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# How Adama Delphine Fawundu Is Reconnecting with Ancestors and Indigeneity in Prospect Park

Observer connected with the artist to hear more about the Relmagine Lefferts residency and her new large-scale, site-specific installation, "Ancestral Whispers."

By [Elisa Carollo](#) • 09/04/24 8:00am



As the first Relmagine Lefferts artist in residence, Adama Delphine Fawundu created a large-scale, site-specific installation titled *Ancestral Whispers*. Photo by Obed Obwoye

In late June, Prospect Park Alliance and Lefferts Historic House Museum debuted *Ancestral Whispers*, a large site-specific installation by the museum's first artist-in-residence, Guggenheim Fellow [Adama Delphine Fawundu](#). Fawundu is a Brooklyn-based contemporary artist and

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photographer who has long explored African diasporic identities, culture and heritage. Her art often incorporates photography, mixed media, and printmaking to delve into themes such as memory, identity and the legacy of African traditions. She also has a deep connection with the Lefferts Historic House, growing up just a few blocks away from Prospect Park and still living in the neighborhood.

"This site-specific project means more to me than I can put into words," the artist told *Observer*. "At the opening, I saw friends who had known me since I was five, as well as community members along with people from the art world, and I am delighted when art can attract a truly diverse audience." The piece has already touched the hearts of a vast array of people, she added when we connected with her to discuss the importance of ancestral connections, rituals of collective healing and how materials and places can incorporate shared memories and reconnect complex legacies.

**In this installation, you had to create a conversation with the Lefferts Historic House, which is heavy with historical memories as a landmark representing Brooklyn's colonial history, including the presence of enslaved people. What type of interaction were you looking to activate given the complex heritage linked to this place?**

I had been researching the Lefferts House for a couple of years, and during my research, I came across two people who were enslaved at the house: Anna and Isaac. For me, it was significant to know their names. I first made a photograph and video for my *In the Face of History, Freedom Cape* series in front of The Lefferts House in 2020. This project, which is currently on view at the Lefferts House, honored the women of African descent who were part of the suffrage movement while telling stories of the past that have shaped the way that we understand America and our world today. At the time, I was thinking about the house and land as an archive. I also thought about honoring those people of African descent who were enslaved at the house. I was amazed when I learned from the historian and director of museum programs at the Prospect Park Alliance, Dylan

Yeats", "per\_e":"dyeats@prospectpark.org", "type":"person"}">Dylan, that there were at least twenty-five people enslaved at the house. I knew I needed to create a symbolic altar for these ancestors. Altars, honoring ancestors—these ritualistic practices are something I grew up with as the first person in my family to be born in the United States. My Bubi and Mende parents, who

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migrated from Equatorial Guinea and Sierra Leone, brought their traditions with them to Brooklyn in the late '60s.



Fawundu is a lifelong Brooklynite whose artistic practices center on themes of indigenization and ancestral memory. Photo Obed Obwoye

**The title *Ancestral Whispers* implies a reconnection with the wisdom of our predecessors. Why is this ancestral connection important to you?**

This ancestral connection is very important. I think of my complex ancestry. My father descended from the Fawundus of Mano-Sakrim. Mano is a very small island off the coast of Sierra Leone; most people on that island are related to me either by blood or marriage. Mano is surrounded by the Mano River and the Atlantic Ocean. The three-hour journey that I took on this river with my mom in 2017 allowed me to feel the vibration of my ancestors within my body. There is so much that I do not know, but I feel it. My mother's father, Joseph Valcarcel, was an Afro-Cubano with ancestors who were enslaved in Cuba. During the late 1890s, my great-grandfather, grandfather and other family members migrated back to Africa and settled in Equatorial Guinea and Sierra Leone. This was part of a large migration sponsored by Spain and Britain



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to repatriate Africans back to Equatorial Guinea, Sierra Leone and Nigeria. I often wonder if my Grandpa Valcarcel was Yoruba. I come from ancestors who had great seafaring and rice-growing skills—it is quite possible that aside from Cuba, some were also enslaved in other parts of the Americas. When I travel to natural spaces within the low country, the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia, my body feels a special connection. I am intuitive and sensitive while in particular bodies of water and natural spaces. My artistic practice is informed by wisdom from this particular ancestry combined with indigenous African cosmology and intelligence.

**Your art practice is informed by stories of human interconnections and exchanges at multiple levels that can be spiritually reactivated through art and ritual practice. As a result, your work often blends historical, traditional and contemporary elements to create compelling visual narratives. How did you incorporate your story into this specific place's complex historical fabric?**

In mostly all of my works I include elements of my Grandmother Adama Sesay Fawundu's Garra textiles. It was especially fitting for *Ancestral Whispers* as this is a textile piece. My late Grandmother was a textile artist specializing in tie-dying and batik. She had a thriving business in Pujehun, Sierra Leone, from the 1940s to the 1990s. I only met my Grandmother twice in my life—once when I was four and then at 20. I have a collection of her textiles in the form of domestic items, gowns, tablecloths, window curtains, etc. I am intrigued by the way in which garra is made through sampling, layering, patterning, relief and repetition. I use these methods when making works and often sample some of my grandmother's textiles. Whether I'm intuitively making a video, textile, photograph or some form of print, these works are symbolic of our bodies, and I consider them living and breathing entities. They are an extension of my indigenous knowledge and our collective energies. I definitely consider our bodies and the earth as both archives and present beings, with all of this intelligence, we are capable of shaping our futures. Using samples of my Grandmother's textiles, along with natural materials from the earth and other significant cultural items, gives me space to create a new language.



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The work was inspired by the lives of Africans enslaved by the Lefferts family. Photo Obed Obwoye

**In this project, most of the textiles you use are found ones, so you're organically branding traditional African fabrics with contemporary techniques to create a layered narrative. Incorporating fabric also creates a powerful, tangible link to ancestral traditions while shining a light on the ongoing evolution of our cultural identities and sensibilities. How did you choose the textiles here, and what guided you in combining them?**

Last year, I created sixteen flags titled *When the Spirits Dance We...*, which opened the "Quilombismo" exhibition at the HKW in Berlin. Each flag was constructed using symbols from indigenous African people, such as the Fang, Duala, Batwa and Bamilke, who were collectively colonized and/or traumatized by Germany. Also included were vèvè and water deity symbols. I considered these textiles as embodying the power and protection of ancestral intelligence and spirits. It was a moving and powerful experience to watch the flags move with the wind at the HKW. This experience made me wonder what the feeling would be like to be immersed in these dancing textiles. At this point, I knew I would cover the front porch of The Lefferts House with textiles. In the spirit of

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transformation, I used some of the same elements from *When the Spirits Dance We...* and also added new imagery from waterways such as the Mano River and the Atlantic Ocean, tobacco leaves that grew on the farm, records related to the people who were enslaved at the house and Dikenga and Akan symbols. I thought about each person who was enslaved at the house and designed a textile for them. The wind, Oya, is a significant collaborator in this piece; I also love that the textiles are living with and embody all of the weather elements that they are exposed to.



Fawundu's 2020 video performance piece, *In the Face of History, Freedom Cape*, was filmed in part in Prospect Park and the Lefferts Historic House Museum. Adama Delphine Fawundu

**Other themes in your work include regeneration and rebirth, which are used to heal collective traumas and historical wounds through ritual. Water is often used as a universal symbol for connectivity and purification. How do water and the sea contribute to the healing of historical traumas and serve as a means of reconnecting with our ancestors and cultural heritage?**



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I believe that water is essential to all life, therefore whether symbolic or physically, water has the power to heal. I think as we tap into ancestral knowledge, we may begin to understand that water connects us all—our past, present and future. Hopefully, through an understanding of the magnitude of this connection, we can see the humanity in each other, and people can lead with love and empathy. Humans are in desperate need of a shift.

**Performance is a crucial aspect of your practice. How does performance help bring ancient rituals to our modern understanding and support our ability to engage with them?**

Over the years, movement and ritual have become very important in my practice because they allow me to connect with spirit and community in a very special way. My goal is to create immersive spaces that activate deep feelings and introspection.

**"[Ancestral Whispers](#)" is on view in September, Thursday through Sunday from 12 p.m. to 5 p.m., and on Saturdays and Sundays from 12 p.m. to 4 p.m. starting in October through December 1.**