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Reimagining the Narrative: A Contemporary Creative Collection of Interracial Perspective

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**Reimagining the Narrative: A Contemporary
Creative Collection of Interracial Perspective**

*A Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Liberal Studies*

by

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December, 2018

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Reader: Dr. Martha Cheng*

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ABSTRACT

This essay offers a critical analysis of my creative thesis, *Reimagining the Narrative: A Contemporary Creative Collection of Interracial Perspective*, which consists of five fabric art scrolls, illustrating contemporary narrative views about interracial relations. I present such information to demonstrate the need to retell history from a visual interracial perspective, so that it might be seen through a new lens. In this critical essay, I argue that while historical context and documentation records history and provides insight into historical narratives, contemporary views within writing and art persist in their capacity to not only offer new points of view, but also propel the mind to reimagine the narrative which has been told throughout history. This analysis offers a unique and relevant perspective into race relations during a time when racism dwells at the forefront of conversation, and the interracial union continues to present unspoken difficulties about being human in a racial society which is often more about race than about being human. I aim to demonstrate that the retelling of history through a new lens created by contemporary writers and artists, including myself, remains critical in provoking valuable conversation needed to fracture the silence behind history, and break barriers between races. This critical essay not only argues for the necessary retelling of history through a reconstructed narrative, but also explains how the contemporary art of *Reimagining the Narrative* does this through creative writing and visual construction, including the process of its creation. Through this collection, the audience may interact with the new narrative through the agency of contemporary art and writing for the viewer to extend their perspective outside the margins of the stories that have been told.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to my family, including my mother, Jacquie, for loving me unconditionally and for loving my husband like a son, my brother, Michael, for loving me and for loving my husband like a brother, and my father, Ewald, who before his death, came to know a relationship with a son-in-law—who is not white. I owe special thanks to my husband, Tommy, for his support and for his perspective while living together for thirty years within a racist society. Our discussions and shared experiences have been equally responsible toward my learning as my formal craft and education. To my friend, Susan, thank you for teaching me everything I know about sewing, so that I could stitch every word within this collection.

From my experience at Rollins College, I would especially like to thank Dr. Vidhu Aggarwal for her knowledge and skillful perspective with language and for giving me license to write outside the margins with my own form of textual and visual language—and the absence of language. I would also like to thank Dr. Eric Smaw for pushing me out of my comfort zone and into the text of court cases, which was integral to this thesis. To my thesis mentor, Prof. Rachel Simmons, and my reader, Dr. Martha Cheng, I thank you both for your willingness to work with me on such a non-traditional creative thesis, for your support and enthusiasm with my work, and especially for your eagerness for the collection to maintain a voice on the campus of Rollins College beyond my attendance on campus. This collection, *Reimagining the Narrative: A Contemporary Creative Collection of Interracial Perspective*, speaks beyond my voice, and breathes beyond my breath.

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INTRODUCTION: INTERRACIAL PERSPECTIVE

When you see me, who do you see?

Do you see a white woman, a human, or perhaps, other?

What if I told you that I am a white woman, and I am married to a black man.

Who do you see now?

Reimagining the Narrative addresses this question and the complex issues about how what we see and what we are told about history are often more about race than about



Fig. 1. Holly Jefferies. *Reimagining the Narrative* (Scroll Collection installation in Carnegie Hall at Rollins College, December 2018), ink, thread, leather, wood, buttons, and vinyl on quilted fabric, 2018

being human. This creative thesis confronts this complex issue through the contemporary art and writing of five fabric scrolls (see fig. 1). Within the scrolls, and my creative writing, I employ the use of language and the absence of language, to tell what needs to be told. I focus on presenting a narrative through which the readers may immerse

themselves into an experience where they can fill the gaps with their own story. As I am continually influenced by writers and artists, I envision both my writing and my artwork offering an opportunity for the viewer to gain a new perspective about old ideas created about race. In both my visual and textual work about race and the interracial narrative, I break barriers, cross lines, and write outside the margins and off the page through the creative writing techniques of stream of consciousness and erasure. I create new narratives and deconstruct old narratives that have already been told, while reimagining them into a new story that is waiting to be told. My process includes the tearing of pages and rearranging the pieces into a retelling of a new narrative. This retelling comes with great responsibility, as many stories, including my own, breathe in and out of every word and space.

As I consider every word or blank space on the page, I imagine the narrative unfolding before me and the viewer, and how the narrative might live on after it has left my hand and sight. The words and blank spaces become windows and doorways into the viewers' minds and souls, and they become what the viewers tell themselves and the world around them. This concept takes on an appreciation for the art of narrative itself and the impact it has on those who find themselves in the path of it. My hope is that I might offer an insight and a path toward a window or door for someone to lead themselves through to find a better path toward themselves.

Through my body of work, *Reimagining the Narrative*, I attempt to reimagine the pages of historical documents and cases about race, and the interracial lines and borders surrounding race. My body of work begins with my own narrative: December 16, 1995, a white woman and a black man wed and sign a state license, representing the freedom to

engage in marriage, cohabitation, and fornication. This act of signing a document honors those throughout history who fought for such freedom and were denied, but also embodies a false freedom of holding such a license—not free from discrimination. This event in 1995, after seven years of living together and before twenty-three years more, marks the history of thirty years of interracial experience and memory. Thirty years, and the narrative remains the same and changes with every breath. It changes with every moment of experience when confronted with racial discrimination. How should this history be told? While the factual events of such an interracial relationship remain true and authentic, the memory and perspective exist only in the framework through which the story is told and retold. *Reimagining the Narrative* attempts to tell the narrative of one and of many through creative and contemporary visual representations of history and experience about how the interracial union continues to present difficulties in a racial society.

Within my body of work, I contemplate the issues of race through my own stream of consciousness—my view of race from my own perspective—about my thirty years of living in an interracial relationship with my husband, and the world around us. I am a white woman, and he is a black man. This union presents unsaid difficulties about being human in a racial society which is often more about race than about being human. My stream of consciousness captures my thoughts with no specific filter or censor, while writing without stopping, writing without thinking too much, and thinking much too much. The words pour out of me too fast to capture all of them, yet somehow it encapsulates everything I need to say, and it becomes an integral part of what would become the collection, *Reimagining the Narrative*.

As I reimagine individual historic narratives about race, I deconstruct distinct narratives that have been recorded in history—including supreme court cases about interracial relations, political messages revolving around racial tension, and my own interracial marriage from the New Jersey Marriage index—and rearrange the pieces to tell another version of the narrative. From these narratives, I create an experimental narrative through extraction and erasure by extracting a profound message or idea with just a few words from the many pages of text. I erase most of the entire text, while extracting fractured pieces of text and forming black lines, blank space, and a new narrative from many pages of text into one page. The black lines and blank spaces between the text metaphorically still hold the truth within the hundreds of pages of what can no longer be seen, and they can now be seen and reimaged through a new lens. As I deconstruct the narratives and piece them back together with my streams of consciousness into five art scrolls, the narratives exist individually and together as one to tell one story of many and the many stories of one (see fig. 2-6).



Fig. 2-6 (from left to right). Holly Jefferies. *Reimagining the Narrative* (*No Margins*: contains stream of consciousness, sequential art, and erasures, *The Intercommingling of Races*: contains stream of consciousness and erasures inspired from the 1800s, *Within this Race*: contains stream of consciousness and erasures inspired from the 1900s–1950s, *On this Journey*: contains stream of consciousness, erasures, and New Jersey Marriage Index inspired from the 1960s–1990s, *Knocking on Doors*: contains stream of consciousness and erasures inspired from the 2000s), ink, thread, leather, wood, buttons, and vinyl on quilted fabric, 2018

Within each scroll, my voice and my breath occupy the core of each piece, whether seen or unseen and heard or unheard, and exist interchangeably with how one must breathe rhythm in and out of the stream of consciousness. Each scroll, individually and as part of a collection, represents a unique perspective and concept about race, interracial relations, and how the narratives continue to breathe with those who encounter them.

Through this critical essay about my body of work, I aim to demonstrate how the creative work of *Reimagining the Narrative* retells new perspectives about race through my own lens; about thirty years of experiencing both white privilege and racial discrimination, depending on whether I stand alone or with my husband. These multiple perspectives offer windows into seeing how we might learn to view race relations as a human race with the purpose of reconciliation between races. Through my body of work, I suggest how the narratives about race might be seen and told through a contemporary lens to accomplish this. To offer such insight, I break from traditional one-sided storytelling, and I reimagine the narrative. While through my examination, historical context and documentation records history and provides insight into historical narratives, I argue that contemporary writing and art persists in its ability to not only share new perspectives, but also in its potential to force the mind into reimagining those historical narratives which have been documented in history. *Reimagining the Narrative* aims to illustrate how reimagining historical narratives about race through contemporary writing and art remains not only necessary to understand a new truth about history, but also critical in retelling history from different perspectives. *Reimagining the Narrative* offers the opportunity and an interactive exercise in re-seeing the narrative through a contemporary, reimagined lens.

SEEING THE NARRATIVE: CONTEMPORARY ART AND WRITING

Through my examination of contemporary art and writing, I find that the controversial topic of race continues to be addressed within the work of contemporary artists who attempt to retell history through a new lens. In my experience, I have found that through most of history, the narratives about race and racism in art and writing have been dominantly told from a one-sided, “white” perspective. Contemporary work and ideas are beginning to break this mold by offering a new way to look at an old narrative. Writing, art, and museums have an ability to provide a new way to see an old narrative. One museum, for example, has been noted for exploring and displaying signage next to historical paintings that provides a new lens into the image and historical context of the image. Until now, a museum viewer might only see a narrow, one-sided perspective about a portrait of a sitter from a label offering the context about the artwork. But now, as described in an article by Sarah Bond, some museums are exploring the retelling of the narrative by hanging an additional label through which the viewer will see the work of art through a new lens:

The Worcester Art Museum (WAM) and some other US museums are exploring exhibit labels as an important means of contextualizing the wealthy patrons of art from a country’s past for a contemporary audience. For the WAM, that past included portraits of men and women from both the North and the South depicted in antebellum art who either owned enslaved persons or benefited from the institution of slavery. (Bond)

An additional label including a different narrative about the same painting offers a new point of view into seeing the same image. This re-seeing of a historical work of art suggests a contemporary way of contemplating an old narrative in a new context. Contemporary art, especially about the past, creates a way to tell a new narrative and generate thought and conversation about a narrative of the past. This essay argues that contemporary art and writing, such as *Reimagining the Narrative*, communicates a new narrative through a visual lens for the viewer to re-see something with new perspective and create conversation. This re-seeing, through contemporary art, provides the platform for artists and writers to create a way for their work to be seen through a different point of view. Influential artists, such as Kara Walker, continue to create paths for other contemporary artists, such as myself, to use their voice and break from traditional art and writing by interrupting form. Kara Walker breaks from the traditional storytelling of slavery and racism, historically told from a mostly “white” perspective, by creating a visual narrative through her large-scale silhouettes. Walker’s silhouettes portray the masked truth about racism and slavery, which is often erased in the traditional history from the “white” perspective. Walker retells history through her silhouettes, by disrupting traditional historical narratives and stimulating new conversation and “historical reexamination.”¹ This concept is addressed by Darby English in her book, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*. English identifies Walker’s exhibits by explaining, “Walker’s work is generally preoccupied with the problem of present-day testimonial about the past” (English 77). The only way to look at history with new

¹ Kara Walker Collection in Rollins College Cornell Art Museum Collection:
<https://www.rollins.edu/cornell-fine-arts-museum/exhibitions/2015/kara-walker.html>

perspective is to change the way we see how history has been told, and create new ways of telling it and seeing it.

This same display of creative work and the retelling of history can be found within contemporary poetry. Two of the biggest influences leading up to the creative work within *Reimagining the Narrative* come from the work of authors, Natasha Trethewey and M. NourbeSe Philip. In Natasha Trethewey's ekphrasis poetry, Trethewey often looks deeply at and into a painting or photograph, and she responds about what is seen and not seen. Trethewey describes the agency within the characters of the painting or photograph, and how the past "refuses to simply be the past ... that it constantly lives all around us" (Trethewey 20). Trethewey's poetic retelling of the narrative gives new voice to those which have been silenced. M. NourbeSe Philip also gives voice to the voices which have been silenced and to the lives that have been brutally distinguished. In Philip's book *Zong!*, Philip interrupts the traditional telling of history and uses linguistic skill in retelling the narrative of the legal text about the slaughter of the slaves on the slave ship, *Zong*. In my examination of *Zong!*, I find that Philip gives voice to the narrative through the poetics of new language, sound, and rhythm, through which the reader sees images and hears voices through the text. This seeing and hearing of rhythm seems to ignite sparks from the ashes of history.

The body of work within *Reimagining the Narrative* also disrupts historical narratives and provokes critical thinking about the narratives of history. It comes from my own lifetime of influence of both traditional art history and the contemporary work of artists and authors such as Walker, Trethewey, and Philip. Such influences, along with the experience and study of race, has prompted the creative work within this collection.

Reimagining the Narrative advances contemporary ideas about how the truth is both revealed and disguised within historical narratives, personal experience, and what we tell each other as humans. The truth within the narrative is sometimes only revealed when we are prompted to look through a new lens. The narrative, the stories we tell, only contain perceptions of truth and memory in how it is told. In the attempt to demonstrate the multi-dimensional perspectives of truth, and historical “truths,” *Reimagining the Narrative* fractures the traditional structure of the one-dimensional, textual perspective, and retells the same story through a new point of view from the artist, for the viewer.

The five art scrolls, which make up the collection of *Reimagining the Narrative*, hold the retelling of the past through a contemporary lens. Through this new lens, old narratives can be re-seen through the assembly of contemporary writing into a visual narrative. Each scroll within the collection includes contemporary forms of writing responding to the subject matter of race within the concept of each piece. In the pages to follow throughout this critical essay, I will demonstrate how the concepts and ideas of each scroll remain centered around profound messages about race from historical narratives, along with the process of writing and reimagining these old narratives into new. As each scroll becomes a vessel for the new narrative, it takes on its own meaning while remaining part of the collective concepts and narratives about interracial relations.

RECONSTRUCTING THE NARRATIVE: ERASURES

In my body of work, the concept of each scroll is anchored by a profound message about interracial relations from my perspective that I have reimagined through the process of extraction and erasure. “An erasure is a poem that is created by deleting words from an original text to create something new and original” (Brewer). Through my own experimental work with extraction and erasure, I explore hundreds of pages of text within court cases, while only extracting a few words or phrases of text to fit between black lines and blank spaces onto one page. The concept behind extraction and erasure within *Reimagining the Narrative* is to reimagine a significant historical narrative, often many pages of text, about interracial relations which might rarely be seen or read, and reimagine it into a contemporary one-page poetic erasure with a profound message about the text to create a new narrative to be seen, and to prompt conversation.

In my own research and examination of the legal text from a court case, I find that the text offers a definitive issue about a case, along with a lengthy account of the proceedings and final decision about how the case is ruled. The content within cases about race usually include pages and pages of authoritative text, but what the pages of text do not usually include is the magnitude of emotion and the voices that are not heard within the court. And, furthermore, who reads all that text? I had never read a court case until I was introduced to the availability of these documents in a “Civil Liberties” class at Rollins College. Searching and exploring the profound cases about race, which advanced the progress of interracial relations—so that I could marry my husband—fascinated me. I immersed myself in the pages and pages of text. After several months of reading and

extracting my perspective of the profound, fundamental issues from nine cases about race and the relations between races, I began the construction of my erasures for each case.

The collection of cases selected for *Reimagining the Narrative* relate directly and indirectly to interracial relations through history from the 1800s to the 2000s.² My extensive reading of these court cases and the pages of texts, along with my passion for providing a contemporary poetic narrative about interracial relations, prompted my creation of the erasures within *Reimagining the Narrative*.

Finding my position and point of view about the underlying issues from each case begins by dismantling the historic narrative documented in history, and reconstructing the text to retell the narrative through a new contemporary lens. Through this new lens, and through the process of extraction and erasure, the narrative can be seen through a new point of view. I extract fragments of text, which will narrate my view of the profound

² Erasures were inspired by the court cases: 1878 *Kinney v. the Commonwealth*, Virginia Supreme court case about the marriage between a “black” man and a “white” woman, and the laws prohibiting interracial marriage; 1883 *Pace v. Alabama*, U.S. Supreme Court case about the marriage between a “negro” man and a “white” woman, and the laws prohibiting interracial marriage; 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson*, U.S. Supreme Court case about a man of mixed race, and “separate-but-equal” laws between races; 1941 *Estate of Monks*, Superior Court case about a deceased “white” man, and the laws surrounding his will declaring his estate to a woman, determined to be “negro decent,” and the prohibition of interracial marriage; 1948 *Perez et al. v. Lippold*, Supreme Court case about a “white” woman and a “negro” man seeking a license to marry, and the laws prohibiting interracial marriage; 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education*, Supreme Court case about the segregation of “white” and “negro” children in public schools, and the laws surrounding “separate but equal” adopted in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, and equal protection guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment; 1964 *McLaughlin v. Florida*, U.S. Supreme court case about the interracial relations between “whites” and “negroes,” and the laws prohibiting cohabitation and fornication; 1967 *Loving v. Virginia*, U.S. Supreme Court case about the interracial marriage between a “negro” woman and a “white” man, and the violation of equal protection and the Fourteenth Amendment; and 2016 *United States v. City of Ferguson*, U.S. District Court case about the discrimination against “African American residents.”

message that comes from the documents. These fragments of text are reshaped into a poetic re-imagination of the legal document previously etched into history. Along with the careful selection of text, white space and black blocked lines fill the place where the previous narrative of many pages of text exists—and no longer exists. These spaces and blocks represent the truth and the untruths that can no longer be seen, and they extend new perspectives to be seen through the new lens of the viewer. They also represent the unspoken and silenced voices that were not spoken or heard within the historical context. Such spacing between the text allows for the reader to imagine what may or may not have existed in the original narrative and what might exist there now. The reader brings their own knowledge about the historical context and their own experience of race to the narrative. In this process of re-seeing the narrative, the historical context remains malleable and conversational with its reader.

No Margins, the original scroll within the collection of *Reimagining the Narrative*, includes three erasures created and inspired from court cases about race from 1896, 1954, and 1967. Each of these three erasures become the leading piece for three of the scrolls in the collection. In the piece, *1896* from *The Intercommingling of Races* scroll, fragments from the extensive text are carefully selected and arranged to retell the historical narrative of how a marriage between “whites” and “blacks” was considered void. In the deconstruction and reconstruction of the text, the new narrative, as shown in a piece of this erasure, forms a new perspective through which it can be told:

1878

Absolute Void.

Be it remembered, that

a negro and a white woman,

as citizens have lived together as man and wife.

[Redacted line]

[Redacted line]

It is plain to be gathered that

it was here then; it is here now.

(Jefferies)

This new narrative offers a contemporary view of progression in the phrase, “It was here then; it is here now” (see fig. 7). Phrases made from these documents become mantra for some of the scrolls.

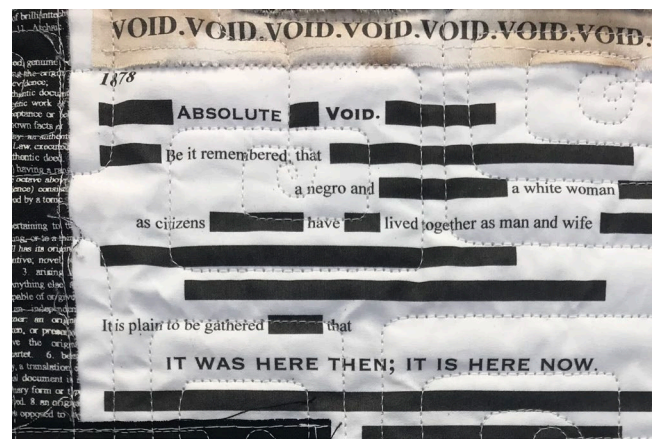


Fig. 7. Holly Jefferies. *Reimagining the Narrative (The Intercommingling of Races: 1878, erasure)*, ink, thread, leather, wood, buttons, and vinyl on quilted fabric, 2018

In the erasure, 1948 from *Within this Race* scroll, one phrase that has been extracted from pages and pages of text speaks loudly and boldly in its isolation and urgency as illustrated in a piece of the erasure:

But ██████████ remember that ██████████
██████████ the truth ██████████ is ██████████ never-to-be-for-gotten.
 (Jefferies)

The fragment, “the truth is never-to-be-for-gotten” plays over in the mind as we grapple with the truth that has been told and not told (see fig. 8). The mind wonders as old ideas come from both truths and untruths, and some ideas do not seem so old in our modern-day climate. Issues from the erasure, 1964 from *On this Journey* scroll, are not so different from today, and the new narrative is not so different from the old:

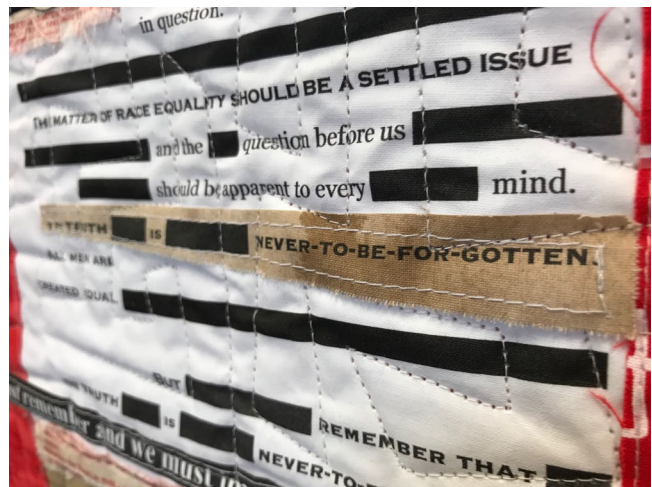


Fig. 8. Holly Jefferies. *Reimagining the Narrative* (*Within this Race: 1948*, erasure with fragments of text), ink, thread, leather, wood, buttons, and vinyl on quilted fabric, 2018

1964

██████████ An ██████████ interracial couple ██████████ living in and occupying the same ██████████ room in the night-time. ██████████

We deal with the ██████████ issue of ██████████

██████████ the interracial couple made up of a white person and a Negro differently than ██████████ any other couple. ██████████

(Jefferies)

Old ideas still surround and haunt the marriages of interracial couples. The documented history of interracial marriage, while no longer void, still represents the marriage between “others.”

The 1995 New Jersey Marriage index, where it lists my own interracial marriage of Holly

Behrens to Tommy Jefferies, is included in the scroll, *On this Journey* (see fig. 9). This document in history fills a void, but it still represents issues with identity and racial

differences as I extract it from a long list of New Jersey marriages.³

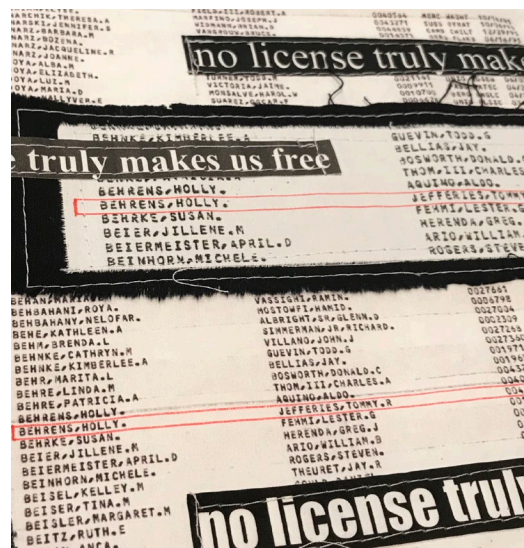


Fig. 9. Holly Jefferies. *Reimagining the Narrative (On this Journey: New Jersey Marriage Index printed on fabric), ink, thread, leather, wood, buttons, and vinyl on quilted fabric, 2018*

³ New Jersey Marriage index (Behrens, Holly. Jefferies, Tommy): https://archive.org/stream/NJ_Marriage_Index_Brides_1995_A-L/Reclaim_The_Records_-_New_Jersey_Marriage_Index_-_Brides_-_1995_-_A-L#page/n58/mode/1up

In the last scroll, *Knocking on Doors*, I address the issues of identity in the erasure, *2016*, reimagined to ask the question, “who do you see?”:

[REDACTED] WHO [REDACTED]
 [REDACTED]
 [REDACTED] DO [REDACTED]
 [REDACTED] YOU [REDACTED]
 [REDACTED]
 [REDACTED] SEE [REDACTED]
 [REDACTED]
 [REDACTED] ? [REDACTED]

(Jefferies)

This question not only confronts issues of identity, but also issues about racial discrimination. The absence of text reveals the question that remains (see fig. 10). I ask this question of my readers and viewers of the scrolls as they look into the blank space between the text. This question exists at the center of the issues of race—and requests a response. This same concept applies to the *2008* and *2016* erasures within this same scroll.

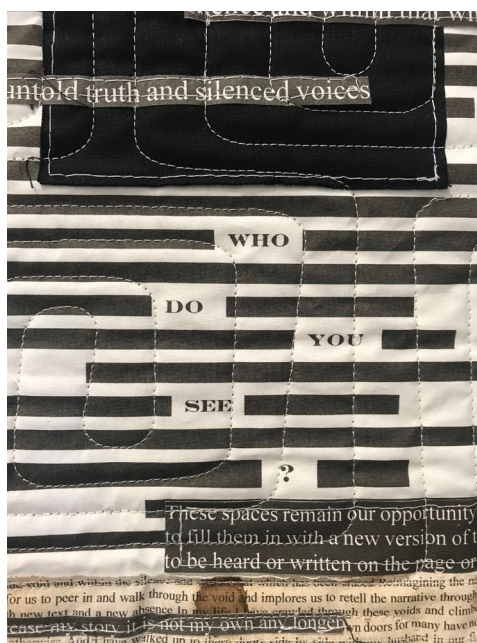
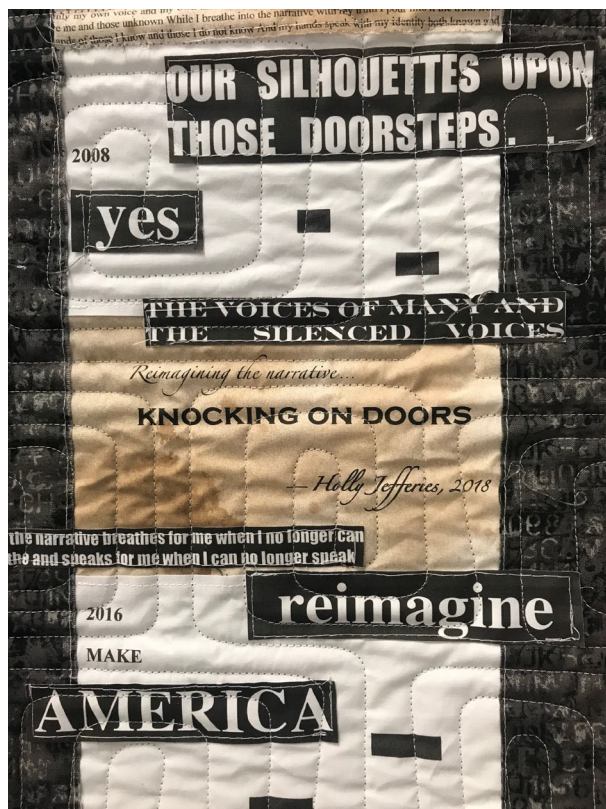


Fig. 10. Holly Jefferies. *Reimagining the Narrative (Knocking on Doors: 2016, erasure)*, ink, thread, leather, wood, buttons, and vinyl on quilted fabric, 2018

These erasures offer single words of text within blank lines and space. In my examination of these pieces, each word, “Yes,” and “America,” along with the blocking and space, allow the viewer to fill in their own narrative within the space so they can look differently into the profound words that caused racial tension within the 2008 and 2016 presidential elections (see fig. 11).⁴ The absence of text, along with the bold profound



words, not only allows the viewer to fill in their own narrative, but also embodies the unheard voices within such a narrative. The absence of text within these pieces, and within all the erasures, represents the silenced voices oppressed within the original historical text. These voices, no longer absent in the representation of space and blocking, now hold the unspoken narrative and truth of silenced voices.

Fig. 11. Holly Jefferies. *Reimagining the Narrative (Knocking on Doors: 2008 and 2016 (2) erasures)*, ink, thread, leather, wood, buttons, and vinyl on quilted fabric, 2018

⁴ Erasures, *2008* and *2016(2)*, in *Knocking on Doors*, were inspired by the presidential elections.

CONTEMPLATING THE NARRATIVE: STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Within my body of work, as I address the issues of race and the oppressed, I carefully contemplate silenced voices as I move into the next step of creative writing within the collection of *Reimagining the Narrative*. I focus on the profound message from each scroll and the fragments of text that remain from the long pages of documents. I write from experience and memory, and I formulate a conscious response to my own work through my voice in stream of consciousness. I use this voice through this technique, which “does not obey the rules of traditional narratives...” (Bezircilioğlu 772). I sit and mindfully write five unique streams of consciousness for each of the five individual scrolls during separate writing sessions. Each writing session is separate and responds to my perspective of the profound message of each scroll and the extractions and erasures within it. Each sitting is deliberate, and includes a focused, uninterrupted thought process about race and interracial relations. My version of stream of consciousness does not include our distracting thoughts about the weather or what we need to do later, but rather the deliberate thinking and response to an idea without stopping or censoring for about thirty minutes to an hour each. These thoughts become an entryway for the reader or viewer to enter the narrative with movement and rhythm, but with no direction and no order of thought. Through stream of consciousness, “the reader turns out to be the writer while he is reading a work written in stream of consciousness technique” (772). The reader becomes as entwined in the narrative as the writer.

The first scroll, *No Margins*, begins with this stream of consciousness response to the concept of race and my own experience in an interracial relationship. This stream of consciousness holds the personal story of the things that both shape, and do not shape, the identity of race in a name, the color of the skin, fitting in, and not fitting in. This piece is the uncensored response to interracial race relations from experience and from history. I write for over thirty minutes while writing without stopping. I write without punctuation and without apprehension, while writing outside of the traditional margins just like my mind. The thoughts and the writing, often repetitive and provocative, remain deliberate and emotionally responsive. Thoughts repeat themselves in my mind. I write these repetitive thoughts on the page—again and again—the way they often repeat in the mind. Repeated words and phrases carry emotion and rhythm, while I write with both trepidation and conviction:

And this comes with both trepidation and boldly without reservation at the same time in the same way I place negative space on the page with the words that fill that space with my thoughts and my experience and my life and that somehow the absence of margins or punctuation or reservation might allow me to say these things without stopping and thinking too much and thinking about much and everything and the things that make my life an example of how we might live together as black and white and with the same name that holds so much history and yet carry that history with a message of intention and no intention and living outside the margins when we are told to live within them and to write only this and that and not any of the other but I am other I am the other that does not always fit in and never fits in though I look like I fit in until I do not and until

someone sees me as who I am and when someone knows who I am do I not fit like you thought I should and then do not fit in like I could or could not And how I choose to not fit in and how I could walk away but I do not can not even though I could walk away That is the difference in race I think That I can walk away from another race and my husband can walk away from another race but he does not I do not (Jefferies)

The trepidation is the anxiety of revealing personal thoughts, and the conviction is the responsibility of telling the story that must be told. The emotion and rhythm respond to the repetitive words and phrases that play over and over in the mind. The repetitiveness serves as ritual vigor and a visceral energy that lives within the narrative and the mind.

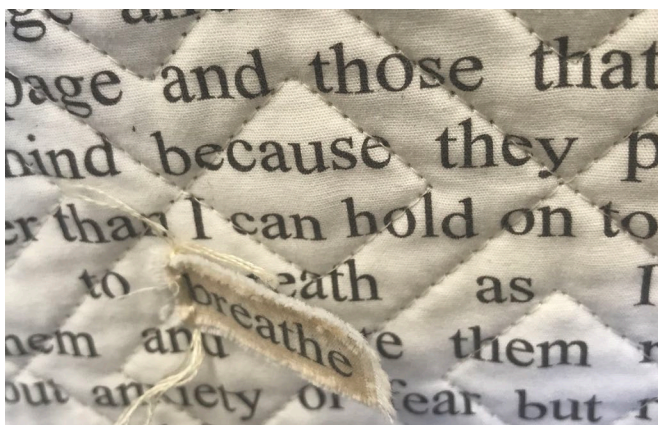


Fig. 12. Holly Jefferies. *Reimagining the Narrative (No Margins)*: “breath” and “breathe,” within stream of consciousness), ink, thread, leather, wood, buttons, and vinyl on quilted fabric, 2018

As I read aloud the stream of consciousness to my husband without pause or punctuation, I take a needed breath when I find a typo. Breath should read breathe. This becomes a central part of the piece, *No Margins*, and the entire collection. As my breath gives a

rhythmic voice to the narrative, it breathes rhythm in and out of the narrative for the viewer. Breath and breathe move interchangeably throughout the collection as the narrative is reimagined, and the stream of consciousness extends the rhythm of my voice beyond the page (see fig. 12). The stream of consciousness speaks within each scroll, and encapsulates each profound message about race and interracial relations.

The Intercommingling of Races references historic law from the 1800s when interracial marriage between “blacks” and “whites” was considered void. This stream of consciousness responds to the existence of this void:

The true power exists in the absence of contract and license and even with this license I hold to claim permission to call a black man as my husband the power exists beneath this veil For even with license to intercommingle and fornicate and cohabit with my husband a veil still exists over the void The void holds the truth where no permission is necessary for such connectedness between two races or two people No license protects us from the hate which exists beyond the veil (Jefferies)

The void within the writing becomes the focal point of this piece, and the word, “void” is repeated over, and over again. *Within this Race* references race mixing and illustrates the stream of consciousness response to the joining of races. The writing responds to the mixing of blood from both races and the blood that has been shed. It responds to how the blood from the human race runs through all our veins:

And we must not only remember but we must retell the narrative with a new voice and see it through a new lens while not forgetting the blood that has already been shed and remembering to speak through the bodies which can no longer speak We can never forget the blood that has been shed from brown and black bodies as we look into the face of our neighbor and know that we share the same blood This blood runs through our veins and puddles in the palms of our hands (Jefferies)

The writing demands that history not be forgotten, and it expresses how the memory of shed-blood runs through the history of all of us as a human race. But, even as history

progresses with freedom for interracial couples to wed and mix races, the mixing of blood and race does not exist without a price. The stream of consciousness from *On this Journey* responds to the licensing of interracial marriage and how this license does not allow for freedom from racism or for the freedom to stand together without discrimination:

How can I be defined one way as I stand alone and another as I stand together
with my husband We have a license afterall But no license truly makes us free
Not yet Not ever For there will always be a memory of what was before our
license was issued and we were free to wed No license gives us the freedom
which makes us equal under God and within the Universe and within our Spirit
No license or book provides the freedom to move throughout the land of the free
quote unquote the so called free (Jefferies)

A license within the law does not prevent the hate and discrimination from racism, but I suggest that when we reimagine the narrative, we begin to prompt change. The stream of consciousness from *Knocking on Doors* addresses the need for change. It responds to being part of the change itself as I contemplate the profound experience when my husband and I knocked on doors together for the Obama presidential campaign. And, it responds to the erasures about Change, America, and the responsibility of our voice. Our voices tell what needs to be told and retold:

We must make our way in even when there seems to be no way in and we must
listen even in the silence of voices and we must speak even when we feel like no
one might be listening for the truth lies within the void and within the silence and
within that which has been erased Reimagining the narrative allows for us to peer

in and walk through the void and implores us to retell the narrative through a new lens with new text and a new absence In my life I have crawled through these voids and climbed into windows and knocked on doors and walked through doors and broken down doors for many have not been opened otherwise And I have walked up to these doors side by side with my husband in our fight for Change and the need for Change and a hope for Change And we stand together still as we make this change within our own narrative and as we fill in the gaps and that which has been erased before us And our silhouettes upon those doorsteps remain part of the narrative whether told or untold and whether seen or unseen (Jefferies)

It remains the responsibility of the artist and writer—and every storyteller—to use voice carefully and deliberately.

The careful and deliberate writing from stream of consciousness captures the uncensored thoughts as they play in the mind. Each written stream of consciousness only undergoes slight edits to fit neatly on one page, while retaining the integrity of the response. The final context bears the emotional and critical thoughts of the writer, while evoking an emotional and critical response from the reader. This interaction, between writer and reader, becomes amplified when streams of consciousness and erasures are combined to create a visual, artistic expression. The streams of consciousness about the experience of race in response to the extractions and erasures become a powerful vessel for both writer and reader. The power of the narrative repeats in long rhythmic responses in the streams of consciousness, along with short abrupt breaks in rhythm within the spaces and fragments of text within the extractions and erasures, echoing my voice along with voices from the past, and what we tell ourselves within our own mind.

ASSEMBLING THE NARRATIVE: A VISUAL CONSTRUCTION

As the rhythm in poetry and writing plays in the mind of the writer, the challenge as an artist comes from illustrating this rhythm in a visual piece. For the visual scrolls of *Reimagining the Narrative*, the rhythm does not only exist in the words and the writing, but also in the punctuation, absence of punctuation, the blocking and blank space, and the patterns and colors of the fabrics. Streams of consciousness and erasures are pieced together to create not only a timeline of history and a profound message, but also to create an engaging experience for the artist and viewer with the rhythm of my voice—and the silenced voices within the absence of text. As I create a visual narrative for my viewer, my thought process responds to my own emotional response so that a similar response might be experienced by the viewer. This artistic approach includes arranging the poetic text with average fabrics that will accentuate the meaning of the work. Each scroll should incorporate the words and text along with the thoughtful selection of fabrics that will frame the piece. The five unique scrolls, as a collection, call for patterns and colors that will work as they hang together or individually. The words, text, and fragments of documents, especially from *Within this Race*, speak of blood, and command the presence of the color of red (see fig. 13). Red becomes the central color

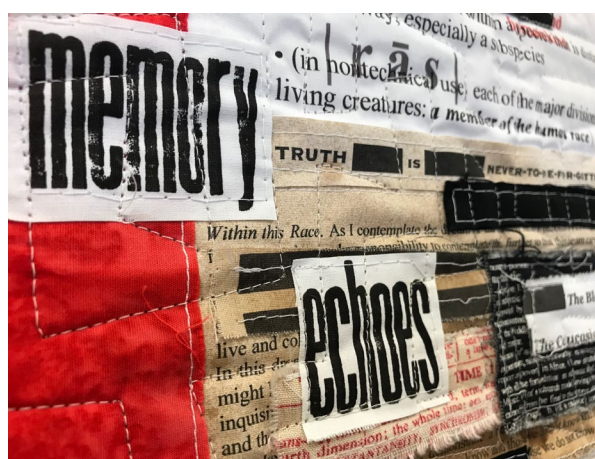


Fig. 13. Holly Jefferies. *Reimagining the Narrative (Within this Race: red fabric with layering), ink, thread, leather, wood, buttons, and vinyl on quilted fabric, 2018*

for *Within this Race*, which hangs centered between the other four scrolls. Red also becomes the accent color for the remaining scrolls against their black, grey, white, and cream colored patterns of fabric. Red fabric patterns and red thread connect against the dark tones to represent the symbolic reference to blood, which continues as a theme throughout the collection. The bold color of red demands attention and urgency from the viewer, while also signifying heartfelt meaning.

As most of the individual fabrics are selected, the creative writing is printed and arranged on paper for the best composition of the erasures and pieces of text. The

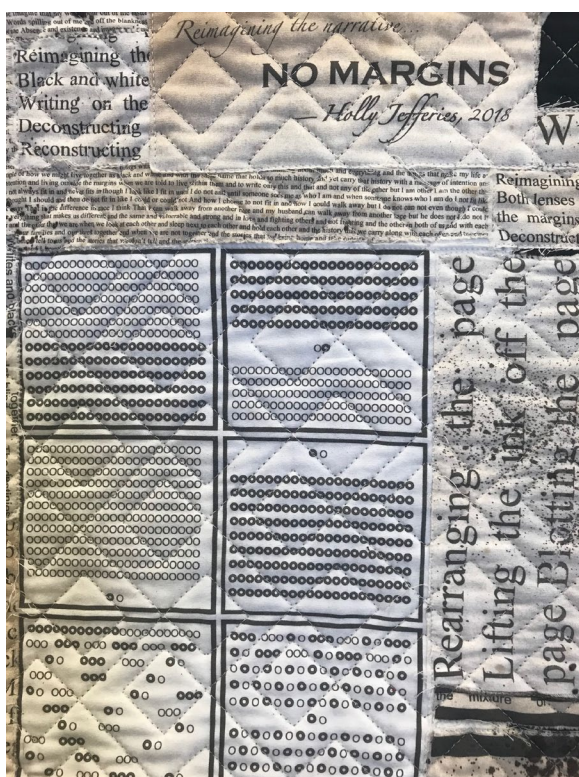


Fig. 14. Holly Jefferies. *Reimagining the Narrative (No Margins: sequential art)*, ink, thread, leather, wood, buttons, and vinyl on quilted fabric, 2018

and sizes. The variety of fonts, sizes, and the levels of boldness holds underlying meaning and understanding to the messages they aim to deliver. Often, the text is printed

original text is arranged with different size fonts to draw the eye to certain pieces of text and to create rhythm and movement.

The stream of consciousness is broken into seven standard size pages of large font text to be attached vertically. Like pages of a book, the writing is stacked until ready to be stitched together. Pieces of text from the title, stream of consciousness, erasures, and documents, along with my own sequential piece of art illustrating a

progression of interracial relations (see fig. 14), are printed on pages in different fonts

once, and then the same text is printed again with different placement over the same page. This careful approach results in layers of text repeating themselves on the same page. Once all the planned pages are printed on paper and assembled, five paper scrolls hang in the studio, and they are ready to print onto fabric.

Every piece of writing for every scroll is printed on white fabric and meticulously cut or torn to fit together to form the foundation of the vertical scroll, which is pinned together on a design wall. The fabric of the stream of consciousness and the erasures remain white, but fragmented pieces of text are stained with sepia colored ink, indicating both the age of some of the pieces and the longevity of the narrative. Both the stained and unstained pieces of fabric are heat treated to maintain the integrity of the ink within the fabric. A long piece of fabric, chosen for each piece, is pinned along the center between the stream of consciousness on one side, and the erasures and fragments of writing and text on the other side. Like the center piece, long strips of fabric are cut and pinned on either side of writing to frame the scroll. Once all the pieces fit together, the scroll is ready to be stitched.

The assembly begins by stitching the seven pages of stream of consciousness on fabric together vertically (see fig. 15). As the first pieces pass under the needle of the sewing machine, and the thread pierces the fabric to bind the pages together, the stitching prompts an emotional

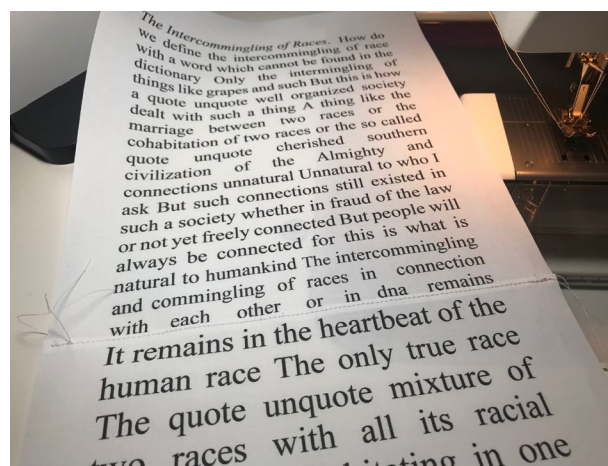


Fig. 15. Holly Jefferies. *Reimagining the Narrative (The Intercommingling of Races: stream of consciousness on fabric)*, ink, thread, leather, wood, buttons, and vinyl on quilted fabric, 2018

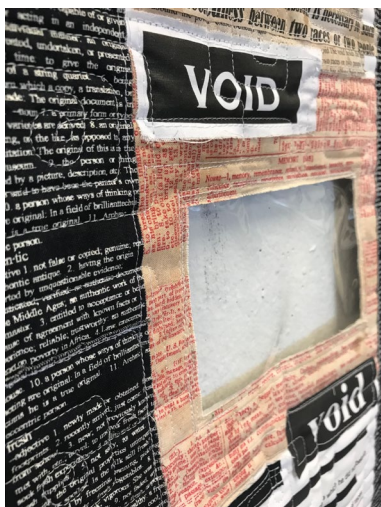


Fig. 16. Holly Jefferies.
Reimagining the Narrative (The Intercommingling of Races: vinyl window), ink, thread, leather, wood, buttons, and vinyl on quilted fabric, 2018



Fig. 17. Holly Jefferies.
Reimagining the Narrative (On this Journey: vinyl window), ink, thread, leather, wood, buttons, and vinyl on quilted fabric, 2018

response. As an artist and a writer, the stitching of personal and critical thoughts for public display serves as a cathartic experience. My feelings of contemplation, trepidation, conviction, and passion that exist in the writing are released into the piece. The piece is becoming what it is meant to become. The pages of streams of consciousness are stitched together to form one piece, and the erasures and text are stitched together to form another whole piece. The fabric strips are stitched down the center and along the sides, forming the foundation of the scroll.

This process is repeated for each scroll until the fabric foundations for all the scrolls are complete, and they hang together waiting for layering. One more step completes the foundation for two of the pieces, *The*

Intercommingling of Races and *On this Journey*. Two pieces of fabric in the shapes of rectangles are cut out of the scroll leaving an open space through the fabric. A piece of vinyl is sewn into the space representing something that once existed—but now only exists in its

absence. The window in *The Intercommingling of Races* symbolizes the void which is written into the narrative, and the void that creates a gap for the new narrative (see fig. 16). The window in *On this Journey* represents the absence of the narrative and the blank space or page through which the new narrative is written (see fig. 17). Like the blocking

and blank spaces in each of the erasures, the window now provides another form of absence through the void and blank space. Now, all the scrolls are ready for layering.

The layering and stitching of text over text carries significant meaning to the piece, both aesthetically in appearance for the viewer, and artistically for the underlying intention of the artist. The layers are positioned to draw in the eyes of the viewer so the viewer might engage with the work by visually unravelling the text. When a piece of text covers another, like in the erasures, the original text cannot be seen but still exists. The text exists because it was written and because it was once seen. In the process of layering, the text continues to exist and remains beneath the layers of fabric. While this text cannot be seen, like in the erasures, the absence of words still play with those which remain seen.

The layering begins by pinning text onto the foundation of each scroll. As the text is carefully selected for layering, it is often torn from the original piece, causing the fabric to fray at the ends. This fraying becomes part of the process and the piece, symbolizing the tearing of the narrative and the pieces that remain from this ripping of threads. The threads stay loose and imprecise, like how the narrative is told and retold (see fig. 18). Layers continue to be selected and stitched onto and over text of all the scrolls. Some words are layered several times in both the same and different fonts.

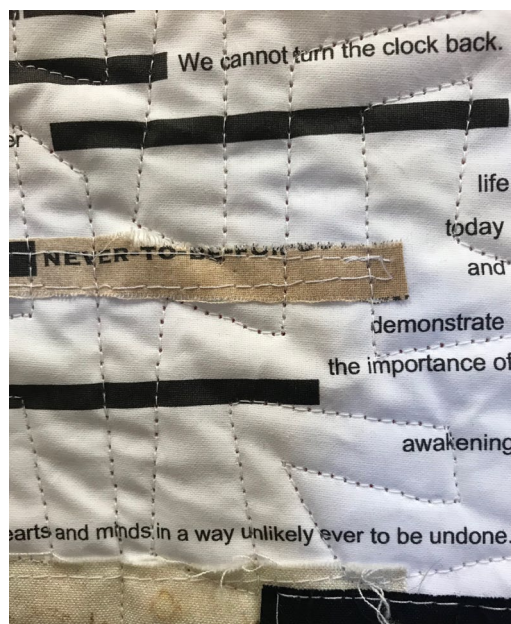


Fig. 18. Holly Jefferies. *Reimagining the Narrative (No Margins: 1954, erasure)*, ink, thread, leather, wood, buttons, and vinyl on quilted fabric, 2018



Fig. 19. Holly Jefferies. *Reimagining the Narrative* (letterpress and letterpress prints on paper), ink, thread, leather, wood, buttons, and vinyl on quilted fabric, 2018

The last layers of text are created by vintage letterpress. The words and phrases that emerge most through the work of each scroll are selected for letterpress printing. The letters for “VOID,” “the memory echoes,” “silenced voices,” “blank page,” “CHANGE,” and “REIMAGINE,” are inked and printed on paper (see

fig. 19). Then, this copy is printed on fabric to be layered onto the scrolls. Some go through staining, while others remain white like the pages of paper they are originally printed upon, representing both the significance of vintage printing and the new narrative that come from historic text. After the words are stained and heated, they are stitched onto each scroll. These final pieces of layered text finalize each piece as they hang together as a collection. Lastly, artist statements and streams of consciousness are printed on single pieces of fabric to be sewn onto the back of each of the scrolls (see fig. 20). The scrolls are now ready for quilting.



Fig. 20. Holly Jefferies. *Reimagining the Narrative* (Individual scroll labels) ink, thread, wood, buttons, and vinyl on quilted fabric, 2018

QUILTING THE NARRATIVE: STRENGTHENING VOICE

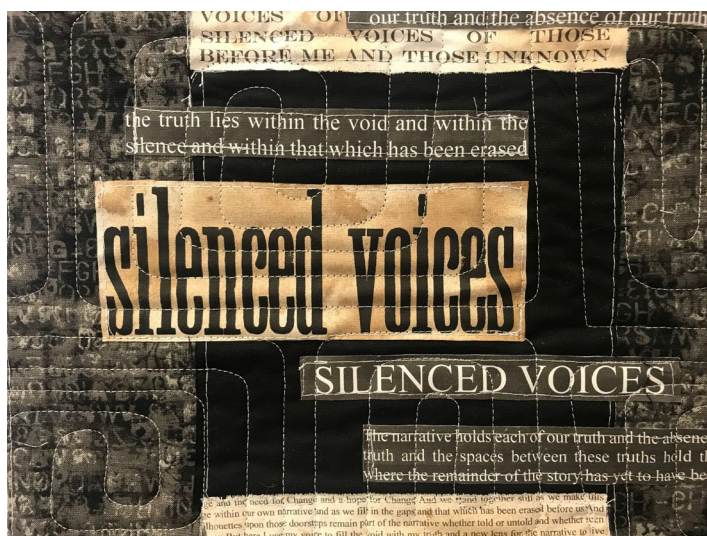


Fig. 21. Holly Jefferies. *Reimagining the Narrative* (*Knocking on Doors*: quilting on layered text), ink, thread, leather, wood, buttons, and vinyl on quilted fabric, 2018

The final stage of quilting the layers of text and fabric of the scrolls serves as a method of securing the fabric and the stitching (see fig. 21). This strengthening of the piece through quilting becomes a symbolic component of the collection. Like a traditional quilt, where blocks of fabric and

memory are stitched together one by one, the pieces of writing and narrative memory of the scrolls have been stitched together, carrying on the tradition of this ancient craft. Quilting and sewing continue to demonstrate the work of many women whose voices and memories might not otherwise be heard. Quilts often represent the memories and narratives of not only those who create them, but also the memories and narratives that exist beyond the fabric. They carry the narratives of memory and their quilters throughout history and often tell a unique story. As traditional quilts are handed down through generations, the voices of many women who created them and the memories they hold, remain within the stitches. The quilted stitches give the piece the strength it needs to endure many years of time. The strength comes from the stitches themselves, along with the hands that stitched them, and the ideas and memories of often indistinguishable

narratives within the stitches. Quilts have been said to “fulfill less-defined functions such as communicating individual and collective interests, beliefs, memories, and achievements” (Nurse-Gupta 239). As traditional quilts are passed down through generations, the narratives are passed down as well, and the stories become the narratives of those who embrace them. Like the fabric of the quilt, and the stitches that bind them, the narratives exist within the threads.

Like traditional quilts, the collection of scrolls in *Reimagining the Narrative* holds the narratives that have been passed down through history and become the narrative of the artist. These narratives are secured through the process of machine quilting. A professional quilter is hired for this process. I work side by side with the quilter to select patterns, and each scroll is laid out onto the longarm quilting machine with batting and the selected fabric for the back of the scroll (see fig. 22). The stitches pass through the narratives and the many layers of fabric. The pattern of quilting for each scroll, selected deliberately for the rhythm of text and the design on the fabric, creates a new texture within the fabric. The words, once flat

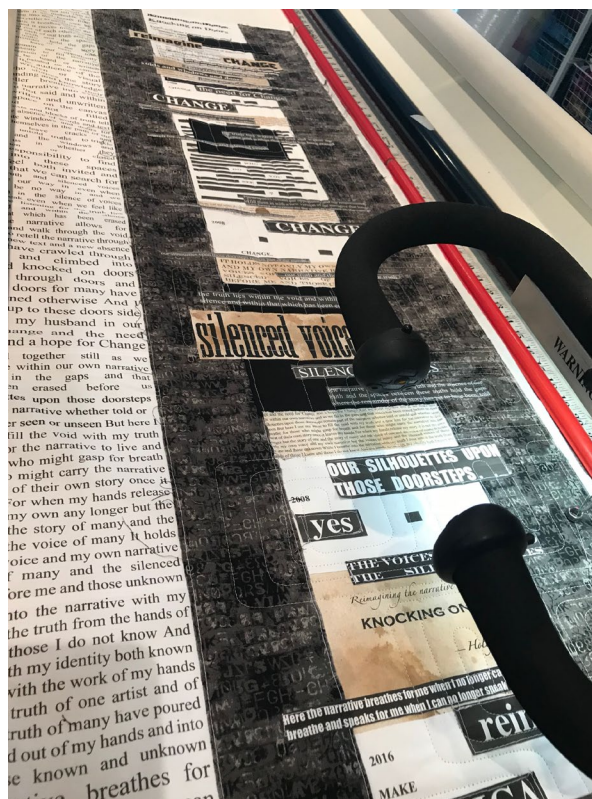


Fig. 22. Holly Jefferies. *Reimagining the Narrative* (*Knocking on Doors*: quilting on longarm quilting machine), ink, thread, leather, wood, buttons, and vinyl on quilted fabric, 2018

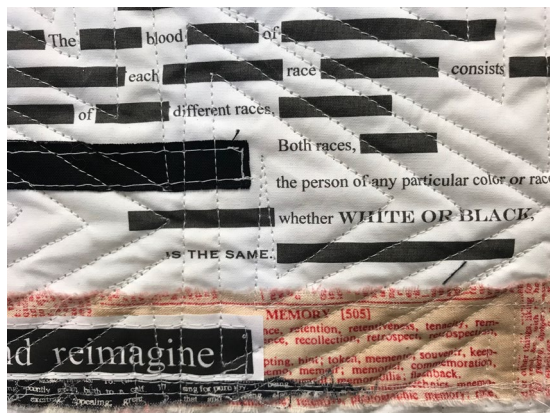


Fig. 23. Holly Jefferies. *Reimagining the Narrative (On this Journey: triangular quilting pattern)*, ink, thread, leather, wood, buttons, and vinyl on quilted fabric, 2018

and smooth, ripple up between the stitches and create movement when reading the text.

The stitches of different patterns, in circular, triangular, and rectangular angles and curves, break the blocks of space and text (see fig.

23). Like the patterns of fabric selected for

each scroll, the form and shape of the

quilting pattern somewhat mirrors the rhythm

within the stream of consciousness and erasures, calling for curves or sharp angles. All

the patterns selected are cyclical in their repetition, like the narrative. Like the

repetitiveness of the words, the stitches repeat themselves as they strengthen the

connection between the fabric and the narratives. The machine quilts stitches into and

over the layers of fabric for many hours until the final stitches are tied. The edges of the

scrolls are bound, and the wood dowels and leather ties are attached for hanging. As the

finished scrolls hang together, the stitches hold the narratives together individually within

each scroll and together as a collection. The narrative exists in its new form, and the

rhythm and voice of the narrative remain in the stitches as I write in the stream of

consciousness in *Knocking on Doors*:

Here the narrative breathes for me when I no longer can breathe and speaks for me when I can no longer speak But until then I must fill the page and the canvas with my voice and the voices of many and stitch together the layers of my own narrative and the narratives of many I tear the pages and the fabric of my life and the lives of many and stain them with new truth and remnants of a forgotten truth

As I stitch threads and stain fabric and fasten buttons and tie ends I mend the truth and hold it together in a new version of the narrative to envelop those who might dwell in it and breathe within the seams and through its woven story And until time weakens these seams and the fabric tears yet again the narrative remains and becomes new yet again and again even as it is discarded and oppressed and silenced For it is through the reimagined narrative that silence breathes with new voice and new truth And until then I continue breathing into the silence and living within the pages and climbing into windows and *Knocking on Doors*. (Jefferies)

The final stitches are complete and the scrolls are rolled up until they are ready to be unveiled to the viewer (see fig. 24). The narrative voice of the writer exists within the rolled scrolls. And, like the quilted blanket of memories, the scrolls envelop the narratives within the fabric and stitches for the viewer to reimagine what we tell ourselves about what we see, and what we do not see.



Fig. 24. Holly Jefferies. *Reimagining the Narrative* (Scroll Collection rolled), ink, thread, leather, wood, buttons, and vinyl on quilted fabric, 2018

INTERACTING WITH THE NARRATIVE: THE VIEWER

As the viewer stands before the collection of scrolls, they are invited into the experience of “Reimagining the Narrative.” The narrative now exists for the viewer, and exists through the viewers’ lens and their retelling of what they see. My personal narrative voice breathes rhythm in and out of the narrative through streams of consciousness on one side of the scrolls, while the spoken and silenced voices within the extractions and erasures speak with broken patterns on the other. The viewer begins to reinterpret the narratives with their own voice and experience, and contemplate what they see and they do not see. Within the scrolls, the spaces, gaps, and windows offer opportunities for contemplation (see fig. 25). Repeated words and phrases layered over the erasures and experimental narratives speak boldly from one side of the scroll that the viewer can see from a distance. In contrast, the uninterrupted rhythm of the stream of consciousness, and smaller font, draws the viewer in closer to the scroll. The viewer must move in closer to the scroll to experience the narrative and read the most intimate thoughts of my stream of consciousness. The

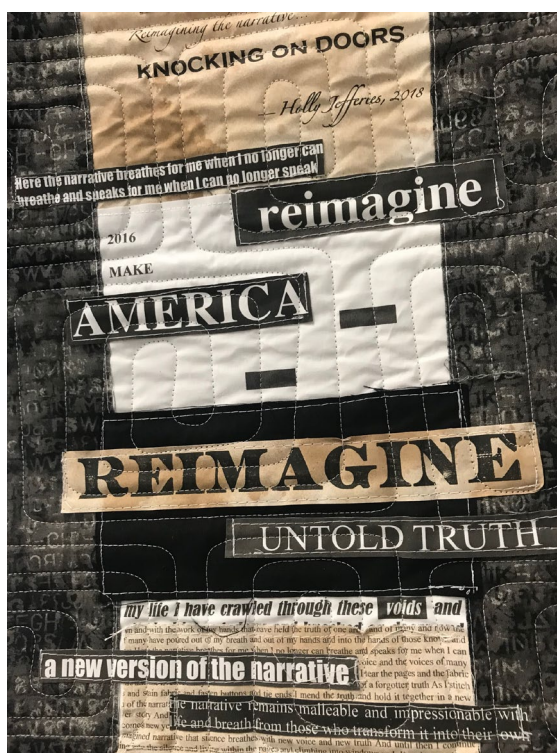


Fig. 25. Holly Jefferies, *Reimagining the Narrative (Knocking on Doors: spaces and gaps within the narrative)*, ink, thread, leather, wood, buttons, and vinyl on quilted fabric, 2018

stitched fabric and text, along with their textures, also draws the viewer in, and the viewer's eyes must shift as they get closer to move with the rhythm and direction that their eyes take them. And, as the viewer moves in closer, and eyes shift into the extractions and erasures, the spoken and silenced voices become voice for the viewer within the black lines and spaces between the text. The old context from the historical text, along with my stream of consciousness, now exist in this new narrative and offers a new point of view for the viewer. The erasures and streams of consciousness now become the contemplated thoughts of the viewer to decipher and unravel. Each scroll, like chapters of a book, offers pieces of a bigger story.

As the scrolls continue to illustrate the story it is meant to tell, the viewer becomes an active participant in the narrative. The words lead the viewer into a direction that the viewer chooses to go. As the viewer continues to engage in the narrative, the words act as dialogue communicating with the them. This engagement behaves as a sort of conversation between the narrative and the viewer. And, while the viewer may or may not comprehend what is seen, the words prompt observation and thought. Like the writer and artist, the viewer assumes the narrative and becomes the storyteller in how the narrative is reimagined and retold through a new contemporary perspective.

In my examination of the contemporary writing and artwork within *Reimagining the Narrative*, as demonstrated in this critical essay, it not only persists in its ability contribute new perspective, but also compels the mind of the viewer to reimagine the narrative which has been told. The narrative remains malleable, fragile, and strengthened just as it is written in the stream of consciousness of *Knocking on Doors*:

As I imagine the life I know and the life I might tell they are one in the same and yet distinctly different Different not in the way that I have lived this life or the truth that I tell but different in how I remember the way I have lived or recall the truth that I choose to tell or not tell This is how the narrative remains malleable and impressionable with life and breath from those who transform it into their own by living and breathing into the narrative as it moves from one storyteller to another For the narrative is not static It breathes within one and within many and it moves from one to another and in and out of each others truths The narrative holds each of our truth and the absence of our truth and the spaces between these truths hold the gaps where the remainder of the story has yet to have been told These spaces remain our opportunity and our responsibility to fill them in with a new version of the narrative that longs to be heard or written on the page or painted on the canvas Afterall it is the audience of the spoken or written or visual narrative who shapes the story with understanding and knowledge The storyteller breathes their version of the narrative into every word said and not said and within every page written and unwritten and every space on the canvas filled and not filled The words and texts and blocks of truth tell one story but the absence of words and text left behind create windows and doors for those who find themselves in the path of the story Spaces leave cracks and crevasses for untold truths to trickle in and out and the windows and doors lure us in whether they appear open or closed It is our responsibility to find our way into these spaces where we feel both invited and uninvited so that we can search for the untold truth and silenced voices (Jefferies)

Each viewer is invited into the narrative spaces within the scrolls and can find their voice within the narrative. Within each scroll, my breath occupies the center of each piece, whether spoken or unspoken, and exists interchangeably with the rhythm of each and how one should breath in and out of such a stream of consciousness and the corresponding erasures. Like *No Margins*, a piece of fabric with “breathe” on one side, and “breath” on the other, is

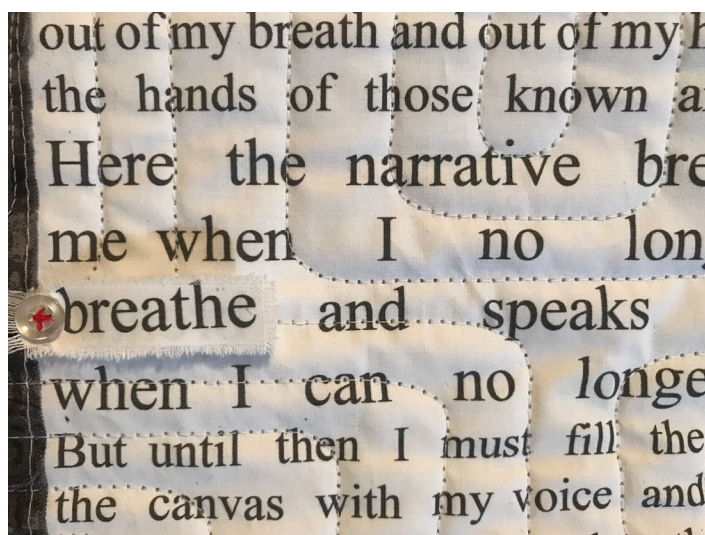


Fig. 26. Holly Jefferies. *Reimagining the Narrative* (*Knocking on Doors*: “breathe” and “breath,” within stream of consciousness), ink, thread, leather, wood, buttons, and vinyl on quilted fabric, 2018

attached to three of the other scrolls, but on these with a button (see fig. 26). This addition of the word breath under the text metaphorically represents the rhythm and voice within each piece, and it remains loose and moveable—like the narrative—depending on how the narrative is read. The viewer can search for my breath and the rhythm of their own breath within each scroll, along with their own narrative. Within the threads of each piece, the narratives exist individually and together as one— to tell the one story of many, and the many stories of one.

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