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Chere

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Art

by

Wilson Andrés Borja Marroquín
Universidad Nacional de Colombia
Bachelor of Arts in Graphic Design, 2003

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This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

Professor Kristin Musgnug, MFA
Thesis Director:

Professor Ana Pulido-Rull, Ph.d
Committee Member

Professor Caree Banton, Ph.d
Committee Member

Professor Sam King, MFA
Committee Member

Professor Stephanie Pierce, MFA
Committee Member

Professor Larry Swartwood, MFA
Committee Member

Abstract

Chere is research project and a thesis exhibition installation composed of a series of drawing/paintings and short animations that explores the phenomenon of migration and the African diaspora. This exploration was originated by contrasting aspects of forced and voluntary migration in addition to Kvasnyand and Hales' idea, that "Belonging everywhere or not belonging anywhere" describes the situation among people of the African diaspora.

Through research I intersperse layers of personal history with that of my ancestors and their descendants in the Americas. As a biracial person, a self-identified Afro-descendant from Colombia, South America, I am interested in the process of hybridization as a consequence of migration. I draw inspiration from African textiles and their African American hybrid forms, quilts. This project analyses Ptolemaic concepts in regards of pre-Columbian and African map conventions, and African syllabaries in order to visualize aspects of the African diaspora such as colonization, evangelization, displacement, instability, inequality, marginalization, adaptation, and acculturation.

With the development of this project I intend to reach a more accurate understanding of the multi-layered experience of the African Diaspora, particularly with regard to the persistent color line traced five hundred years ago by the Western colonial system. This exploration traces back to the origins of cultural traits of the Afro-descendant traveling culture. It focuses on elements that survived and disseminated in the New World such as quilts and percussive music, and place them in a contemporary context. This project also incorporates materials infused with historical meaning to my practice as a visual artist.

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Dedication

Chere is dedicated to the memory of Liliana and Esperanza, my divinized ancestors.

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I. Intro

Chere is research project and a thesis exhibition installation composed of a series of drawing/paintings and short animations that explores the phenomenon of migration and the African diaspora. This exploration was originated in response to questions about voluntary and forced migration; one in particular, is there truly a voluntary migration?

Through research I intersperse layers of personal history with that of my ancestors and their descendants in the Americas. As a biracial person, a self-identified Afro-descendant from Colombia, South America, I am interested in the process of hybridization as a consequence of migration. I draw inspiration from African textiles and their African American hybrid forms, quilts. This project analyses Ptolemaic concepts in regards of pre-Columbian and African map conventions, and African syllabaries in order to visualize aspects of the African diaspora such as colonization, evangelization, displacement, instability, inequality, marginalization, adaptation, and acculturation.

With the development of this project I intend to reach a more accurate understanding of the multi-layered experience of the African Diaspora, particularly with regard to the persistent color line traced five hundred years ago by the Western colonial system. This exploration traces back to the origins of cultural traits of the Afro-descendant traveling culture. It focuses on elements that survived and disseminated in the New World such as quilts and percussive music, and place them in a contemporary context. This project also incorporates materials infused with historical meaning to my practice as a visual artist.

II. Prehistory (Background)

This project started approximately three decades ago with a simple question: Where do I come from? For a biracial person like me the answer is complicated. This question led me to

conduct a research that goes beyond a family tree. This research is related to notions of identity and belonging. It has to do with my image in regards of the community I was assigned to by the color of my skin. My research will take a decolonialist approach, an approach where I conceive a history told from the side of the colonized and not the colonizer.¹

Early Influences (Maps, Blueprints, Board Games and Topography)

At an early age I was exposed to maps. As a civil engineer, my father used to bring back from his work trips all sort of documents, blueprints, and topographical diagrams. When he took me to construction sites I started making the connections between real places and the symbols on the maps. Around the same time, he also taught me how to play chess, a game with a black and white squared board and two teams. I remember coming to the conclusion that just exactly as a chessboard, my family was black and white.

One of the family stories my father used to tell was that as an engineer, he helped to replace the wood logs with concrete bricks in his mother's house. To me this house was a place occupied by all the family from which my siblings and I grew up apart. Despite their efforts and due to limited government's investment in an "inhospitable" area populated by blacks, the street where my grandmother's house was built has not been paved yet.

Geometry, Geography, and History Subjects

Some other influential experiences for me were geography and geometry classes. Among the first drawings that I can recall feeling proud of were maps. The fact that the Earth might be measured by simple triangulations and how ancient civilizations used the Sun and the stars to locate themselves, navigate, and keep track of the time has always fascinated me. Unfortunately,

¹ Albert Memmi, 1965. *The colonizer and the colonized*. New York: Orion Press.

those lessons were focused more on Greece, Rome or some other place from the “old” world disregarding highly accurate Pre Hispanic mapping systems.²

My interests in this research project also include geometry and its application in architecture and graphic design. My background in graphic design enriches the research project by finding similarities and relationships through visual representations like maps, timelines, diagrams, architectural plans, graphic design structures and grids. Both maps and graphic design emphasize division into grids. In addition, I discovered that African American quilts patterns are based on the division of the square in its halves by approximate measurement; these squared patterns clearly resemble West African textiles (fig. 1).

Even though the presence of African Descendants in the Americas is evident, the history books I read in my early years in school³ dedicate just a few pages to talk about their presence and contribution building the continent, focusing exclusively on the slave trade and the subsequent emancipation. The same invisibility goes for the history of indigenous populations, the first inhabitants of the “new” continent. This omission is unsurprising since, even today; most of textbooks’ content was produced abroad, in the mother countries. As Mafundikwa affirms: “Most history books still tie the colonial line to European supremacy”⁴. In fact, I only began to learn in depth about the African Diaspora during the last 4 years in the Fulbright⁵ program and upon my arrival to the United States at the age of thirty to the University of Arkansas. Dr. Calvin

² Barbara E. Mundy, *The Mapping of New Spain. Indigenous Cartography and the Maps of the Relaciones Geográficas*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996, p 61.

³ I attended public schools in Bogotá, Colombia from 1992 to 1998.

⁴ Saki Mafundikwa, 2004. *Afrikan alphabets: the story of writing in Afrika*. West New York, N.J.: Mark Batty, p xvi.

⁵ As part of an affirmative action, the Cultural Studies for Afro-descendants and Indigenous Communities Program was the first Fulbright program of this kind in Colombia (2009-2011).

White⁶ and Dr. Caree Banton classes⁷, covering Afro-descendants history, were the first classes of this kind I attended. They were my first black teachers ever.

African descendants in Colombia officially represent twenty-six percent of the population; almost ten million of the forty-four million of Colombians.⁸ However, the number might be estimated differently. Since being white is the ideal, is not surprising that any person is reluctant to recognize having African or indigenous origins when they are asked to check a box in a sheet of paper. White was the idealized perception of the human soul imposed by the crown during colonization.⁹ This perception has been disseminated into books, encyclopedias, and constitutions throughout the last four centuries, becoming one of many reasons for discrimination against Afro-descendants.¹⁰

The Experience of Navigating a Major City

I started navigating the city at an early age and encountered many homeless people. People coming from rural areas used to call the capital “city of the dead” because of the amount

⁶ Calvin White, Jr. is an associate Professor of History and the director of the African and African American Studies program. He received his Ph.D. in History from the University of Mississippi. He is especially interested in East African religious traditions and the connections between African and African Pentecostals’ traditions. I attended his class on African American history since 1877 – Spring 2013.

⁷ Caree Banton holds a joint appointment in African and African American Studies and history. She received her Ph.D. in history from Vanderbilt University and an M.A. in Development Studies from the University of Ghana. Dr. Banton also attended the University of New Orleans and Grambling State University. Her research focus on abolitionist Caribbean post-emancipation, and colonization in the 19th Century. Her interests are in the significance of these movements to the Caribbean, the African Diaspora, and the larger Atlantic World. I attended her classes on Afro Caribbean history – Fall 2013, Freedom in the age of emancipation – Spring 2014, Popular culture in the Caribbean – Spring 2014.

⁸ Ministry of Education of Colombia official site, <http://www.mineducacion.gov.co/1621/article-87346.html>

⁹ Michel Pastoureau, 2009. *Black: the history of a color*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, p 39.

¹⁰ Edwards, Brent Hayes. 2003. *The practice of diaspora: literature, translation, and the rise of Black internationalism*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, p 26.

of people sleeping in the streets. To the eyes of a child it seemed quite normal but I came to understand that these people, who were mostly indigenous or Afro-Colombian had been displaced because of violence. I only discovered recently that Colombia has one of the highest rates of internal displacement as a consequence of violence in the world.¹¹

An example of the persistent discrimination embedded in quotidian life is the word *campesino*, a word I heard repeatedly in cities like Bogotá. This word means peasant in Spanish and is commonly used to derogate a person, the same word became a synonym of *indio* (indigene). *Indio patirrajado* (barefoot indian) is an expression frequently used as an insult. Linking those ideas, I use footprint marks in my work not only to incorporate the conventions painted in Pre-Hispanic maps,¹² but also to talk about how this symbol also represents poverty in an urban setting. (fig. 2).

Personal History of Migration (Somewhere Between the Opposites)

My own family presents a black and white dichotomy. My father is of African descent; my mother is considered white in spite of her dark eyes and hair. My siblings and I grew up in the capital city, away from our Afro-Colombian heritage and were rejected by most of my mother's family.

Migration is part of my family history; my ancestors came to the American continent in a ship from Africa against their will. My mother's family left their hometown and moved to the city because violence was taking over. My father came from the Pacific coast of Colombia to the city to become the first college educated member of his family. Moreover, I crossed a border to

¹¹ Russell King, 2010. *People on the move: an atlas of migration*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p 70.

¹² Barbara E. Mundy, *The Mapping of New Spain. Indigenous Cartography and the Maps of the Relaciones Geográficas*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996, p 60.

have this conversation. This is part of a history I share with thousands of others. I am part of that huge mass of people on the move. As I have experienced, one of the many consequences of migration is that roots and connections with the land and the past are severed. The fact is that even though my grandmother lived for over one hundred years, I never met her. By using typography and scientific symbols I recognize one of my grandmother's expectations for her offspring: access to education. Like the majority of Afro-Colombian women population after emancipation and during the first half of the twentieth century, she was illiterate.¹³

Traveling Abroad to Stumble Upon the Diaspora

It was not until I started traveling abroad that I realized my personal experience of the diaspora. Fortunately, I have had the opportunity to travel to Peru, Mexico, Cuba, Venezuela, and various major cities in the United States.¹⁴ I enjoy the experience of traveling using paper maps in fact I collect them. Writing on them, tracing routes, finding places, unfolding and folding them back amuse me. As a graphic designer, I see transit and city maps as intricate pieces of visual communication.¹⁵ What interests me the most is how maps describe history, geography, space, and time, but ignore socioeconomic distinctions. Through my travels I have learned about the political and racial landscape. Based on the idea of ethnicity, one of the goals of this project is to depict those interactions that have been "whitewashed" from history.

One particular experience in Cuba made me see the effect produced by a constant exposure to a discourse of invisibilization. After talking to me as if I was a local, a Cuban vendor

¹³ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, *Report on the situation of people of African descent in the Americas*, OEA/Ser.L/V/II. Doc. 62 5 December 2011, p 17

¹⁴ New York, Chicago, New Orleans, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Saint Louis, Cleveland, Austin, Miami and Kansas city

¹⁵ Woodward, David, and G. Malcolm Lewis. 1998. *The History of cartography. Vol. 2. Bk. 1, Vol. 2. Bk. 3*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p 1.

from Havana was amazed with the presence of a black tourist from Colombia. From the brief conversation I had with this person I understood that he was really surprised with the fact that a black person could afford traveling, in his mind black tourists were not possible, simply because black folks are poor in general. Sadly, the Cuban vendor was not far from the truth, after two hundred years of the abolition of slavery, the situation has not improved substantially for nearly one hundred and fifty millions of people of African descent in the Americas.¹⁶ Somehow we are still tied together to the “dark” idea of poverty. We have been displaced and cannot afford the luxury of mobility.

My trips also showed me that a sense of disconnection was something bigger than just me. “Really, you are from Colombia, I didn’t know that there were blacks in Colombia” was a recurrent comment in all these countries; it strikingly showed me how invisible we still are. That kind of comments made think that even though we share similar origins, therefore, several aspects of the culture (food, music, dance, beliefs, attitude), is due to discrimination, isolation, poor education, and above all, the systematic attempt to erase us from history has made us invisible to each other. For instance, I never read about the experience of African Descendants in other countries in my history class. Approximately twelve million of African slaves were brought to the Americas, that overwhelmingly large number represents only fifteen percent of the people that left the West African coasts during three centuries of slave trade.¹⁷ These men and women landed in the new world with the biggest concentration in Brazil. Their descendants are present

¹⁶ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, *Report on the situation of people of African descent in the Americas*, OEA/Ser.L/V/II. Doc. 62 5 December 2011, p 17.

¹⁷ Howard Dodson and Sylviane A. Diouf. 2004. *In motion: the African-American migration experience*. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic p 15.

in every single country of the Americas. After the United States, Brazil, and Cuba, Colombia has the fourth highest concentration of Afro-descendants.¹⁸

Unsettlement and marginalization are keywords in this project. The term “African-American” or “Afro-Colombian” in my case, acknowledges with respect the origins of a vast population. It also presents a serious conflict in the sense that having two different places of origin may produce the feeling of not belonging entirely to any of those places. I came to understand my feelings of not quite fitting through the words of Kvasnyand and Hales when they suggest that “Belonging everywhere or not belonging anywhere describes the situation among people of the African diaspora.”¹⁹ Migrants become minorities, minorities suffer from isolation, discrimination, mistreatment, rejection, and in most of the cases, poverty. Located in the pacific coast of Colombia, most of the African descent population lives below the poverty line²⁰.

Even though Latin America is widely conceived as naturally diverse in terms of ethnicity, discrimination towards communities considered minorities (African Descendants and Indigenous populations) is a long lasting mark; the southern part of the American continent still struggles to reach the ideal of whiteness, a legacy of colonialism. This land is constantly imitating trends from the north and discriminating anyone that does not fit that ideal. The place I have occupied as mestizo or mulato has always been problematic.

¹⁸ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, *Report on the situation of people of African descent in the Americas*, OEA/Ser.L/V/II. Doc. 62 5 December 2011, p 7.

¹⁹ Lynette Kvasnyand and Kayla Hales, 2008. *The African Diaspora, Black Identity and The Evolving Discourse of the Digital Divide*. The Pennsylvania State University College of Information Sciences and Technology. University Park, PA 16802, p 3.

²⁰ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, *Report on the situation of people of African descent in the Americas*, OEA/Ser.L/V/II. Doc. 62 5 December 2011, p 17.

III. The Promised Land (History and Geography of Migration)

Thanks to the travels I undertook, and my current status of skilled migrant in the United States²¹, I have been able to understand what Dodson affirms when he says that “African descendants have been shaped by five hundred years of migrations, forced and voluntary. They are heirs to all the movements that have formed and transformed their community.”²² In addition to this and in order to describe the position of people of African descent Norle states that “The diasporized are the ‘etc’ of traditional society: all those peoples displaced as a result of Western colonial productivity.”²³ Every displacement African descendants have undergone has led to hybridization as a way of adaptation.

Precisely, the process of hybridization as a consequence of migration is one the aspects of the multi-layered experience of the African Diaspora that interest me the most. In this body of work, I combine traffic sign imagery, maps, and board game conventions to explore visually the complexity and tensions produced by this phenomenon and its connection with urban distribution based on ethnicity. It is in fact, in terms of segregation and exclusion that Daniels defines the African Diaspora existence framed in a space “that has always been located at societal margins, defined and reinforced as the color-line.”²⁴ In other words, the placement of black, among other colors, out of sight.

²¹ King defines skilled migrants as those with tertiary-level education who adapt more easily to destination societies, and tend to be looked more positively by the citizens of receiving countries than are unskilled migrants.

King, 2010. *People on the move: an atlas of migration*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p 86.

²² Howard Dodson and Sylviane A. Diouf. 2004. *In motion: the African-American migration experience*. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic, p 9.

²³ Lesley Naa Norle Lokko, 2000. *White papers, black marks: architecture, race, culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p 178.

²⁴ Lesley Naa Norle Lokko, 2000. *White papers, black marks: architecture, race, culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p 196.

One of my interests resides in the push and pull game between strong forces that make masses move. Entire families are pushed out by war, mistreatment or lack of opportunities; then pulled into major cities by the promise of a better future. Internal migration is one of the consequences of industrialization; international migration is one of the consequences of colonialism and imperialism. In both cases, to migrants the “promised land” is nothing other than a hostile environment in which they have to find a way to survive. Migrants become infused with “otherness” and face racism and xenophobia. Populations in constant movement transform urban settlements into living organisms that constantly expand. Garcia Canclini states that accelerated urban expansion is the main cause of cultural hybridization. In the case of Latin America, seventy percent of the population is now concentrated in urban areas.²⁵

Mercer suggests that “to better understand distinctive diasporic experiences (that are nonetheless deeply interconnected by the practice of culture) not as territory, property, or ownership, but as living fabric of web, text, and flow.”²⁶ My intention is to apprehend these dynamics through an exploration of visual elements from the cultures involved in the colonization of the New World.

IV. What Lies Beneath the Surface (Formal Aspects)

The decision to work with maps in this project is linked to an idea formulated by Barbara Mundy, she affirms that during the conquest and colonization of the new world, “cultural communication was dominated by images”, due to the fact that “pre Hispanic societies were the creators of complex and sophisticated imagery and were more conversant with logographic,

²⁵ Néstor García Canclini, 1989. *Hybrid cultures: strategies for entering and leaving modernity*. Minneapolis, Minn: University of Minnesota Press. p 207.

²⁶ Elam, Harry Justin, and Kennell A. Jackson. 2005. *Black cultural traffic: crossroads in global performance and popular culture*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, p 145.

rather than alphabetic.”²⁷ These images recorded the clash of cultures and the resistance of those being colonized. In addition to this, my previous exploration of maps, board games, history, and geography led to the idea of geography changing as a consequence of migrations (fig. 4). Some of the issues this project explores are how those changes had been visually represented and who was in control of those representations. Consequently, I am interested in what lies beneath the surface of the history that it has been told. Like a chessboard, the map is the surface where the battle for power and control has been fought, a map where one can pinpoint his own origins.

In this body of work I explore visual representations of collective and personal memory. Keeping in mind the way in which sciences like history and geography visualize time, space and people involved in major events, I use a landscape-oriented format to combine elements and conventions from timelines, maps, and board games. Comparing contemporary transit maps (which clearly show a Eurocentric approach) to pre-Hispanic and African maps (fig. 4 & 7), I decided to work with the most common shapes in all the cultures such as squares, dots, arrows and triangles. These conventions represent common aspects of the hybridization occurring in the Americas. By juxtaposing these marks, I talk about the multiplicity and diversity of cultures in this continent, with special emphasis on the presence of African descendants defined as “Blacks” by the colonizer.

Palimpsests of History and Memory

Mafundikwa states: “The European colonizers claimed Afrikan territory with impunity, and thereby created new historical realities for the colonized”,²⁸ similar events happened in the New World. In both cases, some of the devices in which those historical realities are written are

²⁷ Barbara E. Mundy, *The Mapping of New Spain. Indigenous Cartography and the Maps of the Relaciones Geográficas*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996. p 84.

²⁸ Saki Mafundikwa, 2004. *Afrikan alphabets: the story of writing in Afrika*. West New York, N.J.: Mark Batty, p xvii.

maps. This project explores the idea of maps as records of juxtapositions of cultures and influences, where the ancient, colonial, modern, rural and urban are present at the same time in the architecture, urban planning, traditions, customs, and language. In these pieces, the viewer is invited to see what remains from the past through the multiplicity of layers. I use maps as palimpsests of the history of the Americas, where ingrained “colored” traces emerge to the surface in between the gaps of a Eurocentric grid. Never neutral images²⁹, maps show a history scraped and overwritten several times, in which the original “owners” of the land are displaced and labeled as aliens; foreigners in their own soil. These maps explore not only at the roots, but also at the routes and the resultant hybridization or creolization of people of African descent. The action of layering and juxtaposing marks depicts the mixture of different influences—a clash of cultures that did not happen peacefully.

In addition to that, in psychology, family constellation theory (a therapy based on the study of African tribes),³⁰ describes life as a game of thousands of people. A game played for generations that we enter since the moment we are born. We are the result of different games, the product of overlapping circumstances; our lives are based on interactions with other players inside a board game that was defined hundreds of years ago. Instead of being precise and well defined, the boundaries in these compositions merge and collapse producing unexpected results, just how a hybridization process works.

²⁹ Leibsohn Dana. “Colony and Cartography: Shifting Signs on Indigenous Maps of New Spain.” In *Reframing the Renaissance: Visual Culture in Europe and Latin America, 1450-1650*, edited by Claire Farago, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995. p. 267.

³⁰ Bertold Ulsamer and Bert Hellinger. 2003. *The art and practice of family constellations: leading family constellations as developed by Bert Hellinger*. [Heidelberg]: Carl-Auer-Systeme Verlag, p 15.

Maps as Storytelling

As an illustrator I also see the map as a visual storytelling form. Since my purpose has been to challenge a Eurocentric perspective I have been looking at pre-Hispanic codices and maps, as well as African maps. Natives in the Americas were highly skilled map-makers. They combined genealogies and mapped their connection to the land and history in codices.³¹ West African map making is part of a vast and diverse oral tradition. Different African tribes can recall and trace accurate maps on the ground by memory.³² As figure 4, 5 and 6 show, map conventions, dance diagrams, and visual symbols in African alphabets and syllabaries share common aspects.³³

Regarding the didactical function of illustrations, I have always found problematic that visual storytelling has been used as another device of colonization, a process in which the exchange of influences has been predominately in one direction: the one of the colonizer with Catholicism and Christianity as its flags.³⁴ Completely aware of the function of the image, as Mundy concludes:

“The church widely promoted images in New Spain because by governing the traffic of images, church fathers could shape the indigenous conception of their world ...As friars sought to replace not the image with the text but the indigenous image with the Christian one. They destroyed native religious manuscripts so that Christian images prevailed. Friars used pictures to teach native peoples the rudiments of Christian doctrine, because

³¹ Dennis Carr, The Beinecke Map: Iconography and Physical Properties, in Barbara E. Mundy, and Mary E. Miller, eds. *Painting a Map of Sixteenth-Century Mexico City: Land, Writing, and Native Rule*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013, p 11.

³² Thomas J. Bassett, Indigenous Mapmaking in Intertropical Africa, in J. B. Harley and David Woodward. 1987. *The history of cartography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. p. 41.

³³ Saki Mafundikwa, 2004. *Afrikan alphabets: the story of writing in Afrika*. West New York, N.J.: Mark Batty, p xvii.

³⁴ Barbara E. Mundy, *The Mapping of New Spain. Indigenous Cartography and the Maps of the Relaciones Geográficas*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996. p.87.

they saw that images had the potential to be the bridge between their literate Spanish-speaking world and the world of their charges.³⁵

Even though these original images were destroyed, natives continued painting and bringing their ancestry into catholic images throughout the colonial period, they did not allow Their Images Be Washed Away.

Shaping the Conflict

As migrants we carry our personal land everywhere. Like lines on a map, our predecessors are printed in our bodies and memory. They left landmarks of their conflicts in the ground; we inherited their language to keep writing history. Like a geographer always revising and updating information on maps, I am constantly adding elements to the composition. This process challenges the way I used to work as an illustrator, and I have been developing it since my first year in graduate school. I follow what the intersection of lines and shapes dictates, building more content around these “landmarks” and keeping all that cannot be moved. Obtaining unexpected results from a chaotic combination.

To give shape to the clash of cultures during the fifteenth century and all the way to the present, I incorporate pre-Hispanic, European, and African map conventions with special emphasis on the African influence. I fuse and repurpose symbols based on historical facts, for instance, the cross in this project represents more than the sacrifice of the son of the Christian god dying for our sins; it grounds the multiple massacres perpetrated in the name of god in the colonies. Although the juxtaposition and overlapping of the marks create new connections, I created these compositions based on the following ideas:

³⁵ Barbara E. Mundy, *The Mapping of New Spain. Indigenous Cartography and the Maps of the Relaciones Geográficas*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996. p 84-85.

The Square and the Grid

The square was present when the Atlantic world came together by chance. In these pieces I use the square as a symbol of hybridization. In African American quilts, the nine-patch pattern with four black squares and five white squares is the symbol of crossroads. The Caribbean, where Columbus landed in 1492 is called the crossroads of the world, the encounter and convergence of Europe, pre-Hispanic America and Africa.

Contrasting with native perceptions of space and time, Europeans brought with them in the fifteen-century the rediscovered Ptolemy's Geography. The work of this Egyptian geographer, as Ehrenberg states, "reestablished the concepts of the spherical earth, latitude and longitude, and North orientation, and provided the geometrical framework for drawing maps with accuracy."³⁶ However, his concepts and ideas were widely applied not only to navigate and measure the world, but unfortunately also as mechanisms of control in the new lands of the crown as Leibsohn affirms:

One facet of this involved arranging newly settled lands into identical, geometrically defined and rectilinear parcels. In this system, life could be organized into regular units that reflected the measured order befitting a Christian kingdom on earth; and, at the same time, the ground was prepared for authoritative control and supervision.³⁷

In this project then, the square as a unit of the grid, represents the way in which private property is measured. In fact, private property was a foreign concept imposed by Spanish colonials in pre-Hispanic lands. Determined by natural boundaries and serpentine walking roads

³⁶ Ralph E. Ehrenberg, 2006. *Mapping the world: an illustrated history of cartography*. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, p 10.

³⁷ Dana Leibsohn, "Colony and Cartography: Shifting Signs on Indigenous Maps of New Spain." In *Reframing the Renaissance: Visual Culture in Europe and Latin America, 1450-1650*, edited by Claire Farago, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995. p.275.

pre-Hispanic maps traced native beliefs of connection with the land, with tall mountains as its main toponyms (fig. 7).³⁸ The sharp edge of the grid sliced those boundaries in order to pillage. The grid stands as a representation of civilization and modernity, always mimicking the unreachable ideal of European cities (fig. 8). Gridded spaces are rare in both Africa and America prior to the arrival of northern colonizers. The white grid stands here also, as a reminder that Latin America, the Caribbean and Africa, are still subjected to a regime of exploitation.

Conducting my research on the diaspora, migration, and mapping systems I stumbled upon the Underground Railroad quilt code (Fig. 9). A verbal-visual communication system³⁹ developed in antebellum America by abolitionists, black freemen and slaves to help leading absconders from southern states plantations to northern cities like Detroit, Cleveland, New York, and Toronto.⁴⁰ The system marked along the way those houses where any help was provided for the fleeing slaves (food, shelter, clothes, tools and directions). A common practice for drying clothes those days, quilt tops were thrown in plain sight on windows, roofs and fences. Although it was not the only strategy for escaping, it seems the system succeeded for one reason: hand-sewn out of scraps and their own worn out clothes, African American quilt making was developed by slaved women as an unsupervised craft.⁴¹ Captured Africans arrived to the New World with nothing else but their knowledge. Systematically kept illiterate to force a disruption from their origins and memory, orality became the vehicle to preserve their identities. African

³⁸ Dana Leibsohn, "Colony and Cartography: Shifting Signs on Indigenous Maps of New Spain." In *Reframing the Renaissance: Visual Culture in Europe and Latin America, 1450-1650*, edited by Claire Farago, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995, p 273.

³⁹ Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard. 1999. *Hidden in plain view: the secret story of quilts and the underground railroad*. New York, N.Y.: Doubleday. p.127.

⁴⁰ Howard Dodson and Sylviane A. Diouf. 2004. *In motion: the African-American migration experience*. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic, p 37.

⁴¹ Eli Leon, 2006. *Accidentally on purpose: the aesthetic management of irregularities in African textiles and African-American quilts*. Davenport, Iowa: Figge Art Museum, p 25.

American quilt making was transmitted orally for generations and clearly has its origins in West Africa (mainly Nigeria, Kongo, and Angola), where Leon affirms while comparing African American bedcoverings and African textiles that:

“These areas had highly developed textile traditions, including quilting and patchwork, but not including the patchwork as bedcovering. Some of the patchwork, moreover, was probably in the repeated block format that appears to have sprung into the American quilt tradition without European precedent”⁴²

Back then for slaves quilt making became an excuse to gather around and at the same time quilts represented precious belongings that kept them warm, a shelter sewn by their own hands, and part of a mapping system that eventually helped them escape the dehumanizing institution of slavery. African American quilts are defined by Tobin and Dovard as a cultural hybrid that enjoys encoding meaning through geometric patterns, abstract improvised designs, strip piecing, bold signing colors, and distinctive stitches.⁴³ In the formal aspect all the patterns in quilt making are based on the square and its subdivisions; where the precise alignment of the pieces is not a standard at all. In fact, this is one of the big differences between the African American and the European-American way. Consequently, I decided to use the square as the basic structure in this project because of its potential in terms of composition, but also because I see it as a way of resistance, a simple way to bend the grid in my favor; by turning my back to the undoubtedly European artistic instruction that I experienced and pointing the mirror to the ancestral. Throughout the process I followed some of the bendable rules of quilt making: Strip-piecing, approximate measuring, improvising to break a pattern, and embracing accidentals. The

⁴² Eli Leon, 2006. *Accidentally on purpose: the aesthetic management of irregularities in African textiles and African-American quilts*. Davenport, Iowa: Figge Art Museum, p.15.

⁴³ Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard. 1999. *Hidden in plain view: the secret story of quilts and the underground railroad*. New York, N.Y.: Doubleday. p.35.

latter in fact defines most of my current work, my approach while drawing has become more intuitive than premeditated.

Crosses and Ex's: Location, Religion, and Dialogue

The cross was one of the most powerful weapons of colonization. History books say that Spanish colonials founded Bogotá. They set twelve small houses around a Catholic church located in what is now downtown. With some exceptions a similar event took place throughout South America and the Caribbean. The x's/crosses in these pieces recognize the fact that in major cities urban growth started using the church as the center point, establishing a grid distribution trying to mimic cities in the Northern hemisphere, then turning into a fan shape and finally becoming a disproportionate chaos. Catholic churches were built on top of pre-Columbian civilizations' temples as was the case of Cuzco in Peru, Cholula, Puebla, and the capital city of Tenochtitlan, now Mexico City.⁴⁴ In my work, churches still stand as deep white scars/landmarks on the dark soil. One of the contradictions in Latin American history is that the Catholic Church supported slavery for centuries but also played an important role in abolition. Currently, ninety percent of Latin Americans are Catholics⁴⁵ - evangelization mission accomplished.

I explore in this project a wide range of meaning of the cross from the simplest form to stamp a signature, to mark a specific location in the ground, or to determine a coordinate using Cartesian system. African, Asian, and European mapping systems include crosses as positioning devices.⁴⁶ But without a doubt the cross is the symbol of the long lasting effect of Christianization in the colonies, a cult of the cross with which I am extremely familiar. I believe this idea came to me while wandering around cities like Lima or Cuzco in Peru, Puebla, Oaxaca

⁴⁴ Peter Barber, 2005. *The Map Book*. [Delray Beach, Fla.]: Levenger Press, p 118.

⁴⁵ Néstor García Canclini, 1989. *Hybrid cultures: strategies for entering and leaving modernity*. Minneapolis, Minn: University of Minnesota Press. p 207.

⁴⁶ Peter Barber, 2005. *The Map Book*. [Delray Beach, Fla.]: Levenger Press, p 9.

and Mexico City in Mexico or Havana in Cuba, where it is impossible not to notice the amount of Catholic churches per mile built with one purpose: Enlighten the “savages” to use a European term.

The first maps sent to the crown in order to explain how the new domains were geographically distributed show, as Mundy states “an order the colonial government was eager to see,”⁴⁷ a geography snapped to the grid with Catholic edifices replacing mountains and hills as its main toponyms (fig. 10). At first, in those maps the church and the grid visually reshaped geography. Leibsohn writes about this:

Because the church and the grid are implicated in colonial policies of domination, their debut and persistence on maps was neither an inevitable nor innocent matter of cultural exchange. This means that the way we interpret maps impinges directly upon our construal of colonization.⁴⁸

Years later this became the rule, churches were those places to gather and be instructed by the word of god. Mendicant friars conducted the first schools in Latin America. The educational system that still persists in most cases today was based on religious precepts. As Mundy states, Church-centered maps show the central role the church played within native communities.⁴⁹ In my project that role is depicted in both tones negative and positive.

In contrast with European perspectives, I incorporate cruciform shapes present in African American quilts, and African textiles, religions and languages. Tobin and Dovard link the

⁴⁷ Barbara E. Mundy, *The Mapping of New Spain. Indigenous Cartography and the Maps of the Relaciones Geográficas*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996. p.76.

⁴⁸ Dana Leibsohn, “Colony and Cartography: Shifting Signs on Indigenous Maps of New Spain.” In *Reframing the Renaissance: Visual Culture in Europe and Latin America, 1450-1650*, edited by Claire Farago, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995. p. 266.

⁴⁹ Barbara E. Mundy, *The Mapping of New Spain. Indigenous Cartography and the Maps of the Relaciones Geográficas*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996. p.71.

African American quilt pattern of the crossroads with yowa (Fig. 11) the Kongo civilization cosmogram. Thompson refers to this symbol as:

The “turn in the path,” the crossroads remains an indelible concept in the Kongo-Atlantic world, as the point of intersection between the ancestors and the living. The horizontal line divides the mountain of the living world from its mirrored counterpart in the kingdom of the dead.⁵⁰

In African American quilting, the crossroads pattern is associated with the city of Cleveland as it was the point of convergence of many paths to freedom.⁵¹ This pattern is also the basis of the North star pattern (Fig. 9). To me it represents the intersection of two, not-so-different, perceptions of the world.

Because of the way I was educated, I cannot assure that is not the ancestral memory leading these choices, but after visiting major museums in the United States⁵², I feel particularly attracted to Nigerian sculpture and visual art. I consciously decided to include Nsibidi cruciform symbols of words, speech, meeting, congress, and speech at the crossroads. (Fig. 12). Mafundikwa defines Nsibidi language “as the ancient writing created by the Ejagham people in Southern Nigeria, developed before the eighteenth century for use by the male secret Society of the Ekpe, or Leopard society.”⁵³ This language survived the middle passage to become Anaforuana in Cuba; based on all these symbols I am writing my own. (fig. 27)

Another cruciform sign in my work makes reference to one of the plantation’s ways of punishment, in which a person is crucified laying down and mutilated (fig. 13). With this I

⁵⁰ Robert Farris Thompson, 1983. *Flash of the spirit: African and Afro-American art and philosophy*. New York: Random House. p.109.

⁵¹ Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard. 1999. *Hidden in plain view: the secret story of quilts and the underground railroad*. New York, N.Y.: Doubleday. p.97.

⁵² Metropolitan in New York and the Getty in California, among others.

⁵³ Eli Leon, 2006. *Accidentally on purpose: the aesthetic management of irregularities in African textiles and African-American quilts*. Davenport, Iowa: Figge Art Museum. p. 105.

highlight the contradictory relation between the benevolent faith of Christianity and the cruelty of its disciples. The cross also appears to acknowledge that in order to survive, African religions and beliefs had to hide behind, merge or cohabit with Christian imagery, as is the case of obeah, Santeria, Candomble and Voodoo.⁵⁴

Arrow/House

Clearly the first layer of meaning for this shape is that of the home, a warm place to sleep under, where one can exist surrounded by significant ones. In contrast, I use these shapes to bring the idea of migrant families without a permanent place to stay. I also play with the idea of the house as private property and the fact that the right to acquire property was denied to African descendants by the colonizer for centuries; they never owned the houses they built.⁵⁵

The square appears here again to construct these shapes. I use the basic quilt making rule to obtain these symbols by cutting the square diagonally in halves (fig. 14). In this regard, I develop further the concept of hybridization based on Patton's idea, when she suggests "the African and African-American preference for small square rooms." She came to this conclusion analyzing African and European adaptations for architectural styles in dogtrot slave cabins, where the household is composed by two basic square rooms with a breezeway between them."⁵⁶

Therefore, I place these shapes to establish a historical connection between shotgun houses, slave cabins, and African architecture presence in the Americas. In this aspect, one of the main influences for this project is John Biggers painting *Shotguns*, 1987, (fig. 15). Thompson's critical analysis on this piece suggests that:

⁵⁴ David H. Brown, 2003. *Santería enthroned: art, ritual, and innovation in an Afro-Cuban religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p 1.

⁵⁵ Sharon F. Patton, 1998. *African-American art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p 28.

⁵⁶ *ibid*, p 29, 30.

“The shotgun is perhaps the premier form of African-influenced architecture in the West Indies (Haiti) and the United States ...the architectures of Kongo as creolized together with European patterns on the soil of Haiti and then transmitted to this nation via Haitians in New Orleans, and, perhaps, another current direct from Kongo via captives landed on the Carolina coast”⁵⁷

The arrow/house shape depicts synchronously human settlement and people on the move. By using this shape I also explore the historical migrations of African descendants from South to North: the Great Migration between 1890s and 1940s, the second great migration 1940s to 1970s, the Caribbean migration from the colonial period to way into the twentieth century; from Africa to Europe and America during the infamous slave trade up to now, and mine from South America to the United States.⁵⁸ (fig. 23)

I place arrows and houses to address issues of displacement, marginalization, relocation, overnight occupations (A common practice used by settlers since pre-Hispanic times),⁵⁹ gentrification (fig. 34), suburban settlements and the “White flight.”⁶⁰ In addition to this, I use this shape to talk about my paternal mythical house (somehow similar to the multigenerational house in Romare Bearden’s work), and the romanticized idea of Africa as our original homeland. (fig. 35)

⁵⁷ Alvia J. Wardlaw, and John Thomas Biggers. 1995. *The art of John Biggers: view from the upper room*. Houston: Museum of Fine Arts, in association with Harry N. Abrams, p 108,111.

⁵⁸ Howard Dodson, and Sylviane A. Diouf. 2004. *In motion: the African-American migration experience*. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic, p 10.

⁵⁹ Dennis Carr, The Beinecke Map: Iconography and Physical Properties, in Barbara E. Mundy, and Mary E. Miller, eds. *Painting a Map of Sixteenth-Century Mexico City: Land, Writing, and Native Rule*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013, p 22.

⁶⁰ William H. Frey, 1980 *Black In-Migration, White Flight, and the Changing Economic Base of the Central City*. American Journal of Sociology, Vol. 85, No. 6 (May, 1980), pp. 1396-1417. Publisher(s): The University of Chicago Press, p 1396.

Fishes

I incorporate fish as the symbol of the African diasporic experience: the constant movement and shifting in order to adapt to different currents. First, the fish here highlights the connection between Christian religions and what is considered the largest forced migration in the history of humanity: the slave trade.⁶¹ Secondly, I place it to acknowledge the relationship Africans and African descendants have with the water, the Atlantic Ocean, and the Caribbean Sea.

Fish is actually what gives the name to this project. *Chere* is the common name given to a small mouth fish species (Bocachico) that grows in the fresh waters of the Atrato river area, in the department of Choco, located in the northern pacific region of Colombia. As I mentioned above, this is the region with the largest concentration of people of African descent (fig 16). Fishermen communities settled alongside several rivers in the area, and the same waters have been used to pan for gold and platinum. Like many other families in the area, my family worked for decades extracting those metals from that land. Unfortunately, this practice has not brought progress to the community, but an irreparable damage to the environment.

I grew up listening about the benefits of eating fresh fish; indeed, fried fish and plantain are the most common dishes in this community, and without a doubt my father's most favorite dish. While telling stories about the river my father introduced emphatically his last will: "*When my time comes no cemetery, I want to be cremated and have my ashes thrown to the Atrato river*"

⁶¹ King, Russell. 2010. *People on the move: an atlas of migration*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p 24.

Ships

At school, as if it was a game, we recreated scenes of the encountering of two worlds to celebrate Columbus Day. It seems like it happened at almost the same age that I learned about the arrival of European boats to shores of the New World and how to make a boat out of a sheet of paper. I bring the paper boat image to depict how the idea of colonization as a positive shift for the people in the Americas is conceived as being as innocent as making a paper boat. By using the Underground Railroad quilt code I depict the arrival of the three ships that Columbus brought to the Americas. Juxtaposed is the figure of Pedro Niño, Columbus' African pilot. (fig. 24)

A ship was not only the colonial vessel that transported people (free and enslaved), all kinds of goods across the Atlantic, but also the container that carried ideas and culture, and at some point the desire of freedom and independence. In his text *The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of modernity*, Paul Gilroy defines ships in the colonial period as,

The living means by which the points within that Atlantic World were joined. They were mobile elements that stood for the shifting spaces in between the fixed places that they connected. Accordingly they need to be thought of as cultural and political units rather than abstract embodiments of the triangular trade.⁶²

Is precisely through dynamic squares and percussive music that I explore tracing back to the origins of the culture that traveled all the way from Africa. Since my interest is to highlight the contribution of African descendants to the culture and economy of the Americas, I explore the influence of music in a visual way with these marks that resemble the waves that a rock

⁶² Gilroy, Paul. 1993. *The Black Atlantic: modernity and double consciousness*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, p 16.

thrown to the water produces. In this case, black communities making waves, producing sound, filling the space with rhythm and culture. (fig. 23 & 24)

Chairs

I use the chair as a metaphor of the black body. These elements represent the colonial commodification of human beings. Chairs can be disposed at will by the owner. Regarding the figure and the black body, while working in this project I always had in mind Bearden's reference to "The Negro artist's dilemma," that is, "the obligation of the black artist to present figurative images (vernacular realism) that counter negative racial stereotypes."⁶³ I am not sure if my figures challenge racial stereotypes; I see the figure in these pieces as confrontational, a sharp reminder of the presence of African descendants and how the black body has been sold, starved, tossed, burned, lynched, dismembered, put aside and marginalized. The black figures in this piece in particular contain various layers of meaning. First, the smiling faces refer to the stereotype of Afro-descendants as happy folks⁶⁴ (fig. 24), but the fact is that upon arrival in the New World, Africans had their teeth checked for diseases. In addition to that and with the intention to make them look healthier slaves were covered with a coat of oil and gunpowder: shiny black meant healthy, strong and ready to be sold.⁶⁵

Masks

The masks I designed are based on the wooden Bwa mask from Burkina Faso (fig. 17). My intention is bringing African ancestral art through contemporary art practices. Also the

⁶³ Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Romare Bearden: Southern recollections*. Charlotte, N.C.: pMint Museum, p 59.

⁶⁴ Nederveen Pieterse, Jan. 1992. *White on black: images of Africa and Blacks in Western popular culture*. New Haven: Yale University Press, p 132.

⁶⁵ Maurie Dee McInnis, 2011. *Slaves waiting for sale: abolitionist art and the American slave trade*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p 123.

impact African masks had on modern artists like Picasso intrigued me. The white mask/faces on black figures are a direct reference to Franz Fanon's book *Black Skin, White masks*, where he discusses the term coined by W. E. B. DuBois, "*Double consciousness*" to explain the necessity of African descendants to constantly regard themselves through others' eyes.⁶⁶ Talking about contemporary art Korena Mercer refers to this saying "The image of the African mask recurs, from the Harlem Renaissance through Bearden to Basquiat, as a constant and distinctive visual trope of the diasporic imagination."⁶⁷ The whiteness of the masks also refers to the Kongo belief, among other African societies, that the dead, or their spirits come back with white faces.⁶⁸ The facial expression is confrontational but at the same time responds to what Thompson describes as the "striking custom of dancing "hot" with a "cool" unsmiling face; a facial serenity, that has been noted at many points in Afro-American history."⁶⁹

V. Black and White: A Wide Spectrum In-between

The black and white dichotomy has always intrigued me. To me the idea of using color to reduce and describe the complexities of ethnicity always sounded vague but loaded with historical weight at the same time. The fact is that the color line traced by the colonizer has been slicing the world into small pieces, so he can exploit it at will. The color choices I made are based on a series of extremely tense connections between black and white throughout Atlantic history, Lhamon describes it saying:

⁶⁶ Frantz Fanon, *Black skin, white masks*, 1967. p 1.

⁶⁷ Elam, Harry Justin, and Kennell A. Jackson. 2005. *Black cultural traffic: crossroads in global performance and popular culture*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, p 156

⁶⁸ Robert Farris Thompson, 1974. *African art in motion; icon and act in the Collection of Katherine Coryton White*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, p 126.

⁶⁹ Ibid p 45

Blackness and whiteness developed an interactive relationship contesting each other during their assembly and display. This cultural history determines that we see the one fully only in the presence of the other.⁷⁰

This polarization started being embedded in written form in the one and only book that marked the beginning of modern times in the western world, and tells the story of the white savior: the Bible. To this extent Pastoreau affirms that “For early Christian theology white and black formed a pair of opposites and often represented the colored expression of Good and Evil. Such an opposition relied on Genesis (light/darkness), but also on sensibilities aligned with nature (day/night, for example).”⁷¹ Two thousand and fourteen years later, the color black is still loaded with negative connotations. Also in other sacred books, as early as 1723 the French defined in the *Dictionnaire Universel de Commerce*, Africans as a race of slaves. This definition circulated for over two hundred years.⁷² Is precisely tied to this fact that I place letters in this piece (fig. 24). Three different typographies depict the persistent ratification of black as inferior/servant throughout western history: Three letters describing the Black Atlantic (Africa, Atlantic, and America). First, the 1447 font Gutenberg used in the very first printed book. Second, the roman alphabet font engraved in Trajan’s column as the base for all the languages spoken in the Americas: English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish. And finally, Helvetica a font developed in the mid twentieth century in Europe.⁷³ To highlight the dichotomy in written form Pastoreau adds:

⁷⁰ Elam, Harry Justin, and Kennell A. Jackson. 2005. *Black cultural traffic: crossroads in global performance and popular culture*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, p 112.

⁷¹ Michel Pastoreau, 2009. *Black: the history of a color*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, p 39.

⁷² Edwards, Brent Hayes. 2003. *The practice of diaspora: literature, translation, and the rise of Black internationalism*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, p 26.

⁷³ Hustwit, Gary, Shelby Siegel, and Luke Geissbuhler. 2007. *Helvetica*. [London]: Swiss Dots Ltd.

Historians can never emphasize enough the significance of the event that the diffusion of engraved and printed images represents in the history of Western culture. With regard to color it marked a crucial turning point. Between the mid fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the vast majority of circulated images, both in and outside of books, had become black and white. All medieval images, or almost all, were polychromatic.⁷⁴

To continue tracing back in history this dichotomy it was actually based on a color discrepancy that the Church found a vindication for slavery. Daniels says about this relationship that:

Blackness was perceived as low, bestial, perverse and unredeeming. In the bible, the mark upon Cain for slaying Abel and the condemnation of Ham to be the servant of servants have been used to explain the origin of the black. The linking of the black with degeneracy in the bible was further written into scientific texts and used as justification, in the romantic reconstruction of the world, in colonialist expansionism and in the a posteriori appropriation of the globe.⁷⁵

As synonym of civilization white was the color imposed upon other cultures. In fact, Norle Looko refers to the African diasporic experience as largely one of superimposition.⁷⁶ White marks are indeed one of the last layers I applied in these compositions. These marks appear to whitewash what it was previously, yet, black marks flow through them as a way of resistance. White is at once the erasure and measure disseminated into other cultures, the influence that reduces diversity to its darkest opposite. While working with these opposites I keep thinking about the over exploited black producer and the ferocious white consumer, and the cause/effect relationship between colonialism and capitalism: How capitalism has ingested so much from black labor but has not yet acknowledged its dependence.

⁷⁴ Michel Pastoureau, 2009. *Black: the history of a color*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, p 119.

⁷⁵ Lesley Naa Norle Lokko, 2000. *White papers, black marks: architecture, race, culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p 204.

⁷⁶ Ibid, p 178.

My exploration of color consists on instead of mixing colors beforehand; I juxtapose them in between black and white marks. The process of layering these colors gets to the point where it is difficult to label them, almost exactly as it happens with biracials or multiracials.⁷⁷ I chose the colors to apply in between black and white based on the goods that has been extracted from the Americas. Because gold was the most precious currency during the colonial period Pastoreau defines indigo as blue gold,⁷⁸ same goes to all the products extracted by blacks in the Americas: Cotton (white gold), Sugar (brown gold), and bananas (green gold), and in the case of my paternal family, platinum and gold indeed. Along sugar and cotton, indigo was another product highly demanded for the crown. European explorers found new varieties of indigo in the New World. These varieties produced a colorant stronger than those made from Asian varieties. Pastoreau affirms that indigo represented a source of considerable wealth to Spain in particular because of its control of the trade.⁷⁹ In addition to black other colors of the Diaspora are red, green, and yellow, the Pan African colors, present in Rastafarian flag, hence the flag of Ethiopia.

Loading color with historical meaning to convey ideas of nationalism is another aspect that triggered my interest in this exploration. Colombia's flag red strip stands for the blood poured by the greatest heroes of the nation fighting for independence. Red here is all the blood in the hands of the colonizer. This color stands for the blood spilled by all the humans thrown overboard during centuries of the slave trade (fig. 24). Red represents all the humans slaughtered in the name of god (fig. 23 & 28). Red brings the consequences of colonialism. Red was the

⁷⁷ Kimberly McClain DaCosta, 2007. *Making multiracials: state, family, and market in the redrawing of the color line*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, p 77.

⁷⁸ Michel Pastoreau, 2001. *Blue: the history of a color*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, p 127.

⁷⁹ *ibid*

color of the square houses in Monopoly the game of capital accumulation. In an urban setting red is also the color in traffic signs that prevents danger.

However not all red is tragedy. As Thompson does, I associate red with Africa: Laterite red, the foundation color.⁸⁰ In fact in this piece (fig. 25), red is the ancestral connection between Mende textiles and African American quilts (fig. 1). Leon writes about this “ there is an African-American belief that a quilt must not be considered finished if it does not contain at least one scrap of red. When asked if they were familiar with such a superstition, my informants often said something like “ No, I never heard that, but I always put some red in my quilts.”⁸¹

VI. Materials and Techniques

My selection of materials and processes is connected with the subject matter. Textiles and fabrics were part of the goods involved in the colonial triangle of trade. Due to the African interest in textiles, fabrics, along with guns and liquor became currency of exchange for slaves between Europe and Africa.⁸² Millions of enslaved Africans in America picked tons of cotton so that the colonizer can wear fresh clothes in the summer. Here then cotton is woven with historical meaning; all the fabrics I work with are cotton based.

The word map comes from the Latin word “mappa” that means cloth.⁸³ I chose to work with fabrics not only for practical reasons. My process has evolved to incorporate a greater variety of mark making gestures that now include the movement of the whole body to create large-scale formats. Working with watercolor canvas offers the possibility of working on large

⁸⁰ Alvia J. Wardlaw, and John Thomas Biggers. 1995. *The art of John Biggers: view from the upper room*. Houston: Museum of Fine Arts, in association with Harry N. Abrams, p 110.

⁸¹ Eli Leon, 2006. *Accidentally on purpose: the aesthetic management of irregularities in African textiles and African-American quilts*. Davenport, Iowa: Figge Art Museum, p 35.

⁸² Howard Dodson and Sylviane A. Diouf. 2004. *In motion: the African-American migration experience*. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic, p 19

⁸³ J. B. Harley, and David Woodward. 1992. *History of Cartography Vol. 2,Bk. 1., Vol. 2,Bk. 1.* Univ. Chicago P, p xvi.

formats while having the chance to move easily back and forth from the wall to the table. Just as maps, all the pieces in this project can be either rolled or folded so that they become objects to carry around.

I decided to work with a mixture of media as an approach to hybridization. Throughout the MFA program I started incorporating a diversity of materials I was not familiar with. One of the biggest challenges was introducing the use of non-art materials like tape, sturdy brushes, markers, bleach, and rolls. As a migrant, I became aware that my interest was focused in materials that can be found anywhere. The other part, the art supplies are screen printing inks (acrylic based), Indian and Chinese ink, and spray paint (also acrylic based). These processes are tied in one way or another to the shattered identities in African diasporic experience whether superimposing, white washing, covering up, cutting out, bleaching out, removing from or burning out.

Two artists that influenced my work conceptually and technically are Faith Ringgold and Romare Bearden (fig. 18). In fact, it was doing my research on Faith Ringgold's work that I found out about African American quilt making tradition, the Underground Railroad quilt code, and their connection with Africa. I came to the conclusion that the artists' approach and technique were strictly related to the subject matter, the historical context, and their personal lives. The technique directly responds to their interest in establishing a connection with their legacy as African Americans in the Twentieth Century. By collaging personal stories, both artists pay homage to their forbearers and make visible the struggles of a segregated community. Their work also shares symbols that talk about the African diaspora and the phenomenon of migration within the United States (the house, the bridge, and the railroad). Bearden's work not only talks

about history, most of his collage paintings are attempts of putting together shattered pieces of memory.⁸⁴

The fragmentation in Bearden's collages Somehow resonates in my cutout stencils. As I was born and raised in a capital city, I became familiar with urban art and its variety of forms. Even though, I have not done graffiti before, the techniques I developed are essentially stencil based. As a reference I have been looking at graffiti artists like Swoon (Caledonia Curry), and C215 (Christian Guémy) (fig. 19). One aspect of their exploration in stencil-based marks that resonates in my work is the possibility of combining serial production with a more painterly quality. Also having the opportunity to carry the stencils wherever I go and use them on a variety of surfaces.

VII. Music

One of the greatest contributions of African descendants to the culture of the American continent has been through music. With only their voices and heartbeat, Africans adapted their instruments to continue playing music as a way to maintain a connection with the motherland in the New World. For the development of this part of the project I work in collaboration with Fernando Valencia,⁸⁵ who after studying with master percussionists and folklore musicians in Cuba focuses his research on the influence of African percussion in Caribbean and Latin American music. The percussion based piece he improvised after my brief input recreates a “sonic journey of the drum” as he describes it, to the Americas via the colonization and enslavement processes that occurred mainly in the present Caribbean countries of Cuba, Puerto Rico, Haiti, Dominican Republic and Colombia. In this musical fragment, several rhythmic cells

⁸⁴ Carla M. Hanzal, *Romare Bearden: Southern recollections*. Charlotte, N.C.: Mint Museum, p 44.

⁸⁵ Born in Colombia, he received a Master in Music Performance from the University of Arkansas in 2005.

that can be traced back to many African music traditions are exposed in their most essential form. In the same way as syncretic activity in the Americas gave birth to new musical manifestations, this percussion piece transforms those basic rhythmic structures in newer, more complex rhythmic entities as a result of the influence of the different musical manifestations from Europe, the Middle East, and indigenous cultures.

The other piece I use is *An expanding distance of multiple voices for solo Violin, 2005* created by African American composer Jeffrey Mumford⁸⁶ and performed by Dr. Er-Gene Kahng⁸⁷ during the Black Music Symposium in February, 2013. I chose this piece because its ties in terms of hybridization. Evidently, this piece is played with classical music instruments, and it clearly shows a Eurocentric approach, but talks about the African diasporic experience.

The music in this project determines not only the rhythm and pace for the animations, but also works as the ambient music of the exhibition.

VIII. Animation

I recreate surreal environments to visualize aspects of the diaspora such as colonization, displacement, instability, inequality, industrialization, urbanization, over population, gentrification, adaptation, acculturation, and hybridization (fig. 34 & 35). For this aspect of the project, I look at the work of Kara Walker and William Kentridge (fig 21). Both artists develop a multi media approach combining drawing, collage, cut out techniques and animation. Walkers'

⁸⁶ Born in Washington, D.C. on June 22, 1955. Guggenheim Foundation and Composers' Conference, Johnson, Vermont fellow and ASCAP Aaron Copland Scholar. www.jeffreymumford.com

⁸⁷ B.A. University of California, Los Angeles, M.M. Yale School of Music, Artist Diploma Yale School of Music, D.M. Northwestern University. She is currently serving as Concertmaster of Arkansas Philharmonic, North Mississippi Symphony Orchestra, and is the Assistant Concertmaster of Fort Smith Symphony. She also performs as a substitute section violinist with the Tulsa Symphony Orchestra and Arkansas Symphony Orchestra. <http://www.ergenekahng.com>

black and white paper silhouettes deal with ambiguous interactions and relations of power between races since the colonial period in America. As an African American she experienced moving out from California to face historical aspects of racism in the southern state of Georgia in the seventies.⁸⁸ Kentridge's approach resonates in my work in the sense that a conversation between drawing, printmaking and experimental animation is established. Similar to this, I explore the subject matter with different media; my practice combines various processes that constantly feed each other.

IX. Installation

The arrangement of the pieces in the long wall of the gallery responds to some basic ideas (fig. 21). First, creating a long timeline that might be read either from left to right or right to left. As stated above, I explore causes and consequences of the African forced migration. I present to the viewer what it appears to be the present and the past, the displacement from the eastern to the western hemisphere, and The New World and its "mother" countries. The pieces can be viewed all at once or by sifting through the details. The viewer can visually navigate a way through the marks in the pieces discovering, connecting, recombining and making associations, to some extent rewriting history. The shattered section in the middle of the long interrupted line conveys ideas of portraiture, dispersion, spreading, and disruption. The pieces hanging by the window resemble stained glass work in Cathedrals and churches. This kind of setting was inspired by Barry McGee's work (fig. 22).

⁸⁸ Kara Elizabeth Walker, and Ian Berry. 2003. *Kara Walker: narratives of a negress*. Saratoga Springs, NY: Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College, p 91.

X. Contemporary Art Influences

In addition to the artists I have mentioned previously, the work of Spanish-Colombian artist Alejandro Obregon (1920-1992) has definitely been an influence in my work. I find interesting the clashing and splashing Caribbean colors he applied on large formats. His most famous series Condores and Barracudas combines figuration and abstraction infused with motion and dynamism in its brushstrokes. Early in the MFA program, I was introduced to the work of Julie Merehtu and Mark Bradford, their map-like compositions were the chaotic-systematic combination I was looking for to challenge my previous work. Some others artists I have looking at are Argentinians Ernesto Deira, Luis Felipe Noe, and Roberto Maccio because they developed a body of work dealing with conflict, war and oppression as well.

XI. Not the End

The development of this project has been quiet a journey. Understanding the dynamics that brought me to this point became somehow reconciliation, a healing process to some extent. Researching my African ancestry definitely became a shifting point for my practice, both, conceptually and technically. The heavy weight of history has lifted the bar for me to encounter a new path of self-discovery. Certainly that path is not straight as the devil moves according to African belief; it is a zig-zag stripe that alternates and moves between places and experiences, and becomes something else in the middle.

Without a doubt my current practice has been influenced by all those dynamics that have been surrounding me. Probably, Ike Ude, Nigerian born New York based artist describes it better

when he says “I see circumstances of my artistic practice as inextricably informed by the multiplicity of conflicting cultural influences I have inherited and delineated to serve myself.”⁸⁹

⁸⁹ Elam, Harry Justin, and Kennell A. Jackson. 2005. *Black cultural traffic: crossroads in global performance and popular culture*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, p 145.

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XIII. Figures



Ewe peoples, Kente prestige cloth. Ghana, 19th Century Cotton and silk. The Minneapolis Institute of Arts. ARTstor Slide Gallery, <<http://library.artstor.org/>>



Rosie Wilkins, Log Cabin, 1988-9, cotton and polyester with polyester filling, 68 x 84 in. ARTstor Slide Gallery, <<http://library.artstor.org/>>

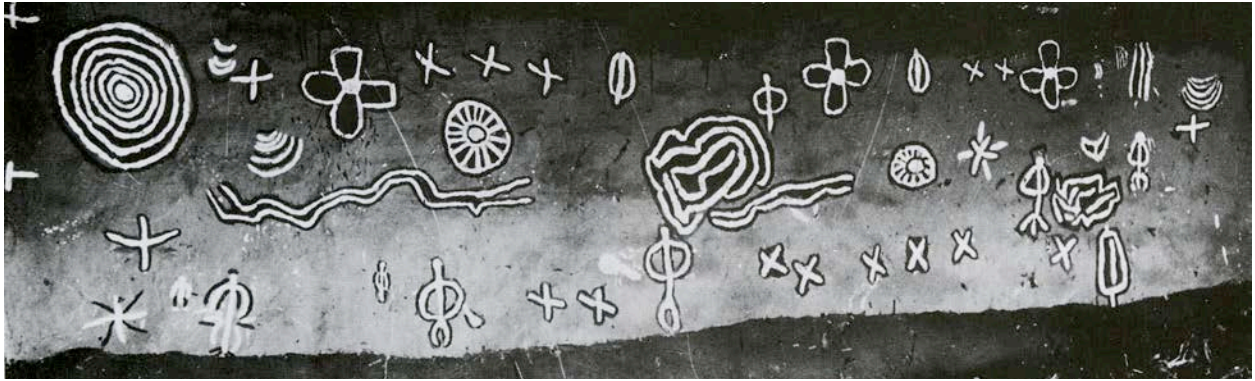
Figure 1.



Figure 2. The relacion geográfica map of Culhuacan by Pedro de San Agustin, 1580. 71 x 54 cm Benson Latin American Collection, The General Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin. ARTstor Slide Gallery, <<http://library.artstor.org/>>



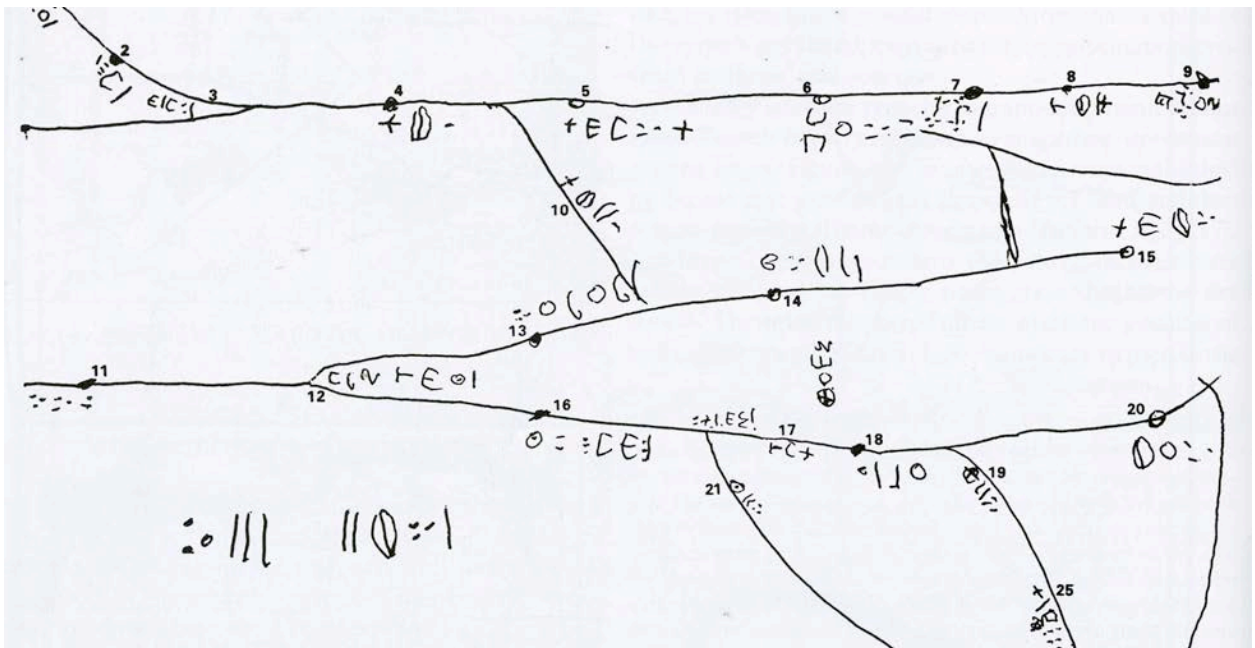
Figure 3. Intersections, 2012



Lukala wall map from Budye initiation ceremony, 1898



King Njoya's map between his farm and Fumban, 1906



Map of Tuareg transhumance zonemade by Kili Kili Ag Najim and modified by Edmund Bernus

Figure 4. African maps from J. B. Harley and David Woodward. *The history of cartography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

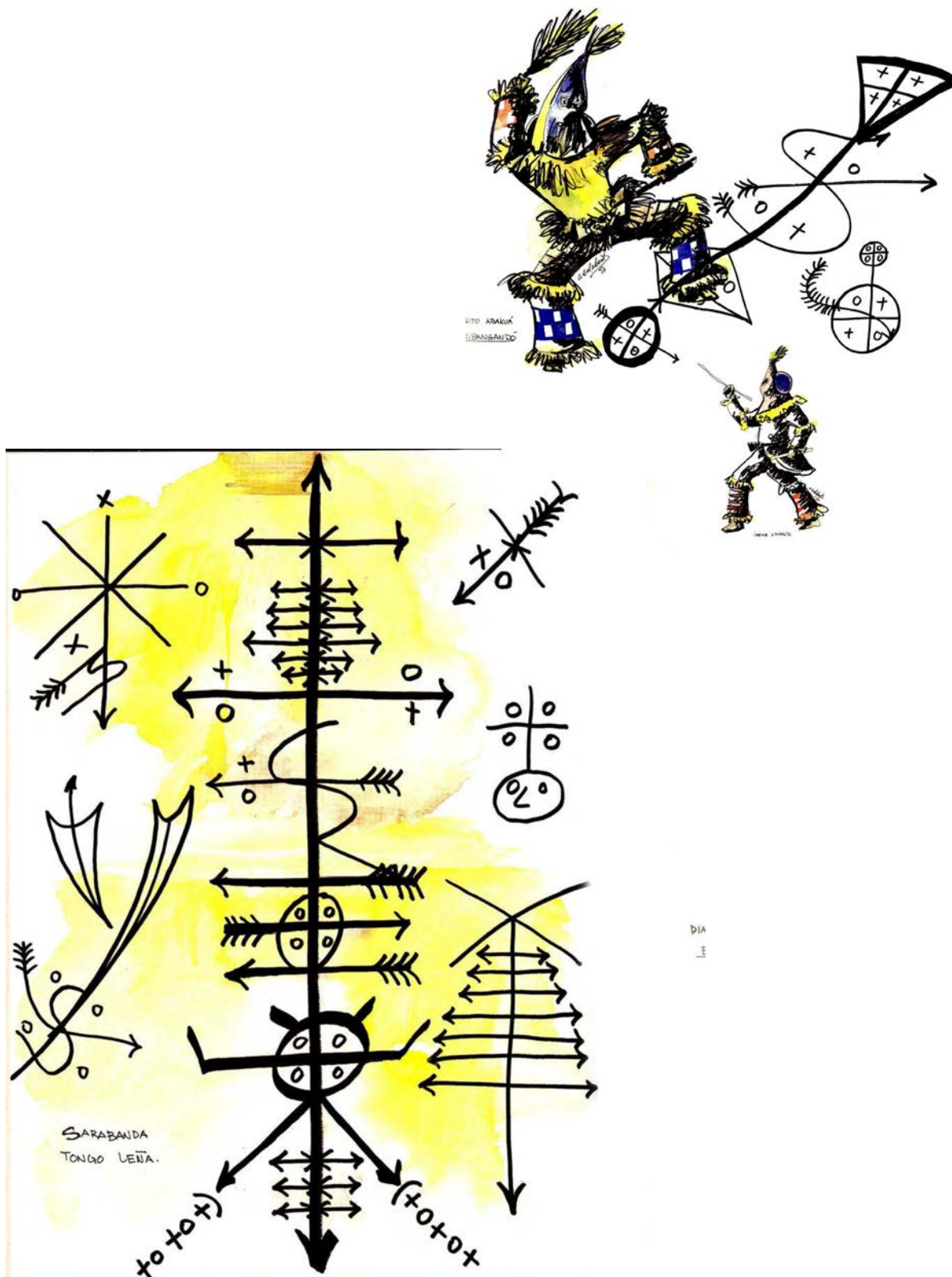
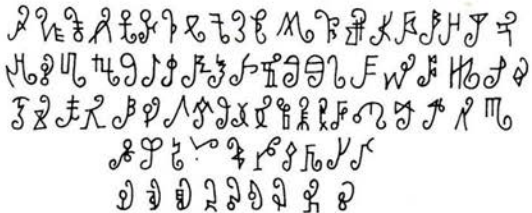

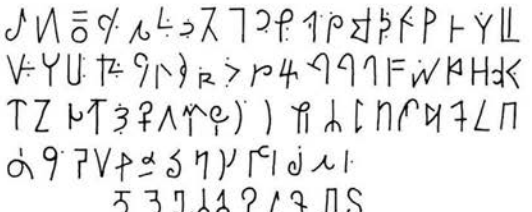


Figure 5. Anaforuana from Saki Mafundikwa, *Afrikan alphabets: the story of writing in Afrika*. West New York, N.J.: Mark Batty, 2004.

pi	pā	pu	pe	peh	pah	po	fi	fa	fu	fe	feh	fah
wi	wā	wu	we	weh	wah	wo	vi	va	vu	ve	veh	vah
mbi	mba	mbu	mbe	mbeh	mbah	mbo	ti	ta	tu	te	teh	tah
bi	bā	bu	be	beh	bah	bo	li	la	lu	le	leh	lah
kpi	kpa	kpu	kpe	kpeh	kpah	kpo	ndi	nda	ndu	nde	ndeh	ndah
gbi	gba	gbu	gbe	gbeh	gbah	gbo	di	da	du	de		dah
							si	sa	su	se	seh	sah
							ji	ja	ju	je	jeh	jah

Mende syllabary of Sierra leone invented by Kisimi Kamara in 1921

<p>  </p> <p>  </p> <p>  </p>	<p>a</p> <p>O</p> <p>lé</p> <p>Yu</p> <p>Noue</p> <p>Sha</p> <p>Pé</p> <p>Re</p> <p>Fou</p> <p>Ke</p>	<p>ka</p> <p>nyi</p> <p>mé</p> <p>Shi</p> <p>Nou</p> <p>Kú</p> <p>fé</p> <p>Kén</p> <p>Fem</p> <p>Mbén</p>	<p>u</p> <p>i</p> <p>ta</p> <p>Si</p> <p>Njoue</p> <p>Kú</p> <p>Rou</p> <p>Kwen</p> <p>Wa</p> <p>Rén</p>	<p>ku</p> <p>la</p> <p>da</p> <p>Shú</p> <p>Yo</p> <p>pou</p> <p>Lou</p> <p>Ga</p> <p>Na</p> <p>Mén</p>	<p>e</p> <p>Pa</p> <p>njem</p> <p>sú</p> <p>Shou</p> <p>té</p> <p>Mi</p> <p>gna</p> <p>Li</p> <p>Ma</p>	<p>Re</p> <p>Ri</p> <p>M</p> <p>Ké</p> <p>You</p> <p>Pu</p> <p>Ni</p> <p>Cho</p> <p>Pi</p> <p>Ti</p>	<p>te</p> <p>nié</p> <p>Su</p> <p>Két</p> <p>Ya</p> <p>Wi</p> <p>Rú</p> <p>Poue</p> <p>Lo</p> <p>Ki</p>
----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Shu-mom, King Njoya's writing system invented in 1896

Figure 6. African syllabaries from Saki Mafundikwa, *Afrikan alphabets: the story of writing in Afrika*. West New York, N.J.: Mark Batty, 2004.

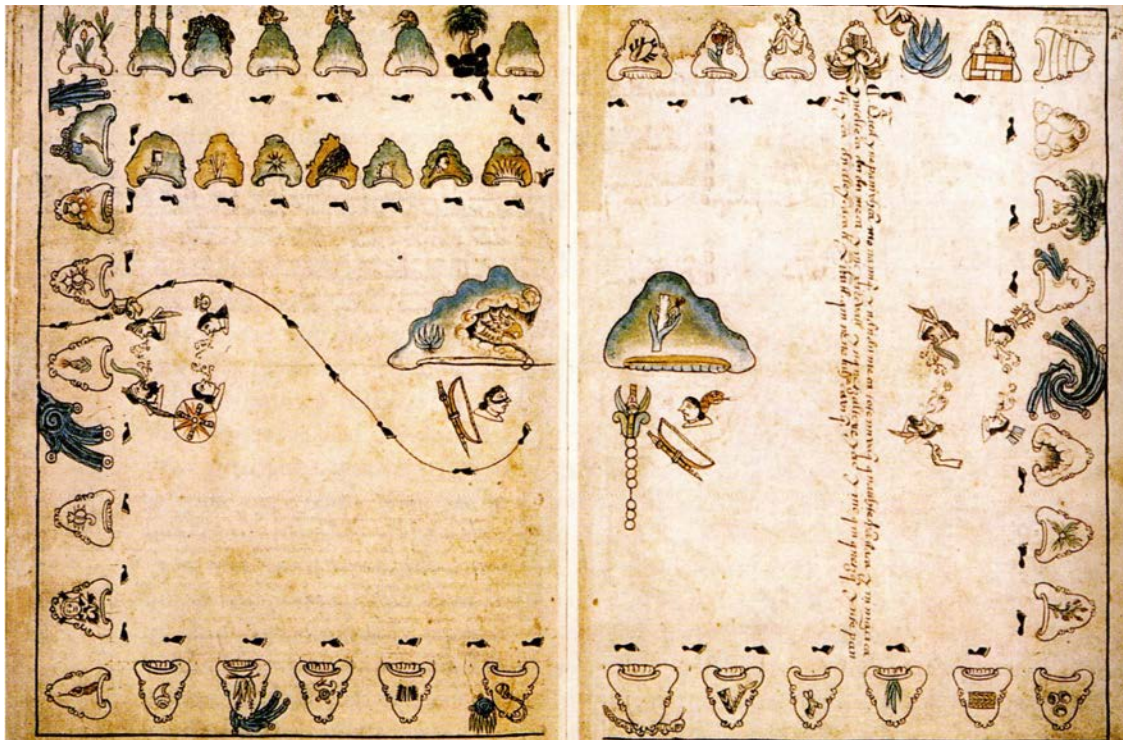


Figure 7. Cuauhtinchan and its boundaries. Color on European paper, from the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca, c.1545-1565. Paris, Bibliotheque Nationale, Ms. 46-50 Fols. 35v-36r. ARTstor Slide Gallery, <<http://library.artstor.org/>>

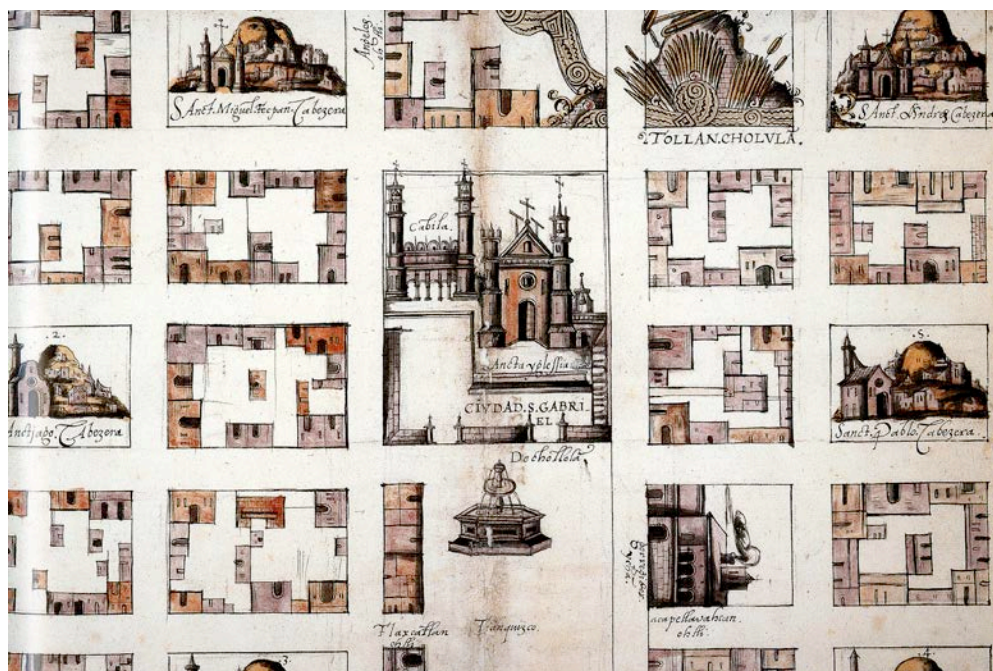
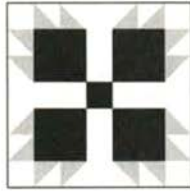
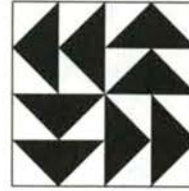


Figure 8. The map of Cholula made by an Amerindian painter, 1579, from Peter Barber, *The map book*. [Delray Beach, Fla.]: Levensinger Press, 2005.

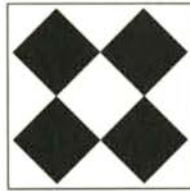
Bear's Paw



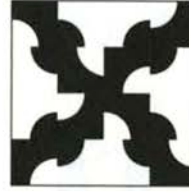
Flying Geese



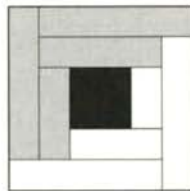
Crossroads



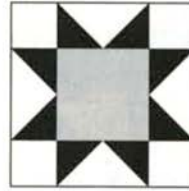
Drunkard's Path



Log Cabin



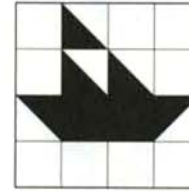
Star/Evening Star/
North Star



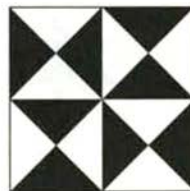
Shoofly



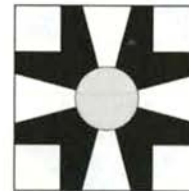
Sailboat



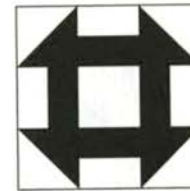
Bow Tie (also known
as Hourglass)



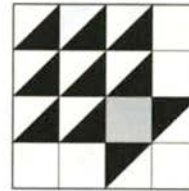
Britches



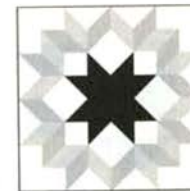
Monkey Wrench



Basket



Wagon Wheel/
Carpenter's Wheel



Nine Patch



Figure 9. Underground Railroad quilt code, from Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard. Hidden in plain view: the secret story of quilts and the underground railroad. New York, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1999.

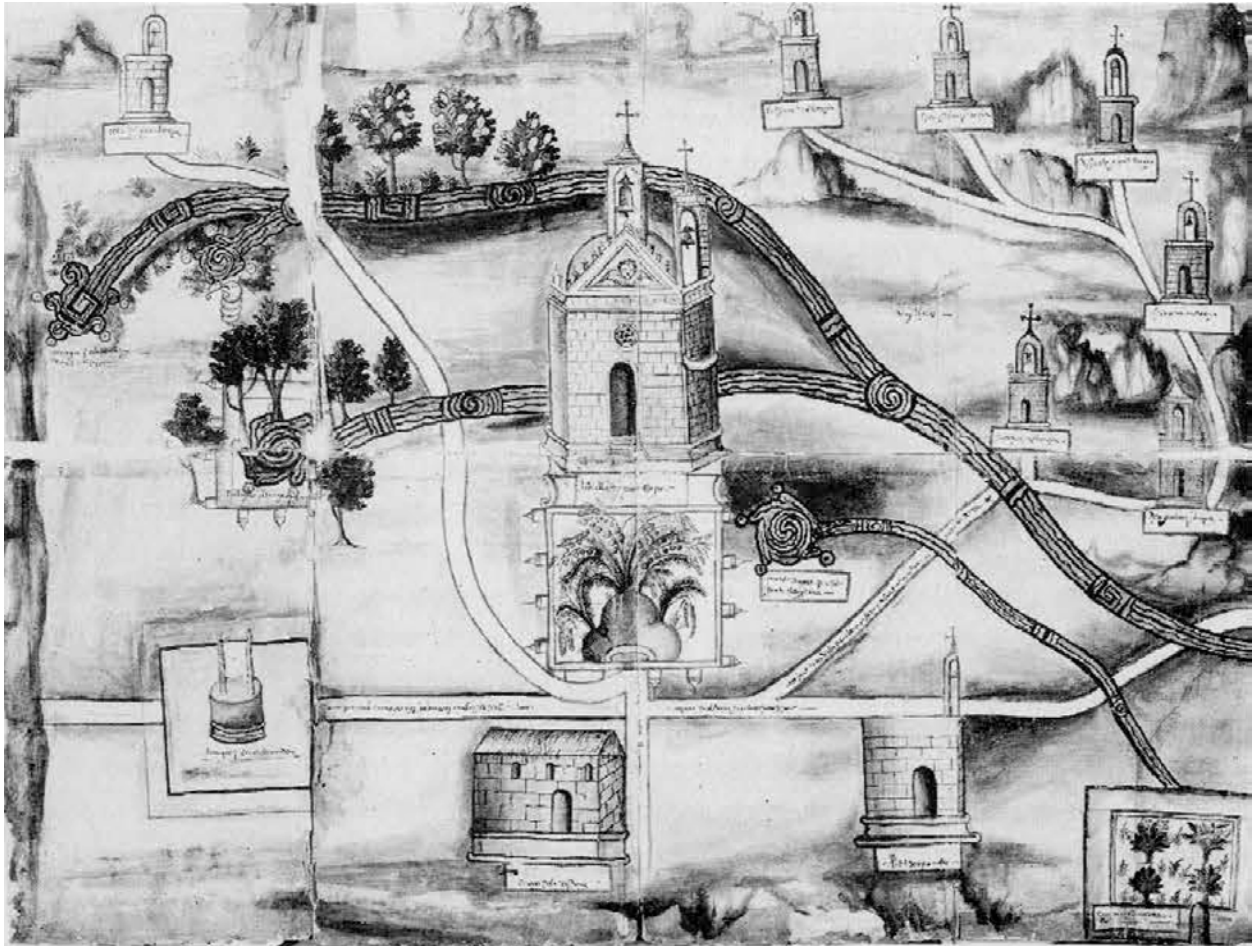


Figure 10. The relación geográfica map of Guaxtepec, 1580, 62 x 83 cm. Benson Latin American Collection, The General Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin. ARTstor Slide Gallery, <http://library.artstor.org/>

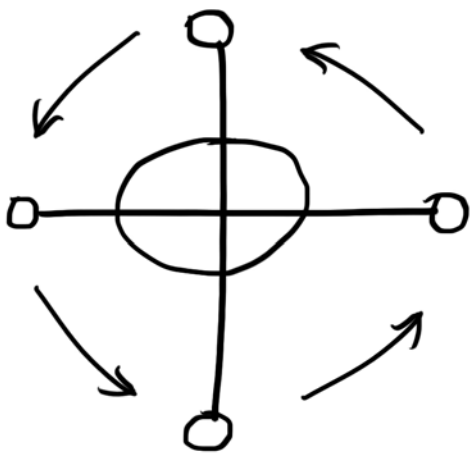
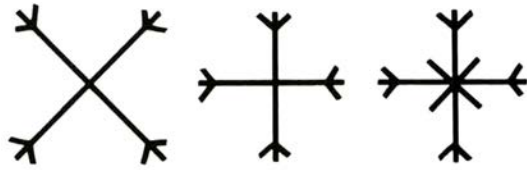


Figure 11. Yowa symbol



Trouble or Speech at the crossroads.



words, speech, meeting or congress.



Arrangements of triangles and squares stand for the leopard's spots a sign of leadership and prowess in war.

Figure 12. Nsibidi symbols from Saki Mafundikwa, *Afrikan alphabets: the story of writing in Afrika*. West New York, N.J.: Mark Batty, 2004.

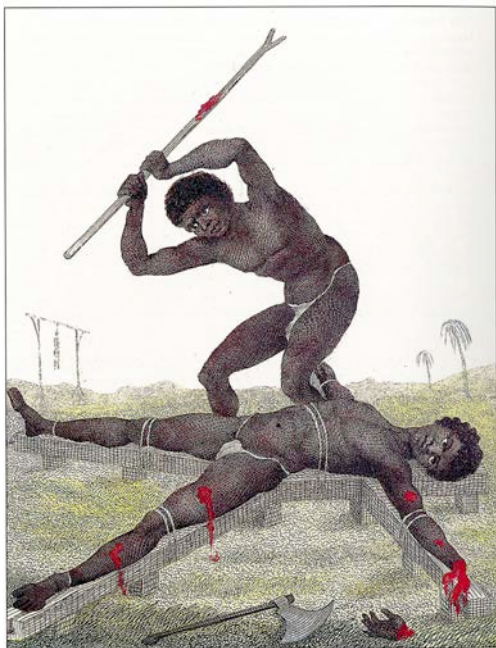


Figure 13. William Blake, *Narrative of Five Years Expedition: Execution of Breaking on the Rack*, 1793, engraving. *Narrative of Five Years Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* Published by J. Johnson, St. Paul's Church Yard, London. ARTstor Slide Gallery, <http://library.artstor.org/>

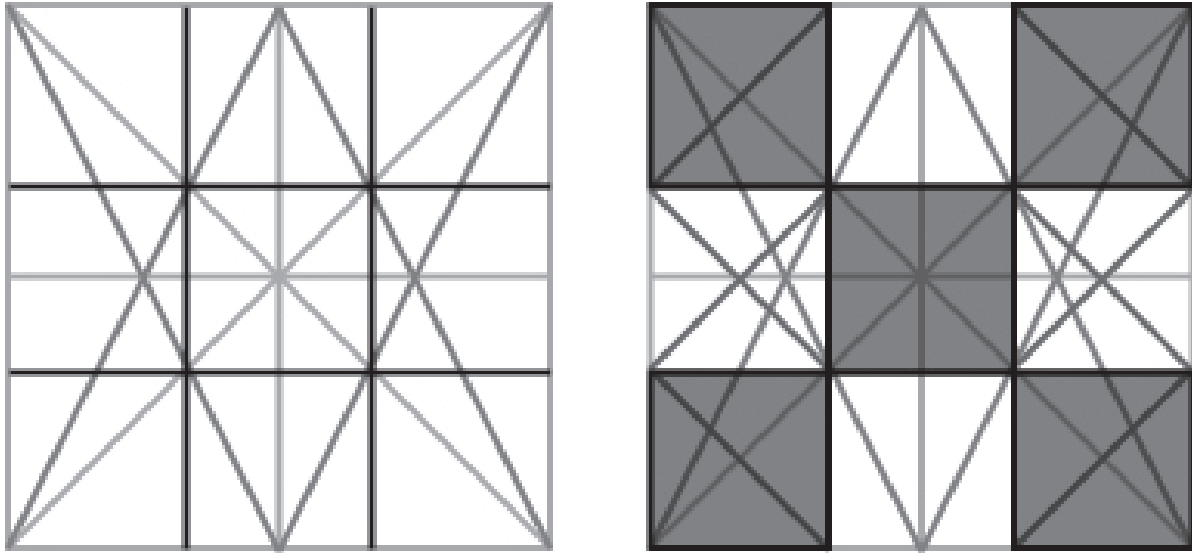


Figure 14. Square and diagonals

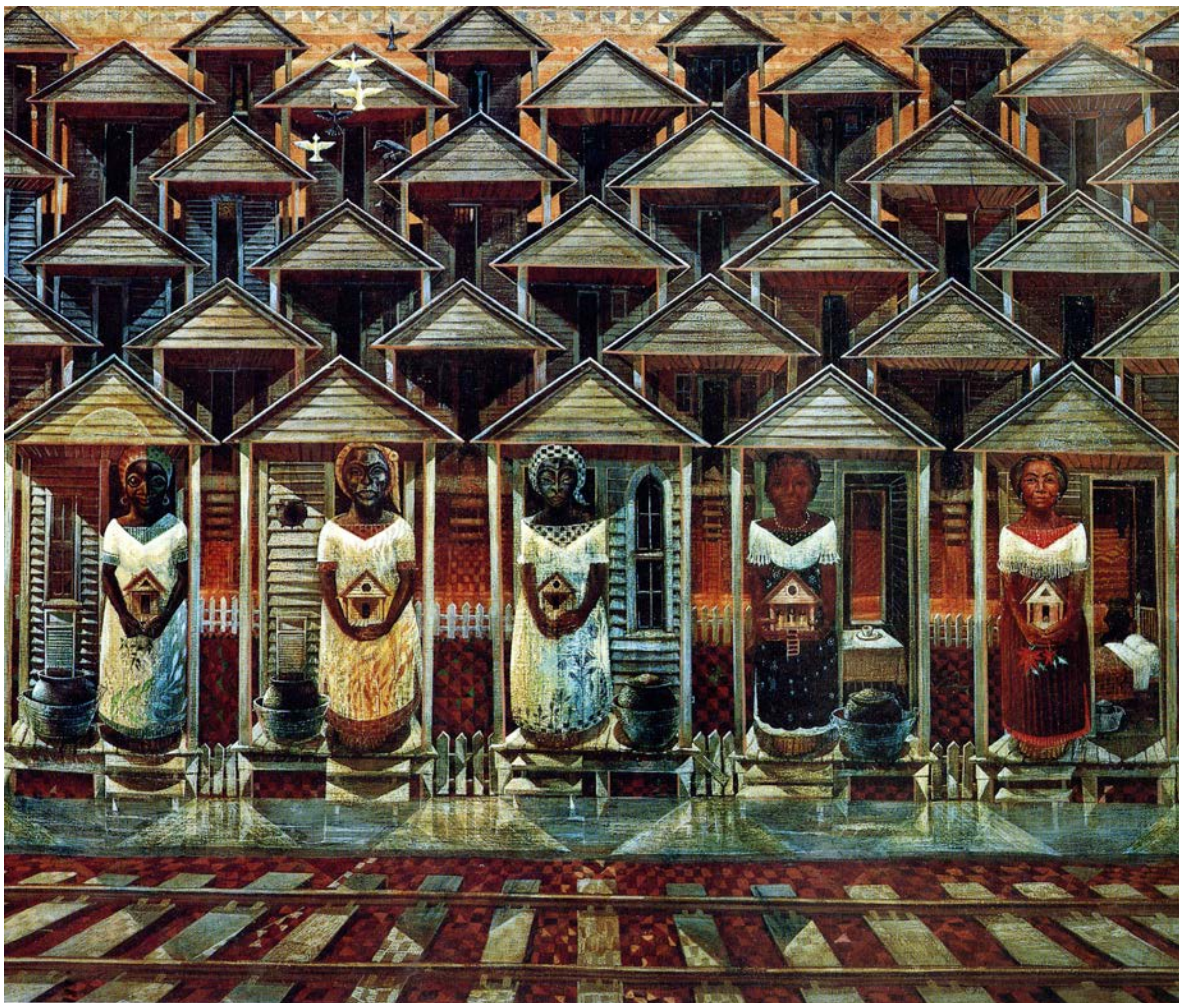


Figure 15. John Biggers, *Shotguns*, 1987. Oil on Canvas. ARTstor Slide Gallery, <<http://library.artstor.org/>>



Figure 16. Map of Colombia. Department of Chocó.

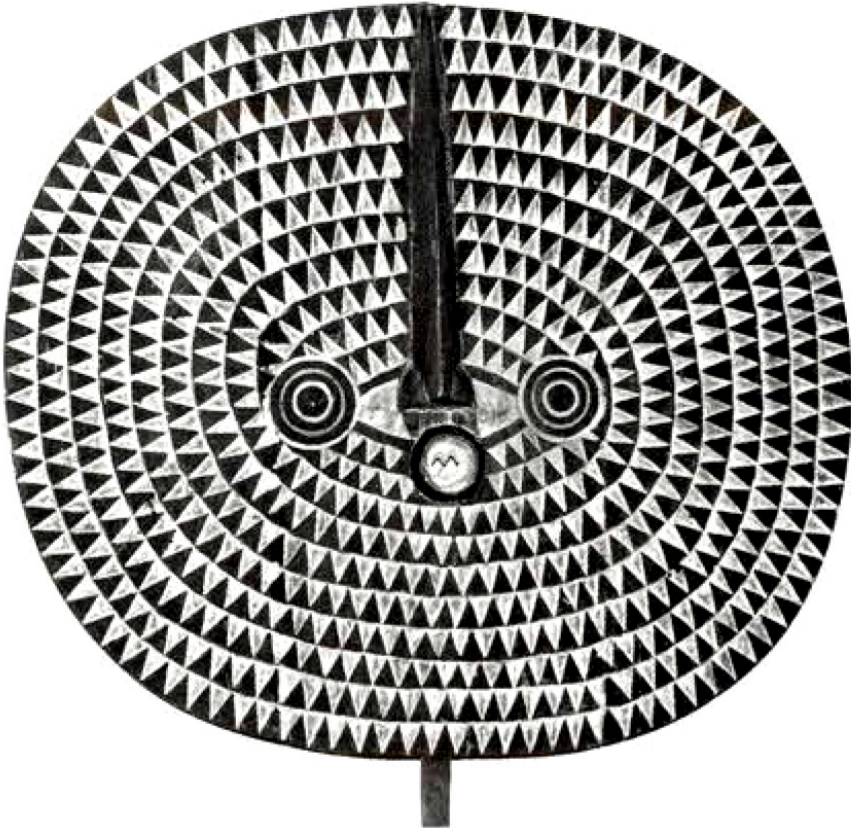


Figure 17. Bwa Mask. Burkina Faso, Wood and Pigment, from Saki Mafundikwa, *Afrikan alphabets: the story of writing in Afrika*. West New York, N.J.: Mark Batty, 2004.



Romare Bearden, *Mysteries*, 1964, 50 x 61 1/2 in, Photomontage. Romare Bearden Foundation. ARTstor Slide Gallery, <<http://library.artstor.org/>>



Faith Ringgold, *Tar Beach*, 1991. Quilt. University of California, San Diego. ARTstor Slide Gallery, <<http://library.artstor.org/>>
Figure 18.



Swoon (Caledonia Curry), 2004, woodblock and linoleum prints on matte mylar with ink and cut paper, 13 x 15 x 2 feet. Photographer: Larry Qualls. Exhibited at Charles Cowles Gallery, Summer 2004. ARTstor Slide Gallery, <<http://library.artstor.org/>>

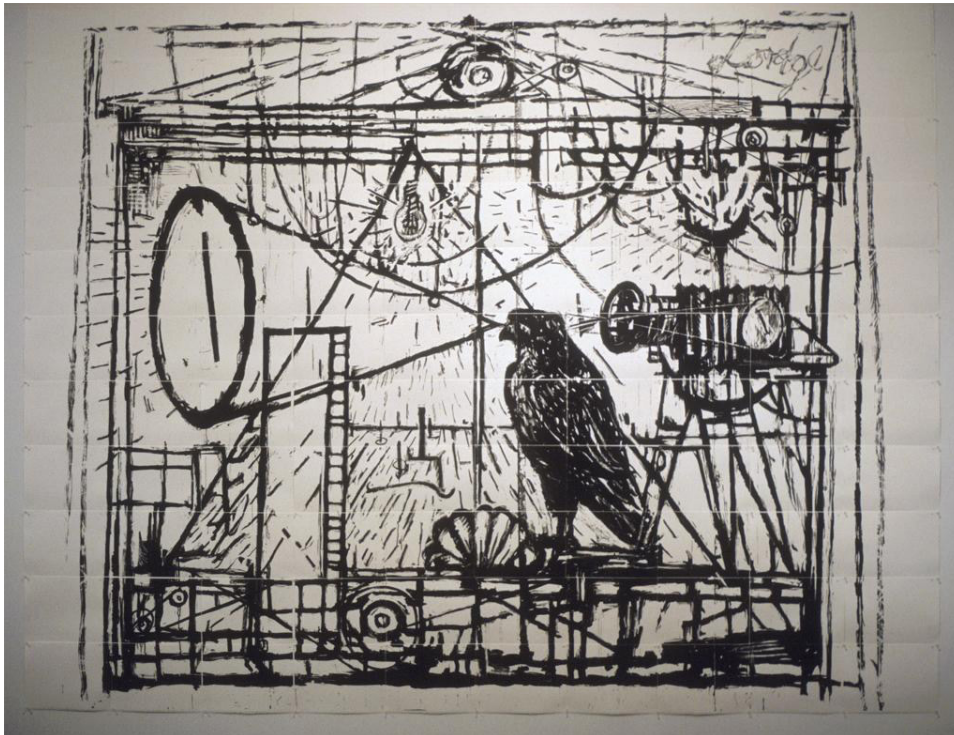


C215 (Christian Guémy), 2011, spray paint, <https://streetart.withgoogle.com/en/#map-the-walls>

Figure 19.



Kara Walker, *Slavery! Slavery! Presenting a GRAND and LIFELIKE Panoramic Journey into Picturesque Southern Slavery or “Life at ‘Ol” Virginy’s Hole (sketches from Plantation Life)”* “See the Peculiar Institution . . . , cut paper on wall, 1997, 132 in x 1,02 in, Photographer: Larry Qualls, Exhibited at Whitney Museum of American Art, Fall 2007, ARTstor Slide Gallery, <http://library.artstor.org/>



William Kentridge, *Magic Flute*, 2003, letterpress on paper, 110 7/8 x 139 5/8 in. Photographer: Larry Qualls, Exhibited at Whitney Museum of American Art, Fall 2004, ARTstor Slide Gallery, <http://library.artstor.org/>

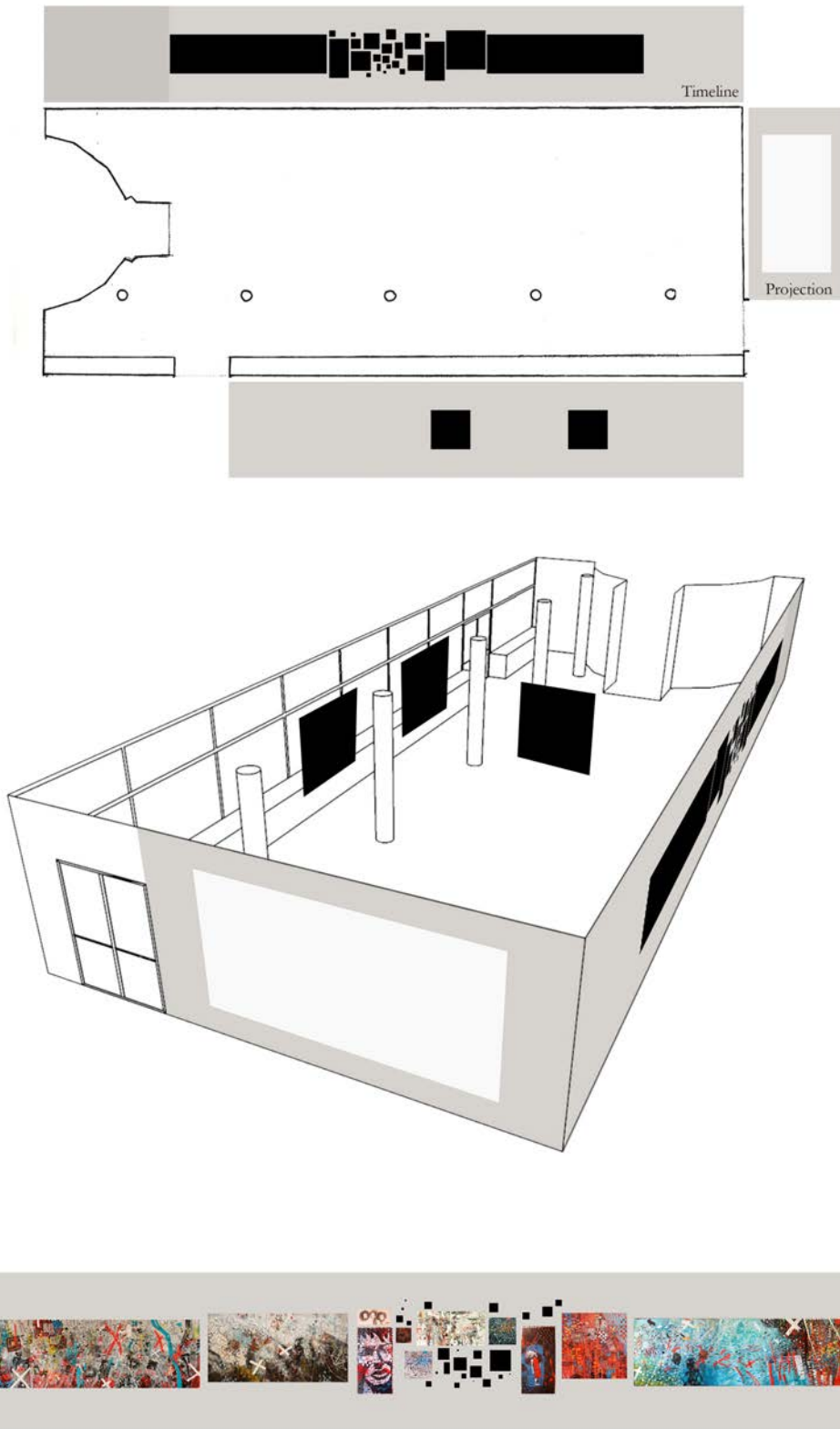


Figure 21. Gallery plan and instalation

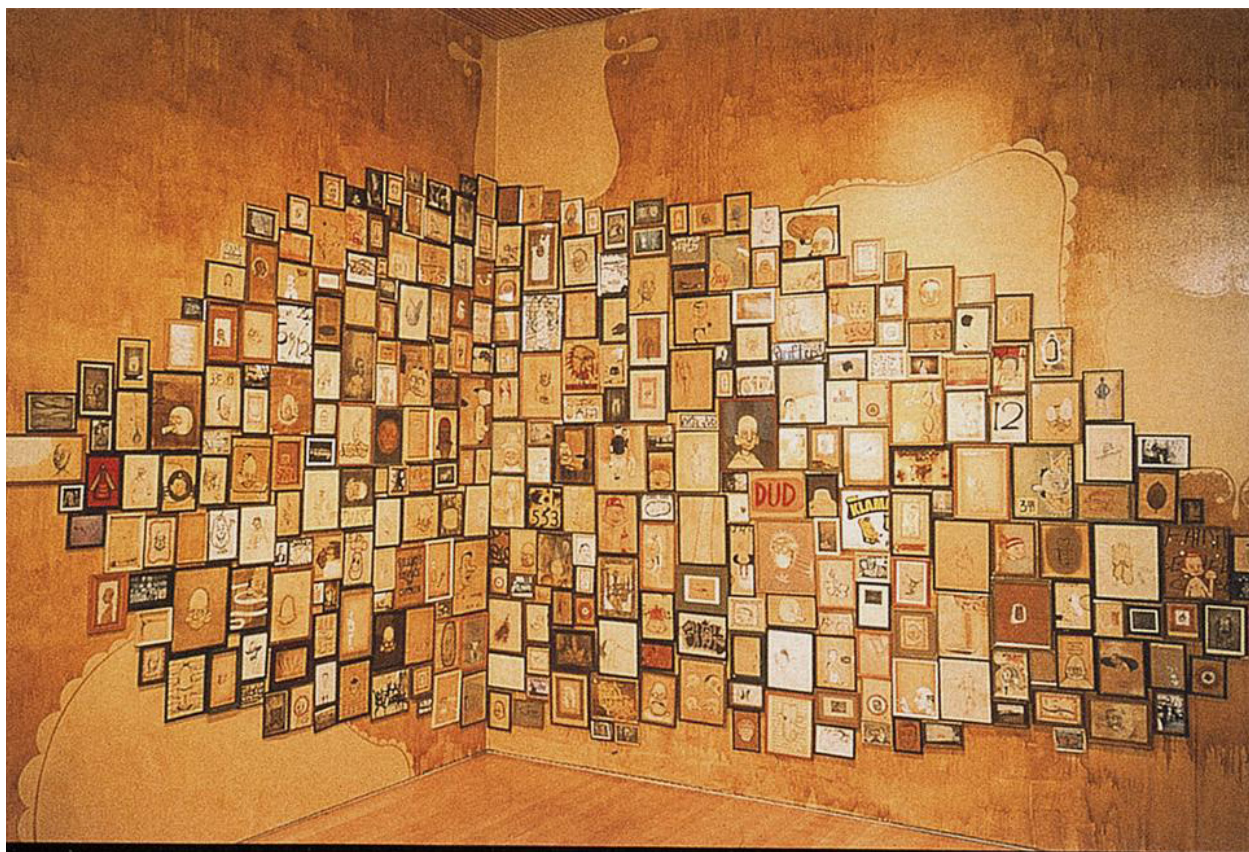


Figure 22. Barry McGee, *Untitled*, 2002, Installation at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, University of California, San Diego, ARTstor Slide Gallery, <<http://library.artstor.org/>>



Figure 23. 18 x 5 feet



Figure 24. 18 x 5 feet



Figure 25. Laterite Red



Figure 26. Portrait



Figure 27. She



Figure 28.

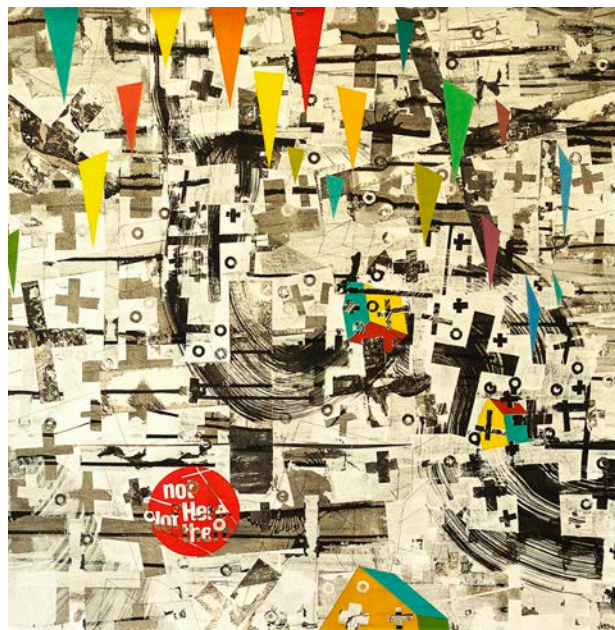


Figure 29.



Figure 30. Written in Black and White



Figure 37. Sacred heart



Figure 32. Passage



Figure 33.

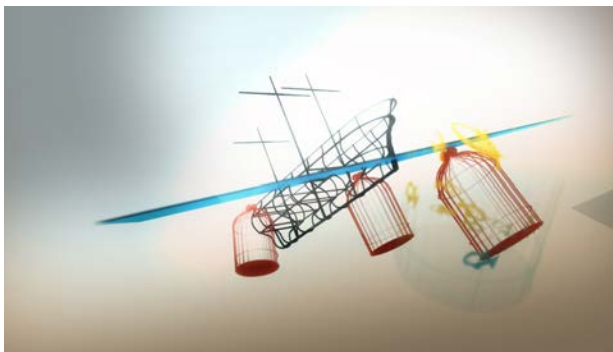
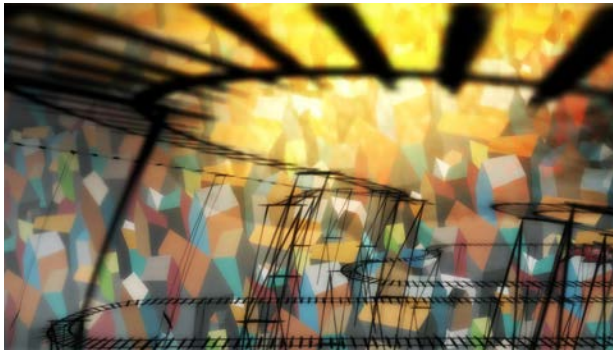
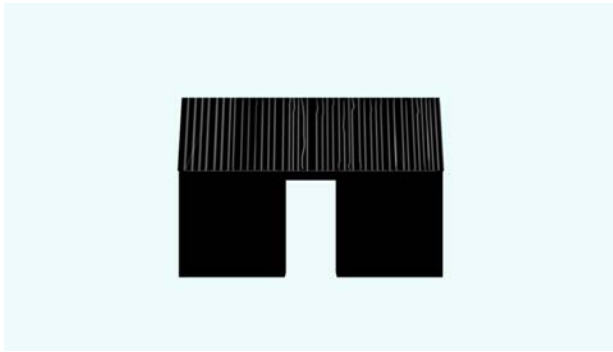
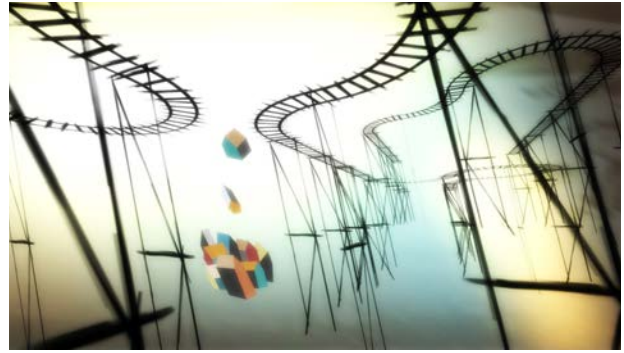


Figure 34. Still images. 1280 x 720 pixels

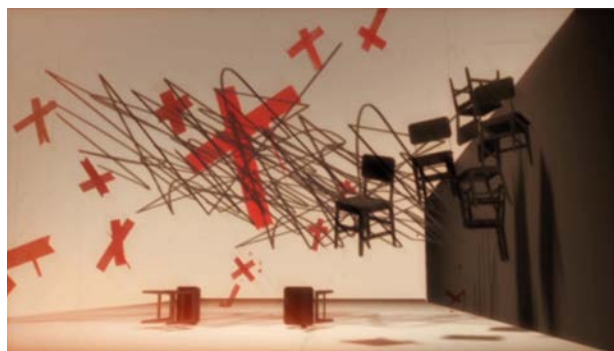


Figure 35. Still images. 1280 x 720 pixels

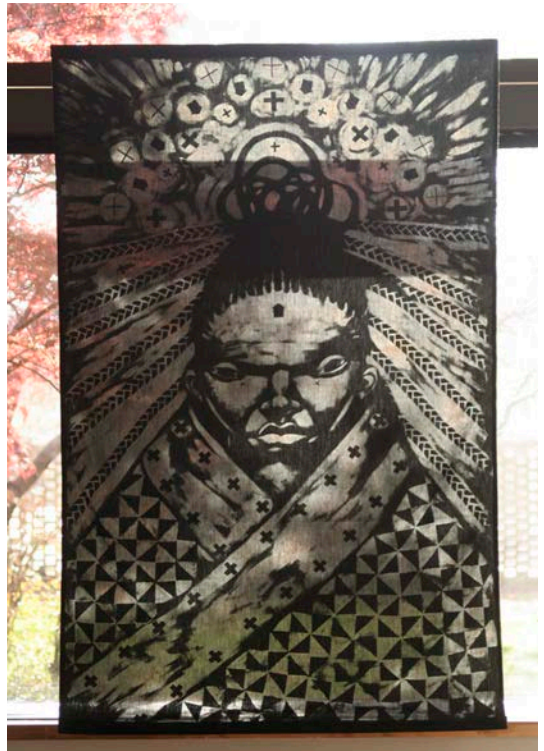


Figure 36. Gallery shots