

## **The Land Has Memory: Reflections on Origins and Place** **Bonnie Lemelle Abadie\***

Lafayette Louisiana, Houston, Texas.

The old folks were tight-lipped when asked about the stories of the past.

“Why do you want to know?” they would ask.

“Let the dead past bury the past.

What happened before doesn’t concern you now.

You live above ground where the air is fresh and sunlight fills your life with grace and potential.

You are the plant growing from the sweet potato below, buried underground.”

It was an answer that satisfied, at least in that moment.

But it would be a question to which I would return again and again.

What secrets were the old folks in Mom’s family hiding?

Was the past too dark to recall?

Was it too shameful?

Was it too painful?

From what place had they come?

What was their perceived place in the world?

I figured the place has to be dark because why else would my question be skirted?

If it were noble, there would be a sense of pride and the stories freely told.

Like the one from my dad’s side of the family.

Our Place as Descendants of Francois. Opelousas, Louisiana.

Francois Lemelle came to the new continent from Lyons, France, as a surveyor for the French government in about 1780. He moved from New Orleans to Opelousas for the job.

His son Alexandre was my great-grandfather.

Alexandre’s son Leonard was my grandfather.

His son August was my Dad.

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Twenty-one-and-a-half acres in the country outside Leonville, LA,  
was the living proof of Francois' work payment.  
Parcels of land had been divided up among family members.

This piece of land had been destroyed by the great flood of 1926 (an exceptionally rainy year)  
when the government, the Army Corp of Engineers,  
in order to save New Orleans from flooding,  
diverted the waters of the swollen Mississippi into the farmlands of Central Louisiana.  
The land was never the same again. The soil had become toxic.  
It wouldn't grow much more than grey peas, a little cotton, and later, soybeans.  
In a twist of irony, and God's design, many years later, I married a man from New Orleans.  
The sacrifices my dad's family endured saved my husband's family,  
providing me with the Love of my Life.

Dad owned the land, and that caused no little jealousy among his siblings.  
He was the youngest of eight children. Least likely in succession.  
But "Pop" bestowed the land to him, his wife (my mom), and his heirs  
because unbeknownst to the others,  
August helped Pop pay the taxes and other financial obligations.

We called it "the old place."  
This land gave us a foundation, a culture, a religion, a touchstone to the past.  
And even though we never took advantage of living on the land,  
Pop's homestead was like home base for us.  
In this place, we knew our place in the world.  
Even though Dad owned the property, it was available to any and all family members  
who needed a place to live.

French Creole was how we self-identified.  
Not an option on standard forms asking about race and nationality.  
I always checked "other."  
This action had a twofold effect on me.  
One was the realization that I was special and unique.  
The other was the feeling that I didn't belong.

I heard that we were two races and several nationalities.  
When Louisiana became part of the US, according to "Jim Crow" laws of the South,  
it was illegal for Whites and Blacks to marry.

Too late!!!

Family secrets, hidden guilt, sense of shame,  
fear of being arrested, hanged, lynched for breaking the law.  
I came to understand the silence of the old folks.

We are French, Italian, Spanish, German, Caribbean, African, Asian, Acadian, Native American.

We are the colonizers and the colonized.

We are the oppressors and the oppressed.

We were called "free men of color."

Dad insisted, "We're people free of color!"

He wanted us to be known as people first.

People of integrity and worth.

When painted with a color, that's all others see.

My land is San Antonio, Texas.

My parents chose this place because the climate (both atmospheric and political) was much healthier.

I was born, raised, educated, established my professional life,  
fell in love, built a marriage, and buried a husband here.

I am connected to the family of faith and the social realities of South Central Texas.

Having no children of my own, I am part of many families.

The San Antonio River and the Missions are important threads in the fabric of my life here.

When my parents died in the 2010s,

my siblings and I had to make the painful decision about what would happen to the land.

We wanted to honor it by keeping it, but  
none of us were willing to uproot the lives we had established  
to rebuild and reclaim the land that initially defined us.

We all decided it was best to let it go.

The best part is that a cousin offered to buy it.

His purchase provided a best-case scenario.

The land still has its place in the family.

A question that visits me often:

"How does one stay true to oneself in the intersection of opposing factions?"

How does one honor all the ancestors simultaneously in their diversity?

Staying true to being mixed is a path that's hard to find.

Society wants no ambivalence.

Only clear choices,

Black or White!

For me, it's living with white privilege in a constantly racially charged environment.

I want to be the bridge between the two, but I am neither.

Not White, not Black.

Discounted by one, distrusted by the other.

Having both the white guilt and the black shame.

Embracing both is the work of a lifetime.

Presenting both to God for Redemption and Grace.

Another question that visits me:

"How do I navigate peacefully through tough terrain?"

I am a woman with brown skin. It's the wrong color for this political climate.

I may appear to some as one who is "illegal."

My place on the color wheel is like a game of chance.

None of us chooses the color of our skin, the place we are born, the family to which we are entrusted.

Artists and poets know: Colors are beautiful!

So I choose to live in faith over fear.

Even if bad things happen to me because of someone's distrust of my skin,

I trust that God is with me.

Still another question:

"How do I embrace femininity and the complementary relationship of male and female in a world that favors masculinity?"

I am a woman whose place in the Church and world at this time has many contradictions.

We raise children to change the world; the world continues to devalue our contributions.

We are important; we are ignored.

We have power; we have no voice.

We get things done; we get no credit.

Wisdom tells me, "Live your life! Don't be concerned about the games people play."

Seeking my place on this planet and in the annals of time, I can see the journey of life is amazing.

Travel is exciting and treacherous.

The view at sunset: it is worth all the trouble, pleasure, anticipation, pain joy and hope.

What a joy to trust in God, source and summit of all.  
Our true home, the ultimate place of belonging.

To have clarity of vision:

We are both breath of God and dust of earth.

Beautiful and fragile, sacred and finite.

My place is here for now!

My place in eternity will be revealed.

One thing of which I am certain:

We are made by, for, and to be LOVE.