

DRAFTS

STEFFANI JEMISON ON THE STROKE, THE GLYPH, AND THE MARK
INTRODUCTION BY HUEY COPELAND



Below, left: **Steffani Jemison, *Same Time*, 2018**, acrylic on polyester film, 20 × 40". From the series "Same Time," 2015–.

Below: **Steffani Jemison, *Same Time*, 2018**, acrylic on polyester film, 20 × 40". From the series "Same Time," 2015–.

Opposite page, left: **Steffani Jemison, *Same Time*, 2018**, acrylic on polyester film, 20 × 40". From the series "Same Time," 2015–.

Opposite page, right: **Steffani Jemison, *Same Time*, 2018**, acrylic on polyester film, 24 × 20". From the series "Same Time," 2015–.





OVER THE PAST TEN YEARS, Brooklyn-based artist Steffani Jemison—whose work will be on view from May 17 to September 22 as part of this year’s Whitney Biennial—has been quietly and intently laboring at the vanguard of Conceptual, discursive, and black cultural practices across a variety of platforms. Her contributions to these multifarious fields, whether in the form of the acrylic glyphs painted on polyester film of her 2015– “Same Time” series or the kinetic pacing of her early video *Escaped Lunatic*, 2010–11, place her alongside fellow travelers ranging from Zarouhie Abdalian to Fred Moten to Hito Steyerl,



figures who likewise move smartly, passionately, and promiscuously among media. Jemison’s means—lecture, sound installation, drawing, photography, video, and writing, as well as their rich conjunctures—have each differently allowed her to examine “‘progress’ and its alternatives,” as she herself puts it, and, I would add, to reframe the determinative coordinates by which we have come to understand the aesthetic as such. Emblematic in this regard is her approach to drawing, which she conceptualizes as both inscription and mark-making, process and product, boundary and expansion, revelation and concealment. This understanding underlines not only her familiarity with established Euro-American genealogies of the medium, but also her investment in those often unacknowledged revisions of it stemming from black vernacular traditions, which manifest in her exhibitions as both tracings and rescriptings in a number of material forms. In the text that follows—originally commissioned in 2017 by the Morgan Library Museum in collaboration with the Drawing Center, both in New York; presented at Chicago’s Iceberg Projects in 2018; and revised specifically for the pages of this magazine—Jemison inducts us into her uniquely capacious world of reference, in which the cryptograms of a James Hampton or a Ricky McCormick can serve to illuminate the problem-space, to borrow a term from anthropologist David Scott, of graphic inscription as it continues to unfold in the Western world within and across the color line. Her words here, then, constitute both a sliver of the intellectual adventure that is her practice and an entry point into her resonant yet resistive installations and the paths of errantry that they open up for listeners, viewers, and other quiet revolutionaries.

—Huey Copeland

I HAVE MADE A MARK, and I do not know whether I am drawing or writing. I am thinking about marks and how they collect on a surface. I have accumulated marks, and I believe that this accumulation is at once a drawing, a text, and an archive. I am thinking, as I am so often thinking, about the proximity of writing to drawing. I am also thinking about how archives are always already oriented toward the future. What is the archive but that which awaits activation? I am wondering about the ways in which drawings are active, are records of activity, are anticipatory. I am wondering about the difference between acting, recording action, and awaiting activation.

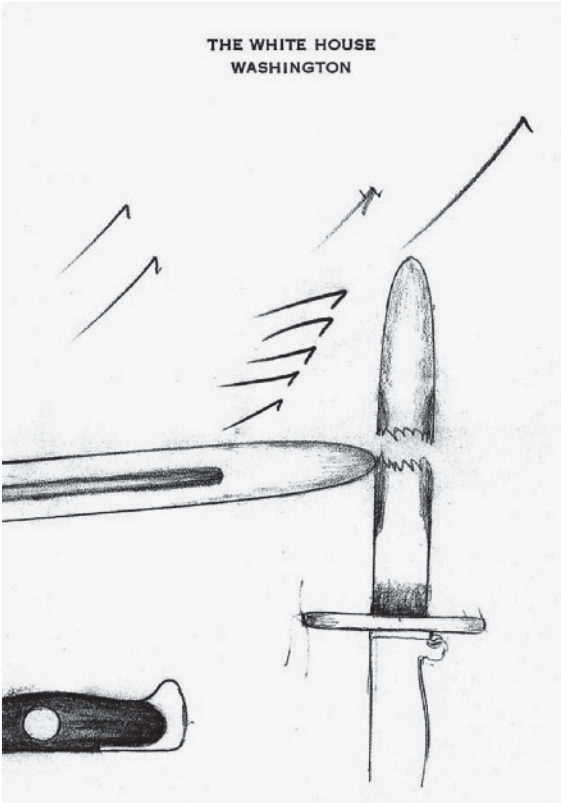
I am thinking that there is a tension between our understanding of drawing as a trace and our understanding of drawing as a proposal. As trace, drawing appears after the fact. “All agree that [drawing] began with tracing an outline around a man’s shadow,” said Pliny. This is to say that, as a trace, drawing appears after the fact, insofar as all representations are belated. And yet, drawings anticipate. “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,” wrote John Berger. Drawing “leans into the future,” he said. Recording the coming into being of ideas, drawings are both *after* and *before*:

I am thinking about what happens when writing is decoupled from communication, or when it is deliberately encoded. I am thinking about automatic drawing and speaking in tongues and spirit writing.

I suppose this is why the logic of drawing can feel something like deferral, a discovery that is also a delay.

But there are other paths to drawing that do not travel through representation. I am thinking, for example, about the thousands or tens of thousands of drawings I have thrown away, drawings on margins and on scraps, doodles—a word that comes from the verb *dawdle*, “to waste time.” I am thinking that the question of doodles as drawings is not an idle one (so to speak). There are, for example, compilations of doodles by past presidents of the United States. I am thinking about what our appetite for these collections implies about how we think of doodling as an index of something else: a state of mind, perhaps, or a capacity to act. I have read that our current president believes, against all medical evidence, that humans are born with a fixed amount of energy that must be conserved rather than expended, and that this is the source of his antipathy to exercise. I am thinking about how, in fact, biologists have observed that energy is created when it is requested by the body. And so I am led to wonder whether doodling, drawing, is a way of continuously generating energy rather than, as some scientists have suggested, simply a form of mild distraction that aids concentration.

I AM THINKING about the stroke, the glyph, and the mark as the constituent components of drawing and language. I am thinking about James Hampton, custodian for the General Services Administration and self-appointed director of Special Projects for the State of Eternity, whose notebooks filled with marks have eluded cryptographers for decades. If they cannot be understood, are they still writing? I am thinking about Ricky McCormick, found dead in a Missouri field in 1999 with coded notes in his pockets that the FBI has not yet interpreted. His father said Ricky “couldn’t spell anything, just scribble.” I am thinking about whether the concept of translation has any meaningful relationship to the activity of drawing or to the drawing object. I am thinking about what happens when writing is





Opposite page, left: **Doodle** by Dwight D. Eisenhower, ca. 1953–61.

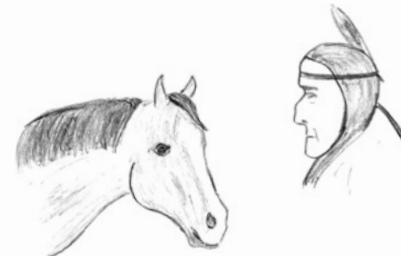
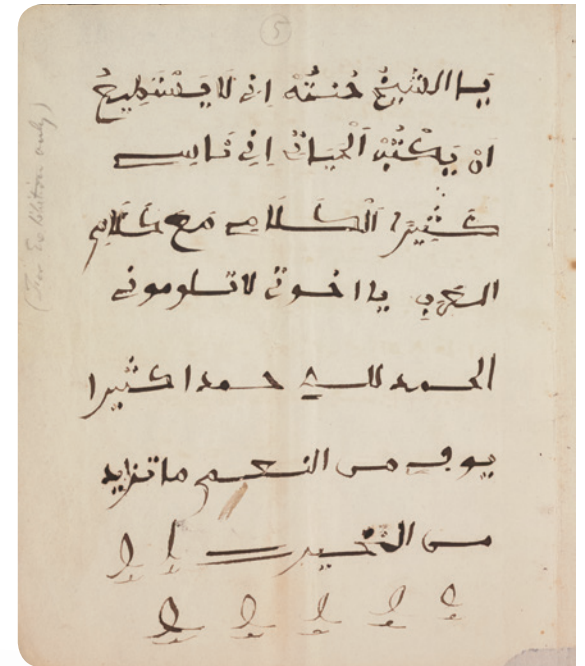
Opposite page, right: **Steffani Jemison, *Same Time*, 2017**, acrylic on polyester film. Installation view, The Meeting, New York.

Left, top: **Steffani Jemison, *WLD (content aware)*, 2018**, UV curable ink-jet print on glass, acrylic, paper, polyester film, 10 × 21".

Left, bottom: **Steffani Jemison, *WLD (content aware)*, 2018**, UV curable ink-jet print on glass, acrylic, paper, polyester film, 10 × 21".

Right: **Page from Omar ibn Said's *The Life of Omar ben Saeed, Called Morro, a Fullah Slave in Fayetteville, N.C. Owned by Governor Owen*, ca. 1831.**

Below: **Doodle by Ronald Reagan**, ca. 1980s.



decoupled from communication, or when it is deliberately encoded. I am thinking about automatic drawing and speaking in tongues and spirit writing. I am thinking about technologies of representation and transcription as symbolic systems from which we are periodically compelled to escape.

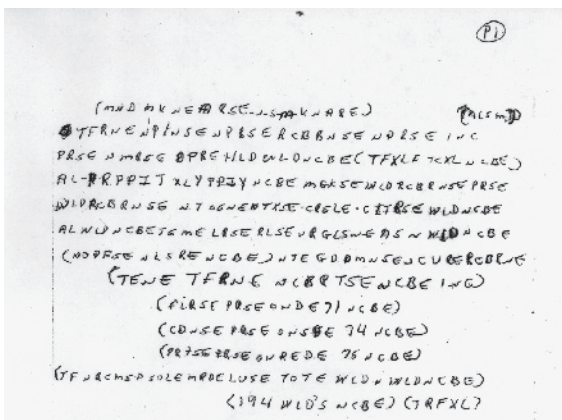
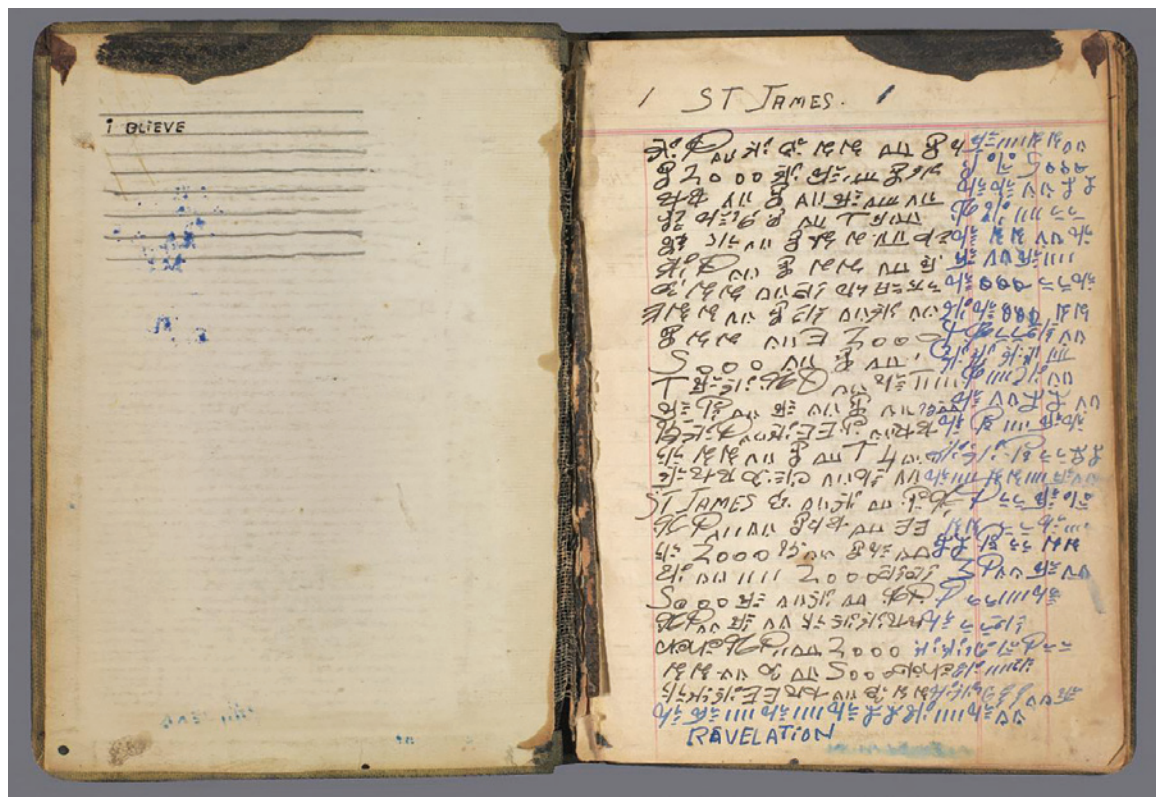
Ellen Butler, born enslaved on a plantation in Louisiana that used to be called Bagdad, said, “When the white folks go off, they writes on the meal and flour with they fingers. Then they know if us steals meal. Sometime they take a stick and write in front of the door so if anybody go out they step on that writin and massa know. That the way us larn how to write.”

Is Butler writing or is she “just” scribbling? Is Butler’s writing a trace? Is it a proposal?

Bartley Townsley, enslaved in Pike County, Georgia, told his miraculous story in the third person, as he would speak of a stranger: “One night, when he had gone to bed and had fallen to sleep, he dreamed that he was in a white room, and its walls were the whitest he ever saw. He dreamed that some one came in and wrote the alphabet on the wall in large printed letters, and began to teach him every letter, and when he awoke he had learned every letter, and as early as he could get a book, he obtained one and went hard to work.”

How long have we been writing on walls?

I am thinking about the Senegalese writer and Islamic scholar Omar ibn Said, who was enslaved in North Carolina. After attempting to escape, he was caught and imprisoned. He covered the walls with demands for his release—but his pleas were written in Arabic. I wonder if his jailers, white men in Fayetteville, North Carolina, in the early 1800s, recognized his writing on the wall as writing at all. I wonder if they thought it was drawing.



I am wondering how a tree is a margin, how a field is a margin, how a wall is a margin.

The poet Phillis Wheatley, who was enslaved in Boston, was a contemporary of Said's. According to her biographer, she "soon gave indications of uncommon intelligence, and was frequently seen endeavoring to make letters upon the wall with a piece of chalk or charcoal." Wheatley, too, was likely literate in Arabic before her arrival in the United States.

Lamen Kebe, born in West Africa at around the same time as Said, and a decade later than Wheatley, was a schoolteacher before his enslavement. Late in his life, Kebe gave an account of the eighteenth-century public-school system established by the Fula in West Africa:

Scholars . . . were seated on the floor, each upon a sheepskin, and with small boards held upon one knee, rubbed over with a whitish chalk or powder, on which they were made to write with pens made of reeds, and ink which they form with care, of various ingredients. The copy is set by the master by tracing the first words of the Koran with a dry reed, which removes the chalk where it touches. The young pupil follows these marks with ink, which is afterwards rubbed over with more chalk. They are called up three at a time to recite to the master, who takes the boards from them, makes them turn their backs to him, and repeat what they were to do the previous day.

And that makes me think of William Wells Brown, formerly enslaved in Missouri, who learned to write on boards that were also walls. He said:

I carried a piece of chalk in my pocket, and whenever I met a boy I would stop him and take out my chalk and get at a board fence and then commence. First I made some flourishes with no meaning, and called a boy up, and said, "Do you see that? Can you beat that writing?" Said he, "That's not writing." . . . I said, "Is not that William Wells Brown?" Give me the chalk, says he, and he wrote out in large letters "William Wells Brown" and I marked up the fence for nearly a quarter of a mile, trying to copy, till I got so that I could write my name. Then I went on with my chalking, and, in fact, all board fences within half a mile of where I lived were marked over with some kind of figures I had made in trying to learn how to write.

Henry Bibb, who was born enslaved in Kentucky in 1815 and founded *Voice of the Fugitive*, an abolitionist newspaper published in Canada, wrote:

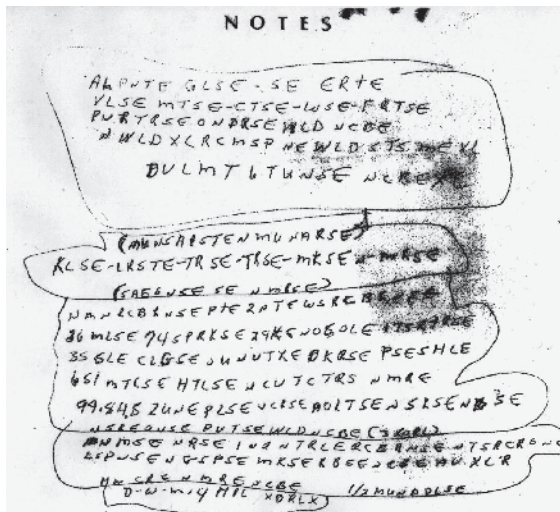
Whenever I got hold of an old letter that had been thrown away, or a piece of white paper, I would save it to write on. I have often gone off in the woods and spent the greater part of the day alone, trying to learn to write myself a pass, by writing on the backs of old letters; by so doing I got the use of the pen and could form letters as well as I can now, but knew not what they were.

In *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, transcribed in 1831 by Thomas Ruffin Gray, the narrator writes:

While laboring in the field, I discovered drops of blood on the corn as though it were dew from heaven; and I communicated it to many, both white and black, in the neighborhood—and I then found on the leaves in the woods hieroglyphic characters and numbers, with the forces of men in different attitudes, portrayed in blood, and representing the figures I had seen before in the heavens . . . and as the leaves on the trees bore the impression of the figures I had seen in the heavens, it was plain to me that the Savior was about to lay down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and the great day of judgment was at hand.

We have moved from writing on floors to writing on walls to writing on the leaves of the trees.

NOW I AM THINKING about hieroglyphics. I am thinking about how this word, *hieroglyphics*, found its way into Gray's heavily mediated nineteenth-century text, and about what that word, implying the history and authority of Africa, implying the power of writing and the secrecy of code, might have meant to Turner, a man raised by a mother, Nancy, and a paternal grandmother, Bridget, both of whom were born in West Africa and may have been literate in Arabic or Nsibidi or Ajami. I am thinking about the way that Turner's revelation in a field pivots between writing and



Opposite page, left: Spread from James Hampton's *The Book of the 7 Dispensation*, ca. 1945–64.

Left and opposite page, right: Notes found in Ricky McCormick's pockets following his death, 1999.

Below: View of "Steffani Jemison: Sensus Plenior," 2017, CAPC Musée d'Art Contemporain, Bordeaux, France. Photo: Jerry Mann.

drawing, between reading and looking, between private and public, simultaneously of labor and leisure, simultaneously of the present and the past. I am thinking about writing from and in the margins, on the floors and on the walls, as a way to generate energy. I am wondering how a tree is a margin, how a field is a margin, how a wall is a margin. I am thinking about how walls can be the most public and also the most private places. In a recent movement workshop, the choreographer André M. Zachery asked me to assume the position of a graffiti writer who was hiding in plain sight. *How would we move?* he asked us. And maybe the answer is: How we always move. I am looking for a route to drawing, and a route to writing, that does not pass through any masters at all, old or otherwise.

I am looking for—no, I am looking at—a path to drawing that is a labor and performance of freedom. I am thinking about the relationship between freedom and withdrawal. What do drawing and withdrawal have in common? To draw is to attract, as in “I draw her toward me,” and to withdraw is to move away; it is a kind of leaning. I am thinking about drawing and leaning. But now I am reading that both are etymologically connected to *drag*, as in “I dragged her toward me,” and *draft*, as in military conscription, or as in a current of air, as in the voice of my grandmother asking me to close the window on a spring day. I am thinking about drawing and dragging. I am thinking about drawing and obligation. I am thinking about drawing and force. I cannot stop thinking about the draft of that window; I cannot stop thinking about drawing and escape. □

