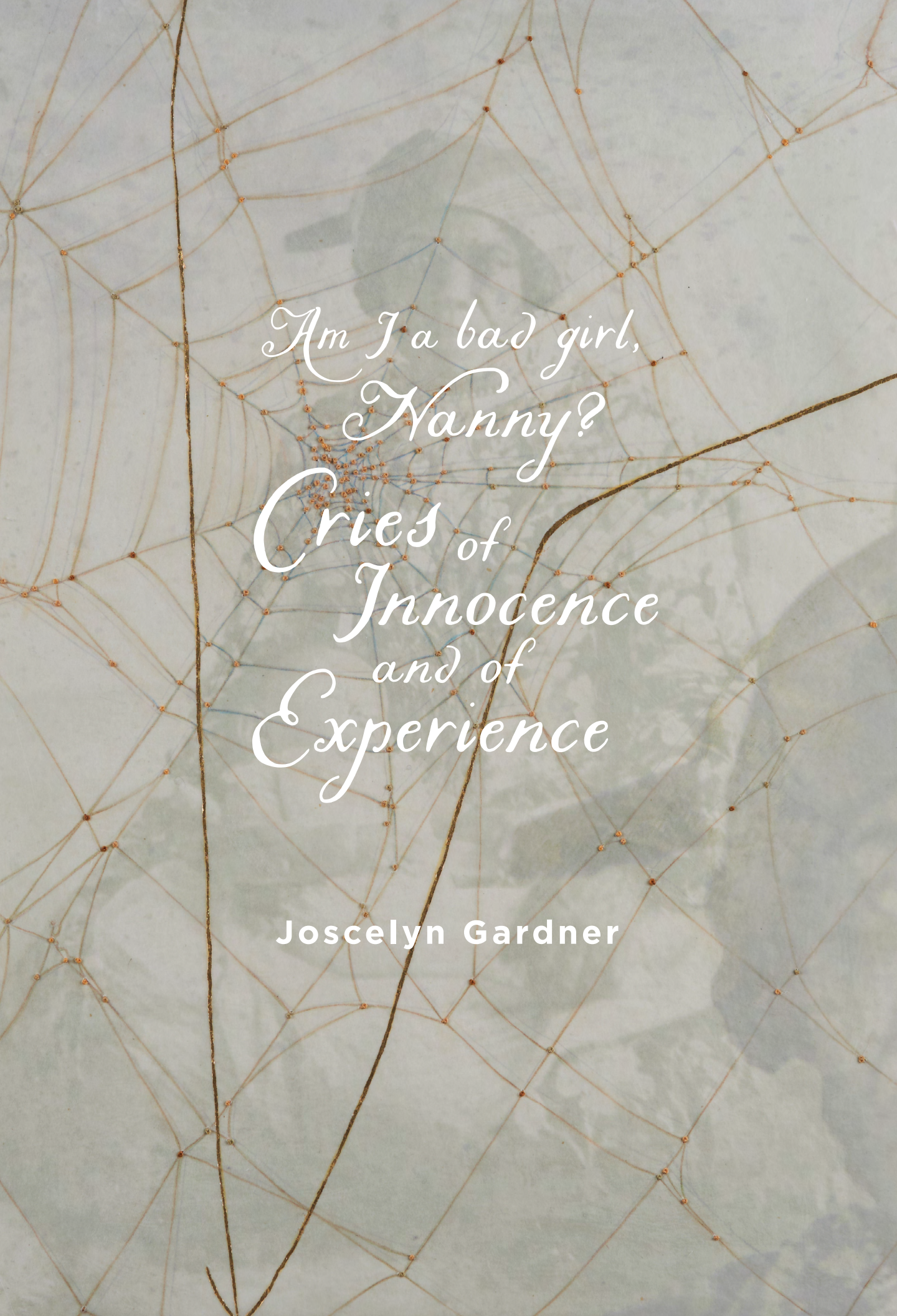
Am I a bad girl, Nanny?
Cries of Innocence and of Experience
Joscelyn Gardner

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Joscelyn Gardner

The Barbados Museum & Historical Society
St. Ann's Garrison, St. Michael, Barbados
2026

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Foreword

Allisandra Cummins

History reveals itself only through the production of specific narratives. What matters most are the process and conditions of such narratives . . . Only through that overlap can we discover the differential exercise of power that makes some narratives possible and silences others.

Prior to the 1930s, few full frontal images of Black individuals had been produced, whether in artistic production, photography or lithography, except in terms of the growing phenomenon of types: of performers or pugilists, preachers and politicians determined to achieve if not fame and fortune, then recognition and respect for achievement. The alternative of anonymized ethnographic postcards and pictures inhabited by unidentified individuals, disallowed the perception of personhood providing indisputable evidence of the way in which the archive, as articulated by Trouillot, conceals, obscures and silences as much as it reveals.

Traditional approaches to historical documentation relating to Barbadian identities and communities, were (unknowingly) amplified in the western oriented collection methodologies introduced within Caribbean memory institutions, virtually until the dawn of the twenty-first century. The traditional notion of the museum as authorizing transmission model has, since the 1990s, been challenged by scholars, curators and educators who argue that museums serve as "powerful rhetorical sites in which the past is selectively presented."

Today there is an imperative to instigate reflections around relevant, ethical and respectful research *with* rather than *for* local communities (Black and white), where institutions like the BMHS, as part of a decolonisation process, seek to facilitate dialogue between the past and present. In the past, both museums and their audiences received constructed knowledge based on curated collections, which over time often allowed the identities of both subjects and photographers to be obscured or even lost. With photography, this problem of disempowering the subject, whether knowingly or unknowingly, is particularly acute, where their reproduction often acts as a mere backdrop to the museum objects or its interpretation on display.

While this is not the first time that the two ambrotypes featuring Harriet Thomas Weekes have been exhibited, they were contextualized in quite different ways. At the BMHS, the 2003 exhibition *Photography within the City of Bridgetown* welcomed the opportunity for the first engagement in the island with the historical production of photography itself. These two images, the only full frontal images of Black women within this survey on the growth and development of Barbadian photography, gave a glimpse of what Curator of the BMHS exhibition, Harclyde Walcott stressed as "...the [inherent] dignity of their sense of personhood, by the centredness and confidence evident in the way they look into the lens" thus offering the first inklings of what could emerge.

Almost twenty years later, as part of the Art Gallery of Ontario's 2021-22 *Fragments of Epic Memory* Julie Crooks' curatorship placed "... these pieces into new arrangements... assembl[ing] a multigenerational—and multicentric—survey of Caribbean art and visual culture" inviting visitors to "explore the Caribbean and its diaspora, placing historical documents in dialogue with an immersive array of contemporary art[2]". Differing audiences came to 'know' these images, without knowing what

[1]Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), p. 25.
[2]AGO,2021

they did not know.

For the first time ***Am I a bad girl, Nanny? Cries of Innocence and of Experience*** by Joscelyn Gardner and its companion exhibit ***Harriet Thomas Weekes: The Right to Opacity*** produced by the Barbados Museum & Historical Society team of Harriet Pierce and Natalie McGuire afford welcome opportunities to revisit this terrain and reengage both directly and indirectly with Harriet and her infant charge Eva through these images, while reclaiming their existence through these recovered fragments, both individual and imagined.

In *Am I bad girl*, the artist remains true to her original intention whereby "Each set of text, sometimes barely visible, speaks to shifting meanings – … Meaning is formed through reading *between* (between the image and text; and, *between* the subjectivities of two persons from the past for whom race dictated their place in society)[3]", presenting Gardner's imagined dialogue between Eva and Harriet, her Nanny through an intricate assemblage of wording, embroidery and lithographs, imaginary reconstructions of Harriet's 'Obis'.

Joscelyn Gardner's initial encounter with the two images at the AGO, aroused her curiosity about the central subjects, and her determination to know more about these two persons led the BMHS to further interrogate our records and retrieve the long hidden history that both images presented differing personas of Harriet Thomas Weekes, produced perhaps a decade apart. For any organization to hold two such images of post emancipation Barbadian/Caribbean women in their collections is extraordinary. For our museum to be the guardians of two images of the *same* (Black) woman prior to 20th century must be considered miraculous. We are indebted to the artist for raising our consciousness about the importance of these objects and the people represented.

Recognition is also owed to the original donor Eva Beatrice Sinckler and her family, both for commissioning these images of Ms. Weekes and Ms. Eva (1858 -1868), holding them as precious keepsakes and ultimately for deciding to transfer their safeguarding to the Museum 100 years later. Research and preparations for Harriet Thomas Weekes ultimately provided the opportunity to challenge previous assumptions about the lived experience of anonymized Black subjects, attending to the ways in which enslaved and free(d) women enter history through their own stories, exposing the powerful legacies of historical fixity and archival assumption, to reveal the abbreviated evidence of personal memory and glimpses of lived realities and familial histories.

These vestiges of existence and persistence have helped deepen our understanding of the juxtaposition between materiality and memory, laying the groundwork for a broader reflection on the ethical responsibility of institutions such as ours in addressing the legacies of slavery, and to finally disrupt the power imbalance inherent in historical production by enabling today's audiences to creatively engage with and slowly dismantle the problematic production of historical narratives as alluded to by Trouillot, without attempting to impose new ones. These bear profound symbolic weight for generations to come.

Alissandra Cummins
Director Barbados Museum and Historical Society

[3]Gardner, 2022

Portrait of Harriet Thomas Weekes with Eva Douglas Richards. 1858. Ambrotype.
Collection of the Barbados Museum & Historical Society.

Artist Statement

Joscelyn Gardner

The body of work on view in the exhibition, ***Am I a bad girl, Nanny? Cries of Innocence and Experience*** has developed from research started in 2021 when I first viewed a unique ambrotype from the Barbados Museum Collection titled *Harriet Thomas Weekes, nurse with her infant charge*, c.1858, which was on loan to the Art Gallery of Ontario for their large survey show, *Fragments of Epic Memory*. This tiny, encased object intrigued me. The Black Barbadian nurse in the double portrait was named, while the white child was unnamed (an unusual feature in this period). As a treasured heirloom that had been donated to the museum for safe keeping, it also likely held cherished memories and untold stories that would offer a portal into my own Barbadian heritage.

Research for the ensuing project was conducted in Barbados and online. I was interested in exploring the complex (and intimate) interracial relationship between two Creole subjects whose lives were determined by their position within a post-emancipation British colonial plantation society. I aimed to gather historical facts about the subjects but chose a speculative methodology when creating my work. I wanted to introduce imaginative possibilities - to create a space of dreaming where the subjects' inner lives and feelings could be explored. I also became very interested in the provenance of the object (and later, its sister ambrotype), paying special attention to the way it was labelled, cared for, and valued over time. Two of my digital archival prints centering around the ambrotype as an object, were presented to the public in a group exhibition titled *In Two Places* held in London, Ontario and Barbados in 2022.

The current folio of letters to nurse Harriet Thomas Weekes by the ghost of the child, Eva Douglas Richards, explores their life together from the child's fictional twenty-first-century perspective. This folio is composed of twenty-four loose leaf multi-layered hand-embellished stone and plate lithographs (paired image and text pages) interleaved with twelve digital archival prints on vellum (whisper poems), in a varied edition of four (plus printer's proof edition). It is presented in a custom linen clamshell box accompanied with a small pincushion. The lithographs have been created with my long-time collaborator, Tamarind Master Printer Jill Graham. Jill and I have worked together on the material aspects of this project since 2023, at the NSCAD University Print Shop in Nova Scotia, where Jill is based, and in my rural studio in south-western Ontario. I would like to thank Jill for her tireless energetic support and professionalism in helping to produce what has been our largest project to date.

My thanks also go to the Barbados Museum curators who wholeheartedly agreed to host this exhibition and to later further its development through research of nurse Weekes' life that is presented in a partner exhibition. I would similarly like to thank those who helped in the exciting research journey - Alexa Greist, PhD and Julie Crooks, PhD who initially alerted me to this ambrotype's existence in 2021; Alissandra Cummins, who generously informed me about the identities of both of the portrait's sitters and nurse Weekes' importance within three generations of the child's family, and moreover, about a rare second ambrotype of Harriet Thomas Weekes in the BMHS Collection; Anne Bancroft, who shared with me process documentation of her conservation of these two historically valuable ambrotypes; Harriet Pierce, genealogist, who in 2025 led the retrieval of historical documentation relating to the ambrotypes; and, Natalie McGuire, who creatively coordinated this exhibition with its

sister exhibition, ***Harriet Thomas Weekes – A Right to Opacity***, in her role as Curator of Social History. The project has come together in ways that we would not have imagined when it was first proposed.

Additionally, I would like to thank Alissandra Cummins for her enlightening foreword and for her continued trust in my work with the museum's collection. My deep gratitude also go to eminent art historian, Erica James, PhD for her valuable and inspired contribution to this catalogue, which has been important in contextualizing my work; as well as to Natalie McGuire PhD and Harriet Pierce for embracing the research on Harriet Thomas Weekes and the Douglas, Richards and Sinckler families for the museum's exhibition, and for sharing the museum's research material in this publication. A large thank you likewise goes to professional photographer, Paul Lambert, who documented my work in Canada, and allowed me to share the portrait of myself from his, as yet unpublished, *Artists of London* project; to William Cummins whose documentation photographs of the ambrotypes, pre- and post-conservation, became generative to my work; and to Neil Barnard, who having formerly produced numerous publications for my gallery, The Art Foundry, when I lived in Barbados, designed this exhibition catalogue and related exhibition materials with unstinting enthusiasm and creativity.

Lastly, I would like to express my profound gratitude to R L Seale & Co. Ltd. who have provided very generous sponsorship for the exhibition.

Joscelyn Gardner
February, 2026

Love Vines
(Cassytha filiformis)

Erica James

Introduction

In recent years, the critique of the presumed insufficiency of the Caribbean archive has generated a call for critical fabulation as a response to absences. Glissantian opacity has also been invoked as critical space, allowing unmoored objects to remain unknowable as an indictment of the archive. Joscelyn Gardner's work over the past twenty-five years offers us another way forward. Through the materiality, historical grounding, production processes, and haptic invocations resonant in her oeuvre, she has made absence itself and the realities of the "unlikely to ever be known" in history, one of many critical landscapes for her work. It is speculative, personal, urgent, asks hard questions, and yet, it remains tender.

Her oeuvre asks something of its audience. This essay speaks to what my engagement with her art has asked of me. As such, it reads like a river. In form, it takes shape like a love vine. It flows in one direction, even when it appears to double back. It tests the curatorial essay form. My hope is that it ends as a beginning, encouraging audiences to allow themselves to also embrace this work's pull.

i

Artistic practices like Joscelyn Gardner's aesthetically affirm that in the Caribbean, the sublime violence of transatlantic slavery, revolutions, colonialism, and indentureship live on in intimate, material, intra-discursive relationships and epistemic forms today. Gardner is perhaps best known for her "Creole Portraits" which center Black women whose names are recorded as being "taken," sexually violated, flogged, and brutalized in the diaries of Thomas Thistlewood, a Scottish plantation overseer and enslaver in eighteenth century Jamaica.[i]

Not without irony, the presence of their names

Wall installation of Creole Portraits III: "bringing down the flowers…" at the Art Gallery of Ontario, 2023.

Cinchona pubescens (Nago Hanah). 2011. hand-coloured stone lithograph on frosted mylar. 36" x 24"

in Thistlewood's diary ensured that these women did not completely disappear from history. But we know little about them beyond these irruptions. We certainly know nothing about how they looked or their interior life. And yet, within a single composition, Gardner's "portraits" gave and simultaneously give audiences a sense of their humanity and embodiment as well as their disembodiment and dehumanisation under plantation slavery.

What I love about these works is that in declaring a thing a portrait, one is declaring the life of its sitter. Something Gardner accomplishes without images in the archive to guide her. Yet she proceeded with the knowledge that in the Caribbean, archives do not take singular forms and are embedded in colonial epistemes of knowing- and forgetting.

She drew on histories of representing the Caribbean primarily through botanical illustration, medicinal plants, implements used to control their bodies and hairstyles created in moments of ease that reference care, creativity and the haptic to produce her portraits. The histories of the referent forms she called on, attest to the complexity of epistemes in Caribbean colonial societies and the way bodies are commoditized through the very process of objectification embedded in these early representational regimes of the region.

What do I mean by this? In her portraits Gardner redeployed compositional codes used in botanical illustrations to represent the violated and sexually available bodies of enslaved Africans from the point of view of the European slavers, visual codes that grounded an aesthetic of commodification – an imperial aesthetic epitomised by William Blake's infamous 18th century engravings based on drawings by John Gabriel Stedman. Beyond the clearly violent, sexual and pornographic nature of the images such as *A Female Negro Slave with a Weight Chained to her Ankle* (1773), compositional elements like the low horizon lines aid in the commodification of the represented body. The sky approximates the white background of wildlife illustrations by artist-illustrators like John James Audubon's *Flamingo* (Plate 431, 1838) where the landscape environment that flora, fauna and human occupy become almost interchangeable. The visual language that formalizes the objectification of the plant, animal or African represented, also produces a clinical distance between the represented and the viewer in the process, psychically separating the viewer from the acts of violence and pain these bodies bear. Like Audubon's wildlife, the human figure is placed in the center of the composition, disconnected from a living environment and culture, an object.

In Blake's images, bodies are presented in a manner that also invite consumptive study, like the fruit, animals or pieces of illustrated sugarcane. The *compositional form* does not engender empathy. Rather, it represses it by mobilizing dehumanizing visual tropes that work to establish these bodies within a hierarchy of value for all commodities in the Caribbean. The ethos operating at the heart of this visual system – and I want to emphasize its systemic nature – serves as a visual shorthand communicating a number of ideas signaled in the frame and mobilized outside of it. That is to say, the objectifying ethos is embedded in the manner of representation.

Gardner takes the formal arrangement of the botanical illustration and upends the affective implications of the form. She layers the representational restraints of the white background and decultured subject with machines of restraint used in slavery to subdue Black people, women specifically, therefore

ensuring that the specter of violence and histories of sexual violence evident in Blake's prints are always in play. In her portraits, Gardner represents the back of each woman's head crowned in elaborate hairstyles, evoking the haptic, intimate and human. Mixed in with the restraints and the braided hair are various plants used during plantation slavery for medicinal purposes, often to induce abortions.

Though we can never know the visual countenance of Mazerine, Quamina or Abba, all names of women Gardner gleaned directly from Thistlewood's diary and attached to each portrait – her work holds space for their existence and affirms their being, while refusing to leave behind the mechanisms of history that worked to erase them – specifically the multi-layered nature of commodity-based capitalist slavery and its dehumanizing violence.

ii

In this new body of work Gardner draws on a portrait that entered the collection of the Barbados Museum in 1957 as a point of departure. Shared recently with the public in the *Fragments of Epic Memory* exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 2022, where Gardner first saw it, it is a rare nineteenth-century ambrotype presumably made on the island, in which Harriet Thomas Weekes, a Black nanny, cradles her white charge, Eva (Douglas Richards).

An ambrotype is a photographic image imprinted on a glass plate that has been coated with collodion to create a faint negative. They are made to appear positive by using a black, often tar-like paint beneath the glass to fill in the positive space left transparent during the photographic process. The material characteristics of Harriet and Eva's ambrotype are worth noting. The positive and the negative spaces are codependent. Ambrotypes are somewhat delicate, and need to be protected from light, moisture, everything that signifies the hot, bright and humid Caribbean. As they age, the collodion becomes unstable creating an almost blurred effect around the image.

It is a minor miracle that this image still exists. Its pre-conservation state tells us that it was exposed to all of these conditions and survived. Even its protective glass cover had a V-shaped crack that embraced the figures and ended in the area just past Harriet's heart - before it was conserved and exhibited. What does the blur acknowledge? What does the crack open, reveal, and preserve literally and symbolically? Might we see this archival object, which had rested comfortably in the Barbados Museum for more than sixty years, as participant in a kind of repair process?

Gardner's experience of the photograph catalysed a new body of work entitled *Am I a bad girl, Nanny? Cries of Innocence and of Experience,* a treacle-like title for a serious work drawn from William Blake's famous collection of illuminated poems, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience (1789-84)*. Blake's poems explored the experience of moving from childhood innocence into adult experience.

In ways akin to her employment of the botanical illustration for the *Creole Portraits*, yet generating an entirely new conversation, Garder draws on Blake's illuminated manuscript as a model which she then transforms into a contemporary conceptual work. As an object, *Am I a bad girl*...is a folio composed of twenty-four loose leaf lithographs (paired image and text pages), interleaved with twelve digitally printed vellum pages (whisper poems that interrupt the folio to explore the portrait's provenance). Each multi-layered lithograph has been embellished with hand-colouring and

embroidered thread, and the complete folio is presented in a custom clamshell box.

The center of this project is the photograph of Harriet and Eva, affirming once again how a single work in the archive, in this case a portrait, possesses the capacity to transform our understanding or extend our knowledge of the Caribbean.

If the *Creole Portraits* in Gardner's words "confronted patriarchal violence against enslaved women, memorializing their powerful resistance to their enforced role as "breeders" of new slaves"[ii] and "sought to address cavernous silences in the colonial archive, respectfully honouring anonymous women whose lives shaped Caribbean history," in this work the conversation not only deepens, but becomes personalized for contemporary viewers. Questions are asked through image and text, process and the implication of touch, making this work as much a "thing" as it is an active catalyst. It doesn't provide answers, but encourages its audience to find them itself.

As Gardner has shared, the Black woman pictured—Harriet—was born into slavery and later freed after the period of indentureship. Harriet served the family of the child she cuddles—Eva—for three generations. There are a few considerations here which Gardner, as a self-described "white Creole artist whose ancestry in Barbados stretches back to the 1600s" understands. She realizes that she is an "implicated subject" in this history. She understands that her work for the last twenty-five years has "explored the entangled relations of enslaved and free women in West Indian domestic spaces—lives lived side-by-side but unequally." And she recognizes that "During slavery, these entanglements were further complicated by sexual violence: where enslaved mixed-race women and white family members were often literally blood relatives." This project recognizes all of this and is also painfully aware of how Black women disappear in representation even when rendered.

It also surfaces other aspects of Harriet's life that the portrait cannot literally hold. Harriet was a nanny, but she was also known as a healer, a roots woman; a source of help for the family she served but also the community that taught her the art of healing and nurtured her outside of the Douglas home. Eva Douglas Richards was born in 1858, six years after the novel Uncle Tom's Cabin was released to wide acclaim. The authorial voice of the child in that novel was also a girl-child named Eva. Perhaps the echo is a coincidence but the relationship that centers that novel between *Eva* and *Uncle Tom* can be seen as refracted in the photograph of *Harriet and Eva*, with the promise of an alternative ending.

This ambrotype is part of a wide transatlantic corpus where Black women are pictured with their white-presenting charges. In places like Brazil, it was so common that it formed the genre referred to as Mãe Preta[iii]. Repeatedly imaged, it is remarkable how little the relationship pictured and the complexities it holds are discussed in the circum-Caribbean, as if the image (and our silence) says all that needs to be said.

The life of this project encourages us to think again. To give this relationship shape, Gardner has created stunning stone lithographs featuring *obi balls*, bundles of natural and magical matter associated with Obeah. She has filled them with plant fragments, feathers, hair, insects, and other objects that would have been used in their activation. For the artist, these balls represent "African spiritual legacies that survived beneath colonial repression;" objects that Harriet may have fashioned to facilitate healing in those

Songs of Innocence and Experience: (s)mothered. 2022. archival digital print on Hahnemule paper

who sought her help. Gardner casts these balls against fragmented prints of the photograph, as well as layers of text consisting of letters in the voice of Eva asking Harriet things she never dared in life. The translucent layers, the visual and historical references, lithographs, letters all come together with poems, authored by the artist, to produce, with complete intention, a book.

In this book, in this diary, Gardner gives Eva voice in a series of letters, which Eva's spirit, still roaming the earth a hundred years after dying, writes to Harriet. The quality of translucency Gardner effects throughout the work - in the poems, letters, and images, gestures towards the borderlessness of memory in relation to the surety of what once occurred or existed and the unknowable spaces written histories are unable to render. In material, form and affect, the work marks the complexities and ambivalence of this fundamental relationship between Black and Brown wet nurses and nannies in the Caribbean, and their white charges. To engage this work, the artist's stated desire to have it generate a conversation where we reckon with the traumas embedded in these relationships, traumas she believes echo in contemporary Creole and Western societies and remain unacknowledged, become clear.

iii

In the face of histories of silence, for reasons we must acknowledge, this is a brave project. When I was asked to write on it, I wasn't sure how to begin, but I knew that the work demanded something different from me than a research or curatorial essay. The artist's focus on the perspective of the child meant that Harriet would remain silent and for reasons I do not yet understand, I wanted my critical voice to amplify through Harriet's voice.

I use the *Love Vine* to title this contribution because in process I began to see it as Gardner first saw it - as a metaphor for the relationship pictured and all that it is tethered to. *Love vine* is a beautifully colored vine common in the Caribbean. It has various medicinal and decorative uses, but in nature it is known to strangle its hosts, sucking away their life. It is a plant Gardner drew on to render the entanglement witnessed in this photograph

between Harriet and Eva early on in the process, as a way to think about a love and/or relationship that was simultaneously nurturing and suffocating—or what Gardner describes as a kind of "parasitic bond neither could escape."

In the letters, Eva frequently asks Harriet whether she loved her, her siblings and family. I found the longing embedded in the question stunning; tragic, sad, even greedy. But it was also a recognition, an acknowledgment, a knowing, even an admission that needed to surface. I wanted Harriet to respond to this love vine and it is where I will end my first engagement with this work; not neatly by returning to an insufficient thesis and a general discussion, but open-ended, in mid-thought imagining how Harriet might respond.

Dear Child,

You speak of love. Have I ever really known love? Is love care? Does it always comingle with a special fear for one's children, family, and charges? Does it really transcend boundaries? Is it a luxury? Does love feel like freedom? I am not sure I have known love or freedom fully. I have had glimpses and moments of care; An indescribable grounding in my community. But to live - sometimes I had to protect myself from those depths of feelings. My child died before he learned to speak...love... There is no record of his death. Born into slavery, I realized early that those who give can quickly take.

Do you remember the tree that frightened you; the tree that grew around the shackles that had been chained to it? Shackles that had once held my ancestors, once held me? We watched the tree slowly consume them as it grew. Was that sad miracle the source of your fear? Even as they disappeared, I never forgot that they were there. I never stopped seeing them even though they had vanished. That tree always reminded me of the need to temper my hopes, to recognize how my story was different from yours and your mother's and daughter's; that my body though always present with you, could allow my imagination to carry me elsewhere – into that tree. Don't see it as a rejection of you, or that I ignored your fear. I understood your innocence then. But how long did it take you to see the differences between us, that I always knew?

You drank my potions. You took mango baths I prepared and accepted the obis I made to heal you many times. You believed. You came to me when scared and in need of reassurance. Why did you and your mother allow your father and husband to sow seeds of distrust in me? I nurtured and cared for three generations without incident and here you ask of my love, of my loyalty, of my children. Why not ask who taught me to heal? Ask me how I came to know. Tell me why you never asked about my children then. Was it your innocence then that made you certain of my love, or is it your experience now that brings doubt; that despite my care, I could resist loving you?

You ask for reassurance, of my loyalty, of my love. Was three generations not enough time to speak? Can you imagine you, without me?

[i] The diaries and plantation records were written in the late 18tth-century by Thomas Thistlewood (1721-1786), the overseer for three plantations in Jamaica. He was also a slave owner. See *Thomas Thistlewood Papers*. James Marshall and Marie-Louise Osborn Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, and Trevor Burnard, *Master Tyranny and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* (UNCPress, 2004)

[ii] All quotes from the artist are drawn from a public talk Gardner gave on this work entitled "Am I a bad girl, Nanny? Memory and Care in a Folio of Letters from the ghost of a nineteenth-century white Creole child" International Multi-disciplinary Printmaking, Artists, Concepts and Techniques (IMPACT) Conference in Trois Rivieres, Quebec, October 2025.

[iii] See https://www.isabellofgren.se/mae-preta/

Portrait of Harriet Thomas Weekes, n.d., Ambrotype, Collection of the Barbados Museum & Historical Society

Harriet Thomas Weekes: The Right to Opacity

Natalie McGuire and Harriet Pierce

Introduction

Harriet Thomas Weekes (1815–1897) offers us a rare and fragile window into a life lived across one of the most transformative centuries in Barbadian history. Through scattered documentary traces and photographic evidence, she testifies quietly, indirectly, to her presence in a society shifting from the violence of the enslaved plantation complex into the uncertainties of a post-emancipation racial order. Her story, like so many stories of Black women in the Caribbean, is marked as much by what is absent as by what survives.

In *Am I a bad girl, Nanny?* Joscelyn Gardner (b. 1961, Barbados) asks a deliberately unsettling question, that lingers at the intersection of care, coercion, intimacy, and survival within the afterlives of plantation society. In this body of work, Gardner engages the colonial archive not as a site of certainty, but as a charged and fragile terrain, where women like Harriet Thomas Weekes appear only in fragments: as roles, annotations, and silences. Through lithography, embroidery, and layered material processes to weave an alternative visual mindscape of Harriet's charge, Eva Douglas Richards, Gardner constructs visual forms that are at once bodily and botanical, echoing the contradictory expectations placed upon Black women whose physical, emotional and spiritual labour sustained generations of white families while their own lives remained largely undocumented.

Gardner's practice, grounded in postcolonial feminist inquiry and an ethics of self-implication, does not seek to speak for Harriet, but rather to sit with the discomfort of what cannot be fully known, and explore multiplying realities through the eyes of Eva Douglas, the child.

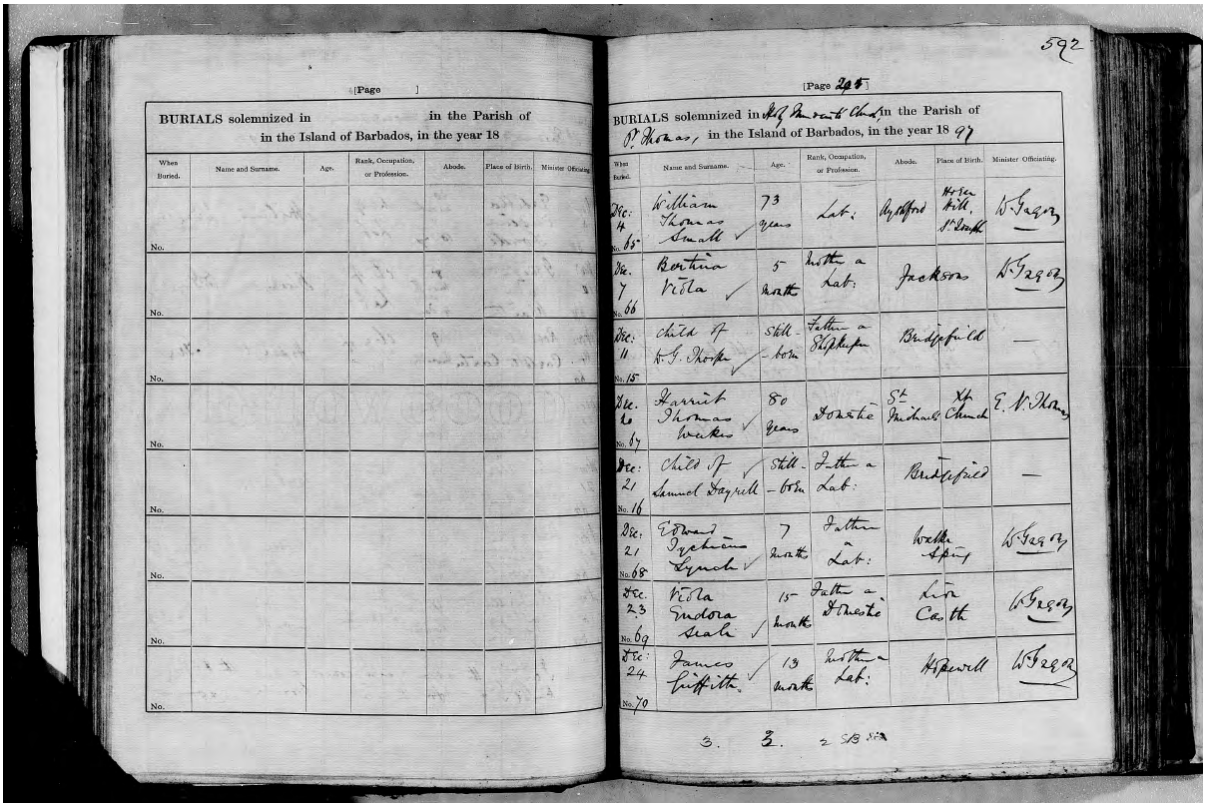
At the Barbados Museum & Historical Society, we remain attentive to the power and risk of this gesture. We embrace the creative inquiries of *Am I a bad girl, Nanny?* and in the sister exhibition - *Harriet Thomas Weekes: The Right to Opacity* -we recognize that she was not a metaphor, but a woman who lived nearly eighty years in Barbados, transitioning from enslavement to legal freedom, navigating motherhood, labour, loss, and continuity within a deeply unequal society. The colonial archival record reveals her as a nurse to multiple generations of a single elite family, yet offers little insight into her interior life, her choices, or the constraints under which those choices were made.

Harriet Thomas Weekes, a Genealogical Roadmap: Harriet Pierce

Two documents from the BMHS' records provided the starting point for the genealogical search for Harriet Thomas Weekes: The gift receipt that acknowledged the donation of a photograph of Harriet Thomas Weekes, by Eva Beatrice Sinckler to the Barbados Museum in 1957, and a second gift receipt for a solo portrait of the same subject in 1970. The limited information gleaned from these two sources underpinned the development of a research strategy.

The first receipt, as well as a notation affixed to the back of the image, told us that Harriet was the daughter of an enslaved woman; she was coloured and had served as nurse to three generations of Douglas women. Although left unstated, as a child born to an enslaved woman, and in accordance with prevailing law based on the matrilineal principle, we also knew that Harriet had inherited her mother's enslaved status.

The information also raised several questions; who was Harriet's father? when and where was she born? was she married? did she have children? when did she die? and who were these Douglas women for whom she worked?



BURIALS solemnized in in the Parish of in the Island of Barbados, in the year 18

[Page]

When Buried.	Name and Surname.	Age.	Rank, Occupation, or Profession.	Abode.	Place of Birth.	Minister Officiating.
No.						
No.						
No.						
No.						
No.						
No.						
No.						
No.						

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BURIALS solemnized in [illegible] in the Parish of St. Thomas, in the Island of Barbados, in the year 18 97

When Buried.	Name and Surname.	Age.	Rank, Occupation, or Profession.	Abode.	Place of Birth.	Minister Officiating.
Dec. 4 No. 65	William Thomas Small	73 years	Lab.	Mystford	Hope Hill, St Lucy	W. Jagger
Dec. 7 No. 66	Bertina Viola	5 months	Illegitimate Child	Jackson		W. Jagger
Dec. 11 No. 67	Child of W. J. Thorpe	Still-born	Father a Shopkeeper	Bridgefield		—
Dec. 16 No. 67	Harriett Thomas Weekes	80 years	Domestic	St. Michael	Ch. Church	E. N. Harris
Dec. 21 No. 16	Child of Samuel Haywell	Still-born	Father a Lab.	Bridgefield		—
Dec. 21 No. 68	Edward Ivechurch Lynch	7 months	Father Lab.	Wells Spring		W. Jagger
Dec. 23 No. 69	Viola Eudora Seale	15 months	Father a Domestic	Lion Castle		W. Jagger
Dec. 24 No. 70	James Griffith	13 months	Illegitimate Child Lab.	Hopewell		W. Jagger

Burial record from Holy Innocents Church listing Harriet Thomas Weekes, 1897, "Barbados records," images, FamilySearch copyright The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints

To answer these questions, we first turned to the Barbados church and civil records, which document births, baptism, marriages, deaths and burials in Barbados. These records covering the period 1637-1930 are freely available online at www.familysearch.org.

Given her enslaved status, we also felt that the *Former British Colonial Dependencies Slave Registers 1813-1834*, should also provide some insights into Harriet's life up to Emancipation on August 1, 1834. The Barbados returns, which cover the period 1817 to 1834, are included in the database, to which Ancestry.co.uk offers free access.

As additional information came to light, our research broadened and included such resources as Barbados' historic newspaper collection, available on the Digital Library of the Caribbean, the Journal of the Barbados Museum & Historical Society and the Hughes Queree Files.

Harriet Thomas Weekes was documented on the 1817 Return[1] for Newcastle Plantation in Christ Church as 'Harriott' Thomas, a two year-old coloured child, born in 1815, the property of Thomas Best. A survey of the 1820 Return[2] for Newcastle, included a five-year-old Harriet Thomas who was among twelve enslaved persons, ranging in age from 5 to 55, sold to R. A. Ellcock of Mt. Wilton Plantation. A review of the return[3] for Mt. Wilton for the same year showed a corresponding entry for the enslaved

[1]"The Return of William Turpin of Slaves the Property of Thomas Best on the Newcastle of which William Turpin is the Manager, there being No Legal Representative." Former British Colonial Dependencies Slave Registers – 1817.
[2]"Return of John R. Best of Slaves the property of Tho.as (Thomas) Best to Whom he is Attorney. Newcastle." Former British Colonial Dependencies Slave Registers 1820.
[3]"The Return of Reynold A. Ellcock of Slaves his own Property." Former British Colonial Dependencies Slave Registers 1820.

purchased from Newcastle.

The relocation of Harriet Thomas from Newcastle estate in Christ Church to Mt. Wilton estate in St. Thomas, represented not only a geographic shift across parish boundaries, but to some extent set the stage for the remainder of her life. It was at Mt. Wilton that she came into contact with the Douglas family, whose patriarch, Daniel Douglas, served as Attorney for the plantation. Thus Harriet's life and that of the Douglas family became firmly intertwined.

In the final return for Mt. Wilton Plantation in 1834[4], Harriet is documented as an enslaved labourer. Since no record of a manumission has been found, it is highly likely that the then 19-year-old Harriet, entered the period of Apprenticeship, as stipulated by the British Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, which came into effect on August 1, 1834; transitioning to full legal freedom on August 1, 1838[5].

On December 16, 1845, Harriet Weekes, a Nurse at Mt. Wilton Plantation, baptized her son James Lessingham Weekes, at Holy Innocent's Church in St. Thomas, in a private ceremony. From this record, the first time the name Harriet Weekes appears in the public record, we know that Harriet gave birth to at least one child. But, it also raises a number of questions:

What is the origin of the name Weekes? Was Harriet married?

To date no record of a marriage has been found. Furthermore, no father is included on the baptismal record of James, which is customary when the parents are not married. The name Weekes, however was not unfamiliar in Harriet's life. In 1820, when she was sold to Mt. Wilton, included in the transaction were Mary and Lucy Weeks, two coloured children aged 5 and 6. Is there a connection? It is noteworthy that the advertisement[6] for the sale of Newcastle estate noted that the one hundred and eighty enslaved were to be sold in "families." Other than this caveat in an advertisement, the record has shown no concrete familial link between these individuals sold in 1820.

Another question we may ask: Is Harriet Weekes and 'Harriott'/Harriet Thomas one and the same? Based on several similarities in the information, it is reasonable to conclude that these individuals *are* one and the same. They are both located at Mt. Wilton and share the profession of nurse. It is also noteworthy that Harriet chose the name Lessingham for her son, again signaling a connection, with the Douglas family. Daniel Douglas' son, James Lessingham Douglas was born in 1834. More importantly, on December 20, 1897 Harriet Thomas Weekes, who was born in Christ Church and at the time resident in St. Michael, was buried at Holy Innocent's Church. This represents the first time that Harriet's full name is mentioned in the public record, thus providing some continuity between the enslaved Harriet/ 'Harriott' Thomas, Harriet Weekes the mother and Harriet Thomas Weekes the nurse. It also highlights the place of the Douglas family in Harriet's life, as this church figured prominently in the rites of passage of this family.

Unfortunately, the colonial public record has

[4]"Return of Renn Hamden of Slaves the Property of the Estate of Reynold A. Alleyne dec'd to which he is Qualified Executor. Mt. Wilton." Former British Colonial Dependencies Slave Registers 1834

[5]The period between 1834 and 1838 was one of British enforced apprenticeship, modeled to ensure a perpetuation of bodily enslavement. This is different to indentureship programmes introduced at the time in the Caribbean for East Indian labour, as an indenture as legal title presumes some agency on the part of the indentured. Apprenticeship was enforced as a precondition of continued bonded labour after 250 years of enforced terror (Kevin Farmer, 2026).

[6]"Notice for sale of Newcastle Plantation," Barbados Mercury, July 13, 1819:3.

been silent on further information on Harriet's son. Did he die soon after birth? It may be inferred from the private baptism that the child was in ill-health and deemed unlikely to survive. As was the custom in such circumstances, a private baptism conducted at the earliest opportunity, ensured salvation of the soul. Unfortunately, no evidence of a death/burial has been found to substantiate this theory.

Harriet Thomas Weekes' eighty-year lifetime was marked by several watershed events in Barbados' history. The Abolition of slavery and the end of Apprenticeship saw her transitioning from enslavement to legal freedom with the potential to chart her own course; Harriet chose to remain with the Douglas family. The Bussa Rebellion of 1816; the 1831 Hurricane; the cholera epidemic of 1854 and the Confederation Riots of 1876 led to societal changes to which Harriet was not immune.

Another event that directly impacted Harriet, was the murder of Reynold Alleyne Ellcock on October 2, 1821, and the subsequent sentencing of those found guilty. In addition to the chaos engendered, these events placed the brutalities of the system on display for all to witness, voluntarily or involuntarily.

It is often said that the lives of ordinary Afro-Barbadians, especially women, remain absent from the historical record. This project to research the life of Harriet Thomas Weekes is one step in filling this lacuna. It is also indicative of the limitations and challenges resulting from inadequate personal information and gaps in the public record. What is interesting in this case is the existence of not just one but two photographs of Harriet, one with a short note of identification. However inadequate, this note named Harriet and placed her in societal context. This project also signals the importance of private collections to further exploration of this aspect of Barbadian heritage.

Archives, Scriptural Tombs and Opacity: Natalie McGuire

The exhibition component of this archival research - ***Harriet Thomas Weekes: The Right to Opacity*** - embraces those absences. Complementing the visual imaginaries of its sister exhibition by Joscelyn Gardner - ***Am I a bad girl, Nanny? Cries of Innocence and of Experience*** - it acknowledges that what we encounter in the colonial archive is incomplete, partial, and mediated, and that the gaps between the threads are themselves just as instructive. Rather than construct a definitive biography, we foregrounded a practice of curatorial listening, one attentive to silences, conjecture, and contested memory. We situate the museum as a site for multivocal interpretations, as a crucial way to be reparative to an archive that has traditionally prioritised a singular colonial gaze. We instead offer a nuanced reflection of the submarine unity throughout our fragmented archipelago, and what emerges is a layered, evolving tapestry of encounters with Harriet.

Drawing on decolonial methodologies from Édouard Glissant, Temi Odumosu and Saidiya Hartman, this project intentionally resists the impulse to "know" Harriet fully. Saidiya Hartman has described the colonial archive as a site of both possibility and violence, warning that its documents can become "scriptural tombs"[7], textual enclosures in which the lives of the enslaved are entombed, rendered legible only through the language of property, loss, and control. Hartman cautions against the uncritical

[7]"Saidiya Hartman critiques the violence embedded in colonial archives and warns against reinscribing injury through historical narration in her essay "Venus in Two Acts," where she introduces the concept of the archive as a "scriptural tomb" (Hartman 11–12).

repetition of these records, asking whether such acts risk subjecting the dead to "a second order of violence" by reinscribing their injury rather than attending to their humanity. This project takes that warning seriously, refusing to animate Harriet's life through speculative certainty or narrative closure, and instead foregrounding the limits of what can be known.

Temi Odumosu's work on colonial photographs and archival ethics further sharpens this curatorial stance. Writing on the affective weight of images of enslaved and colonised subjects, Odumosu urges cultural institutions to move beyond access and visibility as unquestioned goods. She proposes an ethics of care that acknowledges archival materials as repositories of affect and trauma, requiring forms of custodianship attentive to vulnerability, silence, and haunting. In this framework, the archive is not merely a source of information, but a relational space in which institutions must ask how they host the dead, and under what conditions their images and records circulate.

Édouard Glissant's articulation of the "right to opacity"[8] offers a crucial counterpoint to the archival impulse to clarify, complete, and possess. In *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant argues that opacity is not a failure of understanding but an ethical position: a refusal to reduce the colonised "other" to transparency, comprehension, or sameness by the coloniser. He insists that relation does not require full knowledge, and that insisting upon it risks reproducing domination. Opacity, for Glissant, is the ground upon which genuine relation and respect can emerge.

Applied here, opacity allows Harriet Thomas Weekes to remain irreducible to the archive that names her. Rather than forcing coherence where none exists, the project acknowledges absence as meaningful, and silence as instructive. Harriet is approached not as a problem to be solved, but as a life to be honoured, one that exceeds the documents that reference her. This curatorial strategy resists the desire to rescue Harriet through narrative mastery, choosing instead to dwell with uncertainty, partiality, and care. Through multiple artistic gazes such as Gardner's exhibition, as well as the engagement in oral performance from the Nation Linguist resident, and conversations with historians and creatives, we open space for multiplicity, speculation, and the voices of those who are connected to Harriet's legacy today.

Conclusion

By presenting new interpretations alongside archival fragments, through this project we sought to redistribute interpretive authority, inviting artists, historians, community members, and visitors to participate in the making of meaning. This project is therefore not a conclusion, but a beginning: an active site of questioning, imagining, and honouring Harriet Thomas Weekes on her own terms: seen, perhaps, but not claimed; illuminated, but never fully captured.

Works Cited

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[8]Édouard Glissant articulates the ethical and political stakes of opacity as a refusal of totalizing knowledge in *Poetics of Relation*, arguing that relation does not depend on transparency or full comprehension, which is often driven by a colonising gaze (Glissant 189–94).

Once, when my little Eva Beatrice was quite a grown girl, we travell
hsheba by rail and you accompanied us. We had joined the train in St. G
in's children came with us. You must remember that fateful day. The jou
children but ended with such a commotion and dreadful kafuffle! You w
rly then, our sweet Nan Nan, with wiry silver hairs springing from undi
htly coloured madras headtie. You came to the rescue with blind faith a
stral wisdom. I owe my daughter's precious life to you, Nan Nan, and
that. Strangely, your son, James Lessingham, accompanied us too, gallo
seback through the hilly canefield cart tracks. Remember? When the stee
gged to a halt near the fishing boats in Tent Bay, you glimpsed him ther
ung up, silhouetted against the sun and sea, and then dissolving into cru
shadow. You step-stumbled out of the train in hopeful grief, but he was
ched madly for him and in the dizzying panic, your little Miss Eva wa
for limpets and puppy eyes on the seashore. I remember a flurry of flap
out on the beach, crashing waves of saltwater misting our cheeks, and
te sand blinding us to the danger in our midst. Then a sudden rain shower
here, and a startling hollering ensued. Our dear Eva appeared before u
tered face and hands. She had dashed under a manchineel tree for shelt
d warn her – 'the tree of death' – and there she was, her face disfigured
ain. You called on the Lord and ran for fresh water. I held her close wh
ormed your Obi cure on her. Her throat was burning... she could hardly
held a manchineel fruit in her hand. A tiny bite of the poisoned apple
– darling, how she screamed!

How did you help her so quickly, Nanny? How did you know the sal
at you had it with you? I never understood. You loved her so. You cared
evotedly. We owe you so much more than you received.

Folio

Am I a bad girl, Nanny?
CRIES of INNOCENCE and of EXPERIENCE

A folio of fictitious letters addressed to
HARRIET THOMAS WEEKES (b.c.1817, d.1897),
from the sorrowful and loving ghost of
Miss EVA DOUGLAS (b.1858),
daughter of Mrs J. C. RICHARDS (Mary Elizabeth ('Bessie') Douglas, b.1837),
and later, following marriage, mother of Miss EVA BEATRICE SINCKLER (b.1885).

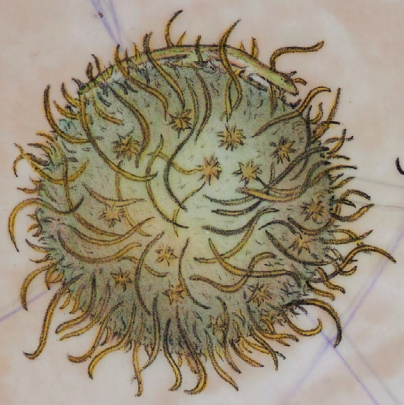
The beloved nurse Weekes, daughter of an enslaved woman, served and
cared for all three generations of this Barbadian family in the nineteenth century.

Nanny Weekes' shadow was recently encountered with that of Miss Eva Douglas
in a tiny black and white photographic portrait (c.1858), displayed in an exhibition titled
'Fragments of Epic Memory' at the Art Gallery of Ontario.

The tearful letters and hand-embellished engraved lithographic images
from the white creole child, Eva, to her dear Nanny,
are channeled through the postcolonial imagination of
Artist, JOSCELYN GARDNER,
who grew up on the island of BARBADOS over one hundred years later,
and has similarly experienced internal conflict through the realization that
her direct descent from an established colonial Barbadian family,
infers that, despite an innocent Christian upbringing and sound moral values,
a system of oppression that favoured whites shaped all that she knew.

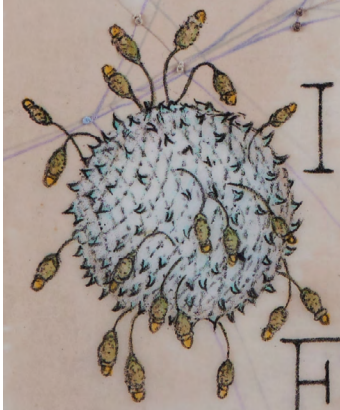
A series of accompanying interleaf poems whisper the provenance of the precious ambrotype.

This folio has been created and published by the Artist
in collaboration with
Master Printer, JILL GRAHAM,
in Mount Brydges, Ontario, and in Halifax, Nova Scotia (2023-2025).



Am I a bad girl, Nanny?

CRIES of INNOCENCE and of EXPERIENCE



Dearest nurse Weekes,

Where are you? Where are you, my dear Nan Nan? I sense you near me sometimes... in backward childhood dreaming. Though your baby bird now nests in one of Mama's storybook sketches where snow cloaks the still fields, and hail stones thrust themselves from swirling thin air, I feel your damp earthy warmth near me. My comfort. Unkind icy winds whip my face. My frozen tongue is stiffly limp. Licking my swollen lips makes no difference. I cannot speak of us. No one listens.

I often yearn for your dependable chest of forgiveness. When barn swallows return here each spring, darting in and out from the warm creaking barn, I twirl with them... misplaced... displaced... searching... always searching. Drifting on ever-changing currents. My muted feathers litter the ground, rooting among pinecones, and acorns, and dark-staining walnuts that I know you would find a use for. I remain unruffled, yet flustered, speaking only through a sharpened claw on smooth limestone and the occasional dash of subtle pastel hues. Pressing my soft painful words onto paper makes no difference. I cannot speak of us. No one listens.

Nan Nan, my spirit pants quietly on a farm in kanata, a country not yet named when I was born, far from the screaming blood-red canefields of Barbados. Your mother's kin came from Africa on a slave ship. I think of this now, though as children, we never knew... me and Ava and John never knew... or, sadly... cared.

We knew nothing of your family though we lived side by side. Did you know your grandmother? Did she ever speak of the floating tomb that carried her ancestors' seeds from the dark continent? Was your grandmother stolen from her mother's breast? Did you ever know the comfort of your own mother's bosom? Where does your mother's spirit soar now?

Confusion impales me, Nan Nan. I wear a shroud of stifling thoughts. Please speak your truth. I will listen. Did you know that we loved you? Did you feel that we trusted you? Did you love us? Did you fear us? Was I born of a wretched white creole family, Nanny? Or, were they the respectable Christians I believed them to be?

Respectfully, yours always,

Eva.

Dearest nurse Weekes, my own sweet Nanny,

I've been wading through an ocean of my early childhood memories from more than a century and a half ago (I too am long gone), and thinking about us... about you... about the life we shared on our plantation in the St Thomas hills.

Do you remember when we used to walk out in the gardens at Mount Wilton in the late afternoons? We loved the little grotto made of climbing plants and creepers with the fountain in the middle of it. Orchids hanging on wires threw out clusters of flowers for the moths to fertilize, ferns waved their fronds, and humming birds cooled their wings in the water spray. We children had to wear little bonnets to protect our fair skin from the tropical sun, and if it was really overly hot, one of the house servants would accompany us to hold a parasol over our heads. You would exchange greetings with all who passed us, and tell us stories about the things around us as we walked.

One afternoon, you told me and your other nurslings the story of old Sammy, the slave at Heywards Plantation who was severely punished for stealing a scrawny, poor-rakey sheep. Well Nanny, I found one of his peculiar seeds! I found a thick black seed in the shape of his head. His prominent nose, his projecting forehead, everything... it was just like the one you said he threatened would appear in his memory from the two-hundred-year-old tamarind tree he was wrongfully hung from. I had broken open a tamarind pod, and while I was lying on the grass, just as we used to do, in the tree's shade, slowly rolling one of its seeds around in my mouth and sucking the fleshy pulp from it, I felt something curiously lumpy. My throat tightened. I gagged, barely able to breathe, and spat it out. And there he was! A smooth decapitated hairless black head. I started to weep in fear and disgust.

Am I a bad girl, Nanny? Am I?

Yours respectfully,

Eva

Dearest Nanny Weekes,

Once, when my little Eva Beatrice was quite a grown girl, we travelled to Bathsheba by rail and you accompanied us. We had joined the train in St George and my cousin's children came with us. You must remember that fateful day. The journey amused the children but ended with such a commotion and dreadful kafuffle! You were quite elderly then, our sweet Nan Nan, with wiry silver hairs springing from under your brightly coloured madras headtie. You came to the rescue with blind faith and buried ancestral wisdom. I owe my daughter's precious life to you, Nan Nan, and Thank the Lord for that. Strangely, your son, James Lessingham, accompanied us too, galloping on duppy horseback through the hilly canefield cart tracks. Remember? When the steam engine chugged to a halt near the fishing boats in Tent Bay, you glimpsed him there, horse rearing up, silhouetted against the sun and sea, and then dissolving into crucifix foreshadow. You step-stumbled out of the train in hopeful grief, but he was gone. We searched madly for him and in the dizzying panic, your little Miss Eva wandered off to look for limpets and puppy eyes on the seashore. I remember a flurry of flapping blankets laid out on the beach, crashing waves of saltwater misting our cheeks, and gusts of gritty white sand blinding us to the danger in our midst. Then a sudden rain shower from nowhere, and a startling hollering ensued. Our dear Eva appeared before us with blistered face and hands. She had dashed under a manchineel tree for shelter before we could warn her – 'the tree of death' – and there she was, her face disfigured, and shrieking in pain. You called on the Lord and ran for fresh water. I held her close while you performed your Obi cure on her. Her throat was burning... she could hardly breathe. She still held a manchineel fruit in her hand. A tiny bite of the poisoned apple was gone. My poor darling, how she screamed!

How did you help her so quickly, Nanny? How did you know the salve and how was it that you had it with you? I never understood. You loved her so. You cared for all of us so devotedly. We owe you so much more than you received.

What did we ever do to deserve your loving care, Nanny?

Yours respectfully,

Eva

Dearest Nanny Weekes,

I woke this morning in a vivid dream, very real, and knew that you hovered near me. Your hot spicy breath was nibbling on my neck, Nan Nan... your long fingers pressing into my pink flesh. What were you doing? There were two blue bruises evaporating from my clammy skin, long roots circling my neck.

It reminded me of one fearful night with you which I dreamed... perhaps true, not you, maybe you... I never knew... the night that my Godmother died. You often showed me where you had buried my shrivelled navel string under the sprawling canopy of the ancient silk cotton tree in the Mount Wilton yard. That was the tree with the horrid iron chains buried within its trunk, where your kinsfolk would sometimes gather. Huge thorns bulged over its rugged surface. I was scared of the spirits that you told me lived in that tree... the spirits that would safeguard us. I could hear their groans at night when the wind blew. I used to pull the heavy counterpane over my head and watch for a blood-sucking Old Hag to enter through the crevices and keyholes in my bed chamber. I would see shadows flitting around on the mosquito netting that draped the four posts of my cavernous bed.

The night that my Godmother died, we saw the Old Hag tip-tapping at my window with Auntie's rings on her pointed fingers... I'll never forget it. Everything in my room was acquiver. The jalousies were flap-flapping, the door had blown closed with a loud bram. Nanny, you always placed rice on my windowsills to protect me, and had given me some periwinkle to keep away evil spirits, but why did you have me look at that hideously fearful creature? Why did you have me so afraid? Didn't you love me? I was your little Miss Eva with the open Bible under my pillow. You sat in your rocking chair in a stone-faced stupour. The next morning, Cookie found a dead black frizzle fowl outside under the same window and you said that the Old Hag had left it for me as a hex. The feathers had been plucked from around its neck. Why was it there? Had I been a naughty girl, Nanny? Was that a punishment for being the little white girl who lived in the big house... wicked little Miss Eva?

Yours respectfully,

Eva

Dearest Nanny Weekes,

You are very likely a figment of my long past childhood fancies, and yet, imagining your raspy whispered humming still stills me... still conjures velvety plant-scented slumber. I lay tranquil with you always, almost as if I could not wake... lifeless dreamer... blinkety-blinkety-blinded by your aura... my eyes tightly fastened with cobweb stories and ancient African rhythms. What magic ditties did you chant? Why was I so placid at your bossom, yet in waking hours often pickle-puzzled and distressed? Mama trusted you implicitly. You had been her dear nurse too. Her special, one-and-only Nan Nan. Did you cast some sort of Obi sleeping spell on me... on her... on my own dear little daughter, Eva Bea? Did you use one of your mother's secret concoctions to pacify us? Why did I not wake instantly when those dirty cockroaches slipped through a tear in the mosquito netting and danced across my face in the dark? I hated cockroaches! I woke to see a white one still near me on my pillow... freshly molted from its crisply cracked mahogany-coloured carcass. White cockroach, white cockroach! the dark voices screeched shrilly in my ear. Were they laughing at me all the while? I could smell their lingering musty odour after they flew off.

But Nan Nan, I know in my heart that you loved us all. I can remember the afternoon that little John got an ackee stuck in his throat. You had warned us not to suck them, but he was mischievous, an own-way boy, so thought he would try them anyway. Bad master John! Bad, bad boy! Bad boy! You flew across the garden on wings of fire and swung him upside down with wild incensed vigour until he cast up the slippery choke-hold stone... heck heck. Then, cat spraddled on the grass, you pinned him down and gave him a stern tongue licking. John lay there trembling and Ava and I cried our eyes out, but John was saved. You always used to say that Bad things happen to hard ear boys that don' listen!

I remain, your deeply respectful,

Eva

My dearest old nurse Weekes,

A throbbing pain dragged me from sweet sticky dream-sleep this morn and I so wished you were near me to apply a secret Nan Nan salve. You used to treat my sore gums with the crushed leaves of the pink mimosa that grew in our yard, I think... but I can't be certain. Never certain. I suck-sucked-and-chewed too much sugarcane when I was a wee girl. The toothaches were my own fault, you said. Stripping sugarcane stalks with my teeth was so delightful and the sweet juice was so delicious. I loved cane season... though not the raging fires that scampered across the canefields at night with the rats, or the black soot that settled on my fresh white bedsheets if the sash windows had been left open.

When the canes were in arrow, we would sometimes walk out with you on the cart roads near the yard. You said we had to be good or a bogeyman would jump us. I remember, one afternoon, Papa saw you picking a poisonous weed you found in the cane piece. He was so furious. He had cantered by atop Crowning Glory and witnessed you bent over in an undignified manner, stuffing its leaves and seed pods into little pouches you knotted up tightly under your flounced skirt. I overheard him telling Mama what he had seen. But she knew better... she knew from her own experience growing up with you that your medicines and soothing balms truly did work and we had nothing to fear. You were so caring and full of ancient wisdom about botanical remedies... You would never have willfully poisoned us, would you, Nanny? That was all nonsense! Complete nonsense! You were a most important member of the family, and we loved you dearly.

Your loyalty to all of us was beyond compare. Do you recall the morning you sent us children out to the orchard to pick cherries and Ava got stung so badly by red ants that her whole face swelled up something terrible? We came running to you with cherry juice dripping down our chins. We had filled up our bowls for you but neglected to wait until we were inside to wash the fruit. We hadn't meant to be disobedient, Nanny. The cherries were just so tasty. An army of angry ants had attacked us, and Ava suffered most dreadfully from their bites. You were able to help her using one of your remedies with black sage. Mama was eternally grateful.

Did we always give you lots of trouble, Nanny? Were we naughtier than your own children? Did you have many children, Nanny? How did your children survive their childhood without you there to mind them?

Respectfully yours,

Eva

Dearest Nanny Weekes, my own especial nurse,

I'm perched here, wings folded, with a chucka-chucka-chucka march pulsing in my tiny head... dreaming of the excitement we shared when the village tuk band used to come round to the big house at Holder's. Do you ever hark back to those bragadung-dung times? We would catch wind of the performers out in the yard playing their rukatuk music, and rush to the upstairs windows to see Mother Sally boisterously bouncing his bosom and massive bumsy, and Shaggy Bear and Donkeyman jumping around rambunctiously in their colourful old rag-a-tag costumes. Sometimes we hurried down to the kitchen and Cookie let us peep at the characters up close, while she handed out flat-jacks, sweetmeats, or coins to help keep the jumbies away. The Moko Jumbie on his stilts frightened me the most - he towered above us with his elongated stick legs projecting from under his skirt and bloomers and an ominous grin on his grotesque painted mask. We would run squealing in fear if he came too near.

The loud frenzied tucka-tucka drumming after the parade down the driveway always stirred up passions in the plantation yard. The foul cocks would scatter all aflutter, and the stable boys couldn't get the horses to stop whinnying. If the minstrels had marched up the avenue leading to the big house when the sun was sinking, we imagined other jumbie spirits were there too, 'butting 'bout and hiding in the long evening shadows of the mahogany and cannonball trees... waiting to jump us.

Even though Mama assured us it was just coloured peoples' entertainment, we would still go to bed in a terror, quivering in our beds with the drum beat thumping in our tight little feathered chests. If you had not been there with us, would we ever have fallen to sleep? You had your secret Obi spells to protect us - your collection of bats and chicken steppers and teeth, and other oddities. We spied them from under the sheets when you thought we were sleeping. They frightened us too. I've often wondered why you kept our milk teeth, Nanny? A small calabash bowl in your room was always filled with them. You carefully saved them when they fell out. Pray tell me, Nanny, what did you do with them? Why were they set among scraggly chicken feathers and broken egg-shells and white candle-ends? Were they to protect us too? Or, was Papa perhaps correct in his untrusting judgement? Were you using them for nefarious or unchristian purposes? Tell me please, Nanny. Were we children correct in trusting you? I always did, and always will! I promise!

Eva.

My dearest Nanny Weekes,

Do you remember when you would tuck me into bed at night after Mama finished saying our prayers with us? You would make me wrap up my long dolly hair so the jumbies couldn't pull at it while I was sleeping. Then you'd say, Night, night, Miss Eva. Don't let the duppies bite! When I was restless or terribly anxious, you would first dip me in a hot mango leaf bath and shoo-shoo away the duppies before putting me to bed. I didn't tell you, but it made me really scared. While you roosted in the nursery rocking chair keeping us company and hum-humming, I would glimpse large shadows in the rafters on the ceiling. Sometimes I cried quietly so the duppies wouldn't hear me. I thought they were going to take me away like they did to the Sinckler family's two sisters, the Henriettas, when they were very little. Or, even worse... remember Mr. Ellcock that got murdered in the house at Mount Wilton by those four angry slaves when you were a wee girl there? I sometimes overheard Papa speaking of it to Mama... I imagined his spirit was nearby.

You told us the duppies were our ancestors. The molly booby moths alighting on the ceiling were a sign that our deceased family members were visiting us. We sometimes saw them during the day hatching from those huge furry striped caterpillars that lived on the frangipani tree in the garden and stripped the trees bare. I didn't know if to believe you about the big ugly moths. I didn't like them. If they appeared at night, I squeezed my eyelids shut and tried not to see them. One night, I thought I heard you communing with them, chirping in shrill squeaks once you thought we were asleep. Sometimes, I thought you might have been like a wicked stepmother from Mama's storybooks who plagued sleeping children in this awfully sinful world, especially when you would tie up a lot of green leaves round your head and say, Lordy now, honey-lab. I got de feber! Let me be!

Am I a wicked girl, Nanny, for having those thoughts? Am I? I was confused by everything. I was never sure who to trust. Was God real? Were the duppies real? Was my family your family? Who would protect me? Your affectionate little Eva may not have been so truly sweet after all. Who was I, Nanny? And, who were you?

Yours respectfully,

Eva

Dear nurse Weekes, my dearest old Nan Nan,

In my dreams, I see a spinning Obi-ball hovering in the candle-lit nursery (is that what it was?), revolving and gyrating eerily from within. Your special storytelling conjured its spectral presence... Anansi, the clever trickster spider is posed there in his tight-stretched web. It reminds me that you used to place us on your bouncing knee as you recited the most entrancing tales to a steady rhythmic beat while our fervent imaginations roamed free. I watched you repeat this with my little Eva Bea as well. Some evenings, Mama would sing us nursery rhymes and tell us stories that her mother had taught her, about fairytale characters in the hills and dales of Scotland, and fairies in the woods and pretty rose gardens of England. More often, though, you regaled us in smoky drum-beat tones, with words that we didn't always understand, but loved anyway. In your 'nancy stories, that cunning spider would outsmart others. He trapped and entangled snake and tiger in his webs... or played crafty tricks on turtle. He would cause all kinds of mischief in order to emerge triumphant in his illusory world. We relished those fables.

Did you also tell us the story of your grandmother who had come from West Africa? Was she a princess from an Asante tribe? Or, did I imagine that? Did she carry womanly secrets with her, secrets that allowed her to resist and overcome the horrors of slavery in the New World? Was she a midwife? As a child, I read in my little book, The Slave's Friend, the one that our auntie brought from America, that enslaved people were stolen away from their homelands and arrived in the West Indies with hardly any clothes. Is that true? I never thought about any of that when I was a young girl, but now, I wonder: how did your grandmother survive the loss of her dignity? Was it through her spiritual beliefs? What did she do when the June winds brought cow itch hairs across the fields? What of your mother? Please tell me about her. Mama told us when we were older that you had an important big-up white father. Were you Grandma's outside family? Did we share the same blood? How I wish that I knew the truth of these matters. Why was there so much hypocrisy and deception hovering under the surface in our oh-so-upright, supposedly christian, oppressive and unfair world? Why were some people considered more worthy than others?

I can't sign my name here, Nanny, but you know it's me... I am so ashamed and dismayed by aspects of our past... but I send my love and beg your forgiveness, though you owe it not.


TRUST
I could not bear the birth another ye
I pray that I be forgiven.
This was our secret, Nan-Nan.
Thankyou.
Eva Douglas
1867

Dearest Nanny Weekes,

Have we been forever contaminated by the embroidered chaos of our shared history? Can we ever escape this damnable web of dis-ease? Our cries, our sighs, our curses and our tears have flowed freely, binding us as one, yet ripping us apart. We have been knotted together and unravelled, strangled and entangled. A creeping vine of love twines its lush coils around us, smothering the heartache of forced intimacy. I wake with the Devil's guts trussed up around me, like a delicate lace hug. Trust and fear simultaneously sting my tissue-thin flesh. Writhing white maggots appear from innards to heal the puss-filled wounds of our experience... while a chorus of glistening tree frogs cheerily chirps my innocence and pinches my culpable girlhood imagination.

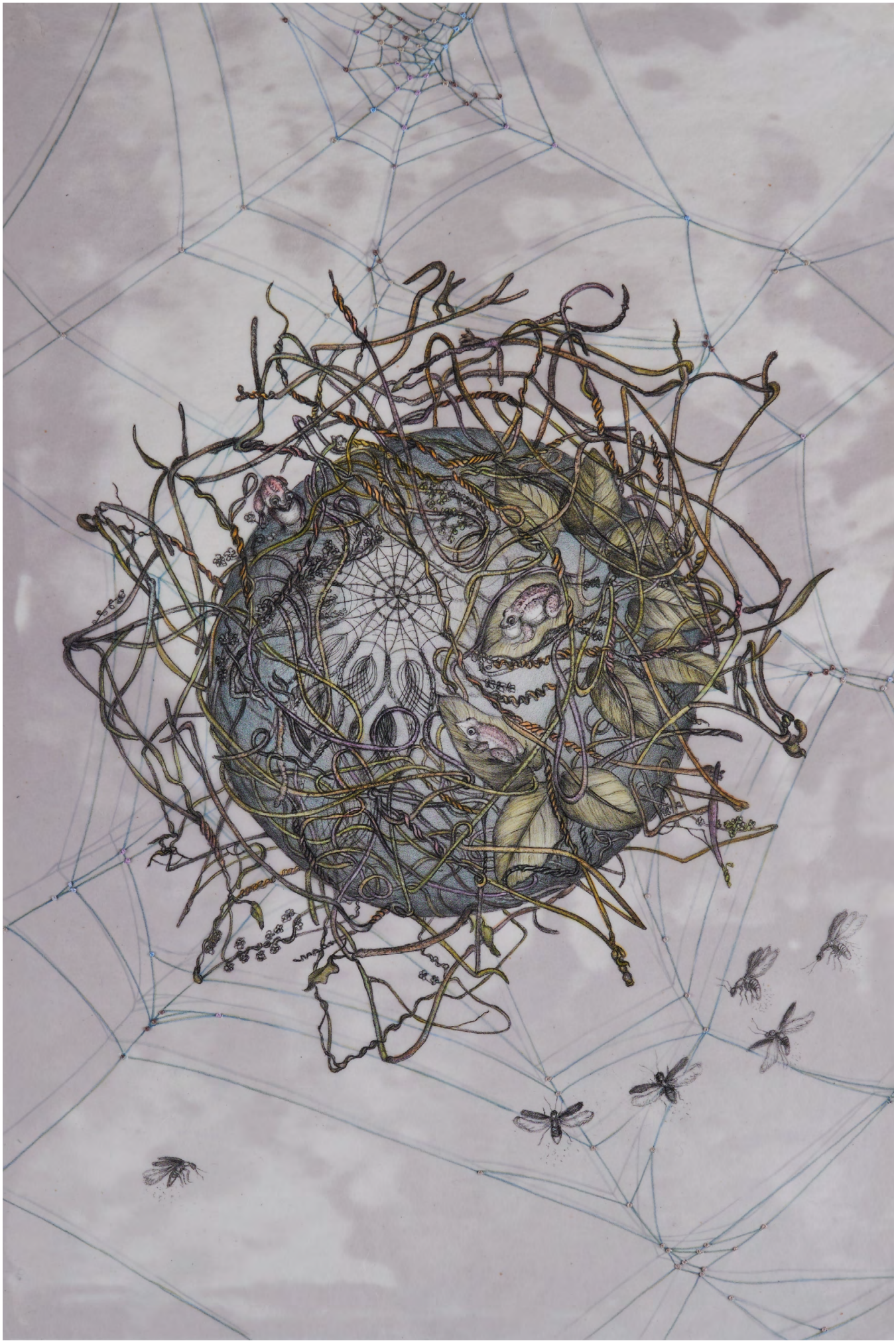
A day of reckoning seems nigh. Salty sweat moistens the soft down on the back of my tender neck. I have awakened to nothing less than harsh truths... discovered my naïve privilege, bruised tongue, and tiny forked tail. Our grand nest of recollections is in disarray, coral stone walls crumbling into dust... our relationship vanishing in fantastical fictional falsehoods. Memories have been twisted and twirled and spun into fine sour-tasting smut. I carry you like a doll-baby, stiff in my arms, down the church aisle to lay you to rest, while teeny-weeny fireflies emerge from the darkness to thrust miniscule barbs of light that flicker into tiny thimbles of hope.

When my little heart doth wake
Then the dreadful night shall break.

Good-bye my dear Nan Nan. I wish you a fond and everlastingly peaceful farewell, sweet, wise nanny of my dreams.

Respectfully,

Eva Douglas, daughter of Mary Elizabeth, and mother of Eva Beatrice, your loving, though stubbornly blinded charges.



A throbbing pain dragged me from sweet sticky dream-sleep this morn
ed you were near me to apply a secret Nan Nan salve. You used to treat
the crushed leaves of the pink mimosa that grew in our yard, I think... bu
ain. Never certain. I suck-sucked-and-chewed too much sugarcane when
The toothaches were my own fault, you said. Stripping sugarcane stalks
so delightful and the sweet juice was so delicious. I loved cane season...
ng fires that scampered across the canefields at night with the rats, or th
settled on my fresh white bedsheets if the sash windows had been left op

When the canes were in arrow, we would sometimes walk out with you
ls near the yard. You said we had to be good or a bogeyman would jump
mber, one afternoon, Papa saw you picking a poisonous weed you found
e. He was so furious. He had cantered by atop Crowning Glory and witn
in an undignified manner, stuffing its leaves and seed pods into little p
ked up tightly under your flounced skirt. I overheard him telling Mama
. But she knew better... she knew from her own experience growing up wit
medicines and soothing balms truly did work and we had nothing to fea
ng and full of ancient wisdom about botanical remedies... You would nev
fully poisoned us, would you, Nanny? That was all nonsense! Complete
e a most important member of the family, and we loved you dearly.

Your loyalty to all of us was beyond compare. Do you recall the morn
hildren out to the orchard to pick cherries and Ava got stung so badly b
whole face swelled up something terrible? We came running to you with
ping down our chins. We had filled up our bowls for you but neglected t
were inside to wash the fruit. We hadn't meant to be disobedient, Nanny
e just so tasty. An army of angry ants had attacked us, and Ava suffered

List of Exhibited Works

Portrait of Harriet Thomas Weekes with Eva Douglas Richards, 1858
encased ambrotype
Collection of the Barbados Museum & Historical Society

With Silent Thread, 2026
multi-panel cyan plate lithograph on gampi silk tissue and Somerset, beeswax, embroidery thread, gold leaf, 66" x 60" (each panel, 22" x 15")
Collection of the artist

Am I a bad girl, Nanny? Cries of Innocence and of Experience, print folio, 2023-2026

Plates 1 – 12 (letters from the ghost of Eva Douglas to nurse Harriet Thomas Weekes), plate lithographs on gampi silk tissue and Somerset, beeswax, embroidery thread, printed digital elements, each 22" x 15", variable edition of 4. Printed by Jill Graham.

Plates 1 – 12 (image panels), hand-coloured stone and plate lithographs on layered gampi silk tissue and Somerset, beeswax, embroidery thread, gold leaf, printed digital elements, each 22" x 15", variable edition of 4. Printed by Jill Graham.

Interleaf pages 1 – 12 (whisper poems), digital prints on glassine, each 22" x 15", variable edition of 4. Printed by Smokestack Studio.

trust & fear (embroidered pin cushion), embroidery thread on felt and gampi silk tissue, 4" x 4" x 1"

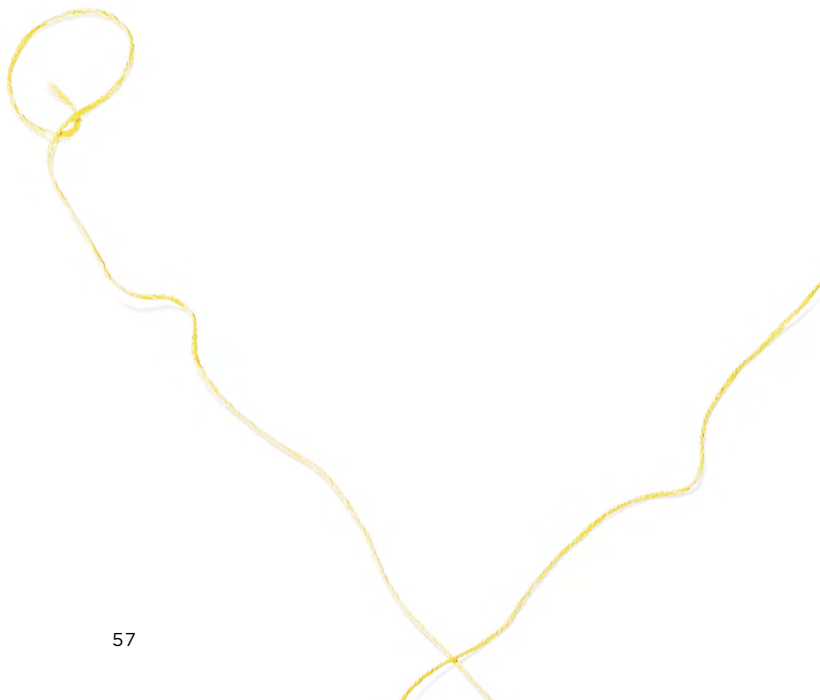
Clamshell box, handmade lamshell box to hold folio prints, linen on archival board, 22.5" x 15.5" x 3", edition of 4. Crafted by Andrew Huot (Big River Bindery).
Collection of the artist.

Portrait of the artist by Paul Lambert Photography

Joscelyn Gardner

Barbados-born visual artist, Joscelyn Gardner moved to Canada in 2000 after nearly fifteen years as a visual artist, gallerist, and teacher in Barbados. Following Master of Fine Arts studies at Western University, Ontario, from 2001-2003, she worked as a Professor of Fine Art at Fanshawe College until retiring in 2024 to focus on her full-time studio practice. Her Barbadian heritage continues to inform her work as a Canadian artist. Currently, she works in printmaking (stone lithography) and multimedia installation (video, film, and sound). For over twenty-five years, she has been exploring colonial archives from a postcolonial feminist perspective to uncover hidden female voices and challenge documented histories, particularly as they relate to plantation history in the Anglo-Caribbean. As a (white) Creole woman, she strives to understand her identity as an "implicated subject" in this traumatic past, while helping to heal historical wounds. Her investigations also reflect a personal journey of reckoning and reconciliation with colonial legacies and diasporic identities.

Gardner has held solo exhibitions in Canada, the Caribbean, the USA, and Spain, and participated in numerous international biennials and curated group shows in museums across the Americas, Europe, Asia, and the Caribbean. Public collections that hold her work include Yale Center for British Art, Museo de Arte Contemporaneo de Puerto Rico, Tropenmuseum (Amsterdam), KADIST (Paris), Fitzwilliam Museum (Cambridge, UK), and the Barbados National Collection. Awards include the Grand Prize at the 7th International Contemporary Printmaking Biennial in Trois Rivières, Quebec. In 2014, she founded Print London, a professional printmakers' collective that has hosted the biennial Ontario Miniature Print Exhibition (TOMPE) since 2016.



Joscelyn Gardner with Jill Graham

Jill Graham

Jill Graham received her Bachelor of Fine Arts, with distinction, from Concordia University, Montréal, Québec, and her Master Printer Certificate from the internationally renowned Tamarind Institute of Lithography, Albuquerque, New Mexico, USA. She has apprenticed with master printers Christian LePoul, at Atelier Circulaire, Montréal, and Bill Lagattuta, at Tamarind Institute, Albuquerque, USA. One of only a handful of Canadian printers to achieve certification in her field, Jill has amassed over 15 years of professional printing experience in both a technical and instructional capacity, in university, non-profit and collaborative studio settings. Most recently she has been sought after to train other printers at both the Artists' Press in White River, Mpumalanga, South Africa, and at Kinngait studio in Cape Dorset, Nunavut. Jill is currently NSCAD University's printmaking technician and the Lithography Workshop: Contemporary Editions master printer, in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

A few of the artists Graham has printed for include: William Kentridge, Diane Victor, Suzy Lake, John Scott, Doris McCarthy, Shary Boyle, Brendan Fernandez, Joscelyn Gardner, Liz Ingram, Jordan Bennett, Endi Poskovic, Leslie Dill, Hung Liu, Enrique Martinez Celaya, Hayal Pozanti, and David Row.

Credits

Am I a bad girl, Nanny? Cries of Innocence and of Experience

Exhibition Curator
Natalie McGuire

Contributors
Alissandra Cummins, Joscelyn Gardner, Erica James, Natalie McGuire, Harriet Pierce

Photography
William Cummins (Barbados Museum collection, *With Silent Thread*), Paul Lambert (work of Joscelyn Gardner)

Design
Neil Barnard, 809 Design Associates Inc.

Printing
COT Caribbean Graphics, Barbados
Reproductions of works by Joscelyn Gardner, courtesy of the artist
Reproductions of works held in the Barbados Museum collection courtesy of the Barbados Museum & Historical Society

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Special thanks to Tamarind Master Printer, Jill Graham, who collaborated with the artist on this project from its start in 2023 and printed the stone and plate lithographs for this body of work at the NSCAD University Print Shop in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

This catalogue was produced in conjunction with the exhibitions *Am I a bad girl, Nanny? Cries of Innocence and of Experience* and *Harriet Thomas Weekes: The Right to Opacity* held at the Barbados Museum, 27 February – 3 October 2026.

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