

A Universe Fits Within the Lacy Family

**for
Black Gold
The Warmth of Oakland Suns**

**Sarai Bordeaux
In conversation with
James Lacy
and
Wynn Esclovon**

**As a continuation in learning with our family about the impact our kin has made.
January 18, 2021**

Acknowledgments

Giving thanks to our family lines. My family line. Uncle James for sharing his stories with me. Giving thanks to Adrienne for this opportunity. In my opinion, all teachers should receive the honor to work with you in some way or another. Your support and your willingness to follow your passions are helping all of us get free. One thing that is so interesting is that as I began writing, I felt creeping in slowly, an anxiety over all of the technical conventions usually required in formal writing spaces. How do I format my Uncle's quotes? Is it ok for me to use "I"? Is this font too much? Though format, editing and revision are essential to this process, these are worries that have the potential to build up and eventually create gates around the stories we are needing to tell. I am so grateful for the space to resist the notion that typos are deserving of more attention than the points we came to make. That typos are more important than we are. Also giving thanks to all of the story tellers and elders and loved ones who participated in this project. It has been a pleasure to be around you all.

Contents

1. A UNIVERSE fits within the Lacy family.....3
(This should no longer surprise me)
2. the universe FITS within the Lacy family
(The term ordinary when we are nothing but)....4
3. a universe fits WITHIN the Lacy family
(They meant us to stay unskilled labor)5
4. the universe fits within THE LACY family.....8
(And still we make a place)
5. a universe fits within the Lacy FAMILY.....9
(And still we move and shake)
6. THE UNIVERSE FITS WITHIN OUR FAMILIES.....12
(Lucky to find that the answers only bring more questions)

1. This Should No Longer Surprise Me

It should no longer surprise me
What flows through our family line.
It's like we were sent here to stick to each other.
For better or worse
Learn each others lessons
Hope the best for each others futures
Be each other's mirrors
Remind Us of Us
Of what has been and
What we ourselves can make become.
What our families can make become.

Uncle James was familiar with Isabel Wilkerson's work before I asked him about participating in this project. He is 85 and has read *The Warmth of Other Suns* already. He is eager to read *Caste*. We've been meaning to have more of these conversations about our family and we are each thrilled to chat.

James Lacy is my maternal grandmother Janie Murphy's twin brother. He is the sole remaining child of Willie and Mary Alice Lacy. Born around 1900, Willie Lacy was a handy man capable of relieving anyone's post in the saw mill. This required a depth of understanding of many positions and tools. Together with his wife Mary Alice, they also ran Lacy's Joint. The "only game in town on weekends", according to my Uncle James, this "cafe, juke joint, night club" was popular with businessmen and folks who worked at the sawmill. Uncle James remembers being around 5 at the time. He recalls with mischief in his smile living above their spot, staying up late to spy on the partying adults through the doors.

Mary Alice Lacy was a few years older than Willie. The exact date of her birth is unknown for certain but Uncle James marks 1896 as a potential birth year. The story I heard from 2 different family members is that a census taker visited Nanny's ¹ home in 1900 and asked about the age of her daughter Mary Alice. When given a response, the census information collector took it upon himself to disagree. He wrote down what he wanted to write down, codifying another mystery in our legacy. The impression I get when I ask about Big Mom, which is what my mom called Mary Alice, is that she was FIERCE.

¹ Uncle James' grandmother. She was apparently a legend. Her name will forever be Eve Jane Amanda Cooper Carrington Cole as whenever she is recalled, the women in my family sing her name in a chorus.

Not to be taken lightly. One story that is told about her is that on the day my mom married my dad and was to be taken down the road from the house to the church in a carriage, Big Mom decided that she wanted to ride in the carriage too. Other options were none. She got what she wanted. A generation earlier, Mary Alice ran a business and was raising 5 children in 1930's Arkansas.

Living in Huttig, Arkansas, Mary Alice and Willie had my great Uncle Jr. July 24th, 1930. My great Aunt Mary was born May 26, 1933. Grammy Janie and Uncle James were born July 15, 1935 and my great Auntie Johnnie came 5th on January 26th 1937. As Janie and James were arriving, the family had to travel to Monroe, Louisiana. There was the closest hospital that would provide the service of helping a black woman deliver twin babies. Now born, having experienced the capacity or racism from inside the womb, Grammy and Uncle James went with their parents back to Arkansas. Shortly after however, the growing Lacy's would make their way back to Monroe to live before embarking on the journey west to California.

2. The Term Ordinary When We are Nothing But

By the time Uncle James, Auntie Johnnie and my Grandmother got on the Greyhound for California a few things had happened. It's always interesting to me that history is often told from one perspective because depending on who you talk to, the present and the past take varying shapes. I would love to know what Willie Lacy was imagining when he preceded his family on the trip west. Working in sawmills all over California before eventually staying in McCloud California where, by the way, segregation existed in many ways same as the south, Willie prepared for his wife and 3 of his 5 children to arrive.

Willie Sr. and Mary Alice Sr.'s oldest two children Willie Jr. and Mary Alice Jr. by this time around 1947 had gone to Washington DC to live with Willie's half-sister Mary. The number of women named Mary in our family at this point is exciting to keep up with. Uncle James's Aunt Mary was born in Chabootie, Mississippi. I did not gain clarity about whether or not Willie Lacy was born in Chabootie as well but I want to say that is that case. The fact that I was in Mississippi for 6 months this past year beats in my throat as we continue our story. I felt the south stalking me honestly before I left California. Coming to an understanding that what I knew about Mississippi and the South was an incomplete picture, I am grateful to have spent time and to have taken up space there, remembering.

Mary Anderson, Willie Lacy's half sister was white on her paternal side. Uncle James tells me that his Auntie Mary's father claimed her, supported her and paid for her college education at University of Iowa Ames. She was a dietician and Uncle James remembers standing in the kitchen with her as a child fixing plates for them both. He smiles bringing that memory up. Auntie Mary and Uncle Larry lived in Washington, D.C. and did not have any biological children. Though conversation and what seemed to Uncle James like much convincing it was decided that both Willie Jr. and Mary Alice Jr. would make the exchange between Monroe, Louisiana and Washington DC to live with their aunt and uncle. Speaking to my Mom's cousin Wynn, she deduces that this change was probably a shock for her mother and uncle due to the change in place culture as well as moving to a new region in the midst of adolescence, around the year 1947.

One year, multiple stories, a continuing legacy. All against the backdrop of a continuing migration westward. The one that is called the second wave of the Great Migration. This country's obsession with waves and labeling and with greatness explains a lot as Uncle James and I continue on talking. For the Lacy's though, pressing on was the goal. And though they were separated for a good amount of time and by vast physical space, Oakland would hold a reunion. Sometime between 1954 and 1956 at 1001 Kirkham Court, in the projects according to Uncle James, Willie, Mary Alice, James and Johnnie would move in with Mary Alice Jr. who had come from DC. Delivering her daughter Wynn in McCloud before setting up her space in Oakland, Mary Alice opened her home to her family the way her daughter Wynn would open her home to me years later. Something that allowed me to stay in the Bay Area, cousin Wynn housed me and provided much personal support. I will forever be grateful.

3. They Meant Us to Stay Unskilled.

In describing the Lacy Family's journey across the United States, it is important that patterns in movement among Black Americans are understood on a larger scale. Often referenced as a period of time where Black people gained social mobility and kissed the worries of the south goodbye, the Great Migration as it is taught in schools does not fully speak to circumstances that still led to disenfranchisement of Black people in the workforce. As we continue speaking, my Uncle James and I, my brain semantically does not want to accept the term unskilled in reference to Black people in America. He tells me though, that what he means is speaking to is the strategic unskilling,

skilling and advancement that created generational gaps in equity, opportunity and wealth, institutionally and capitalistically speaking. Reaching back to the writing of Isabel Wilkerson in *The Warmth of Other Suns*, Uncle James finds that though the census was problematic (as evidenced by his mother's family's experience) it did help track the lives and movement of our families and trends in labor markets. Here is how he explains the concept of skilled vs unskilled labor.

“We were the farmers of this country. We raised the food. The Europeans that came over here in the 19th century moved essentially to the industrial centers and the powers that be wanted it that way”. They wanted to give the white immigrants opportunities in manufacturing, skilled labor, whereas they just used black labor for unskilled labor. Unskilled but at the same time very meaningful. For farming, the cotton we produced was exported to the factories in England, the cotton, the sugar cane, those items that were produced in the south but were processed elsewhere. Our labor was used to produce the raw materials that they would then ship out. That's why Isabel Wilkerson's writing on the ways by which labor was used in the midwest was so important because the plan was to keep African labor unskilled. The European countries, in this instance the British, were the ones that processed these raw materials and agricultural products. So we remained unskilled.”

Wanting to speak to the expertise that I know we as individuals and as a collective contributed under threat, I ask Uncle James if he thinks that Blacks in this country thought they were themselves unskilled. He states that we knew our skill level but...

“When you talk about skilled Labor dahling, you are talking about factories, about production. For example, when people moved out of the South to Detroit in the 30's and 40's, it was to produce cars. That was a big difference to go from sharecropping to skilled labor producing automobiles and airplanes and trains. So that kind of skilled labor, the powers that be saw to it that we did not get into that kind of production [for as long as possible]. Every effort was made to use us as unskilled labor [collecting raw materials]. Same thing with the labor in the South. African American labor, Black labor, that pool of labor

continued to be sent to various parts of the country where the powers that be wanted and needed the labor. [At the same time] Europeans and Eastern Europeans moved, for example, to the industrial centers of the midwest during the period of the early 1900's. After WW1, a lot of Poles, a lot of Russians, Romanians and Germans, moved to the midwest. It's a fascinating story because it helps to explain why our people remain unskilled. It was by design."

Uncle James recalls all of this from memory. He integrates his experiences with Isabel Wilkerson's analysis in order to sing a song about what was happening within his family as this huge shift continues across the country. Micro. Macro. Everything. After I pick my face up off the floor, I go back to his question about what impact we've had on this country.

Our impact?

Still standing after we built this country and

Were then kept so called unskilled.

Really?

Unskilled?

Jailed, barred and killed.

Still here.

Building

Dodging terror on the daily here

And still raised families

Still lived lives.

Our impACT?

We prove that it's acceptable to believe in superheroes.

We are them.

Even resting.

Even stolen

We are the foundation of everything.

Building on Uncle James question,

My question is about impact is

How do we take our impact back?

Our innovation back

Take back the laundry list of accomplishments we made

In spite of everything afflicted?

How?

When?

Now?

Ok.

C'mon then.

4. And Still We Make A Place

Before a new era in Oakland began though, the Lacy's would create a home in McCloud, California. Being that California is more than 1,040 miles from the northern border to the southern border, there are many ways to make journeys across the state. I am familiar with the road trip by car, the airplane, the train and the bus, including the Greyhound. Whereas I have made trips within the state, Uncle James, Janie, Johnnie and Mary Alice made the trip from across the country. In the 40's. Uncle James tells me that the bus was segregated and without air conditioning in either August or September. Between the humidity, the length of the trip, the racists and the fact that McCloud, California was absolutely not San Francisco, it's no wonder Uncle James tells me that there were tantrums coming off the bus.

Though it was not what Uncle James and my Grammy and Auntie Johnnie expected, off the 1-5 north on the 89, as far as can be from Hollywood, they came to love it. Love. It. With streets in the Black neighborhoods named after Beaumont and Orange streets in Texas, folks and families would welcome newer Black families making their way to Northern California. Near Mount Shasta, the point said to be the sacral chakra of the universe, I love it there too. When time travel is possible for me, I am going back there to be a fly on the wall. My Grandmother would meet her husband Wilbert "Red" Murphy and later have my mom in 1954, my uncles Brian and Mike and my auntie Carla after, continuing the path to my personal existence and thus leading me here today to share this story. Another impact of the Lacy family is me.

When I tell Uncle James that I romanticized the saw mills in McCloud. He tells me that he did too. I myself didn't even realize because of this romanization that there were sawmills all over the United States and that Black men had already experienced this type of work. I am kind of ashamed to say that I thought the mills taught new skills and provided opportunities for Black families to live better by providing jobs that were not available in the south. In processing my shame, I tilt my head, purse my lips and roll my eyes upward. Thinking. I start to track where I got this idea from. Uncle James is a map

inclined person. I'm not. I couldn't name all 50 states right now or fill them in on a blank map, let alone tell you what was produced in each region. I can however talk about the push and pull factors from 8th grade Social Studies . Uncle James speaks to these factors too, which named the terror of the south as a major reason for the migration. The pull factors were that California was from my understanding, was not racist. There was the gold rush for goodness sakes. I heard nothing of Japanese internment, segregation of Mexican students from white students in schools or discrimination against Black people on all fronts. Not. One. Thing. My shame lessens remembering Uncle James speaking about the powers that be. I remember that it's been a long time to place shame where it actually belongs. To work through that shame toward change.

Uncle James tells me that his father had questions about the saw mills as well. One of the strategies relating to the skilling and unskilling of the Black labor force was to place a plateau on the positions and pay of workers. Though experienced workers were capable of every job, opportunities to advance let alone even own a saw mill were nil. Willie Lacy in speaking to one of the cornerstones of the McCloud Black community, a member of the Slokum Family, asked about Black men in sawmills in other parts of the country. It was explained to his surprise that not only had people advanced but there were already instances of ownership of saw mills by Black men across the country. Uncle James gestures with his hands and increases the volume of his voice to make this point. I am excited by this and also angered. I can only imagine how the conversation went between Mr. Slokum and Great grandfather Lacy after that. Keeping us from understanding our impact not was not only a strategy of the sawmills, but of this nation in general to keep us from knowing about the greatness of each other. Of those in our personal circles.

5. And Still We Move And Shake

We have been everything. Done everything. Impacted this country in every way. Contributed to every institution within every sector. The reach of our families and our communities is so vast that when we think about the concept of movers and shakers and about celebrities we don't have to go far to realize that we are them. Each of us the G.O.A.T in our own right. Unfortunately we don't get to see each other in our vastness always. From my own mother and father reaching back to the beginnings of the Lacy family, our kin has

made foundational contributions to this country and to the mission of Black liberation.

Uncle Jr. was drafted in 1950 and served in Korea. Before that he and Uncle James had dreams of being a doctor and a pharmacist. Uncle James tells me that he and his brother were close and would pal around together thinking about all of the great things to be done. Uncle Jr. eventually moved back to the east coast but before he did, he got a bachelor's degree in social science and an MBA from Berkely. In addition to traveling, cooking and gardening, he also taught business classes at Merritt College around the time of the formation of the Black Panthers. Uncle Jr. passed away on December 8, 2011 in Georgia. Before he left this plane, he provided an example for all of us here of what it means to have a great time while you can.

My grandmother, with her growing family, would stay in McCloud. Every time I would travel there to stay with her and my grandfather, I felt like I was a part of the magic. Together the Murphy's became their own institution in McCloud. My grandfather worked in the mills and my Grammy was a head banker at TriCounties Bank in Mt. Shasta. Besides hearing about how grammy would expertly navigate the snowy roads between towns, I remember visiting my grandmother at work after swimming lessons and before I would go to get a cheese burger with Pow Pow. It is only now that I am realizing how lucky I am to have heard my grandmother tell her own stories about the town. About how things are and were.

My grandmother passed away the December before last. Right before she went, I was able to read part of my thesis project to her. My thesis had been a long time coming, 8 years to be exact. I felt so much love coming from her as I read. I imagined her voice telling me that it doesn't matter how long something takes. What is meant will be figured out. Always. My grandmother, even though I had not heard her voice in years, was heard loud and clear to me right then. Though I missed her expressiveness, her smile and her laugh, she was a comfort even in silence. Sometimes, when I would visit her I wished I could be there with her inside her head. Help her straighten out any confusion. Help her place memories and take some of the pain she seemed to be experiencing away. My grandmother lived with Alzheimer's. As her condition advanced, leaving her town was the last thing she ever wanted to do. My mom, my aunt and me are grateful to have just recently visited McCloud to honor her, my Pow Pow Red and Auntie Johnnie at what will be her final resting place.

When we are able to gather again safely, we hope to return there with her ashes.

Auntie Johnnie had been a nursing student at Chico State University between 1954-1956, she contracted polio there and would require the use of a wheel chair for the rest of her life. Facing this challenge, Auntie Johnnie, Mary Alice and Willie Lacy as well as Uncle James moved in with Mary Alice Jr and her daughter Wynn in Oakland. This was the beginning of the Lacy's extension in time here. Mary Alice Jr. would go on to earn a Master's Degree and work as a naval supply clerk before taking a job with the federal government in Richmond. Because of a familial guiding and because of her, the Lacy's would extend their legacy in Oakland. Johnnie Anne Lacy would go on to be named Woman of the Year by the California State Senate in 1988. As the former head of the Community Resources for Independent Living (CRIL) for 14 years, she advocated for herself and other folks of color with disabilities in the area of workplace and personal access to independence. Auntie Johnnie led the campaign that raised 350,000 to build Community Resources for Independent Living in Hayward. She lived off of Carlos Bee, 10 minutes (30 minutes in traffic) from the job I worked as an emergency substitute when I was staying with cousin Wynn. The connections should no longer surprise me.

Uncle James finished high school in McCloud, saved \$1200 and traveled to Washington D.C. to attend Howard University. He stayed during at least a part of this time with his Auntie Mary. Though he had intended on studying pharmacy, he chose liberal arts instead after a time because according to him, "pharmacy was hard." After university, Uncle James went back to McCloud and then moved to the Bay Area. At San Francisco State, the university at which I just finished my Master's degree some 65 years later, Uncle James was a part of the African American Association. When I ask him about groups that were working toward protected civil rights that were not recognized like the Black Panthers, he says there were many. It is interesting that when we are taught about Black people's local impact in building consciousness and securing rights and opportunities, a narrative around this time is that the Black Panthers were the only ones making an impact. Efforts by other groups existed oftentimes vacuums and every effort was made to sever connections between groups fighting for liberties. This is another strategy of the state. Uncle James not only worked in the Bay Area on behalf of Black Liberation, he also lived extensively in Ghana and worked with African leaders uniting for the continuation of the struggle for the decolonization of the African continent

and for strengthened relationships with Africans in America. Today, I spoke with Uncle James. He is currently living with his daughter about an hour and a half away from where I live with my parents. His grandson William is going to make sure he is able to join us virtually. Uncle James is so excited to have taken part in this sharing of this history. Our History. From Mississippi, Arkansas and Louisiana to Oakland to Africa our impact has been everything. Our dreams for our families are everything. We ourselves come to find out, are indeed what we have been searching for. We ourselves are the warmth of the sun.

6. Lucky To Find Out That The Answers Only Bring More Questions

In the middle of this story, I mused about what a shame it is that history is not often understood from marginalized or even multiple perspectives. It is counterproductive to liberation that single stories² are reinforced by policies and institutional practices in this country. In having the opportunity to speak to my great Uncle James and continue research into my family history, I have never understood more the importance of seeing our family as the creators of history not just who history happened to. In living their lives the Lacy's contributed to the thread of America. What we now have the honor to continue working on is the creation of entire Black fabrics. What I learned in school about migration and the narratives and tropes that are created around the ways Black people reached California do not speak to our nuance. Does not speak to the individual and collective decisions that were made within families. Does not speak to the ways that though the physical South was left, policies and practices still upheld the prejudice it is synonymous with.

In speaking to my family members and learning more more, I am excited to uncover complexities. For every question I have answers to now, I have three more questions to ask. That is because of nuance. This new learning is requiring me to peel back layers and reveal patterns in my family and in my own life that are at times overwhelming. This is my job right now though. Not to overload myself with information and stress about drama, but to understand the distillation of the impact that Uncle James speaks of. To give myself the opportunity to create a place, a story and purpose within US without regard to the U.S. To look in our mirror and see what in our legacy we want to pass on as well as what in our line we need to heal from. This is a choosing. More a being than a doing. In realizing and working toward Uncle James' question around realizing our impact, I am hoping to internalize the fact that though we are

² From Chimamanda Ngozi *Danger of a Single Story*

worthy as humans without impact, what we have and will continue to contribute to each other has the capacity to create space free from the need for validation of anyone who would diminish us. We are all we need.

How do we engage each other's versions of history?

In our families especially

How do we create space for each other's truths to exist?

How do we take back the impact of our contributions in order to invest in the stories and skills of our families all for the sake of liberation?

Finally.

Gathering information, asking questions and

Listening to stories for this project

Has left me with so many more wonderings

So many more imaginings

So many more mysteries to gain perspective on.

Solving things is becoming less important to me.

Hearing my elders speak

About my ancestors

And the quests they were on

Even in the face of Jim Crow in the South

Terror

And

Racism

Still everywhere else.

Though there is nothing new under the sun

We can make become

From the warmth of our own suns

We are The Warmth of Other Suns³

The The Warmth of Oakland Suns⁴

Every day was a new day to shine.

Even from our rooms, from under our covers

Every breath we acknowledge

Is a healing

Every conversation

Every Story told

³ From Isabel Wilkerson's book *The Warmth of Other Suns*

⁴ From the project *Black Gold: The Warmth of Oakland Suns* by Adrienne Oliver

Is fuel to continue on
Taking what is meant to be ours
Embodying the fact
That we ourselves are ours.