



JAMIESON WEBSTER: SAY SOMETHING, JAMIE (AFTERWARD)

Written in parallel with *Chloë Bass: Obligation to Others Holds Me in My Place*

By Jamieson Webster

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The idea of a family romance fantasy is the psychoanalytic notion that at some point we all indulge in the belief that our family isn't our family. That the family that we have and hate or love, somewhere in our minds, is not our real family—I am actually the child of a great king and queen. So the romance is about an alternate history, some line of flight that could have been taken, and probably should have been taken, because then I wouldn't be suffering in the ways that I do, wouldn't be born this person that I am, wouldn't have to be here. Many fairy tales told to children play on this idea, which sets off a great journey to discover the truth and set things right. One might also want to recall the structure of ancient myths, like that of Oedipus, who didn't know that his family wasn't his actual family, sending him straight into his mother's bed, only to cry out "mê phunai"—better that I was not born.

The family romance can get even stranger than this once, from within this made up story about one's life, one can actually locate a deeper truth about who one is, landing, for example, on a more severe demand coming from the real family to have, precisely, a family romance. It is as if they asked you to believe in a certain story of what would have made us, this family, who we really were. The kings and queens that were my real family were are the ones I wanted you to believe that I was or would have been, if, for example, you hadn't come along. So you are not imagining who you might be, apart from your family, but in fact what they wanted to be, maybe by obliterating you. Which means—and now we get to come full circle—that the family romance with which we meant to betray and abandon our real families was its absolute fulfillment. It was never your romance, only theirs. This is what is passed down from generation to generation, a romance about the end of generations and of zero obligation. Coming to this radical imaginary point in a self-analysis means we can better take on our obligations to those in our past and to others in the future.

Might we consider this an attempt to go back to a time before time? Freud called this the death drive. And in fact, it is often a story like this that begins most wars, an idea of returning to the real nation that we were, like making something great again. Nostalgia, then, isn't about the past that was and isn't any longer, it is about something that never was as an attempt at the pure negation of what is. Lacan, for this reason, called nostalgia "moral cowardice." One might also call it a battle cry. Instead, let us do the careful and delicate work of catching up to the day that we are in. So much of what takes place in psychoanalysis is a work of deconstruction in order to do precisely this, and only in a rare moment finding enough room to construct anything new—though there must be that too. Enter the artist.

Chloë Bass' investigation of the family format captured through home documentation in her work *Obligation to Others Holds Me In My Place*, brings these psychoanalytic ideas to a new poetic and artistic height. The notion of a mixed race family, and the mixed race child, bares a mythology of its own (the tragic or magical mulatto), which further prompts a series of violent mythologies about an original white-only America. "No wonder we feel we cannot tolerate an identity that's anything other than singular. Mixture reminds us of the dangers that bring people together, and the challenging conditions that we persist to create," she writes.

Bass is no stranger to psychoanalysis, which is a part of her family romance that she deploys with subtlety. Psychoanalysis, in an age of identity politics gone wild, has long questioned the notion of identity which is what the family romance fantasy is essentially about—who you imagine you are (and I can't help but think here of Bass' *The Bureau of Self Recognition* which starts from a lack of recognition, rather than its fullness, seeking recognition in ephemeral even contingent moments in everyday life, rather than those strong moments of willed identity). In this project, again moving beyond the strong vision of self, Bass' work turns archival, critical, historical, and political in order to poetically find the traces of an uncertainty in identity and its corresponding aesthetic forms in a "visual record of a living history." Is this living history one that is created by Bass, or one found by her in our collective past? It's both, because this is always what happens when we work with the footage of memory.

In Lacan's paper on the mirror stage, many know the moment when the premature infant looks into the mirror and recognizes himself for the first time, giving a coherent organized image to what was otherwise an immersion in the chaos of a fragmented body. While this at first inspires what Lacan names jubilation, this exuberance is always followed by an almost complete sense of alienation; for what does it mean to find yourself on the outside in an image that is, in fact, reversed. What many often don't know is that there is a third presence in this little scene—for the baby must be held by someone or something, in order to look into the mirror and recognize itself, feel a new forms of excitement, and also bear the feeling of estrangement. This holding can be a walker or a high chair, it can also be a mother or father's arms. When the artist or psychoanalyst who has to walk us back, they must provide a frame to hold us as we pass through these affectively charged moments, moving us towards the very core of a feeling of disorder that is behind all mythological self-musings. With this frame, we might, as Bass puts it, not reflect (upon ourselves), but find new ways of looking.

This is what she intends to do with our living memory as captured in our home movies. Let's look once again at what Freud says about memory. In Freud's paper on screen memories (our earliest memories from childhood that seem strangely hallucinogenic and home-movie like) a number of strange things take place. First, the memory itself seems not to exist at all as a real fragment of a memory by the end of the paper, instead coming to be a construction by the person remembering it, in order to say something about the present that has eluded him or her.

Freud's early childhood memory was of picking yellow flowers in the green mountains and in some moment of aggressive haste, pulling the flowers out of a female cousins hands (who begins crying), the children all then running to the nanny who gave them sumptuous bread and butter to eat. He analyzes this memory in order to discover that he is indulging in a fantasy that if his parents hadn't left the country for the city, not only would he have been able to carry on a romance with a beloved cousin (flower picking and ripping flowers from her hands being a sexual innuendo), but he also would have been richer, would have had all the bread and butter in the world, and wouldn't find himself in the financial problems he was currently experiencing which remind him of his life then, after leaving behind this resplendent image of childhood.

More than this, in the story of his intense and disappointed early childhood love for his cousin, Freud remembers his first adolescent depression which was transformed into an obsession with books—something his father chastised him for because he rang up his first debts when unable to stop himself from accumulating them. The Freud remembering the memory from earliest childhood, to the memory of struggling with books (as a way of not struggling with love), was coming to a very precise point in his life, just as he took up writing about this earliest memory: namely, Freud was having a difficult time not continuing to read and amass books, in order to finally, at over forty-years old, write one of his own. This book would be the infamous *Interpretation of Dreams*.

If we bring this all together: deflowering a woman, oral indulgence, financial security, family glory, authorship, condense into a megalomaniacal conglomeration, a wild hallucination, that is taken for a childhood memory. A wish for the future is seamlessly projected into the past. So is the memory even real? Does it matter? To whom? To the historians? Perhaps what is more interesting than the idea of veridical truth is the power of these real-unreal memories to determine the future. The "Screen Memories" paper is one of Freud's earliest, part of his self-analysis, and he did go on to write the book, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, that forever changed the history of the Freud family.

Nevertheless, this story of Freud glory is somehow less interesting to me, as it would be to Chloë Bass. What is more fascinating is the fact that the key moments in the early childhood memory—the color yellow of the flowers, the name of his young love, the strange equation between book and flower/book and sexual satisfaction, the substitute satisfaction found through the nanny—seem to come to haunt Freud like impossible and ghostly hands that drag us back from what we were jettisoned from. These key moments, like a strange fragmented home movie, return again and again in all of Freud's cases, as if to mark them.

They mark Freud's work with patients not by making the patient's story conform to Freud's story—this old trick of narcissistic listening—but in a more uncanny fashion. It is as if Freud ran blindly, head-first into these very signs, his unconscious comingling with his patients, and returning itself to him there: Dora's pseudonym is the name of Freud's nanny, the Ratman's love has the same name as Freud's first love in the early memory, the Wolfman has a decisive encounter with the same color yellow, the dream of a botanical monograph (whose pages are like petals that can be ripped out) is the key dream about the book about dreams that Freud needs to find the courage to write.

So once the early memory is analyzed and partially destroyed, it liberates a series of everyday visual and acoustic fragments, like a name, gesture, color, or equation, that enter into a machine-like-structure that seemingly returns them to you from the outside. I would pit this liberation and return against nostalgic destruction and repetition. You might want to say to me that this early memory was just there in the lockbox over-determining everything, even if there wasn't someone there to witness it or pry these bits and pieces out of it—and in part this thesis is right—but I think this elemental work with memory in psychoanalysis, like in Bass' project, does something much more strange, more radical, and more decisive.

I suppose in this you have to take me at my word; but isn't it too dangerous not to do it, from another perspective, and rely on what's simply there to return again and again as it will, without the help of others? Especially since this seems to have led us straight down the road of a nostalgic wish to return to an earlier time, in an act of almost pure violence. Better if we model ourselves on Walter Benjamin's angel of history, who runs backwards into the future, watching the debris as it piles up, beginning to sort through it, like Bass does, in order to make something new, help us see what can be done with what has amassed skywards. Let us risk a little intimacy here; something I see in Bass' work as a call for a profound intimacy, especially with making and breaking apart images. While the psychoanalyst would name this a meta-psychological principle, something about the nature of the binding that takes place in creating representations and the unbinding necessary for destroying them, from the vantage point of this artistic work, it is simply messianic in nature, meaning blasting moments of the past or present out of linear time as the force of transformation.

If America is caught in a moment of nostalgia, a moment when the myth of the American Dream is evaporating, fueling other myths that are even more violent, what analysis is possible in a more collective fashion, for a country or people? Isn't it possible to take apart our home-movies, our family documentation, in the name of liberating some unknown elements in this archive? Would that look like this capture of a hidden sound that emerges from these strange films that tell us something painfully intimate? Or, is it the unearthing of a new performance principle that is evoked by a first encounter with the camera, one that has only exponentially increased in our visual culture? What about the visual chaos that is the stuff of an immigrant family that always verges on hoarding and consumerism, mixed with the chaos of filming without limits or even purpose? (Instagram and other forms of social media have solved this problem, obliterating this rare moment of filling the VHS tape). There is so much to learn here; this is what she is showing us.

The artist has also found her fragments of an uncertain identity too, which point her to a different version of America, and which also seem to structure her work: not understanding the question "what are you?" as a question about her mixed race, forcing a moment of self-recognition as an absence of it. The deep imaginary connection one can have with strangers on the basis of visual cues filled with longing, bound by broken histories. Two genocides are enough (this word said with some cynicism) to start speaking—and the image of the biracial child as a Dalmatian puppy (obedient, beautiful, almost refusing mixture, and ironically classic Americana that is the stuff of Normal Rockwell paintings of fire houses). Is this not the very structure of her tripartite works: *The Bureau of Self-Recognition*, *The Book of Everyday Instruction*, and *Obligation to Others Holds Me in My Place*?

As well, the project allowed me to come full circle and ask why, so many generations later, on another continent, in Florida of all ridiculous places, in a family of half Swedish immigrants to the Midwest at the turn of the century, and the other half Filipinos coming to America after World War II and the Japanese invasion, can we find in near exact facsimile the same set of signifiers as Freud's from early childhood: I have my own nanny to think about, there is the immense presence of the color yellow and that 1970s green, the power of a name and for that name to return, the zeroing in on a gesture, like that of pushing a vacuum cleaner, that surrounds a strange scene of agony, that is also full of desire (my parents and my own) surrounded by piles of things that will need to be sorted through, including these DVDs. All these mythic coordinates exist as a scene laden with pathos that can allow something real to come to the foreground. Some radio transmission that appears to be in the past, but is in fact coming to us from the future, telling us, of all the terrible things to say, that our obligation to others holds us in our place.

— Dr. Jamieson Webster

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This essay also appears as part of a longer publication, Say Something, Jamie!, produced by Chloë Bass and Jamieson Webster, and available through Recess.

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