



## APPROVAL SHEET

Title of Thesis: Looking Out

Name of Candidate: Elena DeBold  
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Thesis and Abstract Approved:

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Kathy O'Dell, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
Department of Visual Arts

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document:                   LOOKING OUT

Elena DeBold, M.F.A., 2016

Directed By:                       Kathy O'Dell, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
Department of Visual Arts

*Looking Out* is an exhibition centered around the relationships, stories, and expressions of an inmate, Thomas, currently serving a life sentence. The work aims to give a voice to Thomas and his family while connecting their stories with the wider issues of mass incarceration, racial injustice, and racial trauma.

At the heart of the work is an exchange between Thomas and Elena. Elena is able to make work surrounding Thomas's life, and Thomas is able to express himself in ways otherwise not usually possible due to his incarceration.

Through its use of immersive, multi-sensory, and interactive artistic techniques, *Looking Out* aims to bring about an empathetic understanding of the lives of others while breaking down stereotypes.

The work seeks to merge art and experience—more specifically, to consider the creation of new experiences, the formation of new relationships, and the construction of new memories as an art form. In this art form, Elena acts as an empath, able to relate to other individuals within their own framework of lived reality, in hope that the role of

empath will stretch to the audience.

Additionally, Elena attempts to demystify Thomas's experience, thus countering the media's stereotype-based portrayal of incarcerated black men, while creating an outlet through which Thomas's and his family's voices can be heard.



LOOKING OUT.

By

Elena DeBold.

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  
Master of Fine Arts  
2016

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2016



## Preface

*Baltimore, Spring 2015*

We waited. Then, all at once, our group merged with others. Together, we skirted the barricade. Police helicopters circled. A voice yelling at us over a loudspeaker was unintelligible above our collective footsteps. Zigzagging through town without permits or plans, we gained in ambition, gained in numbers, and our voices rose.

We leaked out of downtown, entering neighborhoods lined with row homes and housing projects. Residents leaned out of windows and stood on stoops, repeating our chants, aiming phones and cameras at the crowd. Here and there, elderly people stood on corners and shed tears. Children sitting on top of cars pointed their fists in the air and smiled wide. After miles, with bodies aching, feet swollen, voices cracking, we kept walking, finding energy in the responses of onlookers. Traffic honked in agreement as we overtook the streets. Car radio speakers blasted expressive music that echoed the sentiments of our chants.

In the distance, we could see barbed wire and thick stone. Nearing the penitentiary, the roads narrowed, forcing our bodies close.

“Free our brothers from the pen! Put the fucking cops in!”

Our voices echoed off the walls, but above the sound of our shouts, we could hear the cheering of male voices, the banging of windows against their frames, and the distinct sound of the rattling of cages.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Months later, the Baltimore City Detention Center was closed down by the Governor of Maryland due to “horrendous” conditions inside the jail. See Justin Fenton, "Gov. Hogan Announces 'Immediate' Closure of Baltimore Jail," <http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/maryland/baltimore-city/bs-md-hogan-city-jail-20150730-story.html>, July 30, 2015, accessed October 10, 2015.

It was the first time I had heard those who are voiceless and invisible, locked away from sight. But the situation prompted me to reflect on a man from my childhood who was now behind bars, and how I had learned of his incarceration. This moment marked the beginning of my path toward this thesis.

. . . . .

*Newcastle, Fall 2009*

I was studying abroad in Australia when I received news of troubling events taking place in my neighborhood back home. A family-owned convenience store down the street from the house I'd grown up in had been the site of a violent robbery, during which the storeowner was shot in the face<sup>2</sup> and one of our neighbors was shot and killed.

Days later, another alarming situation had transpired. Another neighbor, B.G. Thomas (from here on referred to as Thomas), was in a shoot-out with the police that ended after Thomas was shot several times in the torso. Shortly thereafter, Thomas was identified and charged as the main suspect in the convenience store robbery and murder. Two years later, Thomas was tried and found guilty for the murder of the customer and attempted murder of the store owner, as well as attempted murder for firing at the arresting officers. Thomas is now serving multiple life terms plus an additional, death-exceeding number of years in prison without the chance of parole.<sup>3</sup> He still maintains his innocence for the initial robbery. He also states that the man murdered in the robbery was a long-time family friend, and though he (Thomas) has done many shameful things in his life, he says that he is not capable of such a heinous crime.

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<sup>2</sup> He survived and his family continued to run the store.

<sup>3</sup> B.G. Thomas is not my friend's real name. When embarking on this project together, I asked him if he would prefer anonymity, and he provided Thomas as a pseudonym. Honoring his request for privacy, I have also intentionally not provided the precise details about his past.

I was so sure, following his arrest and conviction, that Thomas was not the same neighborhood boy I remembered sitting with me on my back porch. The media that reported the story portrayed the convicted individual as a “cold blooded killer,” who had murdered a close childhood friend. But upon close scrutiny of my thoughts and feelings, I realized that even before the media coverage of these events, there had been times I had been afraid of Thomas.

In *Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity, Discourse, and Racial Politics in Popular Media*, Ronald Jackson identifies several scripts society places upon the bodies of black men. One such script, which my perceptions of Thomas exemplify, is the “black masculine body as violent.” As Jackson states, behavior resulting in the confirmation of such roles makes the script “powerfully real,” creating “real fears, anxieties, and insecurities.”<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, in news reports and many people’s minds—including my own—Thomas had become the violent black male, reminiscent of the gun-wielding masked men in blurry security footage played and replayed in the media.<sup>5</sup> But there was a disjunction between how the media portrayed Thomas and how I had known him. To my mind, Thomas was a neighborhood boy whom everyone looked up to. As a teenager, 14 years older than I, he had worked alongside my father to renovate parts of my childhood home, taking breaks to drink my mom’s famous iced tea. Throughout my childhood, Thomas would stop by and catch up with my parents and play with me. I had never seen Thomas violent or angry. So why, from time to time, had I felt afraid of him? As I delved more deeply into the question of who Thomas was and is as a person, I began to see my own acquiescence

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<sup>4</sup> Ronald L. Jackson, “Black Masculine Scripts,” in *Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity, Discourse, and Racial Politics in Popular Media* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 75.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 83.

to an irrational belief in stereotypes. I had adopted a prewritten violent script and placed it on his body.<sup>6</sup> Emboldened by curiosity and an unsettled feeling that there was something I needed to do, I contacted Thomas and his family.

Months passed without a reply, then I received an email from his wife asking me to call her. Serendipitously, when I called, she was talking with Thomas on another line. When she connected us, his voice sounded cheerful and warm, as he asked about my family. A few weeks later, I visited him in prison, and it did not take me long to realize that he had not changed or hardened. He was that same older childhood friend who spoke kindly, never bullied, and was always helpful. This extreme counterpoint to my fears inspired me to use my art practice to attempt to rewrite the “black masculine scripts” that I had applied to Thomas in order to bring to light the human behind the bars.

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<sup>6</sup> Jackson, "Black Masculine Scripts," 80.

## Dedication

*Looking Out* is dedicated to Thomas and his family who, through thick and thin, always supported and continue to support this project. I will never forget what I have learned and all that I have seen. They have inspired me to stay positive no matter the circumstance. I have no words that can express how grateful I am to them.



## Acknowledgements

First and foremost I would like to thank my husband, Jeffrey Rettberg, without whom I could never have completed this project. His unwavering support is what got me through. He has helped me make all my ideas come to life with his construction know-how, his smarts, his strength, and his perseverance.

I also would like to thank all my fellow IMDA classmates, especially those in my 2016 graduating class: Wes Stitt, Tom Boram, and Cliff Evans. Their intellects have greatly aided my education and their jokes have brightened my days.

Additionally, I would like to thank all of the Visual Arts staff at UMBC whose feedback was always thought provoking. More specifically, I would like to thank my committee – Kathy O’Dell, Lynn Cazabon, Lisa Moren, and Lee Boot – for always being supportive, inspiring, and helpful.

I want to thank the Center for Art, Design, and Visual Culture (CADVC), especially Symmes Gardner and Sandra Abbott, for helping me with installing the exhibition. Thank you to Christian Valiente and the Visual Arts Production Center for the equipment and technical support.

And a final thanks to all the friends, family, and the community who have supported me.

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## Chapter 1: The Work

*Baltimore, Spring 2016*

Within a decade of Thomas's being sentenced, my M.F.A. exhibition *Looking Out* opened near the city where Thomas once lived. In the following description of the installation, I shall use the present tense so that readers might imagine themselves in the gallery space.

The work on display at the Center for Art, Design, and Visual Culture (CADVC) represents two modes of my artistic practice, one a documentary approach representing the experiences, stories, and relationships created during the project, and the other offering a more active, participatory experience for the audience. Didactic panels appear on several walls, explaining these approaches and other details outlined in the following description.

The documentary portion reveals my research process and social practice. Dozens of envelopes from Thomas to me are displayed, their tattered ends indicating they've been opened. The back of each envelope is stamped: "outgoing inmate mail." These envelopes are more than literal evidence of the letter-writing part of the project; they also figuratively represent the entire relationship Thomas and I forged through consistent communication.<sup>7</sup> Also in this section is a glass vitrine housing the only two items of clothing that Thomas still owns but is not able to wear.<sup>8</sup> Next to the vitrine hang articles

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas and I also communicated over the phone and in-person visits.

<sup>8</sup> The remainder of his belongings were donated or incinerated upon his sentencing.

of my own clothing, which I wear when I visit him, on a coat hanger as if they are about to be worn.<sup>9</sup>



Fig. 1 Elena DeBold, *Looking Out*, 2016. Envelope. CADVC.



Fig. 2 Elena DeBold, *Looking Out*, 2016. Envelopes in glass display table. CADVC.

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<sup>9</sup> The clothes I wore to visit Thomas had to meet the prison's visiting policy specifications.



Fig. 3 Elena DeBold, *Looking Out*, 2016. Thomas's shirt and tie in glass display table. CADVC.

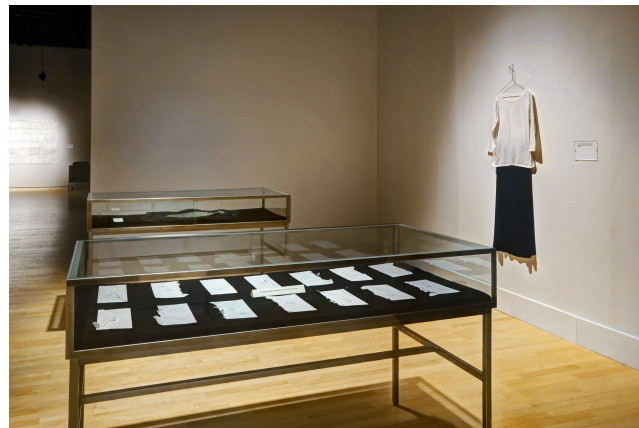


Fig. 4 Elena DeBold, *Looking Out*, 2016. CADVC.

Installed against one wall of this section are three plinths, each representing an experience I had with Thomas's youngest daughter.<sup>10</sup> At the beginning of the project, I asked his daughter what she would want to do with her father if he were not

<sup>10</sup> Thomas gained six stepchildren when he married, and he is close with most of them. He and his wife met while he was incarcerated. After several years of thought and trepidation, they married.

incarcerated.<sup>11</sup> For each of these shared experiences, I took photographs and made audio recordings on site at the events, in which I participated in Thomas's stead, and also collected common objects related to the activities. I then shared the audio recordings and images with Thomas, recording his reactions via telephone interviews.



Fig. 5 Elena DeBold, *By Proxy*, 2016. Multimedia installation. CADVC.

In the exhibition, the collected objects are displayed in clear Plexiglass cases atop the pedestals, this placement suggesting the elevated value of these otherwise everyday items and their capacity to signify the experiences for all who participated. The objects include a twig from the daughter's former playground, trash from outside his wife's old apartment, and a basketball game ticket. Each object is paired with the audio track of the original experience and my interview with Thomas.<sup>12</sup> Mounted parametric directional speakers give the illusion that the sounds are emanating from the objects themselves.

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<sup>11</sup> The list included her father's witnessing her first high school basketball game as a cheerleader, and visiting her elementary/middle school, which her grandmother had founded and directed.

<sup>12</sup> Some audio closely matches the objects, while other recordings veer into seemingly unrelated topics.



Fig. 6 Elena DeBold, *By Proxy: Basket Ball Game*, 2015, 2016. Multimedia installation. CADVC.

Near the plinths is an installation of two large, square, same-sized photographs, one hanging from the ceiling, floating parallel to the floor, just above the heads of the audience, and the other lying directly underneath, on the floor. The first features a patch of bright blue sky, the second a segment of cracked black asphalt. Both images were taken at the location where Thomas was shot and arrested.





Fig. 7 Elena DeBold, *Site of Arrest*, 2016. Photo installation. CADVC.

The adjacent gallery space displays the experiential, participatory section of *Looking Out*. Occupying the center of an alcove is a one-foot-deep, large, white rectangular basin of water, with several pillows arranged around it for sitting. The rectangle's dimensions, six feet by eight feet, are exactly those of Thomas's current cell. Ten feet above the basin, hanging parallel to it, is a mounted screen. Projected onto the screen is a video loop of ephemeral, blurred, and abstracted indoor pool imagery, shot with an underwater camera looking up through the water at the fluorescent bulb-lined ceiling of an indoor pool. The accompanying audio is a combination of underwater sounds, splashing, industrial buzz, and clattering reminiscent of a prison. The installation is intended to create spatial and audio tension, while the visuals are meant to entice the audience into interacting with the water.



Fig. 8 Elena DeBold, *The Hole*, 2016. Interactive multimedia installation. CADVC.

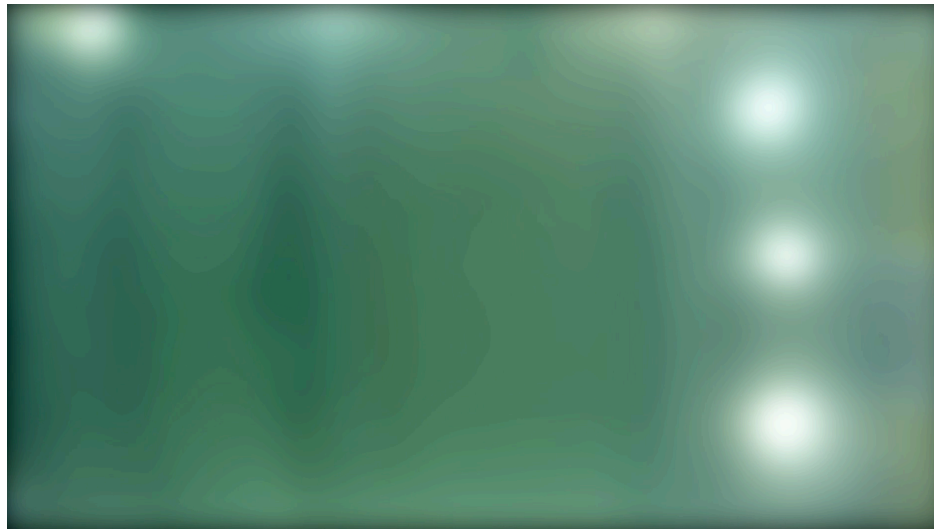


Fig. 9 Elena DeBold, *The Hole*, 2016. Video projection. CADVC. Still from projected video featured in *The Hole*.

When visitors place their hands in the water, the audio changes from ambient sound to a distinct voice, which, as indicated on the nearby didactic panel, is that of Thomas reciting a poem he wrote about his experience of incarceration. The projections slowly transition to abstracted footage of a person swimming overhead, backlit by the

fluorescent glare of the ceiling lights. This multisensory environment aims to effect empathy by way of simulating sense memory and suggesting to viewers that they spent a moment in the pool – with Thomas.



Fig. 10 Elena DeBold, *The Hole*, 2016. Interactive multimedia installation. CADVC.



Fig. 11 Elena DeBold, *The Hole*, 2016. Video projection. CADVC. Still from activated video featured in *The Hole*.

### **Goals and Aspirations**

I have numerous ambitions for *Looking Out* that can be encapsulated in two categories: one formal, involving the outward manifestation of the physical artwork, described above; the other contextual, having to do with the relationship between viewers and the artwork.

A key goal is to create in the audience an empathetic understanding of Thomas and his family. While it is impossible to represent Thomas or his family fully because of my distance from their daily lived experiences, I can attempt to demystify Thomas's experience, thus countering the media's stereotype-based portrayal of incarcerated black men. I hope this counter-narrative opens a gate to both empathy and compassion for a population often deemed unworthy of those feelings.

Empathy has multiple meanings and is not a stable, measurable feeling. However, for the purpose of this written thesis and exhibition, I define empathy as the ability to relate to and understand the lived experiences of others. Empathy is also the keystone to

building compassion, which researchers currently see as related to empathy but more specifically capable of stimulating energy for altruistic actions.<sup>13</sup>

Toward achieving this goal, I aimed both to create an outlet through which Thomas's and his family's voices could be heard, and to provide ways for him and his family to exert their agency. The process of building a bond between Thomas, his family, and me might, I hope, serve as an example of how to gain a deeper understanding of the lives of those affected by incarceration. Creating and documenting experiences with Thomas and his family has deepened my own understanding. The project has brought me face to face with issues of privilege and the role it plays in representations of violence and incarceration; it has made me aware of the impact of absence on family structure and cohesion, and how absence may be countered through communication and exchange; and it has cast a bright light on the role that racial inequality plays in the (im)morality of current systems of incarceration in the United States.

### **Privilege (and Fetish)**

Mainstream media feeds viewers an endless stream of images of bodies in pain,<sup>14</sup> stereotyping and fetishizing black bodies, in particular, as criminal bodies. Early on in my project, I committed to resisting this standard. For this reason, the imagery in *Looking Out* is void of images of Thomas and his family.

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<sup>13</sup> "Compassion," The Greater Good Science Center (GGSC), University of California, Berkeley, accessed March 12, 2016, [http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/topic/compassion/definition#how\\_to\\_cultivate](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/topic/compassion/definition#how_to_cultivate). For a list of useful peer-reviewed articles on compassion and altruism, also see the website of The Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education (CCARE), Stanford University School of Medicine, accessed March 12, 2016, <http://ccare.stanford.edu/research/peer-reviewed-ccare-articles/>.

<sup>14</sup> One such example of this is the repeatedly shown footage of Freddie Gray's arrest.

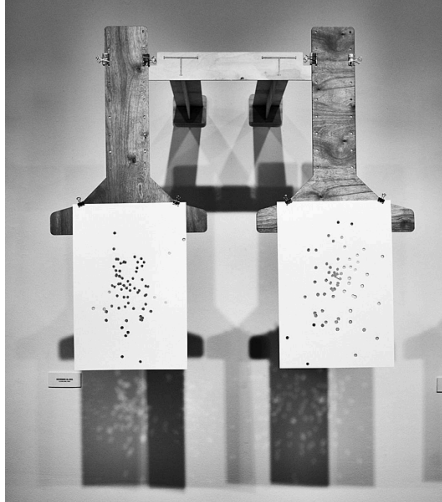


Fig.12 Paul Rucker, *Excessive Use*, 2015. Multimedia installation. Creative Alliance.

Baltimore artist Paul Rucker often resists the fetishization of the black body (and mind) in pain in his works dealing with racial trauma. For *Excessive Use*, 2015, Rucker used a Glock 22 semi-automatic pistol to fire at several sheets of plain white paper,<sup>15</sup> each sheet representing a person shot by the police. He then titled each sheet with the city and date of the incident.<sup>16</sup> This demonstrates the damage inflicted upon the bodies of the dead and wounded without fetishizing them – something the project might have suggested had he used standard shooting range paper targets featuring silhouettes of human torsos. Similarly, I never show recognizable images of Thomas and his family. Nor do I show images of the prison, one of the sites of trauma for Thomas and his family. Instead, I place the viewer in Thomas’s position of sharing only the same sky and earth with his family. In between the sky and earth is the horizon that surrounds him, upon

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<sup>15</sup> Rucker obtained a license to own this firearm.

<sup>16</sup> For documentation of this performance, see, “Rewind Exhibition,” accessed November 30, 2015, <http://www.rewindexhibition.com/koken/albums/excessive-use/>.

which he “looks out” daily, confronting that which separates “us” from “them”—barbed wire fences, high cinderblock walls, and guard towers.

Absent are the literal images of a subject who would otherwise be the focus of an exhibition with documentary components. The audience is left in want, a similar want, though one immeasurably less devastating, to that of an imprisoned person missing the world outside the prison walls.

### **Experience and Exchange as Form**

Many artists since the 1960s have sought to merge art and life.<sup>17</sup> In *Looking Out*, I seek to merge art and experience—more specifically, to consider the creation of new experiences, the development of new relationships, and the construction of new memories as an art form. The exhibition resulting from these performative events comprises artifacts and interviews with which viewers interact in what I hope become transformative experiences.

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<sup>17</sup> It is commonly held that the discourse on the merging of art and life was launched with Robert Rauschenberg’s comment in a 1959 interview: “Painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. (I try to act in that gap between the two.)” published in the exhibition catalogue for *Sixteen Americans*, ed. Dorothy C. Miller (NY: Museum of Modern Art, 1959), 58. I am referring here to more recent interpretations of Rauschenberg’s notion that fall under the category of socially engaged art. Socially engaged artists who emerged in the 1990s, such as Christine Hill and Fritz Haeg, built mutually beneficial relationships through ordinary transactions. For instance, in Hill’s piece *Volksboutique* (1997-present), she gives quotidian objects to the clientele of her small shop—a performative act, that fosters an appreciation for everyday objects and communication (see <http://www.volksboutique.org/>). Similarly, Haeg creates work from everyday interactions in his piece *Edible Estates* (2005-2013), which combines the act of socializing with that of picking fresh fruit from a communal space (see Nato Thompson, *Living As Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011* [New York: Creative Time Books, 2012], 166-167). An example of a more tactical socially engaged art example is *Women on Waves*, a project begun in 2001, which arranges for a boat with an abortion clinic on board to drop anchor off the shores of countries where abortion is illegal, and utilizes theatrical strategies to draw attention to the issues their work addresses. For details on this project and other examples of this type of work that merges art and life, see Thompson, *Living As Form*, 18+30 (for *Women on Waves*).

In my personal life, I have always valued experiences above objects, so perhaps it was natural for me to follow the same route in my artistic practice. By making experience a central focus in this project, the bond between my collaborators and me informed an exchange that was purposefully designed to create a mutually beneficial transaction, which is extended to the audience. The resulting symbiosis is central. Also vital to *Looking Out* were the aims to highlight Thomas's absence by my performing as a conduit through which he could experience his family, and to use my platform and privilege as an artist as a way for him to express himself.

The idea of creating an exchange was inspired by the work of Baltimore artist Lynn Cazabon. One of her recent works, *Portrait Garden* (2014), also addresses incarceration.<sup>18</sup> In this project, Cazabon worked with inmates at the Maryland Correctional Institute for Women in Jessup, Maryland, to create gardens in the prison's outdoor spaces. Inmates selected specific plants to represent themselves. After they planted their garden, Cazabon photographed each plant and recorded interviews with each woman about the plant she had chosen and her gardening experience. The photographs were then installed inside Light Rail vehicles in Baltimore City, creating a public representation of each inmate in the very communities where they once resided. *Portrait Garden* created a symbiotic relationship between the inmates and Cazabon, giving inmates the opportunity to garden and to express themselves, while providing Cazabon with a research platform for querying assumptions of incarceration's limitations on growth and change. This symbiosis is something that I have tried to emulate in *Looking Out*, while extending the relationship to the family of the incarcerated person.

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<sup>18</sup> Lynn Cazabon was a member of my M.F.A. thesis committee, and it is because of her project that I made sure she played a substantial role in the planning and execution of *Looking Out*.





Fig.13 Lynn Cazabon, *Portrait Garden (S., Dryopteris erythrosora)*, 2014. Digital print, 22in x 23in.



Fig.14 Lynn Cazabon, *Portrait Garden*, 2014-2015. Digital print, 22in x 23in. Displayed as interactive posters in Baltimore Light Rail trains.

## Chapter 2: Drowning and Suffocation

At the age of nine, Thomas began taking swimming lessons at the local pool. Lacking confidence in both his abilities and his instructor, Thomas typically stayed in the shallow end, where he could stand. There, he spent time mastering the ability to hold his breath for long periods of time underwater. Excited by this accomplishment, he would

demonstrate his newfound skill to his fellow classmates. Once, however, while underwater, he hit his head on the side of the pool and found he couldn't surface. His body slowly drifted until it reached the deep end. His fellow students, unsure of what had happened, continued to look on, until they realized something had gone wrong. As inconceivable as it sounds, Thomas was underwater for seven minutes before he was rescued by another child. The instructor had been preoccupied, the lifeguard had neglected to keep tabs on Thomas, and no parent had noticed.<sup>19</sup>

Thomas's life had almost come to an end because those in charge of keeping him safe had neglected to provide what he needed to survive – a watchful eye. More than twenty years later, Thomas's life came to another end. Like nearly one million other black men,<sup>20</sup> Thomas was incarcerated – stripped of his personhood and considered politically,<sup>21</sup> economically,<sup>22</sup> and socially<sup>23</sup> deceased.<sup>24</sup> Just like at the pool, those charged with “looking out” for Thomas – parents, teachers, guards, society in general – have continued to neglect him. Ta-nehisi Coates warns that such “a society that protects some people through a safety net of schools, government-backed home loans, and

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<sup>19</sup> After this incident, Thomas went through intensive mental and physical rehabilitation. Drowning had left him with learning disabilities, and he was soon diagnosed with ADHD and prescribed Ritalin. Thomas hated taking the medication because he felt it turned him into a “zombie.” Now, he looks back on Ritalin as his gateway drug; taking it made him realize that a drug could greatly change his emotional reaction to the world around him.

<sup>20</sup> “Criminal Justice Fact Sheet,” NAACP, accessed March 12, 2016, <http://www.naacp.org/pages/criminal-justice-fact-sheet>.

<sup>21</sup> Most inmates in the United States are not allowed to vote.

<sup>22</sup> Inmates are not usually counted in most unemployment statistics.

<sup>23</sup> Inmates are largely ignored by society.

<sup>24</sup> African Americans constitute around 1 million of the 2.3 million of the incarcerated population even though African Americans make up less than one fourth of the US's population. On average, African Americans are incarcerated at close to six times the rate of whites. See the NAACP “Criminal Justice Fact Sheet.”

ancestral wealth but can only protect you with the club of criminal justice has either failed at enforcing its good intentions or has succeeded at something much darker.”<sup>25</sup>

Thomas had nothing to safeguard him against this dark paradox and, so, he drifted, unseen, to a distant prison cell. No way to gain the “oxygen” vital to becoming a successful human. No way to escape a system pulling him down deeper. These are the concepts that prompted the physical, visual, and interactive design of the basin and projections in *Looking Out*.

## **Silence**

There are few ways for those of us on the outside to connect with inmates, and vice versa. Letter-writing is the cheapest and easiest, but it comes with its own hurdles, including: 1) attaining two different personal identification numbers assigned to each inmate;<sup>26</sup> 2) using approved paper;<sup>27</sup> and 3) understanding it can take weeks to receive a response letter from prison.<sup>28</sup>

Another option is speaking on the phone, which involves: 1) getting on the inmate’s approved call list, which is only updated every few months; 2) waiting for the inmate to call at regulated days and times;<sup>29</sup> 3) accepting that the conversation will be recorded and archived; 4) understanding that the inmate’s account<sup>30</sup> will be charged \$20

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<sup>25</sup> Ta-nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 18.

<sup>26</sup> Only the inmate or closest family members know these identification numbers, and they must be written in a precise place on the envelope, or the letter will be returned.

<sup>27</sup> Letters written on card stock, thick paper, or note cards will be returned.

<sup>28</sup> The time it takes for a letter to be received depends on how attentive the responsible parties on the inside are at clearing the letters and depositing them in the outgoing mail.

<sup>29</sup> An outsider may not call into a prison to speak with an inmate.

<sup>30</sup> I had to set up a special account so that Thomas would not be billed for our phone calls.

for 30 minutes;<sup>31</sup> 5) limiting the conversation to 30 minutes, when the call will be automatically terminated; and 6) bracing oneself for the loud, shrill, computerized voice that marks 60 seconds, then 30 seconds, to termination.

Visiting the inmate is the most intimate option, but it presents the greatest number of obstacles: 1) getting on the inmate's approved list; 2) visiting on regulated days and times; 3) usually traveling great distances, as most prisons are in rural areas, far from the inmates' homes;<sup>32</sup> 4) parking in specified lots, typically the farthest from the entrance;<sup>33</sup> 5) being searched by a police dog; 6) complying with dress and accessory codes;<sup>34</sup> 7) making sure that for any medical necessities, such as a cane (or in my case, a medical seat cushion), you have a physician-signed letter;<sup>35</sup> 8) removing shoes and passing through a metal detector; 9) being led to the waiting room, which is outfitted with benches bolted to the floor;<sup>36</sup> 10) only being able to touch the inmate upon greeting and departing; 11) limiting the visit to two hours; 12) knowing the inmate can be called away at any time for any reason; and 13) understanding that using the restroom immediately terminates the visit.

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<sup>31</sup> This price is actually low compared to others I have seen published.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas is housed in a facility two-and-a-half hours from Baltimore City, and there is no public transportation to the prison.

<sup>33</sup> If you park in the closer lots, you will be asked to move, even if the lot you're in is empty.

<sup>34</sup> Such specifications call for bras with no under-wires, clothing that is not too baggy, tops that are modestly cut and not too tight, no boots, no hoodies, no jewelry except a wedding ring, and men cannot wear jeans. The stakes of compliance are high. After driving two-and-a-half hours to the prison, to be turned away for what is deemed an "inappropriate" article of clothing, would be an exasperating loss of time and opportunity. Anxiety prompted me to wear the same clothes every time I visited, since they were once deemed acceptable, but I often brought several outfits with me just in case the tide of acceptability might turn.

<sup>35</sup> In addition to a letter from a physician stating the importance of such medical necessities, you must also bring a letter or x-rays if you have metal rods, screws, or plates in your body.

<sup>36</sup> The waiting room at Thomas's facility is fitted with thick, hard, iron benches bolted to the floor. There are no cushions, prompting most visitors to stand. The white cinderblock walls are decorated with patriotic or religious images, one of which includes a half-naked female angel. The room is also furnished with a small TV, always set to a news station. The only restrooms available to visitors are usually unsanitary.

Restrictions on communicating with the outside world are rigorous, but minimal when compared to the constraints on inmates' self-expression. In some states, the media cannot interview an inmate unless the family of the victim of the crime that resulted in the inmate's incarceration (or the victim, if alive) agrees to the interview.<sup>37</sup> Thus, abusive conditions within those prisons cannot be brought to light via the media. Also, if word gets out that inmates are being treated unfairly, officers and staff at the prison often seek retribution on the inmates involved. As Thomas explained, if staff knows that someone is reporting to headquarters the mistreatment of himself or other inmates, the reporter risks the staff raiding his cell and destroying his property. "They [the correctional staff] do vindictive things with no oversight. There is no one to say 'don't do that, they're humans' .... Sometimes you really don't have a voice; if nobody says anything about what you're going through, then nobody will know."<sup>38</sup>

Thomas has experienced the lack of humane oversight firsthand. Currently, he believes that chemicals and lead in the water are causing him health issues.<sup>39</sup> The prison staff refuses to test the water. The physician in the infirmary says that Thomas must find a way to get a water sample to family to get it tested. But as the list of restrictions above indicates, there is no way of handing anything to a visitor or mailing a cup of water.

All these obstacles boil down to: silence. Fellow inmates further the silence, Thomas points out. Inmates' lives do not tend to matter to fellow inmates:

If you get sick, you're going to die. The guy in the cell with you, he ain't going to tell nobody you're about to die ... or you've overdosed and you need help. He's

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<sup>37</sup> I learned this from a meeting with Natalie Sokoloff, an emerita faculty member at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice at the City University of New York.

<sup>38</sup> Phone call with Thomas on February 22, 2016.

<sup>39</sup> This is a form of environmental racism.

just going to walk around like it ain't happening until the police find you like that.<sup>40</sup>

One might attribute this behavior to inmates being “bad people,” but my discussions with Thomas made me wonder if it has more to do with survival, fear of retribution, perhaps even self-hatred,<sup>41</sup> than with what many people consider a lack of personal morals? During this project, one of Thomas’s fellow inmates was found dead in his cell from an overdose. Thomas was most disturbed by the staff’s crass jokes about the dead man, as they hauled out his dead body and then went back to business as usual.

The suppression of expression, of humanity, and of communication with the outside world makes it easy for stereotypes to flourish in the void and overtake reality.

### **Spreading of Silence**

Families, communities, and society at large are affected by the silence of incarceration.<sup>42</sup> Social scientists have observed that although incarceration has become commonplace, particularly in African American communities, it does not create a common ground for a community to come together.<sup>43</sup> Facing innumerable challenges to everyday subsistence, among them the “stigma and fear of shame” attached to incarceration of family members, those on the outside fall into what Michelle Alexander calls “social silence,” which not only leaves inmates to suffer the traumas of incarceration alone, but results in “a repression of public thought, a collective denial of lived

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<sup>40</sup> Phone call with Thomas on February 22, 2016.

<sup>41</sup> Or possibly internalized racism.

<sup>42</sup> According to The National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated it is estimated that 2.7 million children in America have at least one parent in jail. (<https://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/>)

<sup>43</sup> See, especially, Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* (New York: The New Press, 2012) and Donald Braman, *Doing Time on the Outside* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2004).

experience.”<sup>44</sup> The spreading of such silence, accelerated by stereotyping, “makes community healing and collective political action next to impossible.”<sup>45</sup>

For all these reasons, my goal has been to give Thomas and his family<sup>46</sup> a platform for telling their stories out loud, hopefully allowing reality to override stereotypes in gallery visitors’ minds.

## **Chapter 3: Empathy**

### **Empathy as Medium, Empath as Artist**

Locating a term that fit the role I was playing in this project was not difficult; from the first time “empath” entered my mind, it stuck. An empath, defined in a down-to-earth way, is someone who is able to “crawl inside someone else’s skin,” or more officially, is able to relate to other individuals within their own framework of lived reality.<sup>47</sup> Serving as an empath, I was symbolically able to enact Thomas, assuming his role in experiences in which his daughter desired his participation. My further aim was for the role of empath to stretch to the audience, whom I hoped might, through the exhibition, gain a deeper understanding of the lives of others and be encouraged

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.,169. Social silence also reinforces the stereotype that poor black families with incarcerated family members are damaged, deprived, and beyond repair.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Children are often the most affected by incarcerated-related silence and issues of racial inequity that fuel it. See Appendix 1.

<sup>47</sup> Note that I am not using “empath” in its more recent sci-fi or parapsychological contexts, but rather, again, in a more down-to-earth sense, as a person who practices empathy.

thereafter to seek meaningful connections with those outside their own race, class, or culture.<sup>48</sup>

An artist who has informed my work along these lines is Emily Jacir, a Palestinian-American artist who acted as an empath for Palestinians in exile around the globe in her piece *Where We Come From* (2001-2003). For this piece, she asked those in exile: "If I could do something for you, anywhere in Palestine, what would it be?"<sup>49</sup> She then photographed herself completing those wishes, and exhibited the photographs alongside the original requests. In each photograph, Jacir acts as a proxy or representative for Palestinians who could not act on their own desires, because they were unable to return to their native land. The piece highlights the suffering caused by exile, through an empathic relationship established between Jacir and her participants. Akin to Jacir, who could cross borders with her U.S. passport, I used my privilege as a white middle-class woman to transcend boundaries to carry out actions that Thomas and his family could not.

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<sup>48</sup> Like other artists who make socially engaged art, my practice aspires to cultivate meaningful human interactions and relationships. Unlike works that fall under the category of relational aesthetics, my work does not create a social situation or audience experience; instead, it is a representation of my own experience, an offering of an example for individuals to follow in their own lives, should they so choose.

<sup>49</sup> Pat Binder and Gerhard Haup, "Emily Jacir: Where we come from," *Nafas*, October 2003, accessed March 12, 2016, [http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2003/emily\\_jacir](http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2003/emily_jacir).





Fig. 15 Emily Jacir, *Where We Come From*, 2001-2003. Digital photographs and writing on paper. Guggenheim Museum.

### Empathy in Social Neuroscience and in Art Theory

Researchers in the field of social neuroscience have recently proven that empathy can be tracked in the brain. Using fMRI technology, it has been shown that when a subject being scanned observes someone in the room experiencing pain, the brain of that subject displays similar reactions to when he or she is subjected to pain. Neuroscientist and psychologist Tania Singer, who is engaged in this research, notes, however, that subjects' brains display greater empathy for those with whom they identify as members of their "in-group" (family and friends) than for people they don't know.<sup>50</sup> Such research suggests that those whom society sees as an "out-group"<sup>51</sup> – for instance, prison inmates, and if you're a white person, inmates of color<sup>52</sup> – are less likely to receive collective empathy. This lack of empathy, I would argue, gets piled atop stereotype, fetishization,

<sup>50</sup> Although there were smaller levels of empathy displayed for the participants' "out-group."

<sup>51</sup> DLD Conference. "DLDwomen 2012 - About Priming Sex and Empathy," YouTube Video, 1:21:55, July 27, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xZFS51K-l80&feature=youtu.be>.

<sup>52</sup> In 2008 (one year before Thomas's trial), African Americans and Hispanics comprised around 58% of the incarcerated population even though they only made up only 25% of the US population. See the NAACP "Criminal Justice Fact Sheet."

and silence to further concretize racial and social injustices. To change this situation, we need to “train up” our inherent capacity for empathy for those whom we consider to be in our “out-group.”

Art has played a key role in such endeavors. Art historians and theorists, particularly Kristine Stiles<sup>53</sup> and Jill Bennett,<sup>54</sup> have argued that art can foster a better understanding of trauma, in part via empathy, and explored how art, specifically about and/or generated from trauma, leads to a wider cultural awareness of social issues. *Looking Out* is intended to increase awareness of inmates’ and their families’ lives in this age of mass incarceration and of stigmatized views of people of color. Like many artworks about trauma, mine offers aspects of the private worlds of specific subjects (in my case, the worlds of Thomas and his family, with their consent and collaboration) to viewers in a public setting.<sup>55</sup> I have attempted to convey Thomas’s traumas in material, visual, and sonic mediums, transforming sense memory into representational signs that do not subsume it,<sup>56</sup> thereby making visible and audible that which has been hidden away and silenced. The multisensory environments on display were aimed not only at representing Thomas’s sense memories, but implanting in the viewer feelings of an already-experienced trauma, feelings that were meant to be visceral, to serve as stepping stones to empathy.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Kristine Stiles, *Concerning Consequences: Studies in Art, Destruction, and Trauma* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

<sup>54</sup> Jill Bennett, “Insides, Outsides: Trauma, Affect, and Art.” In *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 28.

<sup>55</sup> Bennett, “Insides, Outsides: Trauma, Affect, and Art,” 31.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>57</sup> Like many of my past works, *Looking Out* is meant to haunt viewers, while identifying them as witness of what Jill Bennett describes as the eidetic memory of trauma, as it is represented in visual and audible “language.” This form of language is, as she points out, tied to French philosopher Gilles Deleuze’s idea of an “encountered sign,” which, unlike an ordinary object, can only be identified by and through a change in

The trail to empathy in *Looking Out* is built from a series of interlocking connections between: Thomas, his family and me; Thomas, the work, and the viewer; Thomas's actual body and the representation of his body; Thomas's sense memory and the audience's; and Thomas's humanity and that of society. These connections are meant to usher in the "out group," establishing a platform for empathy.<sup>58</sup>

## **Chapter 4: Parallels and Politics**

There are parallels between my life and Thomas's, though the space between those parallel lines is vast, marked largely by white privilege and/or its absence. This factor became particularly notable in the differences in our school experiences. We attended the same elementary and middle schools.

### **My School Experiences**

My home life as a child was a landscape of scattered eggshells around which I tried to maneuver – as is the case for most children with mentally ill parents. Any word or action could lead to a drastic unraveling of reality, plunging me headfirst into unpredictability, turmoil, and violence. School was my only shelter from this domestic storm, and the abuse and neglect accompanying it.

In contrast, school was a structured place, with goals and rules clearly laid out. It was a place where I excelled, unambiguously, and I quickly fell in love with learning. I

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affect. The effect on the viewer of the artwork in *Looking Out* is manifested in emotional responses to the encountered signs rather than aesthetic observations about the objects representing Thomas. These signs employ thought in a multitude of ways, including emotional, physiological, and sensorial. Bennett theorizes that such affective encounters invite the audience to consider deeper thought and, in turn, deeper truth. See Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, 33-35, 44.

<sup>58</sup> Bennett, "Insides, Outsides: Trauma, Affect, and Art," 45.

could express myself there. My artwork and thoughts were cherished. Trying to stay in this haven for as long as possible, I often took on extra responsibilities, participating in afterschool art clubs and scholastic organizations for “high achievers.” School could only provide me sanctuary for a fraction of my life,<sup>59</sup> but during this fraction, I had not only a respite from my parents, but a refuge from the boisterous and bullying streets of my neighborhood.

Growing up, I was the only white girl in a small community of black families whose children were mostly male. Adding to my conspicuousness, I was painfully awkward. I became a target for constant taunting and aggression. “Eleeeennnnaaa!” the boys would call from windows, porches, and corners, “Eleeeennnnaaa,” mimicking my mother’s nagging “white” voice. Now I understand my neighbors’ behavior much differently.

Similar to the Baltimore youths about whom Ta-Nehisi Coates speaks in his book *Between the World and Me*, the kids in my neighborhood were practicing the “culture of the streets, a culture concerned chiefly with securing the body” in a world that benefits from its destruction and incarceration.<sup>60</sup>

### **Thomas’s School Experiences**

Further complicating relationships with my peers, it became clear that most of the children from my neighborhood *hated* school. I was baffled by their disdain. As I grew older, however, I saw they were treated differently from the predominantly white student body. I had wondered why I rarely encountered children from my block in school. Then I

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<sup>59</sup> School roughly took up 33% of each weekday for 50% of the year.

<sup>60</sup> Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 24.

realized that early in their school years they had been relegated to the bowels of the academic order. They were routinely quarantined as “troublemakers,” their black bodies seen as pollutants in the academic atmosphere, to paraphrase Coates. Often they were grouped together and put in classes with children who were developmentally disabled, though they were not. Evidence of their intelligence had always been clear to me in the way each could understand and manipulate the politics of our block – in fact, many of the young men I grew up with wanted to be lawyers or judges. But the outcomes of education were distant to them, for most of what they experienced in the academic world was disciplinary action of a system built on institutional racism.

The school system that had saved me had simultaneously participated in the suffocation of the minds of my black classmates, forcing them to be invisible, their presence barely noticeable even to those who knew them best, their voices muffled by concrete walls and a strict attitude of intolerance for speaking out. Such experiences can only be rivaled by incarceration, which their treatment at school eerily prefigured.

Thomas reflected on the prejudice he experienced as a young student:

As a child I didn't know that I was being segregated. The first memory I recall of racism is by my 5th grade teacher, Miss P. She would seat her students by color: the first group, white girls; the second group, white boys; the third group, black girls; and, finally, the last group, black boys. If you had what some would deem as behavior issues, like consistently talking in class, she'd put you in “the box.” It was a desk with 3 sides of it boxed in using cardboard, which measured approximately 2 feet high. There was no way you could see anyone else in the class or do any of the classwork, because you couldn't see the teacher nor the chalkboard. However, this method was [considered] appropriate for teachers who had the misfortune of teaching black kids in a predominantly white school. Most of the time children diagnosed with attention deficit disorder were placed in the back of the class instead of in the front, which didn't allow us to receive the attention we needed. It appeared as though the white teachers weren't capable of handling children of color, especially the ones who were a challenge. Instead of

adapting their teaching techniques in order to ensure every student was able to at least read and write, teachers simply passed each student.<sup>61</sup>

Thomas is describing something that a lot of black children experience and that I witnessed in the same school: alienation of students of color due to institutional racism. This alienation, and concomitant invisibility, can develop into a “disidentification and disengagement” from a school environment, leading to “poorer student outcomes”<sup>62</sup> and more detentions and suspensions.<sup>63</sup> Further, this tumultuous environment can cause a child to feel “physical and psychological vulnerability,” creating a psychological state of “perpetual danger.” Such repetitive forms of both undisguised and hidden racism lead to psychological responses resulting in racial trauma.<sup>64</sup> Thomas recalls his first violent racist experience, as a 13-year-old:

...My first girlfriend, who was white, and I went to the annual fire works one 4th of July at our school. On this day, I suffered the first physical act of violence for being a "nigger" who had a white "nigger loving" girlfriend....That moment gave me a rude awakening. We were kids; and we suffered being spit on and having beer thrown on us.<sup>65</sup>

Around the same time as this “rude awakening,” caused by interpersonal racism, Thomas started using drugs, which eventually led to more illegal experiences. Thomas’s illegal activities and interactions with the police also followed a cycle. Thomas was first arrested in 1997, when he was 23, for theft, and was subsequently arrested some ten times

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<sup>61</sup> Writing by Thomas via email from his wife to me, August 15, 2015.

<sup>62</sup> Suspension and expulsion rates for children are higher for children of color. Thirty-five percent of African American students between grades 7-12 have been expelled or suspended, compared to fifteen percent of white students. See NAACP “Criminal Justice Fact Sheet.”

<sup>63</sup> Maryam M. Jernigan and Jessica Henderson Daniel, "Racial Trauma in the Lives of Black Children and Adolescents: Challenges and Clinical Implications," *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, no. 2 (2011), 127-129.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>65</sup> Writing by Thomas via email from his wife to me, August 15, 2015.

before turning 35.<sup>66</sup> The shoot-out with police that led to his arrest and current incarceration can be seen as the final outcome of race-based discrimination, stress, and trauma he experienced throughout his life.

### **The Personal is Political**

Through my work on this project and others, I have explored the personal topic of trauma's effects on my life, and in so doing, have discovered its cyclical nature. I see how my early traumas led to later suffering in my life, but also see how those who hurt me had also been previously damaged.

It is through my own experiences with trauma that I have been able to relate to Thomas, for one cannot identify as a trauma survivor without also identifying with the states of invisibility, voicelessness, and powerlessness that trauma produces in others. In taking steps toward understanding my own trauma, and then Thomas's, I have grown increasingly aware of different types of trauma that have transpired and continue to transpire in the lives of people around me on a daily basis.

While my need to understand such suffering on a scale beyond myself is admittedly fuelled by an urge to control the traumatic situations that have occurred in my own life, I have begun to identify how trauma (and fear of trauma) informs everything around us—our histories, our politics, the way we raise children, and what paths we choose.

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<sup>66</sup> "Maryland Judiciary Case Search." Maryland Courts. Accessed November 30, 2015. <http://casesearch.courts.state.md.us/casesearch/processDisclaimer.jis>.

In her essay “The Personal is Political,” Carol Hanisch identifies how our personal lives exemplify issues and situations that replicate those of the larger society.<sup>67</sup> Through this project, I have shed further light on my own personal history of trauma, while aiming to connect Thomas’s history of trauma to larger socio-political issues.

## Chapter 5: Staying Positive

From the beginning, Thomas has often signed his letters with “stay positive,” an extraordinary sentiment coming from someone serving a multiple-life sentence. A man condemned by society encourages me – a privileged white woman in a higher institution of learning – to keep going. Even on my worst days, “stay positive” reverberates in my mind.

Thomas’s and his family’s lives are hard. Thomas tells me that in his life on the inside, he feels like he’s drowning (again) and that his relationships, his body, and his life are always in jeopardy. But he wakes each day determined to “stay positive.”<sup>68</sup> It is clear that his family carries this motto with them, too. Thomas and his family are not ordinary people. They are strong, diligent, and optimistic in the face of adversity.

I always felt uneasy in the neighborhood of my youth, unsure exactly what was happening on the other side of my parents’ picket fence. I sensed I was not getting the entire picture. Now I see faces and names and can attach them to the injustices I

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<sup>67</sup> Carol Hanisch, “The Personal Is Political” (1969), in Shulamith Firestone, ed., *Notes from the Second Year: Women’s Liberation, Major Writings of the Radical Feminists* (New York: Radical Feminists, 1970), 76-78, accessed March 12, 2016, [http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/wlmpc\\_wlmms01039/](http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/wlmpc_wlmms01039/). Also see Hanisch’s own website: <http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html>.

<sup>68</sup> This is not to say that Thomas does not have moments of anger, depression, hopelessness, and many other emotions, some of which he articulates in the recordings in the exhibition. In turn, I have experienced many of these same emotions, plus guilt, throughout this project (see Appendix 2). But I have learned from Thomas that “staying positive” fuels me to continue my work on the outside, as it fuels him to continue to stay alive on the inside.



witnessed years ago. Through my research on this project and my growing life as an activist, I have learned the value of truth. I hope I have helped Thomas and his family to speak their truths. I am not a dreamer any more. I am fully awake.<sup>69</sup> This project opened my eyes, and I hope that the work created from it will encourage others, with stories similar to my own, to rise from their slumber.

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<sup>69</sup> In *Between the World and Me*, Coates identifies those who do not see modern day racial injustice as “Dreamers,” usually white people. “The Dreamers will have to learn to struggle themselves, to understand that the field for their Dream, the stage where they have painted themselves white, is the deathbed of us all. The Dream is the same habit that endangers the planet, the same habit that sees our bodies stowed away in prisons and ghettos” (151-152).

## Appendices

### Appendix 1 - Affects of Incarcerated-Related Silence, Racial Inequality, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder on Children:

Children are perhaps the most affected by the dynamic of silence, as discussed in the “Spreading of Silence” section above. Thomas’s youngest daughter, for example, does not talk openly of her stepfather’s “situation,” even with her closest friends.<sup>70</sup> Many children cut ties with, or drift away from, an incarcerated parent, sometimes due to the daunting challenges to communication cited earlier, but also for fear of their “secret” getting out. Thomas’s situation is somewhat different, inasmuch as his wife once worked in the prison system, knows the ropes, and despite working two-and-a-half jobs to support six kids as a single parent and pay her husband’s legal expenses, makes sure the family consistently communicates with Thomas.

But in an even broader context, there is reluctance in the United States to acknowledge that racial inequality is still an issue in our society today. This fundamental silence also most affects children and adolescents of color, who are forced to cope in a world full of racial tension, while not being validated as victims of micro-aggressions, prejudice, and oppression. Studies have found that schools are the main environment in which black students experience racial discrimination early in life. Such an atmosphere can lead to racial stress and racial trauma, as discussed in “Thomas’s School Experiences.”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> For discussion of the silence that children of the incarcerated feel, in particular, see Braman, *Doing Time on the Outside*, 220, and Jernigan and Daniel, “Racial Trauma in the Lives of Black Children and Adolescents...,” 124.

<sup>71</sup> Hye-Kyung Kang and David Burton, “Effects of Racial Discrimination, Childhood Trauma, and Trauma Symptoms on Juvenile Delinquency in African American Incarcerated Youth,” *Journal of Aggression*,

Though racial trauma and race-based stress are not mentioned in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*,<sup>72</sup> many studies have found that youth of color experience precisely such trauma. These studies indicate that such young people have experienced symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) due to the discrimination and racial stress they have experienced.<sup>73,74</sup> Such symptoms include decreased self-esteem, lack of satisfaction with life, lower academic achievement, and increased levels of anger, aggression, and violence.<sup>75</sup>

A recent study conducted by Hye-Kyung Kang and David Burton identified a striking correlation between the amount of racism experienced and delinquency rates in African American males. The study found that PTSD symptoms caused by experiences of racism were directly linked to delinquency.<sup>76</sup>

Such findings call into question not just classroom behavior but policing policies at the local law-enforcement level. An example is New York City's "stop-and-frisk" policy, a procedure resulting from structural racism; young African Americans are its predominant target.<sup>77</sup> The study suggests that such "stop-and-frisk" practices can lead to racial trauma and PTSD symptoms. The acting out of such symptoms then leads to or furthers delinquency, which can in turn put the youth in a position to be traumatized

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*Maltreatment & Trauma* 23, no. 10 (2014): 1109-125, accessed October 25, 2015.  
doi:10.1080/10926771.2014.968272, 1118.

<sup>72</sup> American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5)* (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

<sup>73</sup> Kang and Burton, "Effects of Racial Discrimination...", 1111.

<sup>74</sup> Kenneth Hardy, "Healing the Hidden Wounds of Racial Trauma," *Reclaiming Children & Youth* 22, no. 1 (2013): 25.

<sup>75</sup> Kang and Burton, "Effects of Racial Discrimination...", 1112.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 1118.

<sup>77</sup> "By 2008, the NYPD was stopping 545,000 in a single year, and 80 percent of the people stopped were African Americans and Latinos. Whites comprised a mere 8 percent of people frisked by the NYPD, while African Americans accounted for 85 percent of all frisks." See Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 135.

again, through more and more violent interactions with the police.<sup>78, 79</sup> This pattern gives a glimpse of the cyclical nature of trauma at its intersection with race.

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<sup>78</sup> Kang and Burton, "Effects of Racial Discrimination...", 1120.

<sup>79</sup> According to the FBI, in 2013 African Americans accounted for almost 30% of people arrested even though African Americans, as stated by the US census, African Americans made up less than 14% of the population in 2013. See FBI "Arrests by Race, 2013" and "Annual Estimates of the Resident Population by Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin for the United States, States, and Counties: April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2013, 2013 Population Estimates."

## Appendix 2 - What I Learned:

Throughout this project I have been able to see, firsthand, the human cost of an immoral and racially biased judicial system. However, in addition to the harsh realities that I have witnessed, I was able to observe how even in the most dire of circumstances, hope can still flourish.

In turn, I have learned a lot about myself in terms of my identity, my own biases, and my work as I have come into contact with Thomas's world. In Thomas's story, I am able to see what connects us (memories, emotions, histories, and relationships), while identifying and learning how to break down what separates us (bias, stereotyping, racism, and classism) through empathy and compassion.

This project has given me a better understanding of the challenges that we face in fighting racism and mass incarceration. I have also been able to see how the puzzle pieces of trauma, racism, and addiction fit together to further complicate issues of mass incarceration. This project has opened up a wealth of knowledge that motivates and inspires me to continue making work around these issues.

Initially, I strove for a more "objective" tone for this written thesis in order to draw more attention to the subject matter and the facts than to my emotional reaction to the knowledge that I was gaining. However, my emotional struggle with this research has had a profound effect on me and is something that continues to unfold. I mourn the life that Thomas lost and I grieve for all the others in situations like his, as well as for those whose lives were lost or affected by the crimes from which Thomas's story flows. Along with the grief comes the anger that society can let injustices happen and continue to happen. Simultaneously, I feel guilt because of my own complicity in these issues of

race due to my status as a privileged middle-class white woman. Yet, all of these emotions only give me more energy and a stronger drive to dig deeper into these topics—along with, of course, what I have learned from Thomas about “staying positive.”

See Appendix 3 for the letter I wrote to Thomas after the exhibition went up, regarding what I have learned during this project.

Appendix 3 - Letter to Thomas originally read at the conclusion of my oral examination (errors in the original letter have purposely not been corrected here; this is the letter that Thomas received and read):

Dear Thomas,

Through our collaboration I feel I have discovered a bit of truth but not truth in a journalistic sense but more a spiritual one. After the first time I went to visit you I cried on and off for days because that sliver of truth was so sharp that it pierced right through me. It's the kind of truth that imprints itself in your heart and into your brain where it informs even the most minute of functions. And it shakes me deeply to know that you are not alone in the injustices you suffer.

To throw a human into our Judicial system especially one tainted with racial bias and prejudice is not justice but more a form of torture. To put a person into a 6x8 cell for 22 hours a day with no control over your life or your body, fearing for your safety, in a state of constant trauma is not something I would wish upon even those who have hurt me the worst. Prison piled atop racial injustice is a hell so severe that it could crush even the hardest of stones. I believe it is a testament to your personal strength, your spirituality, and your family that you have survived unbroken. You and your family are my inspiration. Your positivity reminds me that even the largest challenges can be overcome.

There are no words that can describe how grateful I am to you and your family for the lessons I have learned, the art I have been able to create, and for being my friends. I will write again soon.

Stay positive,

Elena

#### Appendix 4 - Expanding the Work and Future Plans:

In the future, I hope to broaden my work on the topics explored here and to continue working with Thomas and his family. I am also searching for ways to bring myself into the artwork so that I may further examine my own vulnerabilities, discomfort, guilt, anger, and sorrow around the topic of racial injustice.

In addition to looking at different aspects of how incarceration and racial injustice affect Thomas's life, I want to expand my work to include formerly incarcerated people who continue to struggle under the stigma that incarceration carries. Aiming to focus on trauma, empathy, and compassion as the core concepts for the work, I hope to research other personal narratives on the topic.

Thomas's story is only a starting point for me in what I hope will be a long career of making artwork that elevates the voices of those who are marginalized by society. I will continue to use my artistic capabilities to create platforms for others to speak their truth.



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