

APPROVAL SHEET

Title of thesis: MENDING NONA'S PIÑA

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ABSTRACT

Title of Document: MENDING NONA'S PIÑA
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Directed By: Lynn Cazabon, Professor,
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MENDING NONA'S PIÑA takes its title from the artist's attempt to mend an heirloom cloth made by native Filipino weavers with strands of her hair, suggesting how forces of colonialism enabled trauma and abuse across generations in her family. Weaving her hair into natural materials and settings, MJ Neuberger posits a return to an indigenous body/self that is abandoned in abuse and Othered by colonization. Combining her tears with water blessed in a native healing ritual, she suggests the transformative power of grief.

MENDING NONA'S PIÑA.

By

Mary Neuberger.

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, Baltimore County, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Dedication

To All My Relations

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Chapter 1: Backstory

What I will say here leaves me vulnerable. But that is what this work is about.

My father's mother, Jane Neuberger, refused her husband's pleas that they return to his native Pittsburgh from Los Angeles. When he tried to do so, the story goes, she had him convicted of stealing their car. He died in prison.

As I child, I remember Grandma Jane's verbal abuse, bright red lipstick, and the bourbon on her breath. She would send me a dollar each time I wrote her a letter. Even then, it seemed wrong. When my father, Jack, and his sister Maxine were children, Jane, who liked a highball at happy hour, would lock them in the family's bungalow, ordering them to clean house while she went out. The small adobe home I would later visit conjured a David Lynch film – myriad murky secrets and abuse.

My Aunt Maxine remained trapped, close to Grandma Jane, who almost certainly gets some credit for Maxine's early death at age 40 ("She didn't want to live," I remember my mother whispering). Jack found an escape – and official sanction for the controlling, abusive behavior his mother had modeled so well – at the U.S. Military Academy and in a career in the Army.

My mother, Carmen, hailed from the oft-colonized Philippines, where she had been abused herself, becoming subject to and perpetuating my grandmother's Roman Catholic habit of keeping up appearances and offering it (whatever "it" may be) up.

Jack and Carmen's marriage made for a perfect storm – one made more fierce by the part that colonialism played in this backstory.

As a child, I once asked my mother about the warrior figures carved into the *nara* lampstands in our family living room, next to the love seats whose plastic

coverings came off on rare occasions when my father’s military friends and their wives came over for *lumpia* and cocktails.

“Headhunters,” she said.¹

In hushed tones, my mother hesitated to claim her connection to these indigenous Filipinos. It was a point of view adopted from the early twentieth century American imperial playbook, steeped in decades of cultural hegemony. After taking over Spain’s three-century-old colonial endeavor in the Philippines in 1898,² the U.S. imported over a thousand Cordilleran people to display as “living exhibits” at the 1904 World’s Fair in St. Louis.³ In her role as an official Fair photographer, Jessie Tarbox Beals – one of the first woman photojournalists whose work was published in the U.S. – got her professional break supporting the American argument that the Igorot people needed civilizing. She was gifted a piece of piña – the traditional Filipino cloth woven from pineapple leaves that figures largely in my thesis exhibition – by the amiable tribespeople.⁴ They were unaware of how her photographs of them would help justify the Othering of indigenous Filipinos, both by their colonizers and my Filipino mother’s family.

My early graduate work focused on what I viewed as the colonization of my mother. I was attempting, in hindsight, to justify her behavior and her various

¹ Although discussion of headhunting by the Igorot is worthy of exploration, it is beyond the scope of this essay.

² Spain relinquished the Philippines to the U.S. in 1898, following the Spanish-American War, and the U.S. granted the Philippines independence in 1946

³ Similar numbers of Native Americans were also put on display. Laura Wexler, “The Missing Link,” in *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 262-290.

⁴ Wexler, “The Missing Link,” 282.

betrayals. Growing up, I worshipped her as the only potential source of non-violence in my family. I supported her emotionally through my middle school years, when I'm certain, looking back, that she was clinically depressed. The women's movement and my hand-holding helped her find a way out. But she didn't find a way out for me. With my older siblings out of the house and my mother rarely home, I came of age alone in the company of Jack, who was sexually, physically, and emotionally abusive.

I left part of myself in that house, certainly my body. I may have hoped my mother, who did the grocery shopping, might see I was bingeing and purging daily. But like many things, it went unnoticed. My mother's habit was to ask what I had done to deserve mistreatment. Maybe she had to dissociate, as I did, to survive childhood. Perhaps, when her family had taken refuge with my great aunt during the Japanese occupation of the Philippines in World War II, she thought she'd done something to deserve her nipples being burned with an older cousin's cigarette.

In distancing herself from the Igorot, the indigenous people of her native Luzon whose images were carved into the lampstands, my mother was rejecting part of herself. For while her maternal grandfather was the son of a Spanish provincial governor, both her parents had indigenous blood. I like to imagine that, if she'd been able to embrace her native self, if her mother before her had been able to embrace her whole self, my mother might have been able to embrace and protect me.

Chapter 2: The Damaged

I left for college and buried most of the past, remaining disconnected from my physical self well into adulthood, unable to enjoy sex with my boyfriend of seven years. It wasn't until I was living overseas and meditating to cope with a painful back injury that I realized I had blocked childhood memories. When a therapist helped me recognize this fact, I was in shock.

I went to my oldest sister for help piecing together what I was remembering, but instead got denial and scapegoating. "That never happened to me," said my sister. "You should be on medication."

She proceeded to do her best to expunge me from the family and largely succeeded. My mother, practiced in allowing bullies to prevail, bought a vacation home for my siblings and their children, but kept it a secret from me, bowing to my oldest sister's demand that I never again be allowed near her daughters. What wasn't a secret to me was that my mother had changed the locks on the door to her home so that I couldn't get in.

"You shouldn't have children," she opined, even as I expressed the desire to do so and concern that my biological clock was ticking. I didn't. Mostly because I was afraid they would inherit my position as family scapegoat.

One of the things I need to credit my immigrant mother for, however, is pushing education. After my family's re-abandonment, finding myself on the run from an abusive partner, I knew from my undergraduate psychology classes that there was probably help available if I sought it out, and I did. So began a long road of recovery. In the shelters where I stayed and the therapy groups I attended, I witnessed

the stories of many – too many – others struggling to overcome similar abuse. “The Damaged,” my friend Ren called us.

The many confidences I’ve been entrusted with on this journey tell me I’m not alone in struggling to figure out what my mother always asked: “What did you [I] do to bring on abuse?” To this day, a creep in a store or bully at work can wield power over me, but I need to allow these moments with self-compassion. It’s the weakest part of me that I need to love.

And this is what a lot of my artwork is about: Embracing the outcast, the abject, and trying to heal the rupture with the self, within myself. Through my art, I aim to challenge the way a hegemonic, bullying culture alienates us from parts of ourselves we reject/project onto others, making works that suggest vulnerability is always shared.

Chapter 3: A Walk through the Exhibition

Approaching my work at UMBC's Center for Art, Design and Visual Culture, the viewer first encounters beech tree branches emerging from dark gallery walls in *holding on* (2017-2018). Harvested both before and after the moment when the clinging marcescent leaves of the beech are forced off by new growth, the branches introduce a temporal and visual progression within my installation.⁵



Figure 1. MJ Neuberger, *holding on* (2017-2018) and *weaving myself in* (2017-2018). CADVC. Photo by J.Hyde.

⁵ Harvard University's Arnold Arboretum defines marcescence as "the trait of retaining plant parts after they are dead and dry The evolutionary reasons for marcescence are not clear, though theories include defense against herbivory (e.g., browsing by deer), protection of leaf buds from winter desiccation, and as a delayed source of nutrients or moisture-conserving mulch when the leaves finally fall and decompose in the spring. One of the most striking marcescent tree species is American beech (*Fagus grandifolia*), whose papery, pale tan winter leaves provide an easy identification feature as well as adding a ghostly shimmer in snow-filled woodlands." Nancy Rose, "When Leaves Don't Leave," *ARBlog*, February 19, 2016, <https://www.arboretum.harvard.edu/leaves-dont-leave/>. Beech leaves, then, are to the tree, as my hair, which I'm using to reattach the marcescent leaves to the branches, is to my body.

Pale, translucent beech leaves dangle above a threshold that leads into a darkened space, having been reattached to the branches with long silver strands of what the viewer may recognize as hair. Verging on disintegration, the leaves are passively interactive, moving with currents of air in the space, with the viewer's own movements and, potentially, with his or her breath.



Figure 2. From the series *weaving myself in* (2017-2018)

Positioned here and there in the installation are inkjet photos of varying sizes from the series *weaving myself in* (2017-2018). The photos were taken over the last year in secret wooded shrines in and around Baltimore where I have been pressing my forehead into the dirt and weaving my hair into bushes and trees as a metaphoric way to return to a body abandoned in trauma. I periodically revisit these shrines to observe how the natural world has interacted with the weavings.

The branches and dangling leaves become more profuse and brightly lit above a threshold that leads the viewer into a darkened space. From the portal, the viewer

sees a small cloth, lit with a spotlight, suspended approximately five feet above the ground above a small wooden stool. The sound of water droplets hitting a surface can also be heard from this vantage point. Upon entering the darkened space, the viewer approaches the translucent cloth, a piña table linen embroidered with pastoral scenes. The light shining through it reveals its discoloration, as well as silver strands of hair that have been woven into it in an attempt to mend a tear. Also visible is the edge and outline of a crown made of wild rose branches, from which the cloth hangs.

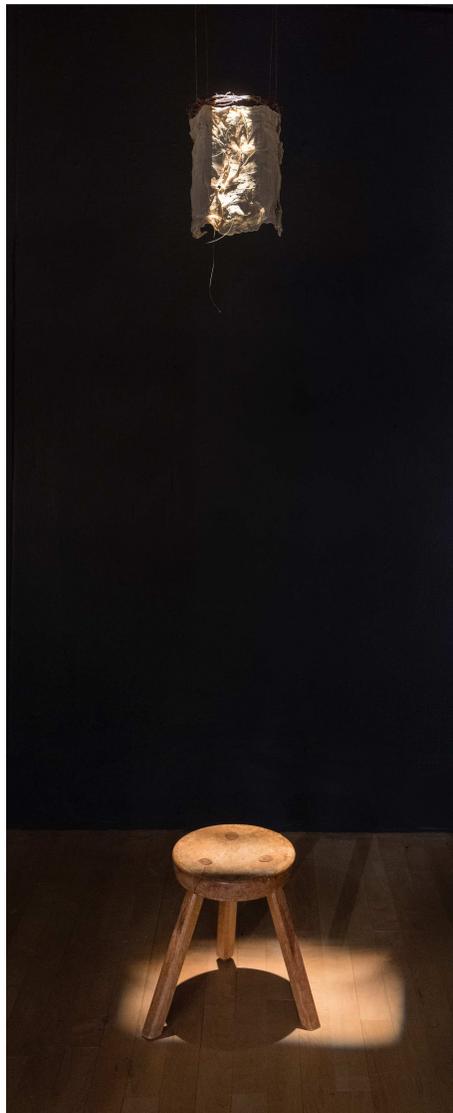


Figure 3. MJ Neuberger, *mending nona's piña* (2018). CADVC. Photo by J. Hyde.

Looking at the cloth, the viewer also perceives light in their peripheral vision and, turning left toward it and toward the sound of the water dropping, encounters another piece of piña – a table runner, suspended horizontally and illuminated by a light source on the far side of the cloth. This piña, embroidered with bucolic imagery, functions as a rear-projection screen and landscape onto which is refracted a circle of light resembling the iris of a human eye. This image appears at the center of the cloth/landscape, intermittently becoming distorted, then appearing more clearly, then distorting again over time. The sound of water droplets can be heard more closely now.

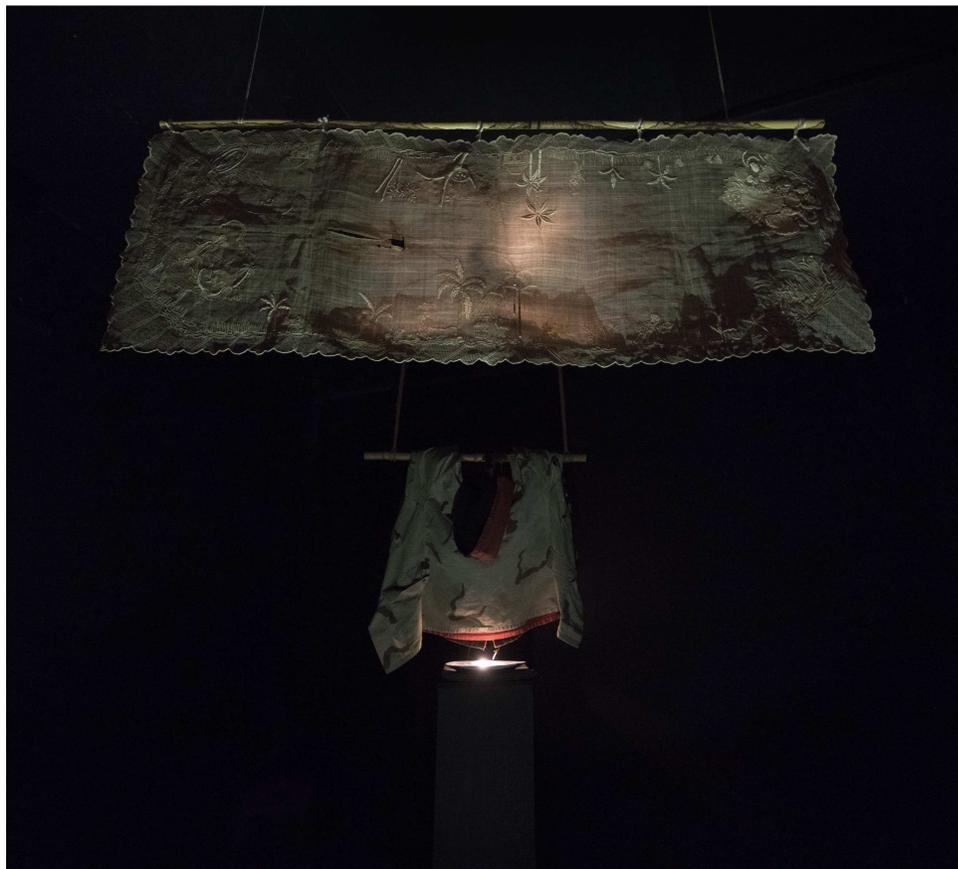


Figure 4. MJ Neuberger, *dig a hole in the earth and cry into it II* (2018). CADVC. Photo by J. Hyde.

The sound and the light emanating from behind the translucency of the fabric draw the viewer to the other side of the piña screen, where the simple mechanics creating the sound and animation can be grasped. A U.S. Army camouflage jacket with an indigenous woven Filipino jacket inside it is slung over a piece of bamboo suspended from the ceiling above a plinth. Atop the plinth is a plain white plate. Tucked inside the jackets is an army helmet filled with dirt. In a small depression in the center of the dirt, ice sits melting under a flashlight. A braided lock of hair hangs between the helmet and the plate, which is lit by a larger flashlight. As the ice in the helmet melts, water slowly makes its way down the braid and drips onto the plate, to which a contact microphone is attached to amplify the sound of the droplets. This piece is titled *dig a hole in the earth and cry into it II*⁶ (2018).

⁶ I went to my first sweat lodge, led by a *Taino* waterpourer named Eagle Spirit Woman, in Tuxedo, NY, two decades ago with three other abuse survivors. Its cleansing power is such that I witnessed a burly, six-foot, ex-soldier and fireman break down after a lodge, disclosing his abuse by his father, who he said had bullied him into five Iraqi tours. “Native Americans have advice if you need to grieve,” the healer working with the man said, “Dig a hole in the earth and cry into it.”

Chapter 4: Embracing the Other

I drove to the state park and headed to the river. There, by the tree that may be washed away in the next flood event on the Patapsco, I dropped to my knees and threw myself face first into the hillside. It was late January. I clutched the cold sandy soil in my hands on either side of my head and pressed my forehead into the ground.

*I breathe in and know I'm breathing in.
I breathe out and know I'm breathing out.*

How do we re-inhabit bodies that have been abandoned in childhood trauma and/or occupied by colonialism, racism, classism, and homophobia?

Before nurture – or lack thereof in too many cases — there is nature. My thesis works grow out of ritual attempts to heal myself by reconnecting with a body I dissociated from in abuse. These practices co-mingle indigenous traditions including the native American sweat lodge, introduced to me two decades ago by a fellow survivor; Buddhist-based mindfulness;⁷ and, inevitably, the Catholicism I was raised with – mixed into a kind of Neo-HooDoo.⁸ In secret wooded shrines near the

⁷ That the Buddha shared space with the Virgin Mary in my devoutly Catholic maternal grandmother's living room could potentially be traced to the pre-colonial period in the Philippines when religious practices included elements of Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as Catholicism.

⁸ Ishmael Reed coined the term Neo-HooDoo in 1969 to describe a modern version of hoodoo, religious practices and beliefs incorporating elements of Vodun practiced in the US. (Ishmael Reed, "Neo-HooDoo Manifesto" in *Conjure: Selected Poems 1963-1970* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1972), 21-25. "Hoodoo is what you call hope, what you call medicine, what you call the nine billion names of God," Greg Tate writes in his essay, "Hoodoo is What We Do," in *NeoHooDoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith*, ed. Franklin Sirmans (Houston: Menil Foundation Collection, 2008) 30-32. Reed says his first impressions of hoodoo and Vodun were of "a negative force," but that he came to see how, African American ministers, including Martin Luther King, Jr., practiced Christianity using "techniques that were obviously African derived." Reed said he began using NeoHooDoo in an aesthetic sense as "part of a

Patapsco River and in a Baltimore City park, I lay prostrate in the dirt or weave my hair into bushes and trees as a way to take myself out of the spirals of panic I experience in an activated state. “Triggering events” in the present can bring up past shame stemming from experiences of abuse as well as the somatic effects of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The rituals, centered in my body where trauma lingers, mark attempts to return to my indigenous, pre-colonized self.

In my research for this exhibition, I looked at how the economic, cultural, racial, and religious dynamics of Spanish and then American hegemony have contributed to the creation of trauma in the Philippines through the colonization of its people, and how my mother’s family was complicit with those dynamics. The colonization of the Filipino people and culture are seen in relation to how a colonized mind can enable intergenerational trauma and abuse.⁹

My works resulting from this research seek witnesses for a shared vulnerability and suggest returning to an indigenous, nature-connected body as a path toward healing trauma. Just as the works arose from an extended form of self-care, I, in turn,

movement whose aim was to use non-Western resources in our work.” (Franklin Sirmans, “An Interview with Ishmael Reed,” *Ibid*, 74-79)

⁹ Much post-colonial theory has attempted to address the myriad adverse impacts of imperialism on oppressed peoples. “Internalized oppression, or more specifically, internalized colonialism is a major psychological effect” latent in Filipino and other cultures such that “the colonized may eventually believe the inferiority of one’s indigenous identity,” according to Filipino American psychologist E.J.R. David. “Experiencing oppression over lifetimes and generations can lead individuals to internalize the messages of inferiority” ascribed to their indigenous heritage, while anger toward the oppressor is sublimated and “redirect(ed)...toward...those who remind the oppressed of him- or herself through domestic violence, homicide and sexual assault.” E.J. R. David, *Internalized Oppression: The Psychology of Marginalized Groups* (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2013), 9.

nurture them throughout the course of the exhibition. As I replenish the ice in the dirt-filled helmet, readjust the lights, and so forth, I am actively extending to the works the healing care I have been giving myself.

In *mending nona's piña* (2018), I attempt to suture a ripped heirloom cloth with strands of my hair as a gesture of reconnection to the indigenous weavers of the fabric. This small table linen that belonged to my grandmother is heavy with colonial connotation. The piña alludes both to a complicity that kept my family identified with powerholders (rather than with their, native, whole selves) and also to a turning against themselves (or those who may remind them of a part of themselves they have rejected), perpetuating abuse and trauma.¹⁰

Weaving my hair into this cloth (and, in other works, into bushes and trees), I posit a return to an indigenous body/self that has been abandoned in abuse and colonization. In *dig a hole in the earth and cry into it II*, I use a combination of my own tears and water blessed during native sweat lodges to suggest the transformative power of grief.

Pieces like *dig a hole in the earth II* (2018) also represent the safe spaces I didn't have in the past but still need, spaces where I can access and acknowledge feelings that have been stuffed down inside myself, minimized, and denied. I hope these works also provide the viewer some measure of safety, allowing him or her to access

¹⁰ Author and counselor Gita Arian Baack, who has written about "inherited trauma" talks about an "urgent need...to process our trauma... if we are to stop passing on the trauma to our future generations... Not processed, the pain, anger and even hatred and violence will continue to future generations." Gita Arian Baack, "Introducing the Inheritors: Moving Forward from Generational Trauma," July 22, 2017, <http://gitabaack.com/blog.html>.

and acknowledge their own connection with a larger human condition of shared vulnerability. And if these hopes are too personal/specific or, conversely, too public/general, perhaps the viewer may see something in my attempts at reconnection that resonates with his or her own struggles to be present in daily existence while enduring the separation from themselves and denial of vulnerability that contemporary life demands.

Art historian Kristine Stiles, whose exploration of trauma and art helped inspire my decision to proceed with this thesis work, discusses the views of psychologist Robert Jay Lifton, who asserts that although it might be argued that “professional life” requires a “numbness,” the degree to which our society is cut off from itself is “excessive.”¹¹

Arguably, separation is a function of western socialization. As psychologist Stephen Taylor writes:

If there is one fundamental psychological difference ... between the American Indians and the European-Americans, it may be that European-Americans have a more “individuated” sense of self.... This modern sense of self experiences a degree of separateness - separateness to the natural world, separateness to each other as individuals, and even separateness to their own bodies (in the sense of experiencing ourselves as an “I” which inhabits a body).¹²

¹¹ Kristine Stiles, *Concerning Consequences: Studies in Art, Destruction, and Trauma* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016) 32.

¹² Stephen Taylor, “Touching the Earth Again: What We Can Learn from American Indian’s attitude to nature,” *Psychology Today*, November 28, 2014, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/out-the-darkness/201411/touching-the-earth-again>.

In one of my earlier works, *A History of Bowing* (2016),¹³ I urged family members to follow their ancestors' lead in bowing to the earth/their body rather than to colonial power. Since the 1960s, there's been a call among Filipino scholars to reintegrate indigenous beliefs into the study of psychology in the Philippines. Such perspectives, however, may face marginalization in the academy which, like a lot of official Filipino society, maintains a colonized relationship to western and American institutions.¹⁴

Stiles, who traces trauma in art back to the "The Shaft Scene" in the Lascaux Cave, points out that philosopher Georges Bataille saw the prehistoric painting of the man and a bison in the cave's shaft as remarking on man's separation from animality (man using the spear as a technology to overpower the bison) and advocating "a reunion with nature through the operation of sacrifice in the realm of the sacred."¹⁵

Curator Franklin Sirmans argues that although "spirituality... has often been treated as ethereal, apolitical, and, at times, anti-intellectual," works in his 2008 exhibition "NeoHooDoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith," its title borrowed from Reed's "Neo-HooDoo Manifesto,"¹⁶ reflect a history that is "rooted in the Americas" and its

¹³ In this performance/installation, I contrast pre-colonial animism and ancestor worship, on the one hand, with the bowing required of Filipinos by the Spaniards, Catholic Church, American colonizers, and the Japanese (who occupied the country during World War II), on the other hand.

¹⁴ "Among the colonially implanted knowledge fields was psychology, European and American in influence, until pioneers of indigenization...proposed alternatives based on indigenous filipino experiences, concepts, languages and orientation." Narcisa Paredes-Canilao and Maria Ana Babaran-Diaz, "*Sikolohiyang Pilipino: 50 years of critical-emancipatory social science in the Philippines*," *Annual Review of Critical Psychology* 10 (2013): 765–766.

¹⁵ Stiles, *Concerning Consequences*, 8.

¹⁶ Reed, "Neo-HooDoo Manifesto," 21.

backdrop of “colonization, oppression and slavery.” But the works, he continues, “have a spiritual resonance in the present.”¹⁷

Stiles argues that contemporary culture needs those who will “bear witness to the contents of survival and the historical bodies upon which the text of destruction has been inscribed.”¹⁸ Some would argue that the life and work of Cuban-born artist Ana Mendieta represent this sort of witnessing; certainly she was willing to use her body in the way Stiles describes. I was aware of and found inspiration for my *Impressions* series (2017)¹⁹ in Mendieta’s *siluetas* (1973-1978).²⁰ I share with her the fundamental desire to use my body to highlight the relationship between it and the natural world.

Mendieta “offered a spiritual view of earth’s regenerative forces” and used ritual to create *siluetas* and other work, drawing in part on her Catholic upbringing,²¹ art historian Julia P. Hertzberg observes. “By understanding and incorporating ritual,” she continues, Mendieta is among artists who combine indigenous roots and the

¹⁷ Franklin Sirmans, “Recapturing Spirit in Contemporary Art,” in *NeoHooDoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith*, 12-14.

¹⁸ Stiles, *Concerning Consequences*, 30.

¹⁹ *Impressions* (2017) are imprints I attempt to make in the earth with my body, often into sand and soil that is in flux, either due to the actions of nearby bodies of water or to human intervention, as construction. Most have been made in secret wooded shrines in and around Baltimore city, where I also weave my hair into surrounding flora as way of trying to take myself out of a “triggered” state and back into my body in the present. I return to my secret shrines, as mentioned earlier, to observe and sometimes document changes that natural forces, humans, and animals have made to the imprints over time.

²⁰ Mendieta’s *silueta* series includes film documentation of “earth-body sculptures” that the artist created using a diverse range of natural materials to create a contour of her body in natural settings. Julia P. Herzberg, “Ritual in Performance,” in *NeoHooDoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith*, ed. Franklin Sirmans (Houston: Menil Foundation Collection, 2008) 64-65.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

impact of Catholicism and colonial histories and “elevate the repetition of performative acts to a transcendent state through concentration, intent, and aesthetic vision.”²²

Catholicism’s deep impact on colonized cultures, visible in Mendieta’s work, also appears in *mending nona’s piña*, where the crown of thorns from which the cloth hangs refers to the “offer it up” approach that is Catholicism’s abuse-enabling colonial legacy in my family.

Mendieta’s *siluetas* are nothing if not performative. On some level, my *Impressions* are also performative and certainly they, along with thesis works like *holding on* and *dig a hole in the earth and cry into it II* (2018) incorporate ritual in their making.

While Mendieta accelerated the natural changes in the earth by altering her ephemeral *siluetas* with chemicals and pyrotechnics, after she “endowed *la tierra* with human form,”²³ alterations to my *Impressions* are created by the sun, wind, river, animals, insects, and perhaps other humans coming upon them. Emphasizing the transformative power of natural cycles, I suggest the human potential for healing and letting go.

Returning to my secret shrines over time, I can see nature reliably taking apart or integrating into itself the evidence of trauma that I’ve left behind. There are the tracks of the deer that traversed the impression of my body one day, a squirrel tail that’s been deposited by a raptor the next. Tiny insects take turns inhabiting hair I’ve

²² Herzberg, “Ritual in Performance,” 64-65.

woven into a tree or, untied by the wind, a hair clings momentarily before dropping to the forest floor and disappearing. More dramatically, the bank of a stream in a city park where I made *Impressions* over a period of months has been completely washed away. I witness natural processes overtaking the memory that each impression or each strand of my hair, like a geologic core of experience, represents – a reminder both of my connection with nature and of what Stiles refers to as the “tenuous conditionality of survival.”²⁴ Mutability of individual human consciousness is seen in the scheme of indifferent natural order: tides, winds, and a time scale measured in breath but also in the slow life of a tree, mountain range, or the stones offered in the native sweat lodge.

²⁴ Stiles, *Concerning Consequences*, 31.

Chapter 5: Materials of Transformation and Transition

Ephemerality is an essential aspect of my work. Leaves, piña, clothing, and other materials are damaged or weathered, perhaps disintegrating. Moving from frozen to liquid, water is changing states. Branches imperceptibly bend as they dry. Most works in the exhibition are in transition, reflecting the arc of natural processes that inspire them. Healing is also transitional, a journey whose destination is never reached.²⁵ And perhaps here, there is a parallel with philosopher Giorgio Agamben's idea of the contemporary that Stiles cites in her writing on trauma: "The contemporary must see the darkness in its own epoch and recognize that, even as the light of a star is perceived, it is already moving away."²⁶

Perhaps appropriately, over the course of the exhibition, works will be altered by my own interventions and rituals, by the movement of viewers, and by the materials themselves. I will be altering the works in acts of what I call "care-taking" adding water (frozen) to *dig a hole in the earth II* (2018), adjusting the flashlights to illuminate its melting. I am *performing* the works, in a sense, through my continuous engagement, in an effort to provide the damaged part of myself with the care it didn't

²⁵ As an EMDR practitioner I was working with advised, I need to accept that I may always react to the creepy guy in the grocery store produce section, but perhaps, over time, I can spend less energy fighting the discomfort and move more quickly through accepting and allowing, and then come back into my body and my power in the present. . "EMDR" stands for Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing, developed in the late 1980s by psychologist Francine Shapiro. The EMDR Institute describes EMDR as "a psychotherapy treatment that was originally designed to alleviate the distress associated with traumatic memories." Working with an EMDR-certified therapist, clients attempt to process trauma so that the effects of "triggering" experiences become lessened over time. "What is EMDR," EMDR Institute, Inc., Accessed March 31, 2018, <http://www.emdr.com/what-is-emdr/>

²⁶ Stiles, *Concerning Consequences*, 21-23.

receive in my early life. I care-take *dig a hole in the earth II* (2018) as an extension of the ritual attempts to heal that gave rise to these works in the first instance.

Viewers passing through the space will cause changes in the installation as leaves, strands of hair, and piña move in response to viewers' movements. Over time, the outstretched beech branches will curl toward the ceiling. In these ways, viewers are engaged in witnessing their impact on, as well as the fragility of, the work, humanity, and nature.²⁷

²⁷ Anya Gallacio describes how *preserve 'beauty'* (1991-2003) is a performance the audience completes and seeks witnesses as her installations of wall hangings made of thousands of red flowers wither and decompose over time. Fiona Anderson "Anya Gallacio, preserve 'beauty,'" May 2014, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/gallaccio-preserve-beauty-t11829>.

Chapter 6: Nona's Piña

I was well into my ritual of weaving my hair into the secret shrines, persisting even as my hair adamantly resisted – which it did, every time – before I realized that I was echoing the weavers of Nona's piña.

"Where are they?"

I could see my grandmother's slight frame silhouetted at the entrance to her living room by the light in the hallway behind her.

I sat up from the love seat where I had been sleeping, "What, Nona? What are you looking for?"²⁸

"The Piña."

Preferring the company of the cockroaches, which roamed freely through her kitchen and living room, to being in the same apartment as my mother's new creepy partner (she divorced Jack when I was 27), I had been staying with Nona when I traveled weekly from Delaware to D.C. for therapy at the D.C. Rape Crisis Center.

Nona was fretting again about her pineapple-fiber table linens from the Philippines. Cultural theorist Lily Cho describes how a homeland is irrevocably lost for an immigrant to North America who then becomes a citizen in their adopted country, "knowing that they become one at the expense of distancing themselves from themselves."²⁹ Embroidered into Nona's piña cloth, which appears in *dig a hole in the earth and cry into it II*, are images of a peasant planting rice, coconut trees, a

²⁸ My oldest sister, Carrie, conferred the appellation "Nona" to my grandmother before I was born. During my grandmother's visit to my family while they were stationed in Italy, Carrie called her by the Italian word for grandmother rather than the Filipino "Lola," and it stuck.

²⁹ Lily Cho, "Citizenship, Diaspora and the Bonds of Affect: The Passport Photograph," *Photography & Culture*, 2, no. 3 (November 2009): p 282.

small dog. The source of my grandmother's insomnia, the table runner that she obsesses over, then, represents a place to which she can never return.

I was stunned in my research to learn how piña, the fabric used to make garments traditionally worn by Filipinos on special occasions, is created. Individual strands of pineapple leaf are extracted and refined in a painstaking process. The intense and intricate labor of native women, whom I imagine went blind creating this cloth, inspired my use of hair to make tiny brooms for *Piña* (2015), as well as, unconsciously at first, weaving with my hair in my thesis works.



Figure 5. Making brooms for *Piña* (2015)

Piña also reeks of colonialism, of course. Among the most effective weapons employed by the Spanish conquistadores were language and religion. In *Piña* and *A History of Bowing* (2016), I used my grandmother's piña table runner and noted that while the Spaniards had children with Filipinos and converted them to Catholicism,

they only taught elite classes of mestizos their language, thus retaining an effective means of colonial control of an archipelago of over 7,000 islands, where more than a dozen indigenous languages and hundreds of dialects were spoken.



Figure 6. Donald Trump in the Philippines (2017). Photo by Jim Watson (AFP) in The Jakarta Post.³⁰

Spanish colonizers are rumored to have insisted that Filipino natives wear a *barong Tagalog*, as the classic see-through piña shirt for men is called, because its translucence prevented natives from concealing weapons at their waists.³¹

³⁰ Watson, Jim. November 12, 2017. Agence France-Presse in The Jakarta Post, Jakarta. Accessed April 27, 2018. <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/11/13/trump-backs-us-spies-on-russia-meddling-but-slams-putin-haters.html>.

³¹ A series of bas reliefs depicting numerous unsuccessful attempts to overthrow Spanish and American colonizers were finally added to the World War II monuments on Corregidor Island in 1987. They read to me like the stations of the cross in Catholic churches, which depict the final scenes in Jesus's life before his crucifixion. Many of the revolts took place in southern areas of the Philippines that have Muslim populations and are targeted today as part of America's War on Terror.

Unlike the *barong Tagalog*, the smokescreens used to obscure Spanish and American colonial agendas seem to have been less transparent to my mother's and grandmother's generations. The complicity with colonialism that appeared to operate in Nona's obsession with her piña was also evident in the way my mother viewed the indigenous peoples of her homeland, including her native self. Colonialism kept the colonized complicit, eager to distinguish themselves from their native forbearers for an invisible western audience. I project my own experience onto my mother's. If I could have stopped trying to be whatever I thought would finally earn her approval, I might have discovered who I really was long before I did.

In *Piña* (2015) and *dig a hole in the earth and cry into it II* (2018), I explore these issues by using my grandmother's heirloom cloth as a screen onto which I project light. The light refracting off the plate of water onto which ice drips resembles an eye that appears to tear up intermittently on the surface of the piña. Altogether, these elements metaphorically hearken hidden histories both personal and political.

Chapter 7: Evolving Light

Perhaps the most important of transitional materials that I incorporate into my work is light. *Dig a hole in the earth and cry into it II* (2018) is inspired by subtle, fleeting light reflected momentarily on rocks next to a stream or the underside of a tree that has fallen over it. A hair weaving I've created in nature may only be illuminated for brief periods by the constantly shifting sunlight and canopy of leaves. Just as natural light changes seasonally and over the course of a day in my secret shrines, so light in my thesis exhibition functions as a progression, from darkened spaces with single points of light to works that are illuminated from above as by bright sunlight. This evolution in my own use of light reflects a change I'd like to see occur in the way society views experiences of abuse.

In the allegory of Plato's Cave, light is a metaphor for awareness, which also proceeds in stages. The prisoners with their backs to the cave entrance only see the shadows of things that pass in front of the fire outside. Next, the prisoner who is set free becomes aware of the realness of the things that are creating those shadows. Finally, he comes to understand the sun as the ultimate light source from which the light of the fire derives its energy.³²

I began my thesis exploration by experimenting in a darkened space with silhouettes in a shadow-puppet landscape titled *Piña* (2015). This installation/performance afforded me a way to begin addressing issues of trauma in my family. As a narrative of conflict and colonization of the Philippines unfolds, I

³² S. Marc Cohen, "The Allegory of the Cave," Washington University Department of Philosophy, Last modified on July 25, 2015, <https://faculty.washington.edu/smcohen/320/cave.htm>.

closely direct the attention of the audience, which sits in a darkened space, by illuminating parts of *Piña* with handheld flashlights to cast silhouettes on surrounding walls³³ (I also used this technique in *A History of Bowing* [2016]³⁴). The metaphor of using flashlights to explore the recesses of my family history continues in *dig a hole in the earth II*. Moving outward from this inner sanctum, the light grows stronger, becomes tightly focused in *mending nona's piña* and progresses toward the broad, bright illumination of leaves and strands of hair in *holding on*.

I still use light to direct attention but, with what I confide in this thesis exhibition, I come out of the metaphorical shadows. Encountering this light is like emerging from the darkness of the sweat lodge able to tolerate seeing – whatever it may be (my abject silver hair, for example) – to acknowledge shared vulnerability, to illuminate, make things transparent. Those who share trauma shouldn't have to hide in the shadows.

There is a progression in my work from making the shadows of things visible to offering the things themselves to be visible, if the viewer chooses to see them. The effects of natural light that I'm inspired by are those that can be, as previously mentioned, elusive: the underside of a tree's canopy lit by the reflection of the sunlit

³³ *Piña* (2015) featured a suspended table runner that belonged to my grandmother. This piña functioned as a backdrop for the performance and installation, which focused on colonization of the Philippines by Spain and the U.S., and trauma my mother's family experienced during World War II, including the Bataan Death March and American abandonment of the colony to Japanese occupation.

³⁴ In *A History of Bowing* (2016), I refer to the coconut plantation that my great grandmother and her husband, son of the Spanish provincial governor of Palawan owned, remarking that the workers there may have bowed to my family but that the bowing that the agricultural staple of rice in the Philippines requires of poorer Filipinos is a bowing that brings them closer to the earth and to themselves.

water moving beneath it; a spider whose silk is keeping a bit of flotsam magically suspended in midair on a summer evening, but whose vast web is invisible until the sun shines on it just so. Providing us with the opportunity to experience these fleeting phenomena is a way the natural world allows us to be present.

Like these examples, the works in my exhibition need light to be seen. The viewer's effort to see the hair in *holding on* mimics my experience in making my own ritual weavings. A spotlight of sun needs to find its way through the leaves and fall on the branch long enough for me to weave into it. Once the weaving has been created, I must wait until the raking light shines through the canopy and lands momentarily in the same place for me to see it again. Moments later, the light is gone. But there I am. Utterly in the present.

The photos of *weaving myself in* chase the moment when the late-day sun makes visible that the hair weaving has been incorporated into a larger installation of spider webs, which will disappear with the next storm. I want to communicate the experience of subtle alterations made by nature and time, the antithesis of instant gratification, to the viewer. In the thesis works, I attempt to make visible to the viewer some of what I've experienced while engaging in the rituals from which the works emerged.

But not too visible. The strands of my gray hair in *holding on* are so thin they can easily blend in with the dark gray walls of the installation. The woods behind the beech leaves during marcescence are also gray. Looking for the strands perhaps provides an opportunity, as stepping behind the screen in *dig a hole in the earth II* (2018) does, to connect to the present, a moment echoed in the gentle sway of the

beech leaves or the sound of a water droplet hitting a plate. In noticing a moment when a hair strand is illuminated or moves slightly in the space, perhaps the viewer arrives in presence, as I aspire to.

Chapter 8: Art and Trauma

As mentioned, reading Stiles's book *Consequences: Studies in Art, Destruction, and Trauma* helped me embrace the path of my thesis research. While her support for art deriving from traumatic experience isn't unqualified, Stiles posits that "visual language wrought by destruction, violence and trauma... has a constructive social function, linking the consequences of aesthetic form to a set of specific aesthetic, cultural, political and personal histories, conditions and relations,"³⁵ and, I hope, raising a degree of awareness of said histories and their impact.

In writing as a journalist³⁶ about other people's trauma, in creating artistic expressions of my own, and during my journey of recovery -- meeting women and some men in shelters, sweat lodges, and other places as I sought healing -- darkness has abounded at times. My thesis work has been my way of witnessing my experience and that of others I've met struggling, often alone, with this darkness.

Stiles, who coined the term "cultures of trauma" in an exploration of Romanian artists' responses to autocrat Nikolai Ceaucescu, notes that the phrase has been co-opted for questionable purposes, including arguments that the topic of trauma may be taking up too much room in discussions of art. She points out that Jill Bennett, another writer on art and trauma, titled the afterword to her own book *Empathic Vision* "Beyond Trauma Culture."³⁷

³⁵ Stiles, *Concerning Consequences*, 22.

³⁶ I've made a living as a journalist and editor for much of my career.

³⁷ Stiles, *Concerning Consequences*, 23.

While moving “Beyond Trauma Culture” may sound good at first, trying to do so simply must not rule out shining a bright a light on trauma’s effects. As one of many recovering from traumatic experience and as an artist, I would argue that, rather than there being too much trauma in art, there is too much trauma period. Bennett additionally posits a readiness not just that art move “beyond trauma culture” but also toward “an evolution of thought beyond its postcolonial phase.”³⁸ All well and good if the need to address the ongoing effects of colonialism weren’t still so painfully relevant.

Have art and its historians, theorists, and critics examined trauma excessively? Change will be secured by challenging intersections of gender, race, colonialism, patriarchy and matriarchy, and cultural and economic conditions that render humans as exploitable objects. Until these realities and the trauma associated therewith are no longer endemic, art’s role in helping to create awareness, is essential.

And art, I believe, can have an impact. Maybe in this context, the fragile beauty I aim for my viewer to see can serve as a reminder of both human vulnerability and how the power of artistic expression can prevail over trauma that led to the need for its creation.

The sweat lodge and my ritual practices, along with art-making that acknowledges and attempts to integrate these experiences, have helped me begin to locate the idea of a safe space that I lacked in my childhood. The cycle is complete via presentation of works that suggest shared vulnerability to the witnessing viewer.

³⁸ Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 149.

Although I write about my experiences here, in my art I can express them in a way that I believe has the power to communicate with more eloquence and, in some cases, via the viewer's investment of their own experiences in the works, more truth.

Amidst all the challenges that a commitment to art necessitates, by providing a space to begin addressing the seemingly unaddressable, art at its most revelatory of vulnerability can begin to suggest how safe space might be created. My role, then, as the author of this thesis, as artist, is perhaps then to be vulnerable in public and, in so doing, to inspire others to do the same, in their art and their lives.

Appendix A: Additional Artistic Influences

Jim Hodges

My thesis work has also benefitted from Jim Hodges, whose work suggests the beauty of the natural world, memory, and loss. He incorporates clothing and fabric into his pieces – in some cases, items he has bought, but also items found and/or made by others for him. Hodges incorporates these materials, plus others very specific to himself – for example, his mother’s perfume and his own saliva³⁹ – into effective and affective works that hail the viewer as witness “Personal history is Mr. Hodges chief subject” but he “avoids dropping into easy nostalgia,” critic Holland Carter has remarked.⁴⁰

Hodges sews together a curtain of delicate sheer scarves in *Here’s where we will stay* (1995) evincing “familiarity” as well as “rupture and loss” says curator Olga Viso.⁴¹ “Inspired by nature and the potency of memory,” Viso admits that Hodges “has been less concerned than many of his peers with engaging in art historical theory,” but she echoes Lynne Tillman’s assessment that Hodges “revels in and unearths the significance of pastness, of what’s gone, lost, what’s left, discarded literally, or stuck in memory; then, through a work, he claims it—for now.”⁴²

³⁹ Olga Viso, “Jim Hodges and the Eros of the Everyday,” *Sightlines*, (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2013) walkerart.org/magazine/jim-hodges-and-eros-everyday. Walker Art Center Executive Director Olga Viso writes a paean to Jim Hodges work. Interesting references to Lynne Tillman’s writing on Hodges.

⁴⁰ Holland Carter, “Jim Hodges,” *The New York Times*, September 25, 1998, www.nytimes.com/1998/09/25/arts/art-in-review-jim-hodges.html.

⁴¹ Viso, “Jim Hodges.”

⁴² Viso, “Jim Hodges.”

I respond not only to the ephemeral nature of Hodges's work, his materials and craft, but also to the complex relationship with his mother and the childhood loss his works seem to suggest.

In Hodges's installation *Dark Gate* (2008), viewers enter a large, dark room in the middle of which is a small wooden chamber lit by a single, bare light bulb suspending directly overhead. The wall opposite the entrance to the chamber functions as window into the dark room beyond it. A series sharp, metal tines converge at this portal, and point toward a small, circular opening in the tines at the center of the window. From inside the small chamber, the viewer looks out into the darkness but sees only the light cast by the bulb above them onto the floor outside where the outline of the sharp tines also appears. Each day, gallery attendants anoint the prongs with Shalimar, Hodges's mother's preferred perfume, and add a hint of a cologne he was wearing when she died.⁴³ Like *Piña* (2015) and *dig a hole in the earth II* (2018), Hodges uses points of light and summons the viewer into a dark space to witness to his experience.

In *Landscape* (1998), Hodges displays a white oxford shirt, within which are over a dozen other shirts, one layer beneath another, shrinking in size from the adult oxford on the outside through a series that includes a child's pajama shirt and a baby's jacket. In *what's left* (1992), jeans and underwear lie crumpled on the floor with a pair of used running shoes covered with one of Hodges trademark chain-link "spider webs," as if left behind in the rush toward an urgent tryst (like his friend Felix

⁴³ Maddie Phinney, "Give You So Much More: Jim Hodges at the Hammer Museum," *artcritical*, October 31, 2014. <http://www.artcritical.com/2014/10/31/maddie-phinney-on-jim-hodges>.

Gonzalez-Torres, Hodges addressed his grief at the havoc wreaked by AIDS in the late twentieth century, in this and other works⁴⁴).

I have found clothing to be an eloquent material and used my own and other's garments to represent our bodies and to express memory and loss in numerous works. In *dig a hole in the earth II* (2018), a US Army shirt and helmet suggest the men in my family and the veteran whose expression of grief from abuse he'd experienced inspired the name of the work. The Igorot jacket inside the camouflage shirt represents my own and my mother's native selves and our indigenous ancestors.

Jimmie Durham

Jimmie Durham's work eloquently describes the conundrum of the abandoned indigenous body. Combining the quotidian and the spiritual, he reifies and creates new ritual/artifacts that describe the colonial process. I'm drawn to the transparent qualities of Durham's work, eloquent use of found objects, and incisive commentary on the relationship between the colonized and the colonizer. His *Caliban* series (1992) is particularly trenchant. The work centers around the eponymous character from Shakespeare's *Tempest*. Durham's dialogue between Caliban (the "native" in the play whose name is an anagram of cannibal) and Prospero (the western doctor who deigns to attempt to civilize Caliban) reflects the nuances of the back-and-forth struggle and portrays it almost as a codependency, with Caliban seeking the approval of his "mentor."⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Phinney, "Give You So Much More."

Durham's irreverence helped inspire *Letter to Francis* (2015) an installation in which I took aim at the Roman Catholic pontiff for discouraging his Filipino flock from using contraception. *Letter* is part of a series of works in which I imagined the objects and rituals of lost indigenous tribes who return to the Philippines, in this case, the storied Tasaday, who, before their encounter with neighboring tribes in 1966, were apparently living a "virtually isolated and primitive...existence" in Mindanao's highlands.⁴⁶ *Letter* imagines how the tribe, unaware of the use of condoms as contraception, might incorporate them into a sport that has some similarities to basketball (hugely popular in the Philippines). In *Letter*, a giant slingshot made of prayer cards and condoms is filled with sweetgum balls and directed toward a large crucifix-like structure to which are attached condom "goals", filled with water or otherwise made inaccessible. Piles of sweetgum balls caught by a burnt and twisted piece of tin roofing beneath the goals suggest the exploding and impoverished Filipino population and the makeshift shelters they attach to the sides of other structures throughout Manila.

Christian Boltanski

I've long been enamored with Christian Boltanski's use of light and shadow, naïve forms and quotidian materials. In *Bougies* (1987) and *Théâtre d'Ombres* (1984-1997), Boltanski offers the viewer fantastical, kinetic, shadows and makes visible the simple method and materials he uses to create them. *Piña* (2015) used everyday

⁴⁶ "Tasaday: Asian People," Encyclopaedia Britannica. Added July 20, 1998. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Tasaday>.

materials (grapevine, a half-consumed apple) to create the silhouettes in a mythical narrative and the simple mechanism used to create the kinetic light reflection in *dig a hole in the earth II* (2018) is made visible to the viewer. Found objects and clothing loom large in Boltanski's work, including the installation *Monte de Pietá* (2000), underscoring the absence of those who owned and wore them. In an essay about this work that Boltanski created inside the abandoned space occupied by a pawn brokers in the late eighteenth century, art critic Sergio Troisi describes "themes dearest to [Boltanski]: memory collected in everyday objects, evoked relics of a collective past, redemption – through the artist's intervention – of nameless people without a history."⁴⁷

"Boltanski will ... contend that dexterous hands do not define art, and that religious ends and sacred power do," according to a Pompidou Center monograph.⁴⁸ In formal terms, my weaving/sewing is more of the quality Zoe Leonard uses in *Strange Fruit* (1992-1997) than with the work of the weavers of my grandmother's piña. but Boltanski's approach resonates as it is in engaging in these acts as ritual that lend my thesis works their power.

⁴⁷ Sergio Troisi, Synopsis of *Boltanski: Montedipietá*, trans. Judith Mundell (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 2002) 74.

⁴⁸ "Christian Boltanski," Centre Pompidou, accessed January 29, 2018. http://mediation.centrepompidou.fr/education/ressources/ENS-boltanski_en/ENS-Boltanski_en.htm.

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