

Vanessa Place – Artist's Statement: Gone With the Wind @VanessaPlace

Gone With The Wind @VanessaPlace

For many years, I have made it a practice never to explain or apologize for my art. I am primarily known as a conceptual poet who often appropriates language that isn't mine: my primary medium is the situation. I also intentionally engage with difficult material, including representations of racism and sexual violence. My refusal to explain my work is an artist's privilege. It is also a white privilege. My position is also due to my belief that such explanations are demonstrations of mastery, which is another feature of both artistry and whiteness. This mastery is the presumption of authority over form, content, and interpretation. But it is also a privilege to imagine one can always dodge that particular obligation. I think it necessary to make an artist's statement about my *Gone With the Wind* Twitter project (@VanessaPlace), to respond to those who were undeservedly hurt by the work and who have requested an explanation of the piece.

To those who were deservedly hurt, I have no response.

In 2009, I began a series of poetic interventions using Margaret Mitchell's 1936 novel, *Gone With the Wind* and the 1939 film starring Clark Gable and Vivian Leigh. Both book and film are staples of Americana: in 2011, the publisher issued a 75th anniversary edition of the book noting that 250,000 copies were still sold each year, and in 2007, the movie was deemed the most successful film in cinema history based on box office receipts. Certain white feminists have lauded Scarlett's independence, and *Tara's Theme* was played over the Oscar acceptance speech for "Django Unchained." While copies of *Huckleberry Finn* are routinely purged from public libraries based on its depiction of race, *GWTW* has not been subject to the same approbation. *Gone With the Wind* is a profoundly racist text. The book's true love story is not between Rhett and Scarlett but white America's affair with self, a self that can only exist through owning property as the primary means of white supremacy. People are another form of property: love, another form of possession. The antebellum Southern romance with slavery is lost, mourned, and replaced with admiration of Northern speculative capital, with pure profiteering, equally race-based. Throughout, Mitchell plays the blackface minstrel, ventriloquizing blackness as the authentic counterpoint of white

artifice. The black characters' speech is written in faux dialect, proof of the book's fidelity to its reality, and their natures are only as they appear to be, just as blackness itself issued as the filler for white lack. Mammy is [1]

the good slave, loyal to her mistress because her mistress is a good master. Prissy, the bad slave, whose failures to perform are proof of her stupidities rather than her subversions, *Gone With the Wind* is about the dictates of the white imaginary, just as race is about the history and dictates of racism.

My *Gone With the Wind* series was meant to white out *Gone With the Wind*, to foreground its “unfit associations” while enacting and inculcating the role white women have performed in minstrelsy. Not just as a matter of historical interest, but as a matter of contemporary concern. As a preliminary matter, *Gone With the Wind* is still protected by the power of American copyright: the Estate of Margaret Mitchell owns the body and voice of those she puppets, and collects the money they earn. If Mitchell were going to speak through them, I would speak through Mitchell. To ventriloquize the ventriloquist, or at least to play her dummy. For, like Mitchell, I would betray the voice I so willfully misappropriated. The difference perhaps being that I would be intentionally showing the whiteness behind the blackface. I believed that while this could not be done through a critical analysis, it might be possible through poetry.

In 2009, I was invited to contribute to a *Poetry Magazine* folio on Flarf and Conceptual Poetry, then-new poetic movements. I initially submitted an excerpt from my *Statement of Facts* work, an appropriation of an appellate brief alluding to a child rape. The editors rejected the submission, the only submission refused by the magazine, on grounds that the poem's “negative portrayal” would upset readers. I next submitted Prissy's famous, “Ah doan know nutin' 'bout bringin' babies,” speech from *Gone With the Wind*. The editors did not have a similar objection to this work and the poem was included in the July 2009 Issue.

There are two book versions of *Gone With the Wind* by Vanessa Place. One version gleans the racist language and imagery of the original. The other simply reproduces the entire book such that there are two complete volumes of *Gone With the Wind* in WorldCat, the collective library catalogue, one by Margaret Mitchell, one by Vanessa Place. The Estate of Margaret Mitchell is notoriously litigious, and the State is the enforcer of its copyright. By isolating the appearance of blackness in the first book, I invited Mitchell to sue to recover the “darkies” she claimed ownership of; by reproducing the entire book I invited suit for wholesale theft of

intellectual property. The question was whether the State would uphold [2]

Mitchell's right to profit from her appropriation against my appropriation of her.

I have always been careful to state that these works are not parodies i.e., not protected by fair use or other copyright exceptions. I am stealing the material from Mitchell because I believe she stole it first. Neither of us has any right to the matter (as in the lives) therein: the only difference between Mitchell and me is that I already know I am guilty. By trade, I am a criminal defense attorney who represents indigent sex offenders on appeal. I am very familiar with representing the guilty, and with being the white body that serves as both the defense against the State and as its emblem.

The *Gone With the Wind* Twitter poem @VanessaPlace is a durational work, as I am tweeting the whole work at the rate of roughly ten tweets a day. Because Twitter is a visual and textual platform I literalized the blackface of the original by substituting the image of Mammy for the more familiar iconography of Rhett and Scarlett as my profile picture, extending this association through use of a similar image from sheet music for “Jemima's Wedding Day,” a coon song from 1899. White women were one of the most popular performers or coon songs, particularly praised for their ability to deliver a convincing performance of genuine blackness: in the song, Jemima is praised as “just the babe for me.” Both babe and Mammy are examples of what I call radical mimesis, direct representation of the thing itself. In this case, the thingness of racism that is *Gone With the Wind*. @VanessaPlace is an ongoing violation of Mitchell's copyright, and the project will terminate either when I receive a cease-and-desist letter from the Estate, or when I have finished rendering the novel into Internet ephemera. Though this will not make it “gone with the wind” as the library or Congress collects all US-based Tweets: @VanessaPlace reinscribes the book's originary crime back into the archive as another criminal act. History repeats, and small crimes are all the more easily reiterated.

Until recently, there was no public or private objection to @VanessaPlace. It has had approximately 1200 followers for some time, and, apart from a few messages mocking it as boring and occasional retweets of individual passages, no expressions of interest. My minstrelsy was easily absorbed into the easy silences around so much everyday stuff that doesn't matter to so many. [3]

These works are cruel. It is a cruelty to display these images. It is also a

cruelty to insist that only people of color be responsible for the articulation or the embodiment of race, to bear the burden of my history as well as the history of that oppression. Blackface is white face. I cannot speak of the pain of having the image put upon me, but I can speak to the culpability of its imposition. The need for white Americans to feed ourselves and our communities with that which is painfully racist and racistly painful feels as obvious as it does inevitable. I embody the perpetrator, historically and currently. That is my condition, and its effects are my responsibility. I am not interested in maintaining a position of rhetorical silence that would permit me to preserve either the precepts of individual property or the conceit of white Integrity. I have been fed the same poison as the rest of my kind, and I vomit it up for forensic analysis and the dog's dinner. It may also get on your shoes.

I am sorry for hurting people of color I am not sorry for forcing white people to re-enact the soft comfort of individual denunciation or the sweet meat of playing ally when the best status one can hope for is that of collaborator. This is a necessary cruelty and I believe in necessary cruelties.[4]