

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

The Legacy of Enslavement on a University Campus

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Dear Higher Ed,

Let me tell you about my great grandmother. She was the granddaughter of the last enslaved member of her line.

Great-Grandma was scary. She was old and scary...but she taught me how to knit. I used to slide up the carpet steps and then land outside of Great-Grandma's door, both curious to talk to her, but afraid to go in. I just needed to take a deep breath and start "Hey Great-Grandma?;" because that was her name. Great-Grandma. I scratched at the temple of my sandy brown hair and got lost in thought. Why exactly am I working up the courage to bother a woman that I am afraid of? It's not like she's calling out to me. She's Great-Grandma. She's here at Grandma's house every day, sitting in her room knitting. The tap of the knitting needles brings me back to my task. I remember why I'm here now; it's the knitting, I want to do the knitting. I take a deep breath and peak around the door. Great-Grandma is sitting on the edge of her bed with the yarn in her lap. The needles are blue. No purple. No, definitely blue. No...purple. Suddenly I realize that I've moved into the doorway of the bedroom to see the needles better to discern the color. I look up from Great-Grandma's hands. She's still knitting, but she's staring...right...at me. I pause. She doesn't smile. I don't remember her smiling. Looking back now, I have plenty of pictures of her smiling, but I don't remember seeing her smile.

Great-Grandma tilts her head in question, but she's still knitting without looking at her hands. My eyes narrow. I'm impressed. I look down at the needles again, but she finally stops knitting. I look up and see her reaching over to the side table and opening the drawer. She pulls out two pieces of candy. I can't remember if it's peppermints or those deep red and green Christmas candies. It's probably the latter because I don't remember getting excited by them. Great-Grandma turns back around and reaches out her open hand to me, the candy sitting in her palm. I don't move. "Come on" she says softly as if coaxing a scared kitten. I slide across the carpet on my knees. Leaving the safety of the wall of the doorway and ending at her feet. I take the candy and Great-Grandma picks up her needles again. She starts to knit while I eat the candy that I'm sure I don't like. But Great-Grandma gave it to me and who am I to say, "no thank you". I have a feeling that the least I can do is accept candy from Great-Grandma because she's scary. She's old. And she's scary. I eat the candy because I want to watch her knit.

Great-Grandma knits for a while and I watch. Loop, loop, pull. No. Loop, wrap it around, put the finger on that part, and... I lose it. She's too fast. Okay. I start over. Loop, wrap it around, put the finger on that part, and pull? What is she pulling?

"Kerri!?" Grandma calls from downstairs. I look at the door waiting to hear Grandma come up the stairs because she says we should "leave Mom alone." That's what Grandma calls Great-Grandma. I move the piece of candy in my mouth from one cheek to the other and suck. I look back at Great-Grandma double checking to ensure that the person that I think is sitting there is the right person. Grandma has her name all wrong. She's Great-Grandma. I may be four or five years old, but I know for sure that this lady's name is Great-Grandma. She's not anybody's "mom". Silly Grandma.

“Kerri!?” Grandma calls again.

“Yes?” I answer still looking at Great-Grandma.

“Get out of that room!” Grandma demands.

“Go ‘on Susie” Great-Grandma interrupts.

“Mom, I...” Grandma goes to answer.

“Susie!” Great-Grandma interrupts her.

Grandma stops calling for me. Great Grandma looks back at me, and I look at her. She is scary. She’s old and scary. But I like her. I smile. Teeth staining from the nasty candy I’m holding in my mouth. Great-Grandma continues knitting, and I watch her. For a while, she watches me, and my eyes follow her hands trying to catch the method. She stops again and reaches for a plastic bag on the floor. My eyes follow her motion, and she tries to sit back up, but she hesitates a little as if it’s hard. I jumped up and grab the bag and her hands to help her back up. She’s cold, but her grip is strong. She looks up at me, but she still doesn’t smile. She does raise her eyebrows in question. She’s just as surprised as I am that I jumped up and came to her. She settles in her seat again and takes a breath. She reaches into the plastic bag and pulls out a pair of knitting needles. They are green. She hands them to me, and I take them as if she is handing me Excalibur. She opens the plastic bag and holds it out for me to look inside. “Pick one” she says. I look inside and pick out a green ball of yarn. “Go ‘head and sit down. I’m a teach you how to knit”.

For years when I was asked about my work with my Fraction family history, I started with the moment my grandmother Susie broke the cardinal rule of the Silent Generation and began to answer all my questions about our history. She started giving me the details of all that she knew about Great Grandma and herself. That time was so important because it is when Great Grandma became Isabelle and Grandma became Susie. I now realize that I’ve spent years discounting all those days and hours sitting at the feet of Great-Grandma as she taught me how to knit and then we eventually sat there knitting together. I don’t have many memories of Great-Grandma and me talking while we knit. But I do realize one thing. When I was 10 years old, Great-Grandma died, and so did my ability to knit. I honestly don’t have any idea of how to do it anymore. Knitting was how I was with Great-Grandma, and when she was no longer with me, the knitting left too. Sometimes at antique stores, I come across a pair of old knitting needles, and I run my fingers up their length remembering Great Grandma. She was scary. She was old and scary. But I loved her.

From 2012 through 2015, I had dived deep into the Fraction family history with my grandmother Susie, and the family history became my new knitting needles. I got to know Susie and Isabelle and I inherited the history that haunted them. I traumatized myself as I asked Susie to re-live growing up in America in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. I watched her eyes glaze over and the iron clad barrier fall into place when she told me about the mobs of White men that would come to the door, demand to see a Black man who was inside, and that Black man quietly leaving to protect the family never to be seen again. She talked about all the people left behind as the door shut and how powerless and hopeless you feel. She talked about the awkward silence in the room as everyone grappled with being expected to live on but stayed silent. That is where the silence came from. To be silent was to be safe. To tell was death. When asking my grandmother to tell me the story, I was asking her to conjure up an immaculate amount of courage, and to go against her lifetime of instinct and tell me anyway.

And she did. She told me about herself, and she told me about Great Grandma, and as I got to know her, she became Isabelle. I learned that Isabelle didn’t show much physical affection-that the candy and the knitting needles was the great action of love that I had always thought it was. I learned that Isabelle also had the iron clad barrier because as a child in 1910, she was groomed by an orphanage to live only to serve White people in

their homes; and she knew it and it was insulting to her being. When she failed to do so, she was left on a street corner of Baltimore and told to fend for herself. My grandmother shared with me a letter that Isabelle wrote her before she died. In the letter Isabelle says “This is a beautiful day. That I am not running away” because even Isabelle had to learn how to stop staying silent.

Susie took her own knitting needles and started to weave together the family story showing me the intricate art, the knots, damage, and the family secret to knitting iron for that barrier. Around 2014, Isabelle changed again and became the granddaughter of Thomas Fraction. Thomas was the last enslaved person of Isabelle’s familial line. We would learn that he is the originator of the iron clad barrier that we have inherited. He spent his life pulling the flax from the land in Blacksburg Virginia and turning it into balls of yarn that left iron threads for us to follow 117 years later. Every loop of Thomas’ section of the family history is riddled with knots and redirections as he starts over again, and again, and again, each redirection firing and shaping our family iron clad barrier.

It is estimated that the chattel slavery arm of our family starts when our first patriarch was brought to America from Angola in the mid-18th century. By the second generation the family appears on records with the surname Fraction. Where the last name comes is pure speculation since (at the time of this publication) no enslaver of that surname has been found. If you ask our family, it’s because fraction was also used like fractious during that time which meant likely to quarrel, or likely to fight. John Fraction (born in 1798) is the first time we see the surname Fraction. His having a surname was very peculiar for the time as most enslaved did not have a surname, and post emancipation, most surnames were likely adopted from the surname of their enslaver. The Fractions would be enslaved by the Preston family for multiple generations, estimated from 1759 through the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863. The first Fraction would be enslaved at the Smithfield plantation in Blacksburg, Virginia. As the Fractions had children, the family would be spread among the Preston daughters, sons, and cousins as the Preston family married, died, and grew their estates and wealth through marriages with other families who also held plantations with hundreds of enslaved individuals. Our family would be separated and sold throughout Virginia and as far as Kentucky.

The Fractions are more than a footnote in history. Their story is outlined in my book *More Than a Fraction* which is an example of how different descendant interpretation can be, and the challenges of doing so within the Eurocentric environment that is the United States. The book is based on research and documentation available through several sources such as the United States National Archives, the Virginia Tech Special Collections, Historic Smithfield, and the United States Military records. All these documents have been viewed, considered, and referenced in scholarly works. However *More Than a Fraction* aimed to do more by offering personalities and mannerisms of the Fractions based on ourselves who are their descendants, since we believed that we have learned our mannerisms, habits, cultures, and talents from them as they were passed down generation to generation. Since the Fractions were connected to an influential family like the Prestons, there is more documentation available about them than is normally afforded to people of African descent during slavery.

We are also a complicated family. A further testimony to the fact that when you dive into enslaved families and get to know them and explore them as human beings having an experience, a conscience, and a life despite enslavement, you get to know a family like any other. The Fractions and the enslaved community held multiple responsibilities for the Prestons. They raised children, were Blacksmith, farmers, and builders. They were sent on tasks to take care of business for the Prestons (like acquiring an elaborate gravestone for the paternal member of the Prestons upon his death). All the while, they attempted to escape to freedom and took advantage of opportunities for freedom during the Civil War. While we are currently unclear how many Fractions escaped to freedom, we do know of five including two named Granville and Wilson who ran and unfortunately drowned during their attempt. During the Civil War, when the Union Army closed in on the area where the Preston plantations were, one Preston named Robert Taylor addressed the enslaved community warning them not to try to run towards the Union Army. During the Civil War the enslaved would seek out the camps of the Union and follow them as contraband or try to enroll. Robert Taylor would threaten the families with death should they try to run and be

caught. Regardless, at least three members of the Fraction family, Thomas (my many times over great-grandfather; Great-Grandma's grandfather) and his brothers, Othello, and Oscar would run from the Preston plantation and join the Union Army fighting for the 40th and 15th U.S. Colored Infantry.

The Preston family is of Irish and Scottish descent and first arrived in the Americas a few years before purchasing their first enslaved Africans in 1759. They were told to survey on behalf of the King of England and settle the land that stretched from modern day Virginia to Tennessee and Kentucky. As one would expect, the first Preston settler, William Preston, arrived with his uncle James Patton who found the land occupied by the Indigenous tribes of the area that included, at least, the Monacan, Tutelo, and Iroquois. A long and documented history of conflict, terrorism, murder, and war proceeded and eventually decimated the Indigenous community, and rendered their long history (a history that I wish I had the knowledge and experience to address) to a footnote in the "illustrious" and "benevolent" history of the State of Virginia and the Preston family and legacy.

For the past four years or so, I have been discussing with Preston descendants and working with Virginia Tech as they explore and acknowledge their history, and the plantations that benefited from the institution of slavery. Furthermore, after the emancipation of the enslaved, Virginia Tech benefited from the federal dollars for the land grant universities, and I am sure, a plethora of other benefits to the social ideals and system founded on White superiority. The University has publicly acknowledged their history with slavery and the displacement of Indigenous peoples, they have renamed a cabin believe to have housed enslaved individuals in honor of the Fraction family and others enslaved on the site. As I write this, we are trying to determine the most appropriate exhibit to go into the cabin. The University has held speaker series and has supported faculty sabbaticals to write on the subject. They even dedicated an entire section of their sesquicentennial celebration to focus on and address this history. I am in the middle of all these actions; participating and stating my part, but I am often burdened with ensuring my cousins and fellow descendant community that we are "unsatisfied." Why? Because any notion of satisfaction still feels like a betrayal to the ancestors that experienced enslavement; because I'm not sure what *should* be done, let alone know a measurement of what is enough.

Within the complex scope of what *is* and what is *satisfying*, our family organization, the More Than a Fraction Foundation, is attempting an innovative case study project between the Preston family and our family. This case study seeks to use a holistic, strength focused, and reality-based model that expands literature, philosophies, and ideas of reconciliation and reparations by testing the *feasibility* of reconciliation. Initial observations during the case study include challenges in language that would allow the two families to interact with each other and discuss the unfinished business of enslavement, so we haven't done that yet. For example, amongst the descendants of the enslaved there are uses of language or the focus on language that suggest "permission" (whether that be the need for permission or repetitively expressing the rejection of the need for permission), language that refers to being granted actions and opportunities, and language that at times fulfills an internal need to continuously declare freedom. Among the Preston descendants, there is language that assumed authority, hinted of "White Saviorism," and at times displayed ignorance of the practice of historical fantasy (the most common was the idea of the benevolent slave master). Within the case study we are also exploring mental health issues related to the unfinished business of slavery including epigenetics, post traumatic syndromes, and narcissism as obstacles to address the unfinished business of American chattel slavery. Another consideration is that the Preston family has realized that they will not acquire massive buy in from majority (let alone all) Preston family members causing inner familiar turmoil and literal conflict for their efforts, without having the tools to address it.

Susie passed away in 2015. She missed when the thread led to Virginia Tech. She missed seeing the land where Thomas pulled the flax to start the first threads. But I would like to think that she was with me as Virginia Tech ignored the calls from others to leave the room, and watched as they looked inside the opened bag that I offered and asked them to "pick one". And so, Tech and I sit in a room knitting their portion of the story together. We are not sure where the pieces go all the time. And we are not sure what to do about the damaged parts of their

section. There may even come a time where the project dies, and we lose the skill to knit it. But what I've learned from Great Grandma, what I have learned from Isabelle Fraction, is that even when the skill is lost, the threads are always there. Over the years, I have conjured up Thomas' name as a homage to our resilience and given Susie the credit for being the catalyst for all that is achieved today. But I don't declare the legacy that is Isabelle. And for that, I am sorry. So, here's to Isabelle. For her needles and for passing on the family iron clad barrier that can stand the friction to shape the Hokie.

*In Reverence,
Kerri Moseley-Hobbs
Founder and Executive Director of More Than a Fraction Foundation*

About the author

Dr. Kerri Moseley-Hobbs is the 4th great-granddaughter of Thomas Fraction, who was one of the last members of the Fraction family enslaved by the Preston family at the Smithfield plantation which today is a part of the campus of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.