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‘A Thought of Home’
Memorialising Slavery and Narrativising War in
Horace Pippin’s Paintings

Celeste-Marie Bernier

‘It is my desire to go down South, to Georgia, Alabama, North and South Carolina, to paint landscapes and the life of the negro people, at work and at play, and all other things that happen in their every day living.’¹ So reads twentieth-century African American artist, Horace Pippin’s unsuccessful application to the Guggenheim Foundation which he submitted in 1941, five years before his death. While his hopes of ‘going down South’ to paint scenes of otherwise invisibilised Black experiences remained unrealised, Pippin’s self-reflexive, eclectic and yet vastly neglected body of work includes an array of domestic interiors and exteriors dramatising African Americans ‘at work and at play.’ ‘Pippin’s scenes of everyday life include both domestic interior and outdoor scenes,” Judith Wilson observes, adding, “His domestic interiors, however, are the works for which Horace Pippin is best known.”²

Despite their renown, however, Pippin’s domestic vignettes in which he bears witness to the struggles for survival among impoverished African American families have suffered from significant critical neglect and under-theorisation. During his lifetime and in recent decades, they have been subjected to repeatedly reductive generalisations and imprecise commentaries within mainstream art historical studies. Any and all such problematic analyses run the risk of minimising, if not entirely eradicating, Pippin’s relationship to social justice and radical protest, both fundamental yet almost entirely unexamined concerns that undergird the vast majority of his oeuvre. As another on-going source of difficulty, a no less problematic assumption emerges from a widespread critical determination to accentuate Pippin’s apparent regionlessness and

timelessness. Over the decades, these dominant tendencies have had the nefarious effect of decontextualising Pippin's bodies of work by abstracting historical specificities and flattening interpretative possibilities when it comes to doing justice to the hard-hitting social, political, cultural, and aesthetic contexts of his multi-layered paintings in which he provides emotionally compelling dramatisations of the 'life of the negro people, at work and at play.'³

Recognizing the extent to which a determination to memorialise "the life of the negro people, at work and at play" undergirds Pippin's practice, this article works to recuperate the elided ambiguities and ambivalences of his multifaceted yet under-examined, narrative-driven tableaux by investigating the following works: *After Supper, West Chester* (c1935), *The Whipping* (1941), *Domino Players* (1943) and *Barracks* (1945). Coming to grips with his elliptical symbolism, I examine the thematic and formal difficulties confronting Pippin's attempts to represent the 'everyday' as his oeuvre encapsulates tensions between a graphic will to display on the one hand and a refusal to tell on the other. More particularly, and as works rarely situated within lists of Pippin's paintings and burnt-wood panels seemingly documenting everyday living, I recuperate *The Whipping* and *Barracks* within the context of his domestic interiors and exteriors. In incontestable ways, both works testify to generations of Black strategies of resistance in the face of an individual and collective exposure to trauma not by emphasizing the exceptional atypicality but rather the 'everydayness' of slavery as a historical institution and of World War I as a modern phenomenon. In this regard, Pippin's consciousness-raising works challenge dominant and typically exclusionary constructions of the everyday in order to shock his white audiences into a realization that harrowing and horrifying experiences were a routine reality for African Americans fighting for the rights not only to 'work and play' but even to survive the sacrifices required by the daily struggle for existence in US society.

The purpose of this article is to implode generic boundaries by challenging the existing criteria within which we define Pippin's body of work – as repeatedly demarcated according to

seemingly clear-cut categorisations related either to World War I, slavery, history, religion or domesticity – in order to interrogate the artificiality of any such interpretative barriers.

Consistencies emerging from a preoccupation with political and psychological ambiguity bleed across his works to provide categorical confirmation of Pippin's preference for an aesthetics of disjuncture rather than an aesthetics of didactic explication. Fighting for authoritative control over his material, on the surface, Pippin relished in seemingly explicatory, dramatic visual vignettes of Black male and female bodies at 'work and at play.' Probe deeper, however, and his commitment to the failures of visual representation - as he worked to foreground understatement, lacunae and fragmentation – speak in categorical ways to the absent-presences integral to his hard-hitting reimaginings of a gamut of Black experiences.

In powerful yet distinct ways, as I argue here, *The Whipping* and *Barracks* exist on a continuum with Pippin's domestic interiors and exteriors, *After Supper, West Chester* (c1935) and *Domino Players* (1943). Across these works, he bears witness to his determination to extrapolate the complexities of 'every day living' as endured by African Americans and as experienced, not only within a context of working class domesticity, but against the backdrop of the historical institution of US slavery and the contemporary reality of European warfare. Across both of these works, he varyingly took inspiration from oral testimonies within his own family regarding intergenerational memories of slavery and also from his own experiences as a combat veteran who had survived the horrific violence of World War I while fighting in the Fifteenth New York National Guard. More particularly, as *The Whipping* reveals, slavery as a legal institution in which Black bodies were bought and sold and according to which the 'child followed the condition of the mother' remained a defining feature of Pippin's psychological and aesthetic landscape. As recuperated alongside his domestic vignettes, this work in which he dramatises the historical realities of the inhumane system of human bondage poignantly testifies to the fact that Black domestic life remained fraught, if not entirely taboo, terrain for early

twentieth-century African American artists struggling to defeat the survival of slavery's legacies in on-going racist discriminatory practices. Determined to see the unseeable, Black painters, print-makers and sculptors such as Elizabeth Catlett, Lois Mailou Jones, Archibald Motley, Jr., Laura Wheeler Waring, Dox Thrash, Augusta Savage, Jacob Lawrence, Malvin Gray Johnson and William H. Johnson, no less than Horace Pippin himself, fought not only to dramatise but to dignify the lived experiences of Black women, children, and men who had remained beyond the pale of white dominant representations by circulating solely as fodder for white racist burlesques and grotesque caricatures.

Across his experimental visual tableaux, Pippin ultimately divorces his works from any potential associations with sentimentality or nostalgia by adopting an aesthetics of rupture and resistance. Working to expose the tragedies, traumas and tortures facing past, present and future Black families, he sought to expose the difficult and unresolved conflicts that were necessarily embedded in all attempts not only to memorialize but even to begin to represent untold let alone unimaged domestic vignettes. Pippin assumed the role of a painter turned reporter, chronicler and witness in order to testify to the harrowing realities that defined the attempts at 'everyday living' by African American women, children and men. As Pippin realised only too well, for African American families fighting for survival in a white supremacist US nation in which systems of discrimination, persecution, and segregation remained the order of the day, the realization of a utopian vision of Black domestic freedoms required the imagination of an artist who had dedicated a life-time to 'seeing the unseeable' of a 'dream-deferred.'⁴

A Black Radical Re-envisioning of an 'Everyday' that was for Whites Only

As a theoretical touchstone and an intellectual trope, the ‘everyday’ remains a slippery and ideologically charged concept not only with regard to Horace Pippin’s body of works in particular but vis-à-vis African American visual culture more generally. As a motif riven with fissures of race, nationhood, class and gender within a white US ideological framework, for critics such as Elizabeth Johns a key difficulty arises regarding ‘whether the art-historical definition of genre painting as scenes of everyday life might not obscure their relationship to the complex social world in which artists created them.’⁵ Working with the view that any such homogenous categorisations are profoundly flawed and necessarily imbued with a white supremacist ideology, she complicates all potentially static and ahistorical constructions by contextualising and periodising the everyday in order to interrogate ‘just what the ideology of “everyday life” has been over time.’⁶ As she observes, African Americans have been among the greatest casualties of totalising narratives regarding representations of the everyday in U.S. culture. Mapping eighteenth and nineteenth-century trends in particular, Johns generalises, ‘most [presumably white] painters depicted blacks only in relation to whites (and characteristically, only one to a picture).’⁷ More damagingly still, she identifies the reductive strategies of stereotyping perpetuated by white artists, noting that, ‘Blacks in the earliest stories and caricatures were amusing, servile, and lazy’ as they are repeatedly included ‘on the sidelines, in service positions, and are male.’⁸

Pippin’s early twentieth-century domestic tableaux exist in stark contrast to these stereotypically caricatured and racist representations as circulating within a white supremacist imaginary by constituting a radical re-envisioning of all such grotesque burlesques and wholesale distortions of the lives of Black women, children and men. Across his multifaceted oeuvre, Pippin was one of a number of Black artists who dedicated his practice to reconstituting dominant representations of the ‘everyday’ by introducing psychological interiority and thematic ambiguity for African American subjects into the domain of fine art. Above all else, his works

bear witness to Ben Highmore's conviction that, 'To invoke the everyday can often be a sleight of hand that normalises and universalises particular values, specific world-views.'⁹ As an artist who was engaged in recuperating individuals and subjects as typically considered beyond the pale of mainstream representations, Pippin's domestic vignettes reinforce Highmore's emphasis that the critical onus is upon scholars to recognise 'the "everyday" as a problematic, a contested and opaque terrain.'¹⁰ Furthermore, Highmore's insistence that scholars interpret 'the everyday as both problem and possibility' has direct bearing upon Pippin's multi-layered dramatisation of Black daily lives as lived in social, political and cultural perspective.¹¹

In categorical ways, Highmore's definition of the everyday as encompassing 'the agency of individuals in daily life, forms of resistance or non-conformity to social structures, a stress on feelings and experience' is indispensable to a theoretical summation of Pippin's aesthetic practices.¹² Pippin foregrounds Black authority rather than victimisation, Black radicalism as opposed to passivity and Black psychological interiority over and above a grossly caricatured physicality. As Cornel West argues, 'Pippin's art portrays black people as "fully themselves" – that is, as they are outside of the white normative gaze that requires elaborate masks and intricate posturing for black survival and sanity.'¹³ As an artist who self-consciously rejects the authority of a white normative context, Pippin's vignettes of everyday Black lives defamiliarise dominant default filters as inextricably associating blackness with spectacle and performativity. Far from explicatory, didactic or packaged for white consumption, his multifaceted Black protagonists come to life in layered narratives and symbolic compositions characterised by formal and thematic ambiguity. Creating a body of work as freed from the racist injustices perpetuated by monolithic and prescriptive constructions, Pippin's everyday constitutes a highly charged arena in which he not only politicised and interrogated but also displaced exclusionary paradigms. Ultimately, the responsibility lies with us as critics as we

must read against the grain of oversimplified scholarly discourse in order to identify Pippin's under-examined, if not entirely distorted, self-reflexive aesthetic practices.

In this regard, and as explained in part by his 1940s art historical context, Holger Cahill's reference letter accompanying Pippin's Guggenheim application sought to fix his work within reductive categorisations. 'Mr. Pippin's work is in the category of popular, or folk art, and is closely related to the everyday life of the Negro people,' he writes.¹⁴ Ever adept at experimenting with composition and colour symbolism in a deliberate interrogation of representational possibilities, even a brief examination of Pippin's radical subject-matter and aesthetic practices testifies to the ways in which his works defy all such straightforward demarcations. As a critic who was intent upon overworking the link between Pippin's paintings and 'the everyday life of the Negro People,' Cahill epitomized an early yet very real trend among critics who were determined to exalt in his status as a documentarian and reporter of Black life rather than as an artist and visual storyteller who was engaged in breaking down white centric notions of the everyday. In one fell swoop, Cahill dismissed Pippin's signifying complexities as an artist by insisting, 'It is sincere and honest work, with the simple undeviating honesty of a child's work.'¹⁵ Working with such reductive terms as 'honest,' 'sincere' and even, 'simple,' Cahill's analysis has proved the rule rather than the exception by maintaining its grip upon contemporary analyses in recent years.

Tellingly, as an artist who was self-consciously and cerebrally engaged with his aesthetic process, Pippin admitted to fusing intellectual thought with artistic realisation in the few surviving commentaries in which he mapped his painterly practices. 'The pictures which I have already painted come to me in my mind, and if to me it is a worthwhile picture, I paint it,' he declared, authoritatively adding, 'I go over that picture in my mind and when I am ready to paint it I have all the details that I need.'¹⁶ Far from solely a necessity – he had a war injury which had disabled his right arm and which initially meant that painting was slow, painful work

– Pippin attached profound importance to conceptualizing his paintings in abstract terms before even countenancing a more physical engagement in the practical application of paint to canvas or hot poker to burnt-wood surface. Interestingly, a variation on this statement is recorded in an unpublished handwritten fragment found in the papers of Robert Carlen, his dealer, and which has Pippin admitting, ‘I think my pictures out with my brain and then I tell my heart to go ahead.’¹⁷ On these grounds, any decision to separate Pippin’s emotions from his philosophy of art as an intellectualised process reanimates rather than destabilises critical frameworks that are otherwise intent upon celebrating his status as a transcendent visionary naïf as stripped of the particularities of his social, political and historical contexts.

Few critics in the early period, or even those writing more recently, have been able to extrapolate Pippin’s commitment not only to radical subject-matter - as he actively rendered Black children, women and men complex protagonists rather than types in his work - but also to an experimental aesthetic vision. In forceful ways, he relied upon visual symbolism and compositional artifice to lend further force to his ground-breaking reimaginings of otherwise distorted black histories. Cultivating multifaceted aesthetic techniques, Pippin’s vastly neglected domestic interiors and exteriors functioned as the defamiliarising lens through which he juxtaposed historical and contemporary political injustices in order to address on-going Black struggles for survival in the contemporary fight, not only for equal rights, but also for an imaginative inner life. As John Roberts incisively suggests, ‘the scholarly tendency to conceptualize him a priori as a vernacular artist results more from his pronounced tendency to turn to the everyday experiences of African Americans for inspiration and subject matter than from his process of creativity.’¹⁸

In conjunction with theorising the interpretative limits presented by any attempt at recuperating Pippin solely as a ‘vernacular’ artist rather than as an artist, period, Roberts’ insightful observations identify a problematic trend among critics who are determined to posit an

artificial split between Pippin's aesthetic practices and his thematic concerns. As his eclectic body of works demonstrates, Pippin's "process" – i.e. his symbolic use of composition, colour and characterisation - represents the visual lexicon without which his narrativisation, no less than his memorialisation and reimagining, of everyday experiences for Black women, children, and men would be rendered null and void. Regarding his artistic practices, as Pippin himself explained, there were no accidents. As concerned his use of colour symbolism, for example, while on the surface he admitted to a straightforward palette – 'The colors are very simple such as brown, amber, yellow, black, white and green' – in the same breath he outlined a design ethos characterised by meticulous precision and methodical organisation. 'I take my time and examine every coat of paint carefully and to be sure that the exact color which I have in mind is satisfactory to me,' he insisted. Furthermore, Pippin admitted to a preference for compositional layering techniques by declaring, 'I work my foreground from the background. That throws the background away from the foreground. In other words bringing out my work.'¹⁹ As an artist who deliberately works with contrasts, Pippin's visual ambiguities arise from self-reflexively formulated, artful juxtapositions. In a deliberate refusal to focus solely on the difficulties of representing his subject-matter, Pippin repeatedly urged that the aesthetic process was key to his practice. Ultimately, he chose not to foreground the difficulties of representing white racist inequalities or "what is doing in the South today" but of art-making itself. 'Art,' he readily admitted, 'came the hard way with me.'²⁰

'I wonder if I will see it aga[i]n:' Home as Memory and Myth in *After Supper, West Chester*

For Horace Pippin, a World War I combat veteran living in a white supremacist US society, the concept of home and of domesticity more generally remained an unattainable abstraction and

even an illusory fantasy. As a man who fought a daily battle to survive not only the persecutory realities and daily discriminations enacted by US national systems of segregation but also the traumatizing memories of war following his military service in the front line trenches in Europe, home was a highly emotive and politically charged arena. While the concept and even the memory of home had nostalgic overtones for Pippin by remaining a source of redemptive, if deferred, solace, it was also a touchstone for loss and trauma. During a particularly prolonged stint in the front line trenches, Pippin went so far as to admit in one of his unpublished autobiographical fragments that the concept of home was more myth than matter. ‘So I layed down, and a thought came to me. A thought of home, and I could see it right in frount of me [sic],’ he declared, expressing doubt, ‘I wonder if I will see it aga[i]n.’²¹

For Pippin as a soldier suffering the daily tragedies of war, ‘home’ was so far abstracted from reality as to exist solely as a ‘thought’ and as such, occupied as imaginative a realm as his paintings which similarly appeared to him ‘in my mind.’ The fact, then, that the ‘thought of home’ existed on a par with the painterly process itself lends credence to its indisputable importance not only as a defining trope but also as a galvanising intellectual and moral force across his oeuvre. As Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson observe, ‘*Home* is the deepest theme in Pippin’s work,’ on the grounds that, ‘*Home* represents the past – everything that Pippin knew as a young boy about life among black people, their lives, religious felling, and activity, as well as the beauty of nature.’²²

Recognizing the vital role played by home in Pippin’s works, Judith Wilson emphasises that the “majority” of his domestic interiors and exteriors ‘depict scenes that probably are based on the artist’s memories of his childhood in Goshen during the 1890s.’²³ One such early example is *After Supper, West Chester* dated circa 1935.²⁴ An emotionally challenging work, any in-depth examination of the formal properties and thematic concerns of this painting - not only on its own terms but also in relation to a preparatory pencil sketch Pippin completed that same year –

testifies to the psychological and formal ambiguities in this painting. Pippin's politics and poetics of symbolic mirroring generate formal tensions via his complicated use of asymmetry as he adopted a visual call and response relationship across this work in order to accentuate the painting's disparate parts. Doubled yet non-identical sets of inanimate objects – houses, trees, rugs and sky – and animate subjects - white and grey-coloured women, children and babies – immediately rupture any pretensions to symmetrical uniformity and actively work to destabilise seemingly straightforward interpretations or surface readings of this work. The two young girls who stand together at the centre of the painting are a source of complexity. While he chose to paint the physiognomy of the girl on the right white, that of the girl on the left is far more ambiguous as Pippin instead relied on a light grey tone for her skin pigmentation. Similarly, while the one visible eye of the 'white' girl on the right is coloured blue, the more racially ambiguous figure on the left has black eyes at the same time that the former wears a grey hat and the latter a brown hat, both pieces of clothing which operates as metonymic signifiers that are symbolically suggestive of issues related to racial difference and his contemporary era of segregation. More tellingly still, while the 'white' girl's facial features are barely delineated, the detailed physiognomy of the girl on the left not only reinforces her black eyes and eyebrows – significantly angled downwards as if to suggest a frown – but also her mouth which is set in a hard line perhaps to insist that race relations remain fraught terrain even in 'everyday' moments of 'play'.

The visual tensions in *After Supper, West Chester* are further bolstered by even a cursory examination of Pippin's graphite sketch which he completed in the same year and in which he boldly rendered racial differences explicit.²⁵ Here, he employed heavy pencil shading for the face of the girl on the left - whose hair he also coloured black - while the physiognomy of the girl on the right remained white at the same time that he coloured her hair a very light grey. Further accentuating clothing differences in this sketch, he compounded racial differences by

addressing class issues: the 'grey' girl on the left wears a plain straw hat decorated only by a black ribbon while the 'white' girl on the right is distinctive for her ornate, multi-layered bonnet. For Pippin as an artist who was preoccupied with dramatising all political inequalities, racial differences remained synonymous with social and economic disparities. On the surface, therefore, and in contrast to his radical and ambivalent sketch, Pippin seemingly constructed a redemptive narrative of racial integration in his painting on the grounds that his racially ambiguous and visibly emotionally conflicted, grey-coloured female protagonist reaches her hand out to the white girl in a gesture of friendship. In compelling ways, however, and on a closer reading of this work, her forceful facial expression betrays an anger and resentment which must be sublimated if the promise of integration is to be realised: no such psychological sacrifices appear to be required of the white female protagonists in this work in vindication of Pippin's protests against the on-going imbalances of power as perpetuated by unending and unjust racist hierarchies.

Pippin's inclusion of further significant symbolic motifs challenge any easy assumptions that he deliberately transformed his dystopian vision of segregated realities into a utopian projection of social equalities in the transition of this work from sketch to painting. As a no less emotionally conflicted painting, Pippin introduced symbolic tonal variations in *After Supper, West Chester* via the darkened grey, blue and pink wash of the sky which palpably resonates with the expressionist skies dominating his war-torn landscapes, including, *Shell Holes and Observation Balloon: Champagne Sector* and *Outpost Raid: Champagne Sector*, both of which were painted only a few years before in 1931. The thematic significance of transposing a sky characteristic of his war paintings onto one of his domestic vignettes is impossible to miss: Pippin self-consciously sought to translate the horrors of military combat into the terrifying struggles confronting Black subjects fight for survival in segregated civilian life.

More damningly still, Pippin adopted a limited colour palette as consisting primarily of whites, blacks, browns, greens and greys to suggest a muted colour range in this painting. At the same time as exposing his economic difficulties - clearly he was forced to use commercially prepared paint in this early period – this emotionally charged palette denied his viewers the possibility of cathartic uplift or emotional purging that would have been presented by an intensified use of a contrasted colour scheme. In this regard, it is no surprise that Pippin dramatised the white baby on the right of this work as holding a toy aeroplane, an object which recurs in his work as a repeated staple not only of his World War I paintings but also of his Holy Mountain series in which he depicted an Arcadian idyll in his striving for spiritual reconciliation and an inner peace from the outer turmoil of racist brutalities. Self-reflexively layering works such as *After Supper, West Chester* Pippin's multifaceted domestic vignettes complicate dominant representations of US 'everyday living' by rejecting white mainstream trends towards rendering Black bodies alternately hyper visible and hyper invisible yet never psychologically complex during an era of "Jim Crow" segregation.

Home as a Historical Site of Violence and Violation in *The Whipping*

Appearing a few years later in 1941, Pippin created his hauntingly powerful burnt-wood panel, *The Whipping*, by burning the tip of a hot poker onto a disused piece of furniture.²⁶ As a work occupying the same symbolic and political continuum as his domestic vignettes, in *The Whipping* Pippin translated his previously metaphorical emphases upon inequalities of segregation - as visualised in paintings such as *After Supper, West Chester* - into explicit interrogations of slavery and its social and psychological traumas. As a searing, graphic and uncompromising work whose colour and compositional contrasts reinforce its drama, in *The*

Whipping Pippin provides a dystopian reimagining of his domestic tableaux. Here he engaged in deliberate strategies of repetition with variation to heighten the unnatural horrors of the scene by including a triptych of two white men and one Black woman which exists in powerful call and response relation to the triptychs of Black women and children populating his paintings such as *Suppertime*, *Giving Thanks* (1942), *Saying Prayers* (1943) and *Interior* (1944). By comparison however, these works not only include no white men - as the Black women and children are 'fully themselves' by engaging in domestic rituals of cooking, sleeping, washing, quilting and playing – but there is also an explicit removal of any trace of Black manhood. Across his oeuvre, Pippin not only eulogised cross-generational community networks between grandmothers, mothers and children but also created a displaced forum within which to condemn slavery's legacies via the unending history of widespread persecutions of Black men which repeatedly resulted in the removal of Black fathers and the annihilation of normative familial structures.

Any initial view of *The Whipping* would seem to confirm Pippin's explicit spectacularisation of the enslaved Black female body as an objectified proof that he exhibited solely as evidence of white male inhumanity. And yet, Pippin's artistic practices immediately and radically problematise any such readings by rendering his commitment to psychological interiority inescapable: his is an understated, even minimalist, representation of an indecipherable Black female corporeality which works to retain emotional ambiguity via a refusal to tell – or a refusal to visualise - in this burnt wood panel. As shown here, a stripped, half naked Black body is tied to a wooden post while folds of a black dress are included so as to render her female identity clear-cut. In contrast to domestic works such as *Supper Time* in which a Black woman prepares a meal for her family, regardless of her impoverished surroundings, here Pippin's Black female protagonist who is neither at 'work' nor at 'play' is faceless, bodiless and powerless to defy white inhumanity. Far from a caricature, she is instead a faceless

archetype as Pippin fought to dramatise the typicality and ‘everydayness’ of Black female suffering during slavery.

Taking Black facelessness to another level of abstraction and understatement, however, the physiognomy of this anonymous, barely delineated enslaved female body is left blank while the textures of her skin are animated solely by the untreated wood grain. Such an evocative aesthetic device results in inexorably uniform, horizontal thin black markings which cut across her torso seemingly to render her suffering yet more visceral via a displaced reference to scarification. In formal terms alone, therefore, this enslaved woman’s body is texturally indistinguishable from the exteriors of the slave cabins as represented in the background to the work. An emotionally hard-hitting work, Pippin denied her experience any pretensions to atypicality on the grounds that he represents her physical self as literally blurred with communal enslaved life. More powerfully still, Pippin painted a series of thick red lines onto the woman’s naked torso to foreground her body as a site of suffering. Whereas he relied upon red in his domestic vignettes variously to symbolise black female spiritual resilience as a source of light, creativity by appearing as a design feature in quilts and rugs, survival as heat from a stove and idiosyncrasy via patterning on clothing, here red is a clear-cut signifier of tragedy.

Furthermore, in contrast to *After Supper, West Chester* in which the sky is evocative of Pippin’s military landscapes, here he drenched the ground in the same dark reddened tone used to incise marks on the enslaved woman’s body. Such a tactic effectively rendered the horrors of slavery viscerally inescapable and in ways which resonate powerfully with the atrocities of war by symbolically evoking the terrain on which black and white bloodied combat was enacted during World War I. Condemning slavery no less than war as a national sin, Pippin’s colour symbolism generates further stark juxtapositions via the bloodied black body, the dark blue horizon and white-skinned slaveholders all of which combine to denounce the racial exclusivity of national freedoms by replicating the colours of the United States flag.

Furthermore, as a figure standing symbolically between the white male aggressor and the body of the enslaved woman, Pippin introduces another white man into the middle ground of the painting. Thematically integral to the scene, this white man directly confronts not only the horrific whipping itself but also the viewer as if to inscribe the act and art of bearing witness as integral to the interpretative dynamics of this work. Distinctive solely for his non-specific, unreadable facial features, this white man functions as a type and therefore as a touchstone not of white social engagement and philanthropy but of passivity in a complicit voyeurism. Here Pippin artfully problematised the act of looking by critiquing white audiences for their failures of seeing. More radically still, the white man's presence accentuates a powerful absence: in contrast to a historical reality in which eighteenth and nineteenth-century public whippings were staged as compulsory viewing for Black men and women as a form of visual terrorism during slavery, here Pippin includes no Black audiences.

On the surface, Pippin's backdrop of deserted yet homogenous slave cabins seemingly accentuates his Black female subject's vulnerability and isolation. And yet, as recuperated within the context of his multifaceted domestic interiors which strip away such uniform facades to show a gamut of African Americans at 'work' and at 'play,' Pippin's technique reifies a visual poetics of withholding as politically and socially indispensable to Black individuals as they fought to retain their autonomy in an imaginative inner life by engaging in strategies of masking, indirection and understatement. Therefore, if *The Whipping* is read alongside his series of domestic vignettes in which he explicitly visualised untold acts and arts of 'work and play,' then Pippin's facades of a homogenous group of cabins included in the background to this work are revealed to be just that: a façade behind which lie narratives of Black agency and individualism. By adopting a comparative perspective across his works, Pippin's aesthetic strategies in which he is working to defy white racists tendencies to commodify and objectify Black bodies become

clear as he repeatedly rejected the dominance of the white gaze in favour of asserting the autonomy and interior ambiguity of his Black protagonists.

The 'life of the negro people... at play.' Home as a Site of Resistance in *Domino Players* (1943)

As a work he painted in oil on composition board, Pippin's most famous domestic interior is *Domino Players* which he created in 1943.²⁷ Showcasing his ease with creating multiple narratives within a single work, as Judith Wilson argues, 'Each picture shows family members engaged in routine activities in a single multipurpose room.'²⁸ Ostensibly a far less emotionally fraught or dramatically ambiguous work either than *The Whipping*, or even the highly charged subject-matter of *After Supper, West Chester, Domino Players* foregrounds Black female freedom in play and leisure as opposed to subjugation in labour. While two Black women participate in a game of dominos, an elderly female figure is seated to one side as she constructs a multi-patterned, richly coloured quilt. In this regard, this painting exists in a powerful visual call and response to many of his other works – *Saturday Night Bath* (1941), *Asleep* (1943), *Saying Prayers* (1943), *Sunday Morning Breakfast* (1943), *Interior* (1944), and *Christmas Morning, Breakfast* (1945), among them – in which Pippin similarly foregrounded an array of objects - headscarves, rugs, quilts, clothing and dolls – no less characterized by multiple patterning and a rich array of colour in order to animate and aesthetically transform his otherwise grey, brown, black and white compositions.

As dramatised in *Domino Players*, Pippin celebrated acts of creativity by emphasising his Black female protagonists' imaginative transcendence over their impoverished surroundings as graphically dramatised here and elsewhere in the exposed brickwork on barely plastered walls, scattered fragments of plain furniture and snow laden wooden window frames. Furthermore, as

one of, if not the only work in Pippin's oeuvre in which a Black woman is shown quilting, black female artistry is foregrounded over and above resilience through labour as dramatised in other works such as *The Wash* (c.1942). More revealingly still, Pippin celebrated such diverse forms of creativity in a deliberate bid to align his Black female characters with his own role as artist. Here he dramatised the complexities of slavery's legacies as residing not only in poverty and non-traditional familial structures – the father is again absent here – but also in creativity via quilting traditions and cross-generational survival through the dissemination of oral histories.

In comparison to *The Whipping* therefore, both *After Supper* and *Domino Players* include an extraordinary level of detail – ornate headscarves, stoves, lamps, clocks, buckets, kettles, pipes, toys – to resist stereotypical emphases upon documentary exposé in favour of dramatizing the complexities of multidimensional Black lives as lived in the interstices of poverty and social injustice. Engaged in acts of being 'fully themselves,' his Black female subjects sit in meditative pose as Pippin typically resisted widespread tendencies towards objectification by accentuating psychological complexities in emotional interiority over and above reductive physical realities. Across his bodies of work, Pippin memorialized the acts and arts of survival undertaken by Black men, women and children in order to shore up his radical protest against the dehumanizing realities of disenfranchisement, marginalisation and segregation.

Home is a Battlefield: *Barracks* (1945)

As a work Pippin painted in 1945, a year before he died, *Barracks* is a domestic interior with a difference.²⁹ Seemingly a million miles away from his female dominated familial scenes, here he dramatized Black men as off-duty soldiers as they appear seated on their bunks rather than

around a kitchen table. As a complex variation upon his scenes of civilian Black family life, Pippin replaced the wooden boards and kerosene lamps of his numerous domestic tableaux with snow covered floors and half burned candles in order to emphasize the difficulties characterizing Black military living conditions. Clearly, despite being painted in the wake of World War II, here Pippin sought to memorialise his own autobiographical experiences during World War I. In the foreground, two uniformed Black men are shown half-dressed as they bend over white shirts which they appear to be mending. As I argue elsewhere, ‘This painting celebrates the strength, endurance and heroism of African American manhood as soldiers retained normalcy and an illusion of home by performing domestic chores even when surrounded by the paraphernalia – guns, ammunition, backpacks – of war.’³⁰ And yet, another reading becomes possible if we consider *Barracks* in light of Pippin’s earlier preparatory work, *Study for ‘Barracks,’* in which he introduced red flecks onto these white garments.³¹ Perhaps his decision to include this red paint reveals his determination to suggest that these men were in fact attempting to get blood out of their clothing: any and all such horrifying splatterings are missing from these shirts in the final painting. As is clear from the revisions Pippin similarly made to his pencil sketch preparatory to painting *After Supper, West Chester*, many of his early studies provided the artist with a testing ground for radical motifs which he subsequently reconfigured or even removed from the final work.

As a scene not of military conflict but of make-shift pretensions to domestic living, *Barracks* exists as a bathetic work which not only “suggests that black heroism can be found in everyday activity” but also heightens the horrors of war by visualising Black struggles to retain normalcy in the mundanities of daily life over and above seemingly spectacular moments of exceptional trauma.³² These dramatic ambiguities attest to the importance of recuperating works such as *Barracks* within the context of Pippin’s familial domestic interiors and exteriors as he sought to deflate war of its exceptional associations in favour of dramatising its untold everyday

realities. Across Pippin's World War I illustrations and paintings more generally, we are repeatedly confronted not with battle scenes but with the paraphernalia and 'everydayness' of war as he chose to document the day-to-day experiences of Black combat soldiers as, in addition to undertaking domestic duties (including mending clothing and equipment), they went on marches and guard-duty at the same time that they engaged in surviving the daily hazardous life in the 'dug-outs.' In a bold move, Pippin shattered mythic conceptions of war as a stage upon which exceptional feats of heroism were performed as he instead defined Black heroism as the ability to survive the everyday rigours of military life. In this painting, Pippin's decision to introduce white symbolic shadows behind his Black male subjects - which are otherwise missing from his *Study for 'Barracks'* - not only establishes that his final paintings typically constitute far from diluted reinterpretations of his seemingly more radical preparatory works but also that his fundamental aim was to aggrandise the injustices of segregation by reimagining these inequalities through a default filter of war. 'By contrasting the naked upper bodies of the two soldiers in the foreground with the white shadows projected behind them,' I suggest elsewhere, 'Pippin symbolically evoked the ways in which segregation in military combat reinforced tensions in race relations.'³³

'Don't tell me how to paint:' Pippin's "Everyday" Acts and Arts of Resistance

'I went over seas with the old 15th inf. Fighting no 369 inf,' Pippin writes in 1920, admitting, 'this Brought out all of the art in me.'³⁴ As a defining emotional experience of his life and as a catalyst to his aesthetic production, war clearly operated as a physical and psychological site of political and aesthetic conflict for Pippin. '*But I can never forget suffering, and I will never forget sunset.* – that is when you could see it, so I came home with all of it in my mind and I Paint from it to Day,' he urged.³⁵ Across his works, Pippin sought to translate the seemingly

aberrant, unnatural and cataclysmic horrors of war into a familiar, recognisable milieu with which his audiences could identify. Given his predilections towards romanticised, epic translations of everyday mundanities, Pippin was clearly preoccupied with translating the horrors of war into an awe-inspiring and sublime ‘beauty’ that was capable of affecting his audiences in forceful ways.

Directly confronting the difficulties of visualising atrocities such as slavery and war, Pippin’s works not only expand the concept of the ‘everyday’ far beyond any seemingly conventional construction of familiar domestic vignettes but also, and of necessity, redefine this concept to encompass his visual translations of the oral histories of slavery as well as his own direct war-time memories. Across his oeuvre, he put flesh onto the bones of the unwritten and unmemorialised daily life not only of enslaved men, women and children but also of Black combat soldiers similarly annihilated by stereotypical distortions enacted by the white mainstream imagination. Refusing to satiate audiences intent upon experiencing a cathartic, no-holds barred spectacularisation of human suffering, Pippin fused the symmetrical uniformity of minimalist compositions with a limited colour symbolism to provide understated, yet provocative, explorations of slavery’s horrors and war’s psychological damage.

As Cornel West tellingly observes, Pippin’s preoccupation with ‘every day living’ can be understood as inextricably linked to an overall determination to push the boundaries of aesthetic process as he sought to realise an individualised painterly vision. Seeking to dramatise his theoretical and philosophical commitment to black everyday life, both imagined and seemingly real, West emphasises Pippin’s ‘artistic affirmation of the everyday experiences of ordinary people’ which he recognises as ‘anti-elitist but not anti-intellectual.’³⁶ As he writes, ‘they are expressions of a rich Emersonian tradition in American art that puts a premium on the grandeur in the ordinary and quotidian lives of people.’³⁷ Coming to grips with Pippin’s radicalised resistance to hagiographic, nostalgic fantasies of slavery and war as well as of

poverty and social marginalisation, West notes that he worked within a ‘tradition’ which ‘promotes neither a glib celebration of everyday experiences nor a naïve ignorance of the tragic aspects of our condition.’³⁸ Refusing to comply with dominant aesthetic practices, ‘Don’t tell me how to paint’ was Pippin repeated refrain to white patrons.³⁹ He provided self-reflexive rather than ‘naïve,’ multifaceted rather than one-dimensional, socially critical rather than quiescent narratives and histories of African American modes and means of resistance and survival.

In revealing ways, Pippin’s domestic interiors and exteriors exhibit his credentials as a historian and storyteller as he not only engaged in a political critique of white racist inequalities but also in a radical and revisionist reclamation of the social and cultural inner life of Black families at ‘work and at play.’ As considered against the backdrops of slavery’s legacies and war’s injustices in maintaining racial segregation, his vignettes assumed the role of mythical dramatisations of ‘the everyday and the ordinary.’ Across these works, Pippin generated interrogative, emotionally charged and yet ultimately imaginative recuperations of domestic idylls which he exposed as repeatedly off-limits to African Americans living lives mired in social and political disfranchisement. Clearly, as Cornel West argues, ‘Pippin’s art still reminds us of how far we have *not* come in creating new languages and frameworks that do justice to his work.’⁴⁰ An existential and profoundly philosophical, spiritual and politicised artist, Pippin relied on painting not only as a means of exorcising his ‘blue spells,’ but also as a means to protest against national acts of violation and violence as repeatedly enacted against Black women, children and men.⁴¹ And yet, however much he was intent upon protesting against Black poverty and experiences of white racism, Pippin refused to lose sight of aesthetic issues. There can be no doubt that compositional, formal and colour arrangements continued to provide the structuring and thematic foundations of his practice. Refusing to create paintings in a documentary vein, Pippin’s most forceful acts of protest arose from his self-appointed role not only as a historian and a storyteller but as an artist for whom the act and art of representation constituted a

declaration of independence and an end in itself. As Pippin insisted, his repeated preoccupation was with doing justice to ‘My life story of art, that is my art, and no one else.’⁴²

Denying white audiences the opportunity to objectify and commodify Black experiences, Pippin aggrandised ‘everyday living’ as a site of ‘suffering’ and “sunset’ and therefore as an ambiguous terrain that was capable of encapsulating Black male and female acts and arts of psychological and intellectual resistance in the face of on-going social, historical and political injustices. Rejecting dominant narratives and histories which tended not only to distort but to oversimplify the psychological as well as the physical complexities of Black life as lived in the United States, Pippin’s domestic interiors vindicate his commitment to art as a source of both radical revisionism as well as of aesthetic possibility. Resisting the dominant scholarly tendency to read his oeuvre solely as social and political commentary, any analysis of these works’ aesthetic dimensions ultimately testifies to Pippin’s conviction that the only way to combat serious bouts of depression – ‘I am in a Bad way at this time’ – was by urging those around him, including his white dealer, Robert Carlen, to remember ‘how Important art is.’⁴³

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Endnotes

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¹ Pippin, 'John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Application,' 1941, n.p., John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Archives.

² Judith Wilson, 'At Work and At Play' in Judith Stein, ed., *I Tell My Heart: The Art of Horace Pippin* (New York: University Publishing, 1993): 139.

³ For further information on Pippin's life and work see my recent intellectual and cultural biography: *Suffering and Sunset: World War I in the Art and Life of Horace Pippin* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015).

⁴ Langston Hughes, 'Harlem [2]' in Arnold Rampersad, ed., *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* (New York: Vintage, 1995): 426.

⁵ Elisabeth Johns, *American Genre Painting the Politics of Everyday life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991): xi.

⁶ *Ibid.*, xi.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 19, 25.

⁹ Ben Highmore, ed., *The Everyday Life Reader* (London: Routledge, 2001): xvii.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, xvii.

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¹¹ Ibid., 4.

¹² Ibid., 5.

¹³ Cornel West, 'Horace Pippin's Challenge to Art Criticism' in Judith Stein, ed., *I Tell My Heart*, 49.

¹⁴ Holger Cahill, 'Reference,' Horace Pippin John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Application, 1941, n.p.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Pippin quoted in Sidney Janis, *They Taught Themselves: American Primitive Painters of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Kennikat Press, 1942): 189.

¹⁷ Robert Carlen, 'Pippin – Horace – Feb 22, 1888,' n.p. Robert Carlen Papers, Archives of American Art.

¹⁸ John Roberts, 'Horace Pippin and the African American Vernacular,' *Cultural Critique* 41 (1999): 32.

¹⁹ Pippin quoted in Sidney Janis, *They Taught Themselves*, 189.

²⁰ Pippin, 'Horace Pippin Explains His Holy Mountain in *Encyclopaedia Britannica Special Number*,' *The Art Digest* April 1 (1945): 44; Horace Pippin, 'Letter to My Dear Friends,' n.d., 2. Robert Carlen Papers, Archives of American Art.

²¹ Horace Pippin, *Series 1: Horace Pippin Notebooks and Letters. Handwritten Notebook entitled, '[t. Mihiel, Heaviest Champagne Argonne, Hear]'*, circa 1920, 10, Horace Pippin Papers, Archives of American Art.

²² Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African American Artists From 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993): 361.

²³ Wilson, 'At Work and At Play,' 139.

²⁴ A full colour reproduction of this work is available online here:

<https://www.beverlyamitchell.com/after-supper-west-chester-by-horace-pippin.html>

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²⁵ A reproduction of this sketch is available online here:

<https://www.alamy.com/after-supper-artist-horace-pippin-american-west-chester-pennsylvania-1888-1946-west-chester-pennsylvania-dimensions-14-x-22-18-in-356-x-562-cm-date-ca-1935-museum-metropolitan-museum-of-art-new-york-usa-image213315918.html>

²⁶ A full colour reproduction of this work is available online here:

<http://reynoldahouse.org/collections/object/the-whipping> I discuss this painting in the following video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X4w1-pFnr8>

²⁷ A full colour reproduction of this work is available online here:

<http://blog.phillipscollection.org/2019/02/12/horace-pippins-domino-players/>

²⁸ Wilson, “At Work and At Play,” 139., 42.

²⁹ A full colour reproduction of this work is available online here:

<http://blog.phillipscollection.org/2015/04/24/horace-pippins-barracks-heads-brandywine/>

³⁰ Celeste-Marie Bernier, *African American Visual Arts* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2008): 111.

³¹ A full colour reproduction of this work is available online here:

<https://www.beverlyamitchell.com/barracks-study-by-horace-pippin.html>

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 112.

³⁴ Pippin, ‘Letter to My Dear Friends,’ n.d. 1-2, Horace Pippin Papers, Archives of American Art.

³⁵ Ibid., 2.

³⁶ West, ‘Horace Pippin’s Challenge,’ 44.

³⁷ Ibid.

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³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Pippin quoted by Claude Clark in an interview in Judith Stein ed., *I Tell My Heart*, 15.

⁴⁰ West, 'Horace Pippin's Challenge,' 53.

⁴¹ Pippin quoted in Stein, *I Tell My Heart*, 24.

⁴² Pippin, 'Letter to My Dear Friends,' 1.

⁴³ Pippin, 'Letter to Robert Carlen,' October 25th 1945: n.p. Robert Carlen Papers, Archives of American Art.