

intermission museum of art

artist statement – [jeffrey martin](#) + [david mccormick](#)
specious reasoning: BLACK FIDDLER

plausible... but fallacious! what if the real-life black fiddlers who played at monticello were super queer and engaged in over-the-top battles with other “family” bands? it is, of course, a bit of historical (hysterical?) fiction, but the fiddlers of the scott and hemings families of monticello no doubt engaged in some music-making that was – over. the. top.

i first encountered these very real fiddlers during a research fellowship at thomas jefferson’s monticello. i was intrigued to discover that enslaved worker sally hemings had three fiddle-playing sons with her master, thomas jefferson. jefferson himself was a violinist, but dared not teach his sons fiddle, lest rumors fly about their paternity (but honey, they flew anyway... youngest son eston was jefferson’s spitting image in “bronze”). the hemings’ were related by marriage to the scotts, a whole clan of fiddlers (at least 5, plus a piano-playing mother) headed by family patriarch jesse scott – the child of a scandalous affair between an indigenous woman and the future governor of kentucky.

between them, they played for every sitting u.s. president for decades, were the entertainment for lafayette’s famous visit to virginia, and managed to gobble up a fair amount of property in downtown charlottesville through some strategic marriages and relationships.

one 19th-century commentator claimed that the scotts “caused the chateau to rock and reel” when they played, and it was said that “he was a chump indeed who could sit by and look on without clinching onto a pretty girl and joining the merry throng” upon hearing the eston hemings band play. plausible indeed that they could be battling it out for street cred in the tight circle of black musicians... and winning!

at some point in this beautiful creative process, we imagined kind of a queer “fiddler on the roof” situation. i immediately thought of the snowden family fiddlers, who literally played concerts on their roof in rural ohio. over these last two “pandemic” years, i’ve actually seen folks playing in equally weird outdoor spaces in order to have “social distance” from their audience – the resonance across generations really struck me.

[the last four months working on BLACK FIDDLER i lived in washington dc in this mansion in the georgetown area for a residency at halcyon](#)

house. this mansion was built by the first us naval secretary, benjamin stoddert, in 1787. across the window of my room, i had this amazing view of virginia over the water. being a black body of the south, descendant of slaves and to be in this building my ancestors undoubtedly had a role in shaping got me to take in virginia each day; moved me to say the least creating this story from our archives and narrating the world. “critical fabulation” to me is imagining the richness of the black fiddlers’ lives without centering the trauma and history of chattel slavery and everything that comes with it. in the words of saidiya hartman (venus in two acts), “i want to do more than recount the violence that deposited these traces [of untold stories of former black slaves] in the archive. i want to tell a story about a family capable of retrieving what remains dormant – the purchase or claim of their lives in the present – without committing further violence in my own act of narration” in BLACK FIDDLER. “what are the protocols and limits that shape the narratives written as counter-history, an aspiration that isn’t a prophylactic against the risk posed by reiterating violent speech and depicting again rituals of torture?⁰¹”

as an archivist and black person, “the archive of slavery rest upon a founding violence. [this] violence determines, regulates and organized the kinds of statements that can be made about slavery and as well it creates subjects and objects of power.⁰²” the ‘specious reasoning’ of the black southern experience is to not imagine a world in the south that looked, sounded, tasted, smelled, and felt like this one. by playing with and rearranging the historical narrative of the monticello and the snowden fiddle families “by re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view, [we] have attempted to jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done.⁰³”

for me, though, it was a photo of dapper robert scott, jr. in his cute bowler hat and fine-ass tan suit, proudly holding his cello as he stands shoulder-to-shoulder with former confederate soldiers, that had me imagining a whole new queer universe for these iconic fiddlers.

and the category is... black fiddle realness. “the intent of this practice [and collaborative work] is not to give voice to the slave, but rather to imagine what cannot be verified, a realm of experience which is situated between two zones of death – social and corporeal death – and to reckon with the precarious lives which are visible only in the moment of their disappearance.⁰⁴”

01. Saidiya Hartman; Venus in Two Acts. Small Axe 1 June 2008; 12 (2): 1-14.

doi: <https://doi.org/10.1215/-12-2-1>

02. Ibid.

03. Ibid.

Historical Black fiddlers

[Rock & Reel: Monticello's Black Fiddlers](#)

article by David McCormick in Early Music America Magazine

David McCormick; Rock & Reel: Monticello's Black Fiddlers. Early Music America Magazine. 31 January 2022. <https://earlymusicamerica.org/emag-feature/rock-reel-monticellos-black-fiddlers/>

[Jesse Scott](#)

article on Monticello's website (article links to other family members)

[Snowden Family Band](#)

Wikipedia article on a family of famous Ohio fiddlers

“Critical Fabulation” – info on the tool of storytelling and creator

[“Venus in Two Acts” by Saidiya Hartman](#)

Saidiya Hartman; Venus in Two Acts. Small Axe 1 June 2008; 12 (2): 1-14.
doi: <https://doi.org/10.1215/-12-2-1>

ABSTRACT: This essay examines the ubiquitous presence of Venus in the archive of Atlantic slavery and wrestles with the impossibility of discovering anything about her that hasn't already been stated. As an emblematic figure of the enslaved woman in the Atlantic world, Venus makes plain the convergence of terror and pleasure in the libidinal economy of slavery and, as well, the intimacy of history with the scandal and excess of literature. In writing at the limit of the unspeakable and the unknown, the essay mimes the violence of the archive and attempts to redress it by describing as fully as possible the conditions that determine the appearance of Venus and that dictate her silence.

[How Saidiya Hartman Retells the History of Black Life By Alexis Okeowo](#)

The scholar's provocative writing illuminates stories that have long gone untold.

Alexis Okeowo; How Saidiya Hartman Retells the History of Black Life. The New Yorker October 26, 2020 Issue. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/10/26/how-saidiya-hartman-retells-the-history-of-black-life>

[On working with archives: An interview with writer Saidiya Hartman by Thora Siemsen](#)

Thora Siemse; On working with archives: An interview with writer Saidiya Hartman. The Creative Independent 18 April 2018. <https://thecreativeindependent.com/people/saidiya-hartman-on-working-with-archives/>

Image gallery

1. [The Scotts play for the Cool Spring Barbeque Club in Charlottesville, Virginia. Robert Jr., Robert Sr., and James Scott, L-R on the left side of the photograph.](#)
2. [Eston Hemings' name engraved on the Memorial to Enslaved Laborers at the University of Virginia. – photo credit: David Perry](#)
3. [The gravesite of Robert Scott Jr., Robert Scott Sr., and other family members, in Maplewood Cemetery, Charlottesville. – photo credit: David Perry](#)
4. [Initial Sketches and Moodboard Images from Beaux Xavier](#)
5. [Ranking of Kings: 10 Ways This Show Is Different from Other Animes \(GameRant\)](#)

Video Gallery

1. [Joe Thompson, Odell Thompson, and friends: Roll In My Sweet Baby's Arms \(1983\)](#)
2. [Joe and Odell Thompson at Greenfield Village](#)
3. [African American Roots and Influences in Country Music](#)
4. [Eddie South – Black Gypsy](#)
5. [“Forty Drops,” Andrew and Jim Baxter, 1928, Atlanta, GA](#)
6. [“Rosalie,” Son Sims Four, 1942, Clarksdale, MS](#)
7. [“Knox County Stomp,” Tennessee Chocolate Drops, 1930, Knoxville TN](#)