Image page 1: “A Reckoning,”
2023-2024, digital photomontage.

Image page 2, top: “Senator Felton Celebrates,”
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Image page 3, bottom: “Lost Nations,”
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Image page 3, top: “Beyond the Museum Case,”
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2024, digital photomontage (not on display).

Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants,* Milkweed Press, 2015

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Reassembling History’s Fragments

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History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again.
- Maya Angelou

When I made North Carolina my permanent home in 2018, I had no prior ties to the state (or so I thought). Even before I moved, I embarked on a long process of getting to know everything I could about my new location: its natural history, economics, ecology, geography, and indigenous peoples, its European settlement and its colonial and American history, even its poisonous spiders and snakes.

Eminent biologist and Native American scholar Robin Wall Kimmerer calls this process of knowledge-seeking “becoming naturalized to place”—not through appropriation of others’ ways, but through understanding that being *from* someplace means not just settling *on* the land but living *with* the land, being worked on by the land instead of exerting dominion over it. In such a paradigm, knowledge is a duty, and action to lift up the land and its people is the highest calling, what Kimmerer calls “the deep reciprocity that renews the world.”

If renewal starts with knowledge, I soon discovered how blinkered my knowledge of “American” history actually was. For example, I thought I knew a little about the Civil War, but I did not know that my home state of New York had nearly seceded with the South. I did not know about the shelter that

enslaved people who had freed themselves found in the Great Dismal Swamp and the Freedmen's Colony on Roanoke Island. I knew almost nothing about Reconstruction and about the Jim Crow years in North Carolina, and a lot of what I "knew" turned out to be wrong. And believe me, I should know better than to fall for a simple storyline. I've spent more than half my life in school, learning or teaching subjects that required deep historical inquiry and healthy skepticism when anything seemed too neatly packaged.

Consider the story of social progress toward full equality for women in America. The 19th Amendment, ratified in 1920, was an enormous success, bought with time and risk by thousands of brave and determined women. However, American Black women didn't benefit until the 1960s, after a hard-fought campaign culminating in the passage of the Voting Rights Act.

In my North Carolina research, I discovered that the first woman to serve in the US Senate was Rebecca Feldman of Georgia, appointed for a single day's term in honor of her work to promote suffrage. Unfortunately, Senator Feldman also was a notorious white supremacist. One of her fiery speeches, in which she advocated lynching to preserve white women's purity, was reprinted in the Wilmington NC newspapers shortly before the 1898 Wilmington Massacre and Coup and helped provide a rationale for the coup's violence.

Senator Feldman's accession to the Senate is an equivocal milestone for women, at best. The artwork I made, "Senator Felton Celebrates," tries to convey this mixed message through the style of an editorial cartoon, juxtaposing elements that clearly don't belong together. The ghostly silhouette in the foreground is the "witnessing consciousness"–the person who tries to take in the contradictions and find a new historical narrative to make sense of them.

Ghostly presences abound in the images I made for this exhibition. The image on the cover of this booklet, for example, called "A Reckoning," imagines the witnessing consciousness coming face to face with a Red Shirt, the garb of homegrown white supremacist terrorists in the late-nineteenth-century Carolinas. Even in a museum case, the shirt retains its power to shock.

Or consider the ghostly figure of Virginia Dare in "Lost Nations," a work that looks at the disproportionate attention given to the "Lost Colony," a mere 118 English settlers, in the face of staggering losses of the tribal people indigenous to the area, and the continuing loss of maritime forest and indigenous flora and fauna. In my research, the disjunction took on yet another valence when I learned that since the late 19th century, Virginia Dare has been a symbol for the purity of white blood. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, one of the largest white supremacist organizations in the US is named for her.

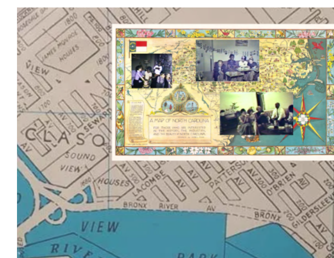
In light of what I found in my research, I concluded that William Faulkner was right: the past isn't past at all. The past is hiding in plain sight, haunting us, making demands of the witnessing consciousness. It is not easy to draw together fragmentary and scattered knowledge into a useful narrative. But it's important not to get stuck staring at horror in a museum case. At its most useful, *knowledge* is a verb.

I reflected the potentially motivating force of rediscovering history in "Beyond the Museum Case," in which the witnessing consciousness acknowledges the past but also looks at the immense power of action. The Red Shirts may have tried to end Black political power and the Black vote through violence and intimidation, but heroic Americans, especially Black Americans, have refused to be denied. The witnessing consciousness, too, snaps out of shock and paralysis, exits the museum, and gets to work.

As an artist, I believe art can help make sense of the "past that is not past." Art can provoke curiosity rather that polarization. By inviting the viewer to help make sense of a complex visual presentation, artwork acts as an analogue for how we make sense of fragmentary and often contradictory historical material.

As it happened, my artwork for this exhibition mostly depicts painful contradictions that I found, chiefly because they presented the greatest artistic challenge to represent visually. Still, I did find many wonderful and little-known stories about the extraordinary people who are now my neighbors. And I found out something wonderful about my own history: I did have meaningful connections to North Carolina before moving here.

As a child, I lived in the Soundview Houses, then a brand-new federal housing project in the South Bronx, eagerly sought after by working-class families. Among the members of our little community on the second floor of Building 10 were several Black families who had relocated from the South after the Second World War. Our closest neighbors were North Carolinians—Mr. and Mrs. Small with their two girls Cheryl and Joann, and Mr. and Mrs. Green with their two boys Bunny and Tony. I also played with kids whose parents had been born in Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas, and South Carolina, bringing to the Soundview Houses a rich mix of Southern accents, foods, religions, traditions and music. The image "Palimpsest: NY/NC" combines a map of my neighborhood in the Bronx in 1960 with a 1960 North Carolina map and photos of the people who brought North Carolina to me so many years ago.



I now know why I felt like I had come home the day we moved to North Carolina. Through the second wave of the Great Migration, North Carolina had found its way to the Bronx. And now I have found my way back, returning home again for the first time.