Hannah Black

A Circle, A Line

A Circle, A Line

Hannah Black

Cookie Jar 2
The Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant

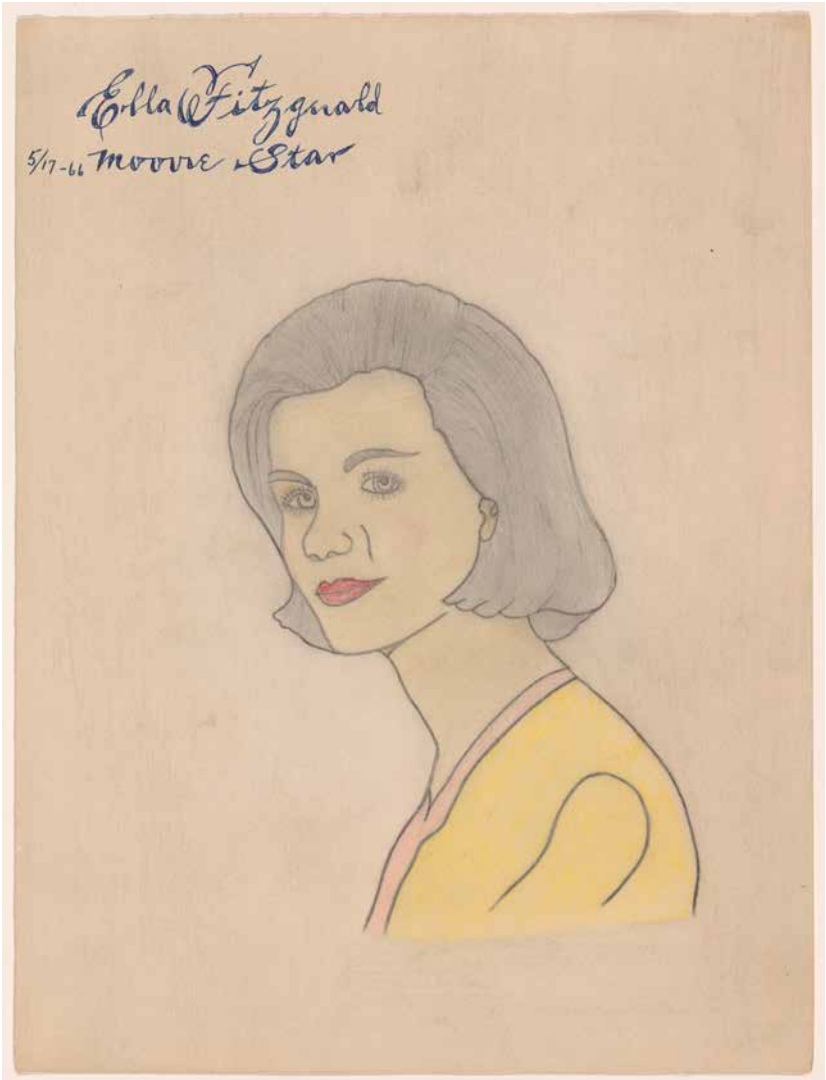
The hills of Wyoming, in Joseph Yoakum's memory-image, resemble the inside of a cacao pod: seeds as little pockets of forest, the central placenta another crowd of trees. These central trees appear both solidaric, like fighters squared up against an enemy, and placidly, thoughtlessly green. The rock supporting them has the texture of wood softened by human use. Pen and pencil lines make blankets of accurate grass. At first glance, the simplicity with which the landscape is rendered seems to share in the persistent simplicity of the earth, even in its condition of deep interlinkage with the abstractions of human life. But maybe it's the other way around: human life is simple, like a sadistic and/or joyful shout, and the nature it alienates is full of secret inner resistances. Yoakum's vision of Wyoming reproduces a tourist postcard while evoking a distant planet inhabited by semi-sentient trees. There is no history in the image. History is introduced obliquely in a handwritten note: "The Hills of Old Wyoming in the Valley of the Moon near Casper Wyoming by Joseph E. Yoakum" (fig. 1). Is there a Valley of the Moon in Wyoming? Google searches just turn up this artwork. Land has been created out of thin air, like a colonial title to a faraway place, or like a dream.

Yoakum's art originated in a dream he had in 1962. He was in his seventies when God appeared to him in his sleep and told him to draw. Thereafter he produced several thousand drawings, predominantly landscapes resembling the saturated geography of dreams, in which the mind sutures itself together by making a habitat for itself. The landscapes are based on memories of his extensive travels as an employee of traveling circuses and as a soldier during World War I. To some writers on and curators of Yoakum's work, these travels have seemed so extraordinary in the context of the life of a poor black artist—even one moved

(fig. 1) Joseph Yoakum, *The Hills of Old Wyoming in the Valley of the Moon near Casper Wyoming*, c. 1966

around the world by the circus and the army, interlinked systems of entertainment and massacre—that the wavering art historical line on Yoakum is that his travels may or may not have been real. "Drawn from memories, both real and imagined," is the equivocation of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, regarding the exhibition of his work *What I Saw* (2021–22), co-organized with the Art Institute of Chicago and the Menil Collection, Houston. Yoakum's work was produced from memory, i.e., from fantasy and from the trash of disavowed forgetfulness. But even imaginary memory is real; or memory is the terrain on which imagination can't recognize itself. The head leans into the past as against the warm, breathing flank of a gigantic animal. The remembered world evokes the past's ongoing vulnerability to destruction.

Art history is troubled not only by the veracity of Yoakum's claims about the documentary truth of his work, but also by his



(fig. 2) Joseph Yoakum, *Ella Fitzgerald Moovie Star,* 1966

evasions around his own identity. The opacity of his relation to blackness exceeds the art world's tacit desire for black artists to represent the triumph of liberal values such as inclusion, mutual legibility, and, in fact, representation itself. In a wonderful *Artforum* essay on Yoakum from 2021, Joe Bucciero summarizes the critique of Yoakum's identity: "He inflated his Indigenous affiliations…as a problematic kind of sublimation: Native culture held romantic associations for him, whereas he understood blackness in terms of oppression. In respective essays for the *What I Saw* exhibition catalogue, curator Esther Adler and Chicago-based artist Faheem Majeed note Yoakum's negligible contact with, or interest in, local Black Arts and civil-rights activity." Yoakum's inflations and sublimations indicate a lonely relation to collective life. Even an unintentionally tragicomic portrait of Ella Fitzgerald, copied line for line from a white model in a shampoo ad, is, as Majeed highlights, "a complimentary portrait in the way that maybe society sees beauty…honoring someone [by] making them more white" (fig. 2).

Yoakum's portraits lack the electricity of his landscapes—but the landscapes also fictionalize reality into smooth lines, and therefore arrive at a difficult truth. In Yoakum's work, reality is beholden to fantasy, not the other way around. His anti-insight seems correct: history is a modality of fantasy. As Bucciero writes, "Like identity, politics for Yoakum was personal, pliable, dubious. He privileged what made him different; he believed what he had 'suffered to see.'"

Yoakum sometimes called himself "Nava-Joe," though no one has been able to substantiate any Navajo origins (he may have been part Cherokee). He gets everything wrong in his depictions of what he playfully asserted as his lineage: his "Navajo" houses are not Navajo houses; the lands are not Navajo lands.

Nava-Joe seems to have been circus-style self-reinvention. It is impossible to adjudicate the morality of this form of play with the self. His proximity to enslavement dissolves any accusation of his inauthenticity into the black hole at the heart of the self, at the heart of representation.

As a black artist born in the aftermath of the formal abolition of slavery, harried by state violence and poverty, Yoakum's evocations of the denuded landscapes of the American frontier and of the gaze of the tourist/traveler speak to black communities' position as both parallel to and embedded within the vicious processes of the settler-colonial state. The claim of reality/unreality blurs and dissolves in his work and in his self-descriptions, in the mode of the circus culture that was a formative part of his life. He lived a black life outside of official documentation, and so he was free and bound to invent every aspect of himself.

Though official biography has Yoakum born in 1891, he claimed that he was born in 1888, perhaps because eight is the luckiest number. Almost invariably, he draws the sun with eight rays emanating from it, as in the 1968 drawing *Mt. Atzmon on Border of Lebanon and Palestine SE. A* (fig. 3). Here, the mountains are angelic feathers and an enormous red flower blooms amid teardrop-shaped trees. An all-American red, white, and blue rainbow stretches over the sky, yoking together two elaborate wings of mountain. The rainbow is less celestial than absurdly concrete, looking like a streak of toothpaste, or the handle of a bucket by which a god might lift up the world and carry it elsewhere. But the drawing is inhabited entirely by its own changeless present, as cumulative and disconnected as the events of a recounted dream.

(fig. 3) Joseph Yoakum, *Mt. Atzmon on Border of Lebanon and Palestine SE. A.*, c. 1968

The eight spiky rays of the sun are also baldly uncelestial and resemble a cardboard crown, perhaps one that might be detached from the bright-yellow sun and worn by someone who has tasked himself with saving the world from oblivion, or at least saving himself. Yoakum said—and perhaps this is not such an astonishing thing for an artist to say—that he started drawing to keep himself from going crazy. To save him from insanity, God gave him the task of remembering. In his memories, we find all the usual protective devices against memory: forgetting, distorting, inventing. Yet an overall truth is transmitted—that the world is under erasure and has to be preserved; that the process of preservation helplessly enacts a further erasure, because this is less a landscape and more a quasi-abstract collection of vivid, unreal forms.

Yoakum became an artist in a storefront studio on Chicago's South Side, as far in thought from the cultural effusion of the city's Black Arts Movement as he was close to it in space and time. He had initially wanted to run a ceramics workshop, but the city refused him a license. What to do, alone in this space deprived of the use he had intended for it? He began to draw: one of the most ancient and immediate gestures. The raw materials he found within himself in this becalmed time were the peregrinations of his youth, a live wind rippling across frozen waters. Despite his play with truth, the heaviness of Yoakum's line gives his extraordinary visions an air of duty. Truth is the wrong concept here: a Christian Scientist, Yoakum believed in his visions. He also believed in the visions produced by mass culture, such as the bright images generated by advertising, given weight by the hope of pleasure rather than a precise correspondence to experience. Across thousands of drawings in ink, graphite, colored pencil, pastel, and watercolor, a world homogenized by memory, faith, and aesthetic compulsion took shape.

In this world, space as well as time is abolished. Distance is indicated by trees sprouting thickly in gaps and crevices, sometimes appearing as if growing inside rock. The dimensionlessness of the trees contrasts with the depth of rock. The trees substitute the technological mediation of perspective for the more tangible mediation of objects. Mountains jut out while trees are flat little figures, almost anthropomorphic, but, in the object-like, human guise of a crowd, standing shoulder to shoulder. The trees substitute the technological mediation of perspective for the more tangible mediation of objects. Space does not open up but instead accumulates in lines of trees, like stepping stones across the river of forgetting.

This is the claim that John Berger made for drawing in general: "Each mark you make on the paper is a stepping-stone from which you proceed to the next, until you have crossed your subject as though it were a river, have put it behind you." But Yoakum's interest in drawing is not that of a faithful attention to reality, nor an inward turn to examine the world's trace on the inner life. Yoakum's line is the boundary line between inner and outer, where memory and thought are distorted by twin forces of exteriority and interiority, both of which register as repetitions.

The writer and curator Édouard Kopp calls Yoakum's technique "perspectival nonsense"—as in dreams or the either/or of waking life, in which an object either is or is not, is here or is far away, is itself or is replaced by a cumulative "and." A more logical relation to perspective would curtail the coexistence of possibilities; in Yoakum's nonsensical landscapes, the traveler never arrives and never leaves. "Yoakum insisted that every one of his highly stylized landscapes was based on his firsthand experience of actual places," writes Kopp, splitting the difference between truth and fiction once again, as Yoakum's work calls us to do. He quotes Yoakum's own ambivalent statement "Wherever my mind led me, I would go." Whatever it means for travel's compass to be the mind, it is the spatial organization of the drawings, as well as their geographical inaccuracies, that provokes the legalistic question of their truthfulness.

In the introversion of his images, Yoakum seems to participate in what T. J. Clark has called "the creation of private worlds." But Yoakum's world is not forged out of the remnants of bourgeois privacy but instead out of the privations of post-Reconstruction black America. Clark claims of Picasso that his interest in interiors reflected a view of "the world and its occupants as essentially

room-bound, near at hand, and entirely possessable." If Picasso strove to contain twentieth-century tumult in the nineteenth-century bourgeois room—both rooms and figures imploding under the pressure—then Yoakum did the opposite: born into a black world of imperiled domesticity, he dragged the predictable language of room-space outside of its bounds and to all parts of the globe, lending the retroactive coherence of a dream to a world wrecked by slavery and omnipresent imperial war. He obeyed God's will, and this obedience shows up in his work. Even the wildest landscapes are as mannered as interior spaces. They are all corralled under God's roof.

Picasso "profoundly belonged" to nineteenth-century bourgeois civilization, says Clark. Profound belonging and possession are not, here, meant as simple synonyms for ownership, but bringing them into contact with Yoakum's black outdoors-indoors illuminates the raw wound of slavery, a malign form of profound belonging. Yoakum advocated no program, no collective identity that could be made available for politics; in his work he barely acknowledged a present or future, except that one was required into which his work could unfold.

Yoakum used the Christian Science term "spiritual unfoldment" to describe his process—"the operation of divine Love in the affairs of men and nations," as adman Walter B. Katzenberger put it in a 1941 issue of *The Christian Science Journal*. The phrase only accidentally evokes the tightly folded lines resembling innards that make up Yoakum's hills and mountains. Wherever we are, we are amid the same vegetation and the same ballpoint contours; we are somewhere between the diagrammatic and the ecstatic, the intestinal and the transcendent. Waterfalls in West Virginia, mountains in China, and that red-white-and-blue

toothpaste rainbow over Palestine: all are rendered with strong lines and soft colors. Saudi and Syrian deserts teach abstraction, like a J. M. W. Turner painting dissolving into sky. In Yoakum's final drawings, produced in a nursing home toward the end of his life, shape and color disaggregate.

Via trees, everything touches everything else. Yoakum might have said, with Picasso, "My tree is one that doesn't exist." The mind is a tree. But Yoakum's memory-drawings are not inventions. If they cannot be substantiated by his experience, still more they have substance. Substance, as in: something sufficiently concrete that it can pass away. As Clark says of modern art in general, Yoakum's drawings, with their air of mystical self-sufficiency, appear to be "a long refusal, a long avoidance of catastrophe, a set of spells against an intolerable present." The catastrophe is unavoidable because it already happened. D. W. Winnicott said that the task of coming to believe that the catastrophe already happened is the task of psychoanalysis. But what if the catastrophe is permanent and ongoing? Yoakum's father died protecting his brother from a white supremacist assault in 1903, in Walnut Grove, Missouri. The same year, Yoakum, who was around nine years old, found work with a circus.

The human features vaguely discernible in Yoakum's largely unpopulated landscapes suggest a horizon of loss concealed by the topsoil of remembered locations. Loss is an attribute of people, not places. The former are, therefore, much harder to render. A little cluster of Yoakum's portraits duly included in *What I Saw*, though clumsy and stiff, are without the characteristic charm of his line. *Ella Fitzgerald Moovie Star* (1966, fig. 2), the portrait mentioned earlier, is a limp copy of a shampoo ad; *Chieff Gray Eagle Squaw Wife Ogalla of Jicarilla Tribe Reservation North of Concord New*

Hampshire (n.d.), of a Native couple in profile, is cliché to the point of bigotry. The portrait subjects are stiff and unreal, laying on the mortuary shelf of the paper, but the trees and mountains breathe, after a fashion. It's not clear what air they are breathing: his drawings leave no space for space. Just as the inside of the body is not really an inward vacancy in which the mind roams around homeless, but a fullness of blood, bone, and organ, the drawings breathe by means of trees like the branched alveoli that line the lungs. They express not the world's variety but the same tangle of impulses that might have led a young person to join the circus—the urge to be elsewhere combined with the urge to be gone.

Every element in the drawings is compulsory and inevitable. Every encounter, no matter how strange or new, eventually reveals the patterns of possibility innate to the life before it. The circus roamed widely to recreate identical conditions all over; its appearance of spontaneous playfulness required massive infrastructure; its exaggerated motley worked to homogenize national identity. It produced sameness out of the material of difference, somewhat like Yoakum's habitual hand producing barely varied landscapes (style is habit's wealthy cousin—it travels further and works less). No matter how far from home the depicted place is, in Yoakum's drawings, things look exactly as they should. Every landscape must have its near-identical trees, mountains, sky.

He began his circus career in the Great Wallace Show, an Indiana-based circus that traveled throughout the United States, and he later worked for William "Buffalo Bill" Cody. He seems to have spent at least some of his circus years working as a billposter, a job that anticipates his later artistic relation to landscape (fig. 4). "Billposters often covered a spectacular breadth of territory," writes Janet M. Davis, a historian and theorist of the circus.

Before the 1891 season, Davis notes:

> Forepaugh's agents Geoffrey Robinson and Whiting Allen posted circus bills atop Pike's Peak at its pinnacle, an elevation of 14,110 feet! . . . Some posters were designed as individual puzzlelike pieces that formed a single giant banner when pasted together; one banner, comprising thirty-two posters, was reportedly some seventy feet long. In 1896 Ringling Bros. spent $128,00036 for posters alone . . . . In short, circus billposters marked the landscape, claimed it, and transformed it months before the actual onslaught of crowds, tents, and animals.

(fig. 4) Circus posters, Manchester, New Hampshire, c. 1911

Davis quotes contemporary writer Charles Theodore Murray's description of "the circus-billposter . . . coming from nowhere and vanishing into nothing, but leaving the glowing traces of his visit in highly colored pictorial illustrations that covered the dead walls in town and along the country roads." In Yoakum's drawing *Mt Pikes Peak the Mtn of Pleasure Highest foot Bridge Near Colorado Springs Colorado in U.S.A.* (n.d., fig. 5), blue rock resembling water bears a sunrise-colored stripe crowned by a human-made structure, an open lattice, perhaps a viewing platform or a bridge. No circus posters visible. A path loops awkwardly through the bottom section of the drawing like scar tissue. Pikes Peak became iconic during the Gold Rush, its image serving as a promise of free loot from a violated land. In Yoakum's version, it's a collection of textures and forms that look as though on the verge of becoming fragments, losing connection to each other.

Yoakum was very young when he first became a circus hand, but black proletarian childhood was even looser a concept then than now. The circus had a vivid, disruptive glamor, prefigured by posters and embodied in the carnivalesque moment of circus day. Intense spectacle rolled into sleepy, small towns and enveloped them in boisterous, hectic heterogeneity, attracting diverse audiences and exhibiting diverse performers. For Yoakum, a black child familiar with the constraints and humiliations of black life in a white supremacist society, the circus may have, at first, looked as much like freedom as it did to many others. As Davis writes, the circus was a teeming array of "racial diversity, gender difference, bodily variety, animalized human beings, and humanized animals." Paul Bossaic describes the circus as "a kind of mirror in which the culture is reflected, condensed

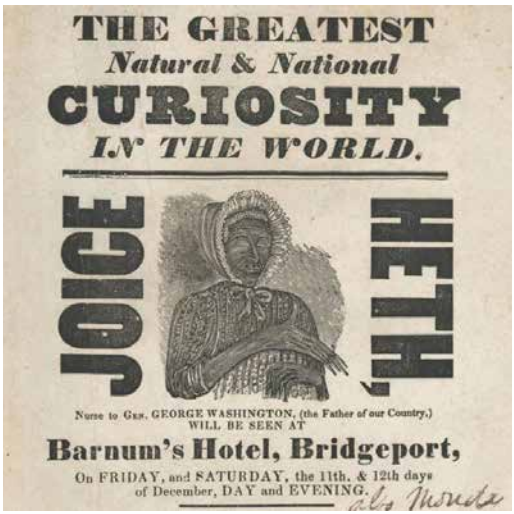
(fig. 5) Joseph Yoakum, *Mt Pikes Peak the Mtn of Pleasure Highest foot Bridge Near Colorado Springs Colorado in U.S.A.*, n.d.

and at the same time transcended; perhaps the circus seems to stand outside the culture only because it is at its very center." In the limited pseudo-revolution of the carnivalesque, brute social reality always persists, even if its hierarchies are temporarily inverted. "By giving blacks the most subservient positions within the lowest division of labor, circus management not only procured the cheapest labor possible, they also avoided angering their white employees," writes Micah Childress. At Circus Day, black visitors were segregated by seating and had to brave crowds of drunk, hyped-up white people outside the big tents; racist attacks were common. "Despite the potential leveling of social hierarchies that the circus's carnivalesque presence promised, frequent altercations on the show grounds exposed deep racial tensions," Davis summarizes. For a black child like Yoakum, there was nowhere to escape apart from whatever brief, secret exuberance was contained within the act of escape itself.

Naturally, the circus was rife with race play; race was its point. Yoakum's later play with racial identity reflected the culture of the circus, where performers took on African, Native, Arab, and other identities to provide entertainment. In the world of the circus, the suspicion of fraudulence was an auratic supplement and a marketing tool. Audiences flocked, not because they were duped, but to exercise their own judgment as to what was true or false, entering the tent to get a look behind the veil. With a ferocious, sadistic, ordinary anti-blackness that mirrored and amplified its social context, the circus valorized black people as grotesque spy-peepholes into the mysteries of the body and of time. Circus impresario P. T. Barnum bought the elderly Joice Heth as a slave and displayed her to hordes of audiences as the 161-year-old former nurse of George Washington (fig. 6); Barnum sold tickets to her autopsy upon her

death. Another well-known performer, William Henry Johnson, was a poor black man from New Jersey. Barnum dressed him in furs and put him in a cage, where he expertly acted the archetypal primitive, rattling the bars and yowling in an invented "primal" language. Zip the Pinhead, or the What-Is-It. What is it? What I saw. Despite the history of their capture and racist misuse, these were performers who brought charisma and craft to their work—even Joice Heth, who was blind and near-paralyzed. What inner light made thousands pay to see her? The convulsive, contradictory race displays of the circus reflected convulsive, contradictory realities.

The official circus route book of the Ringling Brothers lists the Great Show as having, in 1900, "six elephants, one hippopotamus, nine camels, two yaks, two sacred cattle, two llamas, and twenty-five cages" as well as "Armless Wonder" J. H. Payne, "Black Face Act"



(fig. 6) Handbill for Joice Heth exhibit, c. 1835

Lulu Mitchell, and many other performers, but Yoakum's name does not appear. The same route book charts a litany of accidents and entertainments, dripping with frank anti-blackness and a very casual attitude toward workers' physical well-being:

> Julius Falk did a monologue turn in the concert in the afternoon, and sang "You Can't Hold Mister Nigger" for a clown song at night, with great success…
>
> Lil Kerslake and his troupe of educated pigs never fail to please…
>
> Smith our assistant Superintendent of Canvas was assaulted and very seriously injured by a negro tramp at night. It is claimed that the negro had tried to get into the show under the canvas and been put out by Smith…
>
> Hazel Earl practiced a new drop off of her trapeze this afternoon much to the detriment of her face…
>
> A very sad accident occurred this morning at about 8.30 o'clock, when Charles Edwards, or Buddie, as he was affectionately known, was struck by an engine on the Pennsylvania Railroad and instantly killed…

In Springfield, Missouri, twenty miles from Yoakum's birthplace of Ash Grove, "seating capacity [was] inadequate to accommodate the crowds at night." Was Yoakum among these crowds, and could this have been when he first joined? An entry from several months earlier reports "a very uneventful day" spent in

Glens Falls, New York. Nearly seventy years later, Yoakum would draw a nearby mountain range with a detailed train, complete with car numbers, chugging along in one corner of the paper (fig. 7). It is not clear where along its circuitous route he joined the circus. But it swept him, as the army would later, into a wider world than the one into which he was born. It provided him with the stock of memories he would use as source material in his drawings, memories not so much romanticized as censored or numbed: he remembered not the circus, not one elephant, freak, or spectacle, but the circus's surround, the speechless land in which its semiotic cacophony left a glistening trail of language, animal shit, torn posters, not depicted.

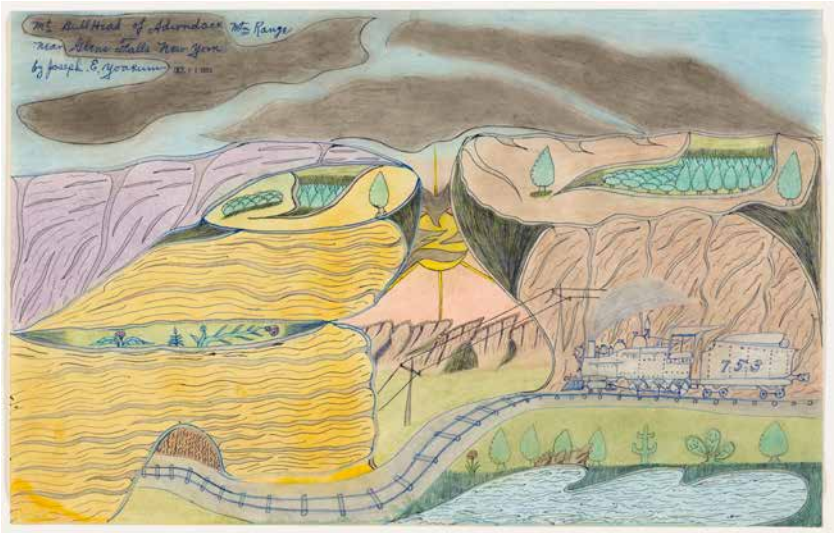
What Yoakum saw was what we all see: the world, sure, but overlaid with the aesthetic haze of its betrayal, of land's bloody reformulation into colony. "To the Indians it seemed that these Europeans hated everything in nature—the living forests and their birds and beasts, the grassy glades, the water, the soil, and the air itself," wrote the historian Dee Brown in 1970. The circus's relation to the enslaved and colonized was vampiric and deeply ambivalent, as Davis describes:

> Buffalo Bill's Wild West had an elaborate program: cowboys, American Indians, horses, buffalo, Indian raids on settler's cabins and wagon trains, ersatz prairie fires and cyclones, bison hunts, military drills, shooting acts, races, and dramatic reenactments from the Indian Wars and of overseas battles at the turn of the century. Using the technological medium that helped hasten the frontier's actual disappearance, [Buffalo Bill] Cody's railroad outfit produced national narratives of "civilization," "progress," and nostalgia for preindustrial American Indian cultures and "wild" spaces, like the circus.

Cody's relationship with Native Americans was conceptually inconsistent. He publicly supported the rights of American Indians, though he had helped decimate the Plains Indians' chief food source, the buffalo. Cody provided a good income for hundreds of Indian employees, particularly refugees from the Wounded Knee Massacre in South Dakota in 1890, yet these actors were hired to play roles that reinforced stereotypes of Native American savagery. Davis writes that "Cody made contradictory claims, asserting that Native Americans could 'uplift' themselves through assimilation, while at the same time protesting that they were 'cooped up' on reservations."

For all its apparent overturning of social propriety—its status as a home of sorts for those deemed freaks or outsiders—the politics of the circus were explicitly imperialist and white supremacist. They linked white America's foundational, genocidal land grab with wider, ongoing foreign policy that in the early twentieth century had begun to position America as a global superpower, ultraviolent yet somehow benign in its glamor. Davis writes:

> Circus and Wild West shows linked the Indian Wars to… the nation's "inevitable" movement from "savagery" to civilization. These reenactments reflected contemporary foreign relations ideologies for two additional reasons: at the turn of the century, most Native Americans were literal foreigners in their own country, because they were not uniformly recognized by federal law as U.S. citizens until 1924. Secondly, the Indian Wars—indeed, the whole history of Euroamerican relations with Native Americans—was a colonizing project, an ideological and strategic blueprint for subsequent U.S. entanglements overseas.



(fig. 7) Joseph Yoakum, *Mt Bull Head of Adrondack Mtn Range Near Glens Falls New York*, 1969

Essentially the circus formulated an aesthetics of genocide and its aftermath. In carnivalesque moments of apparent license, it restaged the brutal Indian Wars that consolidated the United States: first as tragedy, then as a wild day out. The circus pioneered a mechanism that Hollywood would perfect: when original accumulation at the periphery bottoms out because of its own success, new terrains of extraction can be hacked out of the cultural imaginary. Two forms of speculation converged: play and finance. In this, the circus made its contribution to setting the terms of the twentieth century, as a product of the nineteenth. Fundamental to these terms was that blood, war, humiliation, and conquest could be laundered as imagery and refined through mass-produced imperial daydreams. Not only did the circus reimagine conquest as a form of entertainment, it educated the army in mass slaughter. As Davis writes:

> Beginning in the 1890s, the U.S. War Department periodically sent army officers to travel with the circus in order to observe how show managers coordinated massive numbers of people and animals. Early in the decade several army officers from Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, spent a week with Barnum & Bailey studying the circus's transportation methods as a way to improve the logistics of the army's own artillery service.... Echoing turn-of-the-century military officials, General Leonard L Woods observed that the "great American army machine" would benefit by copying the transportation and labor systems of the "great American circus machine."

To ready their troops for battlefield obliteration, Western armies copied the vast railway infrastructure that supported American circuses, for example in the form of the field kitchens that sustained their troops in readiness for battlefield obliteration (fig. 8). Yoakum, a circus worker turned soldier, could not have been alone in having eaten at both the original circus kitchens and their military facsimile. As a soldier during World War I, he must have witnessed the brutal reality of war. In its reduction of living bodies to piles of corpses, this war lay on the flip side of the circus's aestheticization of battle, its elaborate production of racialized "species": millions died as undifferentiated, meaningless flesh, as cannon fodder; for only some of the dead, their whiteness made them available to be posthumously celebrated as heroes.

This circus-to-war pipeline, with its convergence of military and entertainment logistics, was not equaled until drone warfare borrowed multicamera imaging from ESPN sportscasting, creating a new regime of managing surveillance data to plan air strikes. Plying their trade across the country, traveling circuses celebrated the USA's victory over the land itself, turned into a commodity, which the circus celebrated by showcasing tropes from around the globe: international animals, miniaturized race science. From these materials, the more or less spurious narrative threads of a nation still in the process of creating itself were woven together, a new Europe sparkling with profit and loss. This boisterous, novel form of life was built upon the attempted ruin of Indigenous peoples and cultures and, to use James Boggs's phrase, "on the backs of blacks." As representations of conquest, the ruined and trodden-upon were permitted a place in circus life. In the circus, blackness and indigeneity appeared

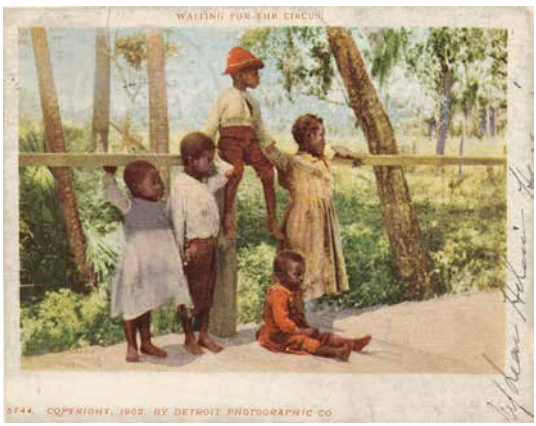
(fig. 8) United States Army field kitchen, Alsace, Germany, 1918

as tropes, and as performance—a return of the repressed (or oppressed) that brought distorted, dreamlike images of marginalized life to the white-hot center of the new American culture (fig. 9). While the law prescribed the promise of assimilation, the philanthropic kidnapping of Native children, and the wholesale erasure of Native language and culture, the circus peddled racist distortions of these cultures that nevertheless allowed, even demanded, that Native performers continued to identify as such. These identifications were not fixed or affirmative. But the contradictory possibilities they represented adhered, then, as now, to the underside of the grand barbarism of the USA, thereby hitching a ride on the history of a nation that aimed for their annihilation.

In the circus, living, breathing Native people, alienated from their massacred and fragmented tribes, were cast as

metonyms of an achieved colonial victory: another vicious form of exhibition bearing the imperfectly repressed trace of resistance. It was common for colonizers to display the body parts of murdered Native resistance leaders as evidence of conquest: Black Hawk's skeleton, Metacom's head. This grisly exhibition was the colonial aesthetic gesture par excellence, expressing a butcher's view of the world as a vast and profitable slaughterhouse—a view that is as robust as ever today. The circus tamed the explicit necro-spectacle of the dead Indian into jolly theatrics like it tamed the wildness of its animals into absurd obedience, keeping the nationalist triumph but losing the viscera; however family-friendly or community-oriented, the spectacle relied, at base, on the threat of world-destroying violence.

Yoakum's careful carelessness toward his origins seems both unremarkable for a former circus kid and an achievement of sorts. It was not as though the possibility of metamorphosis



(fig. 9) "Waiting for the Circus" postcard, 1902

was a given for someone of his place and time and race—though perhaps then, as now, the capacity to treat the self as immaterial material was only a matter of courage or necessity. All attitudes to race contain some dimension of fantasy: like gender, race has no *real* real. Against a backdrop of colonial consolidation, the protean identities of the circus, which made a trope of every conflict and integration, bore a strong resemblance to the uneven reorganizations of race happening as the US shaped itself into a world power. Some of the posters that Yoakum pasted on "dead walls" may have advertised Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World (fig. 10).

This spectacle made its premiere just outside the grounds of the Chicago World's Fair in 1893, intended for a global audience. The Congress of Rough Riders was a putative meritocracy of spectacular equestrianship. An American cowboy fought various others, including an American Indian, a Cossack, a Mexican Vaquero, a Riffian Arab, and an Argentine Gaucho: an image of a fair match, obscuring the violent asymmetry of capitalist-colonial war. "Strange people from our new possessions," read the Congress's promotional materials. Mass culture shone the zombie twilight of nostalgia back onto a decimated world, like Satan crying real tears at the foot of the cross.

Yoakum had received a deep education in circus culture. So, when the white art world came calling, naturally he did what he had learned white audiences found alluring: collectors, like circus-goers, adored a spurious genealogy. In concocting Navajo roots, Yoakum contravened the collective proprietary rights of identity (for a black person, a necessary entitlement to nothing), but equally he drew on the circus praxis of race play

(fig. 10) Poster for Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World, c. 1899

to exercise the black right to ironize history. He continued his flight toward an invented life, away from arbitrary death.

Yet the circus's relation to land was one of domination and displacement: it depicted the world from the standpoint of genocide. This standpoint seems to me to explain something of Yoakum's drawings—their beguiling air of a spell cast on the past and their simultaneous flatness. "Genocide is endemic to enslavement," writes Jared Sexton in his essay "The *Vel* of Slavery" (2014). "Slavery is not a loss that the self experiences—of language, lineage, land, or labor—but rather the loss of any self that could experience such loss." Genocide is both, then, an end point and an endemic condition: it is an end point of settler violence against the land's inhabitants, and it is endemic to those whose forced labor transforms the land. It is an acid that eats

away at the texture of experience. It voids experience in two ways: physically, via torture and killing, and legally, in that colonial law provides a completely abstract way of thinking about ownership of land—what is used, cared for, and inhabited by one group of people might belong, by law, to another who has only just set eyes on it. In this way, the standpoint of genocide puts the concept of experience under erasure. From the standpoint of genocide, there is no experience.

During these years of thinking about Yoakum, I have gone from adoring his work, to feeling inexplicably frustrated by it, and finally back to a more tempered, sober love. Perhaps because of a pathological inability to compartmentalize, when I look at Yoakum's landscapes now, in the spring of 2024, I look through the prism of the currently ongoing Zionist genocide in Palestine. Therefore, I see in his fabulations the trace of the circus, of the army, of genocidal, asymmetrical war. The political horizons of Palestine take the form of a national liberation struggle, whereas the politics of the art historicization of Yoakum's work are those of blackness and anti-blackness and their articulation within art institutions. Blackness and indigeneity have often been contrasted and counterposed, for example in Sexton's "The *Vel* of Slavery." But around the time Yoakum was first integrated into the art world, in the 1960s, these two different strands, national liberation and black struggle, were often drawn together in the concept of black people as an internal colony within America. Around that time, James Boggs wrote, for example, of the black population deemed surplus to capitalism's requirements: "The outsiders, in contrast, owe no allegiance to any system but only to themselves. Being workless, they are also stateless. They have grown up like a colonial people who no longer feel any allegiance

to the old imperial power and are each day searching for new means to overthrow it."

Yoakum is not searching for a means of overthrow. But he is an artist with no allegiances. Something of both what is frustratingly impenetrable and what is deeply seductive about his work now seems to me to be related to how it tacitly inhabits the standpoint of genocide. Of course, he perceives and experiences the events and places of his life just like anyone else. Yet his experience appears in his work as an elaborate, implausible case for itself. The land he draws is everywhere, anywhere, somewhere, nowhere. These landscapes are weird dreams repressing the terrible events that formulated them as pure nature, wherein nature is the opposite of life.

The "outsider" artist is like the conspiracy theorist. For him, the interior and exterior are undistinguished because there is no border within which the relative safety of the institution reigns. Meaning is everywhere in the same way that dust is everywhere in an ill-tended house. Illuminated by sunlight, motes of Yoakum's religious faith appear. This faith is where my interpretation fails. It is crucial to his own understanding of his work and indigestible for me as a secular writer, though the standpoint of genocide both necessitates and annihilates monotheism. We could go so far as to say that any concept of the One into which all ones are subsumed is foundationally genocidal, its liberatory aspects bound to bondage—but this is beyond me to decide. To romanticize the outsider is to participate in a precisely genocidal logic in which some bad Other is mythologized and reified even as they are tortured and killed. The category of the indigenous is indeed one of those binary halves only given meaning by the colonial encounter with original accumulation (capitalism's

foundational move of depriving a population of its self-knowledge and means of subsistence, i.e., the traditional use of its land), just as "outsider" is only a meaningful term in relation to art's institutions, which are themselves, of course, a mechanism of capitalist accumulation.

Yoakum's metabolization by the art world from the late 1960s onward was fraught with predictable difficulties. The white admirers who mediated his work acquired it at knockdown prices while advertising him as a brilliant primitive. At his peak in the 1960s, he was completing a drawing a day: once monetized by a pass through the wringer of the market, this quantity of work represented a deep well of value. Works he had previously sold to neighborhood children for a quarter apiece became expensive commodities to be hoarded and argued over. After Sherbeyn Gallery in Chicago enmeshed him in an exploitative contract, friends stepped in to help protect his interests. Yoakum's habit of copyrighting uncolored originals of his work and stamping them with dates is understandably defensive. Less conscious, probably, is the anti-museological gesture of writing titles on the drawings; these sometimes appear in an ornate hand. Several works bear the instruction *do not sell*. They are probably worth a lot of money.

The insider art world saw freedom in Yoakum's laborious lines because freedom is a persistent fantasy of the margins. Recall Marx's famous joke that the worker is free twice over: free to work or, failing that, free to starve. Compulsion masquerades as choice. America perfected this. Yoakum was free to draw, but was he free not to? His prodigious output speaks to the inner paroxysms of the obsessional. In 1968, the artists Roger Brown, Gladys Nilsson, Jim Nutt, Karl Wirsum, and Ray Yoshida, who formed the Chicago-based collective the

Hairy Who, came upon Yoakum in his storefront studio. The Chicago Imagists were young American artists in the late middle of the twentieth century, full of bombast and striving and a muscular playfulness that made their aesthetic zingy and elastic. Their love language was a blend of lionization and theft. What they found in Yoakum's work was permission. They took up Yoakum as a savant and icon. Brown compared their discovery of Yoakum to Picasso's discovery of Henri Rousseau. This was how Yoakum's dreams crossed the border into waking life, where others cashed in on them. Dream traveled like a circus carrying heavy loads of irony, hilarity, and pain. I admit, at last, that Yoakum's work also expresses a vanishing form of freedom to me, too, in that it relies on no outside object or influence. For better or worse, in these drawings, the past lays no claim to the present or the future. Like memory, which does not exist, this past is in a perpetual struggle to be real to itself.

Where have I been, and what did I see there? Of my travels I possess images that might as well be dreams. Mangrove shade, salt residue tracing fish scales on skin. The rough track with its vein of grass curving behind the stone house. The last of sunset a vivid line on the horizon as the car tails the end of the day. And so on. Affectionate, difficult ghosts crowd behind me, but I don't turn to look. I am an eye on a taut sail. I am fossilized sensation. I have a bad memory, only improved somewhat by my daughter's birth, which has made my life more real to me. My other memories, such as they are, are like the ledger in a lost property office: they name loss, and they are also a kind of temporary accumulation. Heat from the fire on my face and the cooler air blowing in from the lake at my back. The trees at dawn have precise faces. The distant music of the night city is ultra-vivid with summer

heat. The hood of the car has been blessed by an unexpected fall of red flowers. See how I write with thick, stylized lines, restating myself in the guise of experience. I know this world is fallen and therefore I must believe in a grace that lives beyond the reach of language; but at least as yet I have no god to which I can issue my praise, my pain, my appeal, a Word to dissolve my words into. I know no monotheistic science, no substance or spirit. My unreal syntax buckles under the weight of the real corpses of the unjustly dead. This was what I saw, but I cannot say what I was looking for.

Bibliography

Berger, John. "Drawing" (1953). In *Toward Reality: Essays in Seeing*. Knopf, 1962.

Boggs, James. *Pages from a Negro Worker's Notebook: A James Boggs Reader*. Edited by Stephen M. Ward. Wayne State University Press, 2011.

Bossaic, Paul. *Circus as Multimodal Discourse: Performance, Meaning and Ritual*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2012.

Brown, Dee. *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West*. Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1970.

Bucciero, Joe. "The Great Pretender." *Artforum* 60, no. 2 (October 2021).

Childress, Micah. *Circus Life: Performing and Laboring Under America's Big Top Shows, 1830–1920*. University of Tennessee Press, 2023.

Clark, T. J. *Picasso and Truth: From Cubism to Guernica*. Princeton University Press, 2013.

Davis, Janet M. *The Circus Age: Culture and Society under the American Big Top*. University of North Carolina Press, 2003.

Joseph E. Yoakum: What I Saw. Edited by Esther Adler, Mark Pascale, and Édouard Kopp. Art Institute of Chicago, 2021. Published in conjunction with an exhibition of the same title co-organized by the Art Institute of Chicago (June 12–October 18, 2021), the Museum of Modern Art, New York (November 21, 2021–March 19, 2022), and the Menil Collection, Houston (April 22–August 7, 2022).

Katzenberger, Walter B. "Spiritual Unfoldment." *Christian Science Journal*, December 1941.

Route Book, Ringling Bros.' World's Greatest Shows, Season 1900. Collection of Milner Library, Illinois State University. Available at https://digital.library.illinoisstate.edu/digital/collection/p15990coll5/id/8887/rec/9.

Sexton, Jared. "The *Vel* of Slavery: Tracking the Figure of the Unsovereign." *Critical Sociology* 4, nos. 4–5 (December 2014).

Winnicott, D. W. "Fear of Breakdown." *International Review of Psycho-Analysis* 1, nos. 1–2 (1974).

Photograph Credits

Page 4: Courtesy Philadelphia Museum of Art. Pages 5, 16, 22–23: Courtesy The Art Institute of Chicago / Art Resource, NY. Page 8: Courtesy The Menil Collection, Houston. Page 14: Courtesy Circus World-Wisconsin Historical Society. Page 18: Courtesy Somers Historical Society. Page 26: Courtesy Records of the Office of the Chief Signal Officer, National Archives and Records Administration. Page 27: Courtesy Wallach Division Picture Collection, The New York Public Library. Page 29: Courtesy Library of Congress.

Cookie Jar 2
Published by The Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant, New York
Edition of 2,000

Editors: Pradeep Dalal and Shiv Kotecha
Project Coordinator: Julie Evanoff
Copy Editor: Deirdre O'Dwyer
Image Clearance: Peter Goldberg
Design: Studio Remco van Bladel

This book is typeset in Eldorado Text Light and printed on Arena, 100 gsm.
Printed and bound by De Raddraaier SSP, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

An earlier, shorter version of this essay was published on March 4, 2022, on the arts criticism website *4Columns* as a review of the exhibition *Joseph E. Yoakum: What I Saw* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

The Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant

The Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant
15 Maiden Lane, 18th Floor
New York, NY 10038
cookiejar.artswriters.org

Hannah Black is an artist, writer, and the author of *Dark Pool Party* (2016) and *Tuesday or September or the End* (2022). She is represented by Arcadia Missa, London, and Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin. She began writing this essay while living in New York City. She is now living in a small village in the Var in France.

Andy Warhol, Color Polaroid

How does art fit into the life of a writer, as an object of study or as an object of desire? The four pamphlets that comprise *Cookie Jar 2* offer a range of possibilities: in the diary pages of an art critic hitting the road with her punk band, looking to check out *Las Meninas* at the Prado; in conversations about Vietnamese socialist realism amid romantic entanglement; in the relay of telepathic artworks by women considered peripheral, and men now canonized; and in a reckoning with the dehumanization of black and indigenous people by the early American circus industry. "Every encounter, no matter how strange or new, eventually reveals the patterns of possibility innate to the life before it," writes Hannah Black in her essay for this volume, on the life and work of the artist Joseph Yoakum.

Cookie Jar is a pamphlet series of long-format arts writing produced by the Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant. The series is named after Warhol's vast and weird collection of cookie jars scoured from flea markets, thrift stores, and estate sales. Each volume of the series highlights various ways through which writing may yet encounter art.

Cookie Jar is free to read in all formats. Order or download all the pamphlets at cookiejar.artswriters.org.

—Pradeep Dalal and Shiv Kotecha, Editors

The Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant