity for their indispensable support of *Revelating Genesis*, my most ambitious project to date.