

YARN

Latent Legacies

by Allison Smythe

I remembered little from the trip I took to Spain with my high school Spanish class— a flamenco dance, a bullfight, the joy we could not deny when we stumbled upon a McDonalds. The six rolls of 35 mm film I'd brought for my new camera and impatiently mailed off for developing after my trip were returned to me empty. I'd failed to load the camera correctly so the film had never advanced from the canisters—one of the greater heartbreaks of my youth. I'd snapped my way through Spain's ancient cities with nothing tangible to remember them by. Now, after an interval of more than a few decades and a deepening appreciation of time's cumulative withdrawals from my account, I had returned. Time compresses the older you get and you realize one day that a century is merely the span of your maternal grandfather's lifetime and that only five grandfathers ago Columbus set out from here to discover the Americas. This time around, history was more to me than a stifling set of facts to memorize to pass tests, it was the quest to

understand how we came to be the people that we are, or at least think ourselves to be.

I was in Madrid with a group of undergraduate students attending a seminar on “The Western Tradition in Europe.” Mornings were spent analyzing the writings of Locke, Rousseau, Montesquieu, and Toqueville, tracing the evolution of ideas that had resulted in our liberal tradition, a tradition coming increasingly under threat back home. For the first time in our country’s relatively short history, average citizens were questioning the durability of our democracy, “the last great experiment for promoting human happiness,” as George Washington put it in 1790. If not democracy, then what?

A day trip I took poignantly illustrated that empires, however powerful, come to an end. In Segovia, an ancient city famed for its 2000 year old Roman aqueduct, traces of once mighty cultures— Celtic, Roman, Moorish, Christian, —are evident in its streets like a palimpsest. The site of a Celtic castle now houses the Alcázar castle, Moorish tiles adorn facades of buildings, Roman arches built without mortar line the entrance to the city. It was here that Isabella, Spain’s first monarch, was crowned queen.

Here, in 1492, that she initiated the Spanish Inquisition, conquered the last of the Moors, expelled the Jews from Spain, and commissioned Columbus on his western quest for fame and fortune. Under her reign, Spain would be united and become a mighty power, though now, as with every civilization before it, only souvenirs of its former glory remain. What endures in the end are the tales we celebrate, the histories of kings and kingdoms, recorded on parchments and in ruins and sometimes whispered in blood. In Segovia's vast and opulent cathedral, enormous tapestries hang high on the walls narrating Spain's history in thread. Standing before them, time unspools backward to the days of Isabella, when America was yet an unimagined land. I was following a thread in my own life, a thread woven into the strands of my parents and their parents and their parents, across centuries and continents, telling the story of the whole world. That particular thread would lead me all the way back to Isabella in Segovia, unraveling the story I was told of my family.

Because my mother descended from a mixed bag of immigrants who had arrived generations ago from the British Isles and Scandinavia, my father's more defined ancestry was easier to claim. His parents

were first generation Americans— his mother German, his father half English and half Irish. If there was any heritage we were prone to brag about, it was our Irish lineage. I struggled to see a hint of Irish or even English in my grandfather’s olive complexion, wavy dark hair, straight nose, and full lips though, as a Vaudeville actor and singer, he performed as the “American Irish Tenor.” We have sheet music bearing his image on tunes such as “The Loneliest Girl in Town,” and “Hello Central, Give Me No Man’s Land,” under which is printed “Successfully introduced by William Smythe.” My grandfather was in show business, he had entertained crowds in America’s nascent entertainment industry, a tiny claim to fame.

He died when my dad was fourteen and as he spent most of his career on the road we did not know much about him. His mother never talked about his history. All my father knew about him was that he was orphaned in California and never knew his parents. When he wasn’t on the road he stage managed Billy Rose’s Diamond Horseshoe at the Paramount in Times Square and sometimes when he was in town, my dad got to go backstage and meet the performers.

“Whether you were a tourist from Iowa or a head of state, if you passed through Times Square between 1938 and 1951, chances are you ventured into the Diamond Horseshoe, a glittering dinner theater and club in the basement of the Paramount Hotel....Gene Kelly..., Betty Grable and W.C. Handy were among the star entertainers, and the house was filled with guests like Orson Welles and Sugar Ray Robinson.”¹⁰⁷

William died in 1946, while managing a show in Chicago for Billy Rose Enterprises. At his funeral, my grandmother reportedly confronted Milton Berle about his death. Berle had been running the show into overtime, killing the budget, and, according to my grandmother, her husband as well.

I was only six or seven when my grandmother died, too young to have interrogated her about William or Vaudeville or their history. I was a teenager when I came across a postcard written in a child’s writing in a box of family memorabilia from someone named Kathleen. She’d addressed it to William, “my dear daddy” and asked how he was feeling. My grandmother, it turned out, was not his first wife.

¹⁰⁷ Lawrence, Vanessa (2014) “Diamond Horseshoe”
<https://www.wmagazine.com/story/diamond-horseshoe-nyc-nightclub>

My father had an older half sister somewhere in the world. We were not William's first family.

Although my cousin and I had endeavored to find immigration records for the English mother and Irish father listed on William's death certificate or a California birth certificate, we'd turned up nothing to corroborate his birth or his parentage. The documents are full of discrepancies: 1940 NY census and his 1946 death certificate record that he was born in Long Beach, CA in 1894, his registration card and passport claim his birth year as 1884. Vaudeville archives began surfacing on the internet. Starting in 1911 we found announcements of William's performances at theaters from Seattle to New York and many towns in between. I was proud his performances were noteworthy enough to be reviewed and to get a tiny glimpse into what I imagined was a thrilling life in theater. Further sleuthing revealed less savory surprises: in August of 1915 William made national news. While married to first wife Mary, he'd run off to Europe with British actress Toby Claude and taken his five year old daughter with him. The scandal is captured in the week's series of headlines:

The New York *Times*: “Actress Seeks Daughter. Mrs. Smythe Fears Estranged Husband Has Taken Her to Europe.”

St. Louis *Dispatch*: “Toby Claude and Actor Disappear with His Child. William Smythe Defies Court Order to Turn Girl Over to His Wife.”

The *Dispatch* even prints excerpts from their personal letters. This is Toby to William’s wife Mary:

“I am awfully sorry if I have hurt you, because I want nobody else’s man. I never would have listened to him if I had known that you cared for him....Of course I am not the only woman, but I am the only one who really cared for him, I think.”“If I see like I will see you and tell you how sorry I am to have cause you any trouble.”....

The New York *Times*:

“Toby Claude, the English vaudeville actress, yesterday filed a spirited answer to the suit of Maria Nevins Smythe for \$100,000 on the charge of alienating the affections of Mrs. Smythe’s husband, William. Mrs. Smythe is known on the stage as Mary Hartman. Her husband plays with

Miss Claude in a vaudeville sketch. In her complaint Mrs. Smythe said that the defendant by arts and artifices, through malice and deceptions, won her husband away from her....”

There the reports deadend until five months later when the *Times* reports Claude has filed for bankruptcy. The debts are for “borrowed money, hotel bill, dresses, jewelry, & etc.” Among her seventeen creditors are W.H. Smythe for “\$2200 cash lent and bills paid.” Further reports reveal Claude was only 4’6” and appeared in films by Cecil B. DeMille and William deMille in the 1920s. There is no further reporting on William, Toby, or Mary. Five years later, William marries my grandmother and his first family is all but erased.

It was not until several years after these discoveries, after my daughter had gifted me a DNA test for Mother’s Day, that I learned more of Williams’s story, a story even he likely never knew. The test revealed I have zero Irish DNA. What I found instead is that William, rather than one quarter Irish, is one quarter African. Given that one of his parents would have been born around the time of the Civil War and was half African, one of his grandparents was fully African in America before Emancipation,

and, one way or another, a product of the Atlantic slave trade. It is hard to imagine any happy scenario in which a child of mixed race in the 1880's would be abandoned in an orphanage but there are plenty of unseemly ones. A lost thread recovered only through a granddaughter's DNA.

So, how does this one strand of family history relate to my visit to Spain? From right where I stood in the Alcazar listening to a tour guide extol Spain's golden age, Isabella commissioned Christopher Columbus's journey. She promised him ten percent of whatever treasures he discovered on his western voyage. Failing to find much in the way of the gold and riches he was seeking, six months later he sailed again. This time he returned with 500 Tiano Indians in tow to present to the queen. And although the religiously devout Isabella demanded their immediate return as she now considered them Spanish subjects who could not be enslaved, this transporting of captured peoples across the ocean initiated the Atlantic slave trade that would continue for over three hundred years and weave its way into my family lineage. Isabella would come to be championed as a pioneer of human rights, education, and the arts even as her religious zealotry would instigate the expulsion of the Jews and the

mass persecution of the Spanish Inquisition, history's perpetual admixture of enlightenment and tyranny. The new world news sounds wearily like the old world news: invasions, wars, religious persecution, displacement. "The past is here, now; its invisibility is our blindness, not its absence," writes Guy Davenport. History is past, yet present. In the same way the walls of Segovia stand as testament to Spain's past glory and savagery, back home in "the last great experiment" vestiges of the slave trade are ambered in the buildings and institutions that slave labor built at the behest of the very people who conceived the inalienable rights of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." My own ancestral line weaves another strand back to slaveholders in Virginia, my very blood a braid of enslavers and enslaved. Celebrated stories are rarely the whole story. The backs of the tapestries we carefully preserve reveal all the messy, knotted, unseen threads that create those illustrious narratives.

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