Genealogies of Forgetting and Remembering

Lauren Frances Adams

Tell me, oh muses, how to make sense of White people in a White supremacist country. How to remember, rather than to forget.

I began researching my family history a few years ago when my mom shared an artifact with me. The faded papers, written in muted inks and flowery cursive script, suggested links to the farm where my father grew up in North Carolina. Dated 1800, it contained a name I recognized, the ancestral namesake of my father. As I scrutinized the text, words and letters pulsed in and out of recognition, *bequeath*, *plantation*, *pocosin*, like a secret message rendered in invisible ink, breathing to life in front of me.

Studying this document has been a powerful force in my queries about American history, and my motivations as an artist. It details the property in eastern North Carolina that my dad and his siblings inherited after their father's death. This land was apparently bequeathed across generations, beginning with the British land grants system in the Carolina colony. I am still piecing together the exact chain of deed from the 17th century.

Amongst the items my ancestor intended for his descendants, such as a feather bed, books, and farm tools, he names eleven enslaved people to be divided amongst his heirs. These ancestors of mine were enslavers, a fact that has spurred my pursuit of genealogical research, and prompted me to question what it means to be a White person in America seeking out our past.

The cartographies of North Carolina's eastern shores allow me to overlay various maps to pinpoint the progressive spatial encroachment of White settlers on the land. Tracing the peculiar shape of the Pamlico River, early European maps sometimes label this area with variations of the word *Secotan*, designating an indigenous settlement present in the late 1600s. The 1733 Moseley map conveys a significant erasure, with Secotan rubbed away and replaced with my ancestors' surnames. Described as planters, colonial families, and first families, these 'allied families' crushed native settlements while transforming the pocosin landscape and establishing their dominance, foreclosing the broader possibilities of cross-cultural kinship for centuries.

In conversations with Mequitta about the connections between our genealogical research and our artist practices, we have discussed our shared understanding of how difficult and exciting this work can be: The thrilling mysteries encompassed by document fragments that complicate linearity and require operating on hunches and circumstantial evidence. Regarding the sometimes little interest in this research by family or culture at large, what Mequitta's works elegantly create is a space where the past is sensitively rendered into the present. A great deal of imagination is necessitated, aided by Mequitta's established commitment to self-representation as a form of self-invention. Mequitta's aesthetic inquiry yields rich questions about family documents as visual artifacts. Who is speaking? Who does not speak? What are the consequences of the privileging of speech for some and the denial of speech for others? One method that Mequitta uses in the *Black-word* paintings, of text curving cryptically within her compositions, questions these formations of speech. Her ancestors' conditions and legal status, as mediated through letters between White people, is both tangible and just out of reach. These paintings reinforce the necessity of reading between the lines, or against the grain, harnessing the pictorial power of informational gaps within the complex slippages and fragmentations of family history and art history.

"What tangled skeins are the genealogies of slavery!," Harriet Jacobs precisely observes in her memoir, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.[1] Jacobs was born in the early 1800s in Edenton, N.C., less than 40 miles as the crow flies from where my family was living, and in close proximity to where Mequitta's ancestors, Milly Morris, Henry Knox, and their seven children lived.

Genealogy is more than establishing a pedigree—for me, it is an opportunity to trace cartographies of privilege and denial, oppression and resistance. My capacities as a visual artist are called on with great depth and even greater obligation. This work is more than DNA tests and familiarity with the typical structures of a probate file, just as painting is more than pre-mixed color charts and rote mechanical facture. This kind of research requires inference, and above all, as Mequitta's work proves, imagination about how to connect with and emancipate narrative.

Sometimes I am astonished that documents exist that detail my ancestors' lives, then I pause and reconsider how I came to be desensitized to the close proximity of the past. And the catastrophic reasons why my ancestors have papers, and other families do not. Jacob's considerations of the White people of her time provide a clue: "Yet few slaveholders seem to be aware of the widespread moral ruin occasioned by this wicked system. Their talk is of blighted cotton crops—not the blight on their children's souls." Twice recently I have encountered documents that show my ancestors, as minor children, being tasked with 'drawing lots' to divide chattel slave property amongst their White elders.

If ditches were used to reinforce the boundaries of their private property, what great ditch is carved within us?

The past isn't past—this phrase is a frequent reminder when talking about America. A close rhetorical cousin: Chattel slavery as a stain on American history. As if, with mere scrubbing and the right solvent, the stain will dissolve. If it is a stain, then great effort has been expended to build structures to strategically forget those stains. Entire apparatus have been built within legal and social codes to erase from our collective memories the unjust foundations and ongoing human rights abuses within the plantation realities of this country. The stain has been papered over, pathologies of silence bequeathed across generations who do not speak of these traumas. Whiteness architected to exclude and mirage the past as a distant and unreachable site, or denial that it happened at all (and that if it did, it wasn't that bad). This refusal of shame for the "wicked system" continuously precludes actionable abolition and meaningful reparations.

"We know…that whoever cannot tell himself the truth about his past is trapped in it, is immobilized in the prison of his undiscovered self," writes James Baldwin in his 1962 essay, *The Creative Process*.[2] Baldwin offers a possible solvent, that the American artist has a particular opportunity in confronting the 'dangers produced by our history.' Baldwin clarifies this task while naming the cost, "But the price of this is a long look backward whence we came and an unflinching assessment of the record."

If the artist's responsibility is to wage a lover's war with society, as Baldwin invokes, then the consequences of failing to reckon with these histories is oblivion. As Mequitta and I step forward to claim our family histories, we hope to yield Baldwin's charge—towards an inner and outer reconciliation, of oneself within the collective *we*. In *Black-word*, Mequitta does this by "unburying" her family story. As an artist, my work the past 20 years has developed out of a commitment to the historic decorative arts as a critical site for engagement. The visual language of ornament is often misunderstood or discredited—a disturbance to the established yet dubious symmetries of narrative figuration and abstraction. Where some may see limitations in surface designs like wallpapers and textile patterns, I see the potential to manipulate the aspirational authoritative taste they promote (which I liken to the "what we wish to be" in Baldwin's essay). Ornament, when widely presumed as patterned background noise, functions as a metaphor for the supposed neutrality and status quo of Whiteness in this country, and for the mythic domestic sphere of innocent White womanhood.

Since antiquity, the artist's muse has become a

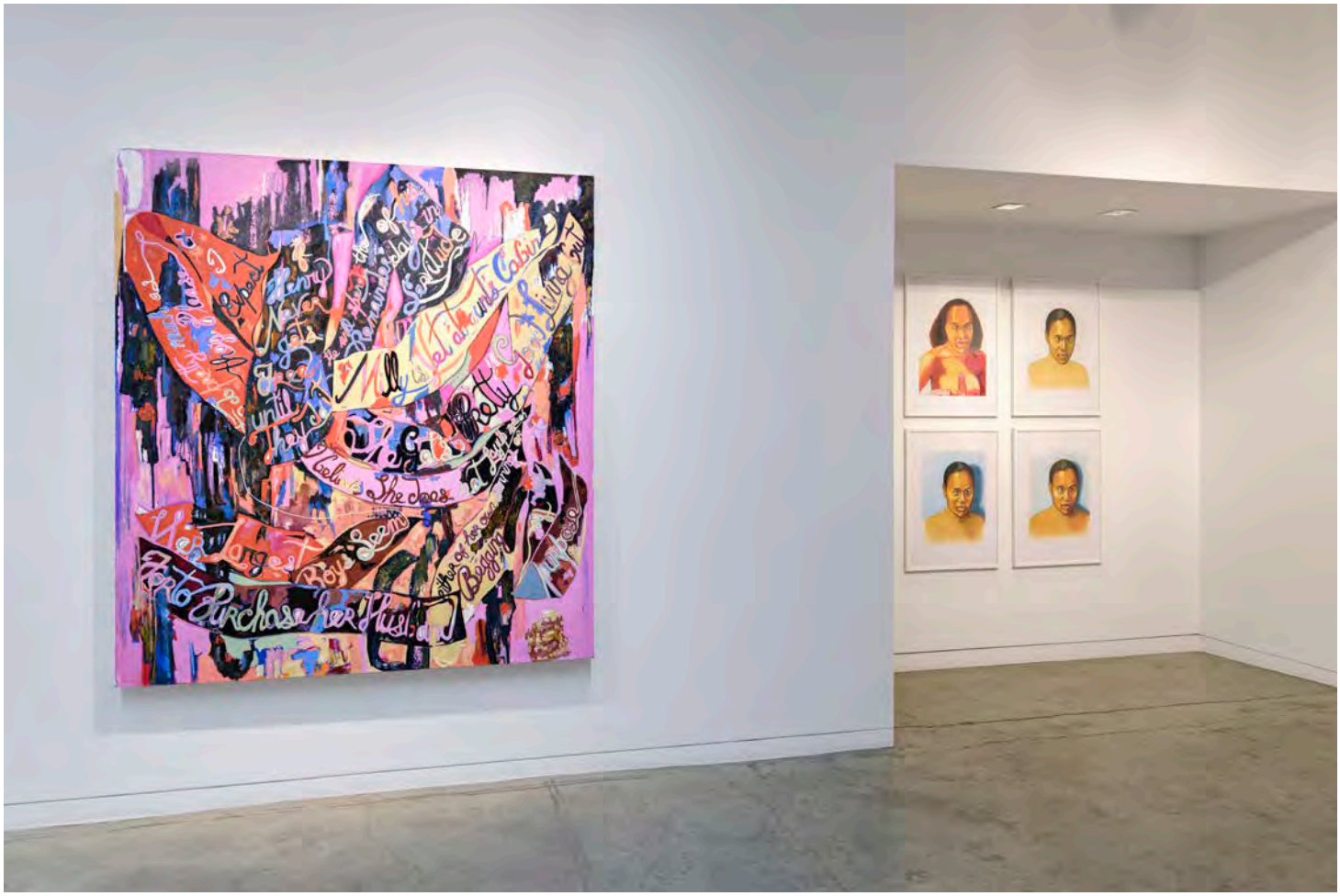
symbol of the divine ignition of pure inspiration. In Greek mythology, Mnemosyne is said to be the mother of the muses, though mythological genealogy, like that of our mortal realm, can be indeterminate. The goddess Mnemosyne represents remembrance and memory. Her daughters with Zeus, the nine muses, were praised in Hesiod's *Theogony*[3] as embodying the *forgetting of misfortunes and the cessation of worries*. In antiquity, Mnemosyne represents the critical role of memory in transference of oral histories. Is this theology of inseparable intergenerational contradictions, such as in the case of the muses and their mother, that of forgetting and of remembering? In *Black-word* Mequitta forces us to look backward, refusing the forces that buried her family story to have the last-word. In striking, monumental paintings, she forces us to linger in the past as we recollect our shared American story. In my family research, and my motivations as an artist, I seek a titan inheritance, making muses out of silenced collective memory, out of American histories of Whiteness and White supremacy. Through genealogical research, I muse on recollected kinship—those ancestors who were enslavers, and those ancestors who, in one will, bequeathed to their survivors, "all the collards in the garden."

Notes

1 https://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/jacobs/jacobs.html

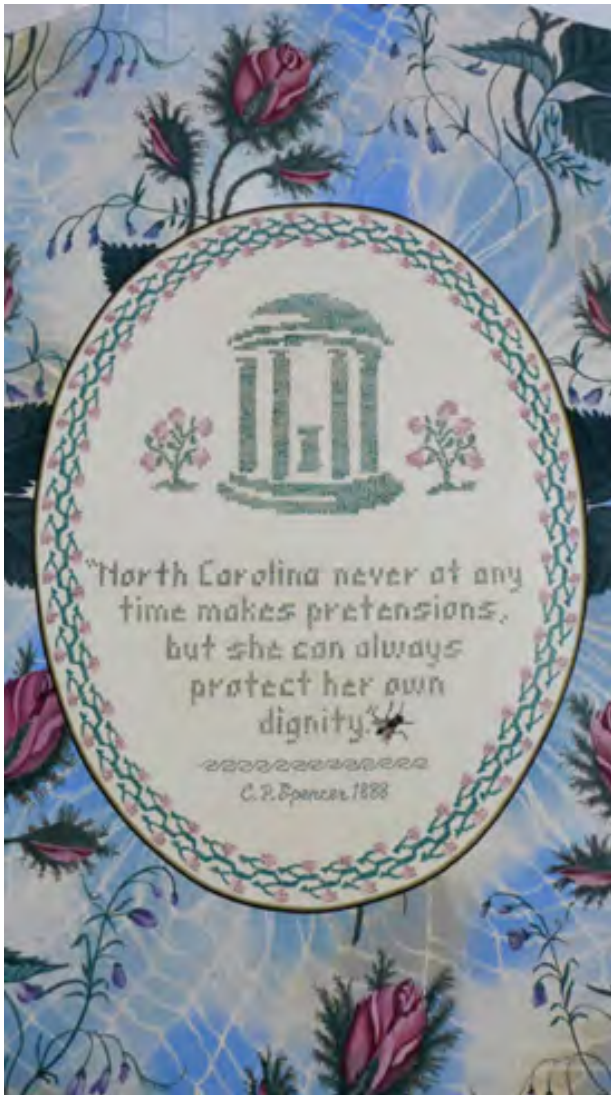
2 https://www.camramirez.com/pdf/P1_Week2_Baldwin_Berger.pdf

3 https://chs.harvard.edu/primary-source/hesiod-theogony-sb/


To Purchase her Husband

That Fly!

Mequitta Ahuja



Lauren Frances Adams, *In Faithful Remembrance of Cornelia Phillips Spencer and to the Truth-Loving People of North Carolina.* A site-specific installation in the former home of Cornelia Phillips Spencer, now the Center for the Study of the American South at The University of North Carolina. Fire screen detail. 2020. Photograph by Denver Dan.

In nineteenth-century home decor, decorative framed paintings were affixed to stands to block from sight the gaping, sooty, black maw at the heart of the house. Liberated from its domestic function, Lauren Frances Adams' fire screen (pictured above) occupies two sub-genres of still-life painting—*trompe l'œil* and *memento mori*—trick of the eye and remember death. The still-life genre is replete with flies. Renaissance and Baroque painters positioned the nasty bugs on everything from ladies' head scarves to the eye sockets of meticulously rendered human skulls. Within the memento mori tradition, flies are vivid reminders that flesh is temporary while rot of the soul lasts forever.



Cousin, 2022, Oil on canvas, 84 x 72 inches

"That fly!" I exclaimed to Lauren when I first saw her fire screen. "It tells me everything." What we're looking at is an allegory, a fact that Lauren makes clear with her medium: paint, not needlepoint, and with that fly, like a blood stain on a white dress. My still-life painting *Cousin* (pictured left) is also an allegory. Both works record a state of tension. In Lauren's, the friction is between the bug and the needlepoint, the depiction and the medium, and the civil tone of the gendered female speaker on behalf of the gendered female State in tension with the state of moral death the speech aims to protect: slavery and the Lost Cause. This work exemplifies Lauren's public-facing, history-driven art. It's also characteristic of the similarities and differences between our two artistic practices. Lauren does not seek herself, yet she obliquely finds and forthrightly implicates herself as southern, White, female-gendered, and the inheritor of privilege gained from chattel slavery.

Early morning—my view of the sky is turning rainbow as the sun rises beyond the carefully articulated line where my grass touches trees. I'm in loungewear, sipping tea from my shining carafe that sits atop a gleaming, Modernist serving tray. Nothing escapes my aestheticizing rule, not my cookie, not even my sinuous stainless-steel stirring spoon. I am researching my family history from my laptop computer. Advancing page by page through probate files is tedious work, but suddenly, in the file of her enslaver, I find my great-great-great-great aunt. It's as if the words are called out over an auctioneer's hammer strike: "*Juliet and five children*." My ears fill with static, and my vision blurs as my and my ancestor's contrasting spheres collide.

In *Cousin,* I present my ease and sumptuous environs at home and in the archive in contrast to my subject of study—my Black ancestors during slavery. I position my current-day comfort as prefigured by the past. I descend from enslaved people, slaveholders, and Free People of Color who were free decades before national emancipation. While some of my ancestors were enslaved, crucially, my maternal line was free. Though Lauren is a White woman and I am a Woman of Color, we both recognize ourselves as privileged, and each of us views myth-breaking as part of our responsibility. Ours is not a meritocracy; we are products of the past. Lauren and I research the same time and territory—eastern North Carolina during slavery—from two different points of entry. Lauren sought history and found herself. I sought self and found history.