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Publication Date

2021

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
SANTA CRUZ

Walled In:
A Subversive American Classic

A thesis paper submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

DIGITAL ART AND NEW MEDIA

By

Armando Rey Cordova

December 2021

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2021

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ABSTRACT

Walled In: A Subversive Classic

Armando Rey Cordova

The history of the United States is full of contradictions and paradoxes that are confusing to those who have marginalized identities or fall outside of the dominant culture in any way shape or form. The aim of this artwork is to open a dialogue and begin the process of bringing a new American consciousness to the forefront of audience members. *Walled In* as an artwork is a clear fanatic of the American canon. This piece draws inspiration from a wide range of American thinkers and storytellers starting with Henry David Thoreau and ending with Jim Morrison. The main argument that the piece pursues is the effect that media has on people's psyches/identities when constructing a national consciousness. That is why it is critical to be in control of generating new narratives while holding old narratives accountable. As American citizens we should be looking back while driving forward. The piece argues that one of the avenues to ensure that creation is through a dialectical synthesis of both old and new forms of media. *Walled In* does not offer any clear solutions, but uses this space as a chaotic workshop to meditate and digest these existential ideas.

DEDICATION

For every Cordova

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would not be here at this finish line if it wasn't for the village of people uplifting and supporting me through this journey. Thank you, Marianne, Patty, Doc, Isaac, Mark, and Kinan for your unwavering belief in my ability to finish this project (and this thesis). Thank you to my brother Dylan Cordova for supplying the rad music that brought Walled In to life. Thank you to my good friends Patrick Stefaniak, Michael Becker, and Forest Reid. I can run the craziest of idea by ya'll and be met with real deliberation. And finally thank you to my partner Tangerine for keeping me sane throughout this process. I love and admire you all.

Walled In: A Subversive Classic



Figure 1: The Title Card to *Walled In: An American Ritual*

Walled In: An American Ritual is a response to the extreme political conflict taking place currently in the United States. The piece is an attempt to begin the necessary work to reconcile and reconstruct a new American identity.

The history of the United States is full of contradictions and paradoxes that are confusing to those who have marginalized identities or fall outside of the dominant culture in any way shape or form. The aim of this artwork is to open a dialogue and begin the process of bringing a new American consciousness to the forefront of audience members. *Walled In* as an artwork is a clear fanatic of the American canon. This piece draws inspiration from a wide range of American thinkers and storytellers starting with Henry David Thoreau and ending with Jim Morrison. The main argument that the piece pursues is the effect that media has on people's psyches/identities when constructing a national consciousness. That is why it

is critical to be in control of generating new narratives while holding old narratives accountable. As American citizens we should be looking back while driving forward. The piece argues that one of the avenues to ensure that creation is through a dialectical synthesis of both old and new forms of media. *Walled In* does not offer any clear solutions but uses this space as a chaotic workshop to meditate and digest these existential ideas.

The piece exists somewhere between speculative fiction and everyday reality. The piece itself will not bring all the answers, nor should it. The main character, simply named WALDEN (and typed in all caps for purposes of clarity), in the performance is a clown and is attempting to do the impossible - create and offer a 'new' vision of America from the solitude of his cabin. He stands on the shoulders of giants but is unaware of their influence. He sees himself as the sole creator and destroyer.

The hope is that the audience will step into WALDEN's world and come along for the day in the life journey through the duration of the performance. The performance aims to be entertaining, jarring, humorous, and to provoke a critical dialog.

The strategy I deployed was to use a canonical American text, *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau, in order to respond to the current times. *Walden* as a text has become a part of the American literary mythos. It is one of those books most Americans will have encountered one way or another. Whether it be as required reading in high school, or as a reference in other books or movies (ex. the film *Into*

the Wild directed by Sean Penn quotes *Walden* in numerous scenes). *Walden* famously is the memoir of Thoreau's two-year experiment of solitude at Walden pond in Concord, Massachusetts. He self-isolated in order to find ways to simplify his life and search for the essence of what it means to be sentient. The isolation Thoreau faced felt eerily similar to the current moment in the COVID pandemic where many Americans have been quarantined in their homes forced to face similar trials. Americans faced the challenges of work, responsibilities to oneself and to one's home in isolation. In another strange parallel, the country saw the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. Buy-outs for large corporations occurred on a large scale while everyday working-class Americans were struggling to pay their rent, find food, and attend work. In other words, those privileged enough to cheat the American experiment did so. And why wouldn't they? Thoreau too also cheated his American experiment. It has been established that his mother would bring him food (weekly) and do his laundry. He would also often go to the town nearby to socialize. Does this tarnish the validity of the experiment? How does this connect to the larger American experiment that we are all currently part of?

With this in mind, part of the importance of interacting with *Walden* was its influence in helping create the American identity that has been co-opted by all sides of the political spectrum. Thoreau is a complicated figure. He was once on the run from the government for tax evasion and a firm believer in self-reliance, mirroring the American myth of pulling oneself up with one's bootstraps. However, reading through the book I was constantly conflicted. Thoreau writes beautifully, his prose

can still inspire awe and wonder. However, thinking critically about *Walden* we need to view Thoreau in a larger historical context, to reveal the socio-economic systems that uphold white supremacy and limit class mobility for the working class.

This project attempts to grapple with the symbols that make up a country, that make up a national identity, and that create the cultural consciousness of the citizens that make up a nation. *Walden* represents a portion of that identity that should not go unchallenged. The portion that is concerned with acknowledging one's historical precedence to find out where to go next. Props and items used in the performance are intended to take on psychic weight. The flag, for example, as a symbol that holds the entire history of the United States - glory and travesty alike. Mickey Mouse, a manifestation of the achievement of the American Dream, including generational wealth, an opportunity to create one's identity/legacy and intertwining that with a national identity.



Figure 2: WALDEN builds a cabin out of Lincoln Logs

I confront this text with my own racial identity in mind. I was born on American soil as a second generation Mexican-American. I read this book in California, a state that the U.S. gained after the Mexican-American War and the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. I aim to invoke the classic Chicano notion that “we did not cross the border, the border crossed us” or “ni de aqui, ni de alla” in this project. As I encountered the text, I had questions of ownership. Could I claim Thoreau and *Walden* as my own cultural text? Thoreau wrote this book in 1854 and it was unlikely that he would consider people like me. My central question is: what happens when someone of my origins, with my specific racial and cultural identity, comes into contact with an American text. With that question I was transported into the borderlands as coined by Gloria Anzaldúa . We are working in a psychic liminal space that exists somewhere between 1854 when Thoreau was writing in his cabin and 2021 where Cordova is performing solitude in his.

Overview of the Project

The project is a performance art piece. It also exists as an installation when there is no performer to activate the space. The physical installation is organized in a pyramid fashion mirroring the structure of an altar. Upstage left is a platform with an American flag on the floor surrounded by Juanita’s brand Menudo cans. Leaning on the platform is a sign that reads: “Menudo here”. Upstage right is a larger American

flag that is draped on the floor off the platform, reaching towards the audience. A basketful of books overflows on the platform and includes *Borderlands* by Gloria Anzaldúa , *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau, and *The Underground Man* by Fyodor Dostoevsky. Upstage center shows a variety of collage photos on the floor - most include Thoreau's portrait. On top of the photos is an aluminum cooking pot set up to look like an offering with four toilet paper rolls surrounding the pot. Stuffed toys including Mickey Mouse, Minnie Mouse and Goofy (and some additional unlicensed characters) are all carefully placed as if they were the audience in the theater. Center stage consists of a painted floor with smaller American flags. There are three color variations on this flag, Red, white, and Blue. Together the symbols make up one larger American flag.



Figure 3. A picture of the *Walled In* set

Upstage center is a mattress that WALDEN sleeps on. Surrounding the mattress are four pillars that hold four screens. The screens play a video of WALDEN

in the beginning of the performance and then switch to a surveillance camera for the rest of the performance. Far stage right is a clothes rack. Far stage left is a hand painted American flag that sports an additional color: green. Throughout the space tinfoil masks are displayed.



Figure 4: Tin Foil Masks

The screens are connected to security cameras that survey the space. One of the two upstage screens is pointed towards the plush Disney toys, and onlookers are invited to take a closer look at the installation. The second upstage screen displays the *Walled In* title card video on loop.

At specific times a performer activates the space. The performer enters in costume and takes center stage. They move behind the microphone stand and place a crocheted hat with ears on their head. The performer then places huaraches (Mexican sandals) on their feet before getting into bed to set up the intro video. They use a mouse and keyboard to control what is on the upstage screens. They find the pre-show video file and press play on both keyboards at the same time. Once the video

starts playing the performance has begun. The performer lays in the bed, covering themselves with a tarp as a blanket while the video plays.

This piece is intended to be experienced live, in person. Unfortunately, since this project was devised and conceptualized during the Covid-19 pandemic I was unable to present my work to a live audience. What is presented and discussed throughout this paper is the video documentation of the performance.



Figure 5: WALDEN arms outstretched

This piece is an example of hyperreality in the Baudrillardian sense. The liminal space that WALDEN, the main character, experiences is a mash-up of moments from American history, American literature; arts and cultures, all happening in one place at one time. It is a big bang, an explosion of every confusing hypocritical American mantra cohabiting one space and evoked simultaneously.

The seams between what is reality and what is mere fiction are blurred inside this cabin. WALDEN is so deeply steeped into the throes of the American canon that the media's influence has become overgrown like vines, and thus infests every aspect of his habitat from the walls to the bedding to his audience. WALDEN writes on an old typewriter not because computers are unavailable or inaccessible but because that is what the stereotypical "great American writer" did. He reads Thoreau not because he wishes to connect his current American moment with that of Thoreau's American experience of 1854, but because the story is another box waiting to be ticked on WALDEN's way to becoming great. WALDEN does not isolate himself to practice self-sufficiency as Thoreau once did, but because stereotypically, (and falsely) the mythic American figure is a lone figure. WALDEN's hyperreality blinds him to how his actions do not elevate his cause but diminish them. His critiques and reconstruction efforts fall short when he fails to see how they play into and uphold American lies rather than accomplishing his true goal of deconstruction. WALDEN is stuck within the loop of hyperreality.

However bleak WALDEN's hyperreality may seem, he is afforded some salvation through the beginning stages of *Nepantla*. *Nepantla* is a concept coined by Chicana scholar and poet, Gloria Anzaldúa, and is based on the Nahuatl word for "in-between". Anzaldúa describes *Nepantla* as a borderland, a liminal space where contradicting identities can coexist and thrive. In *Nepantla* one is encouraged to face the clashing contradictions of one's existence and create a new frontier. This piece

understands Nepantla as part of the process of reconstruction. A process that is non-linear and non-structural.

If hyperreality affords us the ability to articulate the ailment that plagues WALDEN, Nepantla is the process in which WALDEN heals.

WALDEN is caught in between reality and fiction. Since he is of Mexican descent, he is also caught in between cultures that seem to consistently clash, and ultimately his relationship to both of these cultures is through consumption. Whether that be consumption of mass-produced food or media he struggles to create an authentic identity that has not been produced for him. The entire piece is WALDEN grappling with these contradictions, and weighing his options in an attempt to synthesize a new American/personal identity. This struggle is what helps create a Nepantla-informed aesthetic.

The best strategy to incorporate this Nepantla aesthetic was to utilize the material offered on both sides and embrace the rasquache aspects of the process. Rasquachismo is a concept coined by Tomás Ybarra-Frausto that attempts to make the most out of the least. It is an underdog sensibility that transforms an object's original purpose into something new and useful. Ybarro-Frausto describes rasquachismo as having elements of "hybridization, juxtaposition, and integration" as a means to survive and thrive. In the case of this artwork, Rasquachismo is used not only for the transformation of physical objects, but also for concepts. The rasquache sensibility allowed this project to transform the text of *Walden* into something more indicative of my personal history, and gave me the ability to mold Thoreau's prose

into a new work. It also gave me the freedom to carve a new space where my experience was at the center of the conversation.

Procedural/technical description of the project

The biggest and most obvious obstacle that the piece needed to overcome was figuring out how to create a meaningful live performance during a global pandemic. The process in figuring out how to exactly do that was especially challenging. In the beginning stages of *Walled In* I knew I was interested in using the book *Walden* as the source material for a number of reasons. In addition to solitude and isolation, it became apparent to me that Thoreau's two year experiment was a recounting of a prolonged endurance performance. This prompted a connection between Thoreau and myself that became stronger the more I stayed with the book. Whether Thoreau knew it or not he was a performer and this became a collaboration through space and time. Thoreau was an American performing radical acts as a means to pursue new knowledge. I am an American and would like to see myself positioned within that legacy. And so like Thoreau who used Walden Pond as a means to study and stand on the shoulders of the giants before, I used *Walled In* as an opportunity to stand on his shoulders, and the shoulders of his contemporaries.

The pandemic for me, as for many of us, was an existential time. It was a moment where the normal flow of work and play was halted. I was forced to look at the space I call home and ask myself “what is this place, really?” Is it truly a home, or a mere intermediary space used between moments of going out to work, or for recreation. What if this place is not serving me? What if it does not reflect me? And

now that the pandemic was in full force and everyone should be quarantined, what if this space exists only to remind me of all the shortcomings and barriers yet to hurdle. I could no longer ignore my messiness as it was out in the open demanding to be confronted. Now all I had was the type of performance I hold closest to my chest. The one reserved for myself and myself only. Thoreau performed solitude and vulnerability and shared it in his prose, I would share mine through live performance.

Since large gatherings were no longer possible the only avenue to keep some integrity of *liveness* would be over Zoom or some live-streaming service. The Zoom performance is where I began. Connecting while in isolation seemed to permeate every social media post and news article I came across. We were all trapped inside our homes for fear of being infected or infecting others with a virus that was causing massive death tolls. New social media trends emerged as ways for folks to remain connected. There was an aspect of us all being in this together, a nice sentiment that eventually lost its hold. At the same time civil unrest erupted in response to the murder of George Floyd. Massive wealth disparity and inequality became increasingly apparent in the national conversation. A rent moratorium showed us that debt can be cancelled at any time to help those in tougher financial situations, and yet the richest people in the country seemed to only get richer. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the insurrection that took place at the capitol building proved to me that there were multiple America's existing at once, and the one I existed in was far different than those who stormed the capitol.

My initial approach to the performance was to include as many people in the process as possible. I wanted to build upon our collective solitude and allow that to influence and inform the finished product. Many of the early Zoom performances I saw seemed to attempt to emulate the effect of theater. To me this felt like a missed opportunity. We were dealing with a whole new medium and should address it as such. These Zoom performances assumed a theatrical fourth wall which felt futile to me. If theater is all about sharing physical space and time, the Zoom space calls for a different approach to sharing that space. Everyone is on their own individual devices in their individual physical spaces, but united in the same digital space. So I decided to try and throw away the fourth wall, and embrace the new space folks would be inhabiting with me.

The goal was to create a new set of rules for viewers who joined the Zoom call to follow and therefore offer a new reality for them to exist and perform in. The initial test was titled, *The Curious Transcendent and his Friends Write a Poem*. Behind this iteration's mechanism was a game that I, the performer, would lead folks through in the hopes of creating a poem by the end of the performance. The driving theatrical device was a word game that utilized Zoom's chat function in order to collect responses to make into a collective community poem.

This version of the character was still inspired by the text of *Walden* but was much more alienating and aggressive towards audience members. The character named The Transcendent, acted as an all-powerful antagonist that provoked guests into emotionally engaging with the material.

While this iteration was effective at gathering responses, I found that I was having trouble getting to the point of the performance without a large amount of time to introduce and warm guests up to the idea. The collective poem was rewarding, but did not have the impact that I expected it to. Sure, it was nice to make something as a group that was unique throughout every session, but the reward of the poem felt tarnished when I thought about how I gathered the material - by poking folks' buttons and becoming a villain. This piece was effective, but not in the ways that seemed productive for the type of performance that I wanted to connect. I was missing a sense of hope.

I let the piece rest for some time and attempted to move away from thinking about the work as a purely textual art piece. It felt necessary to put the pen and paper down and find ways to put the ideas of *Walden* into action. So I decided to pick up some spray paint cans. I found that in order to get work with spray paint done the cans demanded that I move their body. An unforeseen side effect of the pandemic was my lack of movement

In this way the medium of graffiti felt like an extension of my poetry and performance practice. Graffiti as an artform seemed to mirror what I was attempting to do with *Walden* in multiple layers. First, the spray paint felt like a transgressive invitation to allow the words found on the page to jump onto a wall and alter the environment, ultimately allowing for a multilayered collage and malleable space. All the fluff seemed to filter itself out and only the important concepts made it to the wall. In this sense graffiti became my strategy for amalgamating high and low art.

Writing the “high art” phrases from the text of *Walden* through a “low art” medium (mostly used for street art or vandalism) on an old mattress was the radical subversion I was searching for. Thus the aesthetic and the transformation of my domestic space was born. Graffiti can transform a space to reflect those who live in the surrounding area. I wanted to see if it could also be used to reflect a psychic space and mental state.



Figure 6: Mattress that WALDEN sleeps on

There is also an aspect of repeatability about graffiti that felt important and necessary to the piece. Thinking of graffiti and pop art in relation to one another, the only real

difference is the space they inhabit. Graffiti exists in the street, and pop art arguable only in a gallery setting. Graffiti artists repeat their tag in varying locations to gain notoriety and infamy. Pop art is concerned with the mass produced object or image.

Goals of the project and expected outcomes:

The intended audience for this piece is every American regardless of their race, gender, or socio-economic class. Of course this piece brings in specificities from my own Mexican-American experience, but my impetus for drawing from the personal is to push against the myth of the melting pot. Many have interpreted the symbol of the melting pot as promoting assimilation into the dominant culture which embodies white supremacy and the erasure of the more complicated histories of the United States. *Walled In* is a patriotic piece full of hope and contradictions. Those contradictions manifest themselves in the tension that runs through the piece. The tension of being inspired by American symbols so much so that the character is almost obsessed, posed against the alienation and repugnance the character feels for the atrocities committed in the same country.

I imagine this piece existing outside of a normal theatrical space. I am interested in having the installation inside a gallery where the set can become activated by the performance at certain times when installed. I can also imagine this piece working well in the context of a festival. Regardless, the intended experience of the piece would have viewers investigate the set first and foremost -- taking in the scenery as the visual art. Because of the nature of an art gallery there will be movement all around the performance. The challenge and part of the work then

becomes finding ways for the performer to keep audience members attention, which in my opinion adds to this liminal space evoked by the piece.

During the performance, the intended effect of the piece is entertainment. Following a Brechtian aesthetic, the hope is that audience members will be engaged by the performance and therefore lower their guards and become engaged with the themes beyond the performance. I do not want audience members to wholly identify with the character of WALDEN, but instead locate the similarities and differences that exist. The purpose of a choice such as this is to highlight the layers of subjectivity that operate inside and outside of the piece. The lasting impression should be the identification of the subjective gaze in relation to American symbols. In a perfect world, the piece would point audience members to confront their own relationships to the symbols in the performance space and begin a conversation of how to either build upon the old symbols or construct entirely new ones for a new generation of Americans.

Literature review/historical context

Walden

Walden is a book written by Henry David Thoreau published in 1854. The non-fiction book in a lot of ways is a memoir by Thoreau recounting his time spent on Walden pond where he spent two years in solitude. Thoreau uses this time as a means to reflect his place in society, and in the world at large, his main goal being one of simplification. Thoreau is interested in simplifying his existence and transferring it to a realm of self-sufficiency. He wishes to be in a place where he no longer needs to

rely on any government or person to live fully. This book is his attempt at that feat, and in some ways this book proved his success.

What is the Proper Way to Display a U.S. Flag?

This is a conceptual art piece by Dread Scott first on display in 1989 at the Art Institute of Chicago. The piece is set up with an American Flag displayed on the floor with a notebook above. Likewise, a photo collage is present with images of South Korean students burning the U.S. flag, and images of coffins with the flag draped over for U.S. soldiers who died in the Vietnam war. This piece invites audience participation by giving folks the opportunity to stand on the flag and write their responses to the title question in the notebook. This piece provoked a wide array of strong reactions from viewers. So much so that Scott was sent death threats from civilians and veterans alike. President Bush Sr. at the time called the piece “disgraceful”. The piece caused so much of a national stir that Congress passed legislation that outlawed the piece. Scott then protested the ban by burning American flags on the steps of the capitol. This resulted in a landmark First Amendment decision by the Supreme Court that established the concept that patriotism is not a requirement of the country’s citizens.

Dread Scott's piece is an iconoclastic approach to the American flag. *What is the Proper Way...?* forces folks to encounter the symbol and engage with it’s complicated history. It highlights this country’s supremacist legacy and psycho-oppressive nature by asking a simple question. It is illuminating to me how viewers refused to engage in conversation with the piece because of the required act of

standing on the flag. This was magnified by the aggressive response by the public, many of whom evoked the horrifying imagery of lynching the artist. (A response that is indicative of the racist mindset that still has a stronghold on many Americans, and perhaps a refusal to want to reconsider the meaning of the flag.)

Walled In engages with the American flag in a similar way. The space is plastered with the symbol in an almost obsessive manner. The image of the flag covers the walls, floor, and mattress that WALDEN lives among. There are three flags in the space, two of which are found draped on the floor. WALDEN stands, sits, covers himself, and even makes love to the flag at various points in the performance. An inspiration from Scott in *Walled In* is the transformation and subversion of the semiotics of the flag. Walden is in clear adoration of the symbol, but is plagued with moments of disgust and abjection. A moment inspired by *What is the Proper Way..?* is during the recitation of WALDEN's poem "Freedom is(nt) Free" in which the character writes on a typewriter his thoughts on the American mind, body, and dream while standing on an American flag.

*"I'm not here to fix the American Body
I'm here to fix my American Body
My American Mind
My American Dream"*
- Excerpt from *WALLED IN*

Trinket

Trinket by artist Pope.L (formerly known as William Pope L) is a large-scale installation first shown in 2015 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.

The piece features a handmade flag that is approximately 54 x 16 feet. The flag features 51 stars instead of the traditional 50. It is also ripped and “distressed” at the edges. This giant flag is found waving in the gallery with the aid of four large-scale industrial fans and will eventually be completely torn over time.

Pope. L describes the flag as a space that inhabits both agreement and disagreement. The grandeur of this handmade flag dominates the installation. To me this evokes many contradictions that are found in American consciousness - such as freedom not being free, and the overlooking and minimization of oppressive actions taken by the nation towards marginalized communities. There is an obvious tension within the impressive stature of the symbolic flag and the eventual destruction that will come over time. Flags, for better or for worse, become stand-ins for the nations they represent. The scale of this piece provokes the question of how truly great a country can be if freedom is only afforded for the few.

The handmade aspect of the flag with the addition of an extra star underscores the theatricality of the piece and adds a critical distance. To me this gesture evokes a representation of a new nation that questions ownership, and pushes for the creation of a new symbol that one can stand behind with pride and gusto. This gesture directly inspired me to make my own flag in *Walled In*. The flag I devised is not the canonical American flag, but my version of it scattered all throughout the set, including a hand painted flag that showcases an additional color: green. This is WALDEN’s attempt at a new wave of American consciousness. It is likewise the only flag that is displayed on a pole.

An American Prayer (The Doors)

An American Prayer is the 1972 album by the American band The Doors that was released after the death of lead singer and frontman, Jim Morrison. The album is notable due to its posthumous creation as the band had already been broken up for some time before Morrison's death. Upon hearing the news of Morrison's passing, the remaining members, Ray Manzarek, Robbie Krieger, and John Densmore, reunited for this final Door's LP. The album is noticeably different from other projects released by the band. This album features Morrison's spoken-word poetry at the epicenter of the album. All of Morrison's vocals heard on the project were recorded before his death. The process then became an audio collage that the other members of the band pieced together and then added music too after the fact.

Jim Morrison as a figure might possibly be what makes the Doors such a mesmerizing and titillating band to follow. His onstage antics are hedonistic, debaucherous, and full of fire. He croons his way through his songs like an off-center Frank Sinatra, and when you're not expecting it, screams a beautiful scream that unexpectedly drops the listener into the throws of a bad psychedelic trip. I believe what is at the heart of The Doors' power: Morrison's poetry.

The process of *Walled In* seemed to mirror the creation of *An American Prayer*. The poetry is at the epicenter, the layers of entertainment and theatrics came at a later date. Morrison is a figure positioned as an American prophet the same way Thoreau. If *Walden* the text is the content, then *American Prayer* is the form.

Campbells soup

Campbell's Soup is an artwork by American pop artist, Andy Warhol. This piece was first shown in 1962. Warhol famously mass-produced images taken from American consumer culture and placed them in a gallery setting.

Continuing with my exploration of American symbols is where I connect to Warhol's project. In his piece he uses Americana as a means to mass-produce the image, the object, and the idea. Through the iconography of Campbell's soup can, Warhol tackles American mass-produced culture. When this piece was first shown, the idea was that regardless of class or race it was possible for folks of all creeds to be eating the same thing - a can of Campbell's soup.

Walled In investigates the concept of mass-produced consumption in a similar fashion. If Campbell's soup can be connected to American hegemonic identity then a more nuanced and personal canned product for WALDEN would be Juanita's menudo. Menudo is a traditional Mexican soup made with hominy and tripe. WALDEN is a second generation American, so his relationship to the soup is not direct but mass-produced and found in a can.

Conclusion

I believe that for this specific iteration, the project has been a success. I did not expect the overwhelmingly positive reaction from my professors, mentors, and community. Even the moments in the performance I was nervous about putting out in the world, specifically the flag desecration/disrespect was met with fruitful conversation from

veterans and non-veterans alike. The most important and terrifying person I was looking to have a conversation with about my work was my father. He is a veteran and lifelong patriot. In many ways, I was raised to have the utmost respect for the country and the flag. He instilled core American values in our family growing up. He feels that this country, and more specifically the military, had given him the opportunities and a hungry hustle that was necessary for him to succeed - and he has. He began with nothing, and now has a beautiful house for his family and multiple business ventures. As a kid, I was raised to be patriotic, but when thinking about my own patriotism, I struggle with the history of this country. The inner struggle I face is that this country will always be the only country I have, despite being of a mixed race mixed identity mixed national origin. The United States is mine and I want to see this place grow, and come to embody the original ideas from the founding of this country. I do not want to see it burned to the ground, but changed. That is why I will always maintain that this piece is a patriotic project. I believe there is nothing more helpful and patriotic than criticizing your country. That is a luxury that many other nations do not offer its citizens. So it is of the utmost importance to take the opportunity while we still have it. I recognize that the flag gestures found in the performance will be taken in a multitude of ways. My own veteran father seemed conflicted. He understood why the gesture was important to the piece, but still was personally hurt by it. It seemed like he saw the flag as an extension of himself and all the success he had achieved was in a way because of what the flag stood for. My father does not feign ignorance though. He is quite aware of the horrors of this country and yet still

stands proud in what this country can be. As we spoke about the piece the conversation became increasingly emotional. He pleaded with me to consider changing the moment because of knowing who he was and all the values he instilled in me growing up. I realized that the piece had achieved the levels of ambivalence and contradiction that I had aimed for, but to hear it from my father directly was a difficult conversation. What really seemed to break my father's heart was that the American dream that was so inspiring to him and nourishing to his being did not have the same effect on his children. I yearn for a new dream. Pine for it even.

A lot of the choices for the performance were made out of necessity and as a means to directly embrace the limitations that come with creative performance art during a global pandemic. Limitations breeds creativity. In this sense the project accomplished everything it set out to do. Moving forward I see opportunities to continue working the strategies that operate within the piece, and deepen the layers that are already present. One way I would do that is to incorporate a live band. I think having a live band integrated into the show as an amorphous, hivemind-like character could add to the world building of the piece, and offer interesting interactions sonically. I believe it may also help with creating the psychic liminal space that the piece is intended to exist in.

I also have a goal of continuously fine tuning this one piece into multiple stand-alone experiences. The live performance and installation will always be the most complete iteration, but if there was one thing the pandemic has taught me in terms of making work, it's that the dissemination of the artwork should be just as

nuanced and as layered as the piece itself. I come from the world of live performance and theater, so nothing will ever beat liveness. But liveness exists in multitudinous ways. Because of the mediated world that most Americans have had to endure for the past year, we now understand that live-streamed presence is not the same thing as physical liveness. The aspirations of Zoom performances is the synthesis of theater, film, and internet culture coming together all at once and creating something completely new. With this in mind, I believe it is necessary to move forward with that understanding and look at the differences in mediums as an opportunity for new modes of expression - in true nepantla fashion. This means I can envision several ways to experience *Walled In* that are substantial and individual, but inform and elevate the other versions of the piece. With the live performance in the center, I hope to create two different forms that extend that liveness. One branch would be a book or zine that centers the poetry and visual language at the forefront. The second would be a film version that takes advantage of the medium to the fullest effect. I can envision different locations, and video manifestations as a means to continue exploring this artwork.

Walled In is just the latest version of a practice I have been developing over a number of years. I have always been inspired by literature. I operate from the written word first and foremost. The title 'poet' is nearest to my heart. This piece draws on my deep love of the history of literature to subvert audience expectations, and then replaces the original with my contemporary version. The practice of 'appropriating' or 'making due', in terms of rasquachismo, is a means to insert myself into the

lineage of the greats and force new conversations that reflect my own marginalized identity. I can't help being inspired by those who came before, and this work of subversion and appropriation is a means to join in on the conversation.

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Supplemental Material: Walled In Script

WALLED IN CABIN: An American Ritual

By: Rey Cordova

SETTING: *Walled In Cabin. A psychic space. A liminal Space. It is a clown show.*

PERSONAE DRAMATIS:

WALDEN..... Of Chicax ancestry. American. A patriot. A clown. Age is unclear. In between.

WALDEN..... (Alias: LAMPIE) A lamp with a cowboy hat. They are big, dumb, and handsome. Best friends with Walden. (AKA:Shit-Face)

WALDEN..... (Alias: SHIT-FACE) A tin foil mask that is attached to Lampie. Is mean and a realist, however has a real "glow" to them.

WALDEN..... (Alias: EL LOVER) A painted tin foil mask connected to a stick. Is Walden's lover.

WALDEN..... (Alias: MICKEY MOUSE) A conglomerate of mostly Disney plush toys. Loves to watch. The audience for Walden's performance.

WALDEN..... (Alias: EL PATO) A painted speaker.

PRESHOW: *We watch a video put together by WALDEN. It gives context to what WALDEN hopes to accomplish. The video is WALDEN seeking aid in his quest to reconstruct the American Identity. He has existed for the last year in solitude - Inside this cabin by himself. This is an experiment. A last hope that some amazing epiphany will occur for WALDEN. His larger goal is to rebuild the United States of America. A country that WALDEN believes to be the greatest country in the world. Or at least was. The country seems to have fallen or been broken up, though it is not clear. This information of the US comes directly from WALDEN. WALDEN is inspired by Henry David Thoreau's performance in his book, "Walden".*

AT RISE: *WALDEN is still sleeping in bed with the rest of his buddies. It is morning. He uses a tarp as a blanket. He wakes up and notices the audience. They are not the usual friends he has around him. Maybe his outward projection in his video worked. WALDEN's one and only goal is to maintain his audience's attention. He craves an audience, but does not want his own narcissism to turn people away. Although he feeds off*

of the energy of people watching. He is mischievous in his quest to put on a good show for his friends. He acknowledges the audience and then completely disregards them. WALDEN is playful with his friends. WALDEN does not speak any words while doing his chores. He only speaks when he finds the poetry to do so.

[TITLE(written): Goooooooood Morning!]

(WALDEN moves MICKEY MOUSE to the front of the cabin and sets them up in front of his microphone so they can watch his performance.)

We Need a New Dream

What's the vision?
Let's pull at the seams, and build a new coat we all can wear.
Our green can't be what unites us. Can it be our red? Can it be our Blue? Can it be our -

Walden

I went to the woods and survived off guts alone -
Intestines made my senses king.
I went to the woods deliberately in search of a new home
Found myself speaking loud, giving myself permission to sing.

Henry David Thoreau spent two years at Walden pond
And now I walled in for a year follow along

I went to the woods to live deliberately

I went to the woods.

I gravitated to the book because of the aspect of solitude and self reflection.

I thought this moment to be an interesting connection
In self imposed restraint and resistance
Thoreau self isolated as a performance
And now I do the same.
Except my wilderness is not tactile
But implicit
I explore the wilderness of the internet
And blindly accepted
Surveillance that has long been present

The woods away from my country

A mirror in disguise
I had to get away
To get within
The woods of my mind

My favorite time of recent is when I sleep.

I have discovered that it is no problem to drift off.
A big departure from what I previously understood about my
circadian rhythm.

And I lay there all day.
Without a qualm.
The responsibilities to be had flash before my brain
And I think and plan and plan and think
But I stay there
And I lay.

I go between my two positions. oh
One of work,
And one of lay.

I sit at my desk and procrastinate
And procrastinate and lay in bed.

Is it just me or has anyone else's lower back muscles gotten
weaker?

The slouch follows me,
And begs me to lay back down.
And so I do.

That is the order, that is the dance. Moving from my desk to
my bed, to my desk
And back to my bed again.

Even though I lay and lay and lay and lay
My back begs me to stop and stop and stop and stop
To sit up straight. To stand straight. And to hold my head
high.
But I lay back down too fast in order to ignore the bodily
request.
I am clever in that way.

I can out maneuver any pain I might have in my back if it
means I can continue laying down.

I don't get up until the absolute last moment I need to get up.

I sleep in, I sleep in, I sleep in.

I used to feel guilt for sleeping in past 9.

I've been trained to be an early riser and late sleeper. The perfect recipe for a hard worker.

Was this part of design because of my ancestry?

But I have rewired my cycles to always be available for me to access.

Sleep is accessible to me - Always now.

This feels radical.

The white kids dont lose sleep so why should I?

The rich kids don't lose sleep so why should I?

-

I went to the woods because I wished I lived to live deliberately.

The only thing I have discovered from this time is that Americans are dramatic.

[TITLE: (written) BREAKFAST]

(WALDEN makes menudo for him and his friends to eat. Talks directly to a Menudo Man.)

MENUDO MAN

Menudo man loves Juanita

Juanita loves Menudo Man

A love spoken out loud

But felt when it can.

In order to enjoy myself do I need to be slow and groggy?

To gain the full effects is it required to be hungover?

Once I grow big strong and mature

Maybe I'll finally understand

One day i'll grow into a menudo man

Menudo Man

Menudo Man

There is one thing I don't quite understand?

Why is it you only eat on sundays

With your head in your hand?

(Campbells is comforting for the soul

But in no ways does it fill the hole
The same way Juanita's does)

Menudo Man

Menudo Man

Why you get your nutrition from a can?

Why do you work so hard?

Is that why you play even harder?

Menudo Man, What is the secret to your energy and relentless
gall

Is it the tripe that makes you stand tall

Or is it the hominy

A harmony of contradictions found in a bowl.

Intestines should not be delicious

And yet here it is.

Is it a reminder that even though there is banging in your
head, house, and job

You too are just as delicious and deep with flavor?

Or is it that you too feel like you've been trapped in a can?

Mass produced and removed from your homeland?

Only celebrated for the finished product and when taken apart

Discarded with disgust.

"Ew tripe. That's intestines. That's not right."

Menudo Man Menudo Man

Help me, help me, if you can.

What if where you now eat is my homeland?

Is it too late for me to become a menudo man?

What if Juanita's soup is the only one I understand?

Does that make me less of a Menudo man?

Menudo man Menudo Man

It's not your job to make me comprehend

I can't begin to understand where you began

But, menudo man menudo man

Can you help me cross this distant land

Hand in hand

Menudo man?

ITS NOT MY FAULT THAT THEY DON'T HAVE TRIPE IN TRADER JOES
MENUDO MAN!

It's not necessarily the broth

Or the bones

Or the tripe

Or the hominy

Its not what comes in the can but what is added.
The hand crafted characters
Cut with care
Not packaged by Juanita,
But picked by my mom.
Picks of cilantro green,
Dried oregano and chile flakes for depth
Raw onion for crunch and
Red Radishes for color
Yellow lemon slice for the juice and the rind.

It makes me remember when I went away and my family asked me
what I needed, food-wise.
And all I replied was with a couple cans of Menudo would do me
right.
Juanitas to be exact. I needed something to look back
And remember thats what I am.
Underneath it all, just another menudo man.
A menudo man that works hard, but plays even harder.
And on sundays when its time to recharge
Engorge, enlarge, and wonder -

" To enjoy Mexican food is to enjoy **life.**"

Menudo Man
Menudo Man
Where is Juanita?
And when can I shake her hand?
When can I thank her?

Can I express my love too
Without the looks askance?

[TITLE: (written) Tension]

*(After WALDEN eats he must relieve himself. He grabs a bucket
and proceeds to excrement. After words he pleasures himself
with the flag as a tool.)*

READY TO DANCE READY TO DIE READY TO CHANT READY TO FLY

Ready to dance
Ready to Die
Ready to Chant
Ready to Fly

Ready to Dance

Ready to die
Ready to Chant
Ready to Fly

The Great American Ritual exists moves forward in a psychic
space
Force ancestors of the land and blood to challenge time and
place
Atrocity exhibitions open for all to see as plain as plain can
be
Self isolation confirming what one already believes
Throw away any ownership of a border

And claim the stench of blood and disorder

Ready to Dance
Ready to Die
Ready to Chant
Ready to Fly

Personal responsibility disintegrates when ghosts walk the
streets
I summon them here to show their face and gnash their teeth
If no one takes responsibility for our original sins it will
be we
Who gather here in this cabin for those who follow my lead

Eat the soup slurp the guts and feel the energy magnify

Ready to Chant
Ready to Fly
Ready to chant
Ready to Fly

*(WALDEN in his drug-like ecstasy writes his new poem.
Inspired - puts on his hand painted button up.)*

FREEDOM IS (nt) FREE

This is the symphony!
This is the great experiment!
The explosion with all the bells and whistles

I summon all the angels and devil me s
All the prophets and sidewalk gurus
I summon all the OGs
Philosophers of the concrete and the streets

I summon military generals

And every single COP

I summon broken windows
And movements in the streets
I summon the rocks that makes the windows DROP

I summon the activists
The politicians
The people
The police

Im not here to fix you!
Im here to fix me!

Im not here to fix the American Body
Im here to fix my American Body
My american mind
My american dream

Im tired of being lost in a world of confusion.

Say goodbye to Jaocuin!
And say hello to me!

I am not the monolith
But the blueprint.

Dressed to the Nines
And sick of this shit

I am not a zapatista
But part of the resistencia
I am not on the front lines
Because the lines are now blurred

Like Gil Scott Heron
The revolution will not be televised
But will be endured
The revolution is happening
Its absurd
That its taken this damn long
That they had to wait for the third
Son. Me.
My brothers and sisters
We
Might disagree -
Fighting is free

And we are sold the thought
That freedom is a luxury
But I disagree
I disagree
I am free
And like Chicano Batman says
Freedom is free
It grows on trees
Fills your lungs
And helps you breath

[TITLE: (written) Reconstruction]

*(WALDEN reconstructs his cabin with Lincoln logs. First
dumping the box on top of his bucket making a loud sound. Then
using it as a foundation.)*

CULTURAL NIHILISM

I'm suffering from Cultural Nihilism

I think the age old cliché question of what is the meaning of
life
Is directly connected to a countries politics

A country is responsible for instilling values within the
citizens consciousness

A country is responsible for the mental health
And when it gaslights its people
The country's brain hemorrhages
And the mind bleeds

There are too many dreams

America's Got a Ghost Problem

America's got a ghost problem
And they are all coming back to get paid.

Their spirits, spectral,
Are angry
Refusing to be turned away.

For,
America's got a ghost problem
And their souls have been damned to stay
Stuck in it's soil,
Never to leave,
Bodies decomposing under the masses feet

And no one thinks a thing
But,

America's got a ghost problem,
And its here to stay
it can't be erased

Maybe its because I was raised
By ghosts that I am not afraid.

Different folks have different ways to say that,

America's got a ghost problem

But to me it's all the ancestors saying
Today is the day.
Not one more death
Or bullshit excuse to discriminate.

Generations of trauma
Flood my veins
Influence my thoughts
And stakes of claim

America. She's just the same

Trauma is as American as apple pie
Or Burritos.

And so America's got a ghost problem
And it's here to stay.

[TITLE: (written) Reckoning]

(WALDEN stands on top of the bucket and speaks candidly.)

In Need of a New Pair of Boots

Is this the mentality of the youth from a young country?
The synthesis of ideas and invasions
The counterbalanced complex contradictions
The citizens are faced with

Is this the mindset that has been ingrained in us?
It feels dangerous
To leave me alone to my own devices
I just want to evade this internal divisiveness

But now im bleeding im bleeding
all over the place
And now im faced with the disintegration
Of identifying with a dying nation.
Can I escape this?
Is it to late for us?

Is it to late?
When there are too many stars in the sky to count
I know I can shine and take my seat with the best of em,
But when I go to sit i'm told
"This seat is taken"
Im sorry. My Bad. I'm mistaken.
I thought this chair was mine in the making.
It's in the same breath where I stand chest out head high but
naked
Undressed disarmed by sayings American.
Maybe if I wasn't so loud, angry, and brown I wouldn't have to
say my name again.
I stand in my boots. Stiff. Tall. But shaken.

We're in need of a new dream.
Me? I'm in need of new pair of boots.

[TITLE: (written) Clean your room before going to bed.]

*(WALDEN cleans his room and begins resetting the cabin to how
it looked in top of show. He tucks in his friends and then
himself. He finishes the cycle.)*

I'd Rather be Feared for my Love than for my Hate

I'd rather be feared for my love
Than for my hate.

I'd rather possess unmatchable love,
Intense and bright,
Than have anger and fear in my heart.

Shun me for how much I love you
Rather than me shunning myself for fear of being known.

I'd rather be a loner due to no one being equipped to love me
back instead of a loner by choice.
Make loneliness a necessity
Not a life choosing.

I hope that when that happens
I will have the strength to continue to love.

I hope my love is bottomless
Despite never finding a vase to fill -
And constantly overflowing.

I hope my love is strong,
And flows regardless of the mess
That spills and fills
And wets my feet, my socks, my shoes,
Wherever I walk.

I hope my love is power
That filters - in and out -
Through and throughout -
The people who can handle my force

I hope my love never waivers
Despite being my only weakness.

I hope my love never betrays me
But when it eventually does -
I hope my love will love me back
And help me nourish my own being.

I hope my love, like a garden,
Will grow til it reaches the sun.

And I like a tree,
Will continue to reach out arms outstretched

I hope my love grows with me

And so I, like my love,
Will become endless, infinite,
Unrequited.

END OF SHOW