

WOMEN AND MIGRATION(S) II



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35. 'These Bones Gonna Rise Again'

A Womanist Reclamation

Michelle Lanier

This story begins with dirt, spit, and a visitation.

In the predawn darkness of 19 October 2020, my eyes flashed open from a dream I couldn't name. I had been spending the autumn months of the pandemic tending a lingering garden of late herbs and cherry tomatoes, ripe with climate change, too sweet with the determined warmth.

Kudzu still hummed with cicada, a sistrum sound of the Eleusian Mysteries. In this case Demeter and Persephone were played by Black and Southern women, linked as mother and daughter, and rooted in red clay earth and stolen topsoil.

That morning was exactly four months after the Juneteenth Uprising of Raleigh, North Carolina, pulled bronze Confederate statues down to eye level.

By October, the grass under their obelisk perch had been re-sodded in unassuming grass by Black, Coharie Indian, and Lumbee Indian hands. My own Blackness joined the chorus of Confederate dismantling work. More than twice we napped in our cars, well past midnight with snipers watching overhead.

In the hot afterglow of taking down symbols meant to press me small, sleep was a slippery fish, slick to slide out of my grasp.

Sleepless solace came in the form of diving into the ocean that is genealogy.

Under dark and full moons I searched, found, and met ancestors in census records, phonebooks, military registration cards, birth certificates,

newspaper articles, marriage licenses, and death certificates. I also found even more of my people and myself in my own DNA, including a long-lost uncle. I had spit in a vial for science and learned that my roots were a virtual snapshot of the Carolina slave trade: Nigeria and England, Mali and Spain, Cameroon and Norway, all swimming in my veins, and more. There are at least sixteen nations listed in my DNA results, all directly touched by the routes of slaving ships. Like many, it appears I am, through and through, the daughter of those pulled across the sea.

One English-descendant man, named Benjamin Bunn, it was confirmed through DNA, is my Great-great grandfather.

He was a Confederate officer and his daughter Leah Lindsay (of Edgecombe County, North Carolina) is my Great-grandmother, born of a Black woman, named Sallie. Benjamin was married to a white woman, but had one, perhaps two daughters by Sallie.

I told the spirit of Benjamin he owed us.

I went to his Black daughter's grave, Leah Lindsay, and told her tombstone that the crumbling monuments were for her.

This conversing with ancestors is not new to me, nor is it new to what I call my AfroCarolina and AfroSouthern people.

We believe, without irony, that our ancestors talk to us in the presence of a red bird, the sudden burst of rain, a kiss of a breeze, a hawk overhead, and in dreams.

Frances Birdsall McCullers woke me with a dream. In it she asked, "You're not gonna check on me? You only care about the shiny negroes?"

My eyes opened.

I had been puttering around the Internet for genealogical clues, when a chilly awareness grabbed my attention. My personal research had avoided my father's father's people, the McCullers. A sojourning people, a people of black cauldron laundering, cinder block churches, sharecropping, widow work, and journey stories, they were fairly mysterious.

Here's what I know. It comes down to dirt.

There is a township called McCullers, in Wake County, North Carolina. Once rural, this piece of earth now boasts impatient drivers, multi-lane roads and fast-food biscuit spots. It is supposed to have held the plantation once populated by my people. I am still in search of this land.

The first McCullers in our family, I am told by my father, was given as a wedding present, delivered to a Carolina, slave-owning bride, all the way from Mississippi.

The elders said his name was once Boylan, but was changed to McCullers, a tribute to their white wedding vows, like an engraved silver dish. The tether to Mississippi and her sister, Alabama, was greed, white cotton, and black dirt.

Wagon trains of enslaved agricultural engineers were walked on foot, for the expectation of their laboring hands.

My paternal ancestor was made to walk in reverse, Mississippi to North Carolina, instead of the other way around.

His wife, Frances Birdsall, somehow survived the south-eastern caravan, too. After freedom, Frances became a domestic, a nurse, and a laundress. Her son married Georgianna, widowing her young. She too became a laundress. Georgiana's son, James, went to war in Italy and studied chemistry at Shaw, the oldest HBCU in the South. He jitterbugged, he juke jointed, he met Willie Catherine (the blacksmith's daughter) at an all-Black USO dance, and later worked in administration for the United States Post Office.

The couple left AfroCarolina and her ancestral bones, and went to Philly. Up and down that road they wove a cat's cradle of paths, birthing the babies, bringing them south, raising the babies, bringing them north. I am the daughter of their oldest son, and somehow, I'm the one the dirt called home.

So when Frances woke me, feeling like a tap on the shoulder, accompanied by questions, I dug and found her death certificate, which listed her burial ground as Boylan Chapel Cemetery.

The cemetery is 8.4 miles from my house.

I had never heard Frances's name, nor had I heard of her resting place.

I took marigolds and wore combat boots, for it was cottonmouth snake season, and nearly the Day of the Dead.

The graveyard sat unmarked beside a merciless road. A now-closed motel sat to her right and a rim shop sat to her left. A Jamaican patty food truck lulled in the parking lot. A chiropractor's little office sat watchful and small. An upholstery shop used the old chapel as storage for bolts of fabric.

The overgrowth that held my Frances's unmarked grave was a near solid wall of vegetation. Everywhere was litter, an old shoe, furniture scraps, styrofoam takeout containers, and liquor bottles.

Sunken graves, periwinkle, fieldstones, and a few headstones were hiding behind the green tangle.

Too astonished to weep (who would do this to a graveyard?) I reached out for a watching pine. "I'm here," I said. "I honor you! All of you! I'll fix this!" I said to the air.

The current landowner shared that two McCullers men had grown tired of upkeep and had sold the little chapel in front of the cemetery, to the chiropractor.

Much of the family had moved north. This was forgotten, sacred land.

I came home. Born in upstate New York, where my parents lived for work, grand-parented by a sojourning Army couple and a Pennsylvania-based, freedom-seeking couple, raised in the Southern realm of AfroCarolina, I had returned.

All of my grandparents were born in North Carolina. None of them died here.

I came back.

Lately I've been dreaming of daffodils in honor of Frances and her chapel. I can almost see her, stirring blue soap into white clothes. Glaring into my eyes.

I find myself saying to her, "I will fix this. I will fix this."