

Notes on Living a Translated Life

From the John Singer Sargent frontal nude painting of McKeller in Boston's MFA, I'd imagined Thomas as tall and slender. Looking more closely, I can see that even 100 years ago a body like Thomas's was not accidental.



by Lorraine O'Grady
October 11, 2020



Lorraine O'Grady, "The Strange Taxi: From Africa to Jamaica to Boston in 200 Years," (1991/2019) (all images courtesy the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston and the author)

The essay "NOTES on Living a Translated Life" by Lorraine O'Grady was first published in Boston's [Apollo, Thomas McKeller and John Singer Sargent](#), which accompanied the exhibition of the same name at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston. The exhibition is curated by Nathaniel Silver.

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In Boston, where I grew up in the 1930s and '40s, my family of recent Jamaican immigrants shared a small block with even more recent Irish immigrants. When Louis Hurley, the Irish boy next door, and I went to kindergarten together joined at the hip, we still spoke with our parents' accents. We had to shed their accents quickly when our classmates laughed at us.

Albemarle, a dead-end street in Back Bay, was just five blocks from Copley Square, where the Boston Public Library stood on one side and Trinity Episcopal Church on the other. My mother, Lena, understood right away that the library was the world's best babysitter. Devonia, my sister, eleven years older than I, could no longer be counted

on. She'd been accepted at Girls' Latin, which, together with Boys' Latin across the street on the Fenway, were the most demanding schools in the city. When she was not sagging under its horrific load of homework, she would flee to my Aunt Gladys's in Roxbury, where our cousins were nearer her own age. That left me to be raised as an only child. Twice a week, beginning just before I turned four, Mama and I would walk to the library at Copley, up the grand staircase, past the two lions to the first landing, where she stood to watch me. My hand could barely reach the top of the marble balustrade to steady my footing as I climbed the rest of the way by myself. Eyes fixed for balance on the Nine Muses painted on the wall above, I didn't look back at her. She was gone as I turned and hurried to story hour.



Sister Devonia O'Grady's 16th birthday, 1939; Devonia, fourth from left, stands slightly behind party chaperone Ruth Silvera, mother Lena's best friend and godmother to Lorraine, who is five years old at the time.

Outside, Mama crossed the square, walked five more blocks past the Commons, and delivered her neat packages of clothes she'd designed and sewn to ladies who lived in long apartments on Commonwealth Avenue or in town houses on Beacon Hill. Sometimes, if there were no fittings, she'd shop on Newbury Street for accessories to turn the clothes into outfits. On her way back to the library, seconds ticking jerkily on the little gold wristwatch Papa had given her for their anniversary, she would stop at S.S. Pierce to get our groceries and canned goods before picking me up. Then it was home to Albemarle again.

In the Children's Room, I soon stopped sitting on the floor in a circle while the librarian read stories to the little kids. I wandered to the shelves to find real books like my sister and parents read. I could almost read. Crouched at the small round tables in the library, over the next four years I memorized the stories of different times and places, of peoples from around the globe, the retellings of Greek and Roman myths, and especially the Knights of the Round Table, with their beautiful illustrations and

old-fashioned words. Sir Gawain and Sir Lancelot were my favorites. But when I looked for stories about Guinevere, they weren't there.



Sister Devonia O'Grady's 16th birthday, 1939; Devonia, far right, celebrates with the small group of cousins and friends who have known each other all their lives.

Once, when I'd turned five and was starting kindergarten, I stole away from the Children's Room to climb the mysterious stone stairs I'd noticed just beside the entrance. The stairs led to the third floor. When I climbed the last step, I was alone in a massive space so long it seemed more like a wide corridor than a room and so dimly lit it looked like it was in twilight. Afraid to enter, I stood motionless, feeling dwarfed by the high ceilings and engulfed by stale air that no one must have breathed in years. When I looked up, far above my head I saw mystical figures, enormous and so encrusted with gold they appeared to be on fire. I forced myself to enter. I went only three yards before I was struck still again, not knowing where to look, then I ran back down the dark stairs to the Children's Room to pretend I'd never left and wait for my mother.

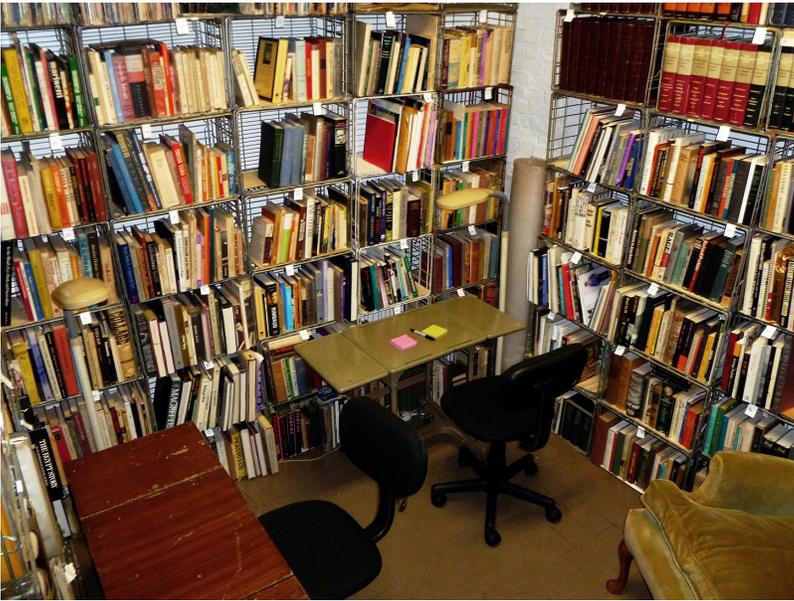
The next year, after first grade, I began to walk to the library by myself. Things were over for me and Louey Hurley. He got kept back in the first and I got skipped to the third, so now there were two grades between us. It was the end of our adventures climbing sheds in backyards off the alleys behind St. Botolph Street, claiming hide-outs. "This one belongs to me!" "No, I saw it first!" I was glad I had my books.



Boston Public Library's Children's Room, 1939; Boston Public Library, Print Department; From 1938 to 1942, the Copley Square Children's Room served as Lorraine's homeaway-from-home.

In two more years, in the early 1940s, I would be off on a new adventure not of my own making. My parents moved to Roxbury to another, slightly longer, dead-end street. This time, we shared our end of a small block with Jewish families who were still observant, bilingual in English and Yiddish and observant not just on High Holy Days. Here my friends were girls ... Jackie Ostrow, Helen Cohen, and I weren't just the same age, we had been born the same week. Within a few months, I would learn to follow their families' conversations in Yinglish and, for several houses on the block, I became a Shabbos goy, the non-Jew who does forbidden tasks on Saturday, like turning on stoves or taking out trash, to help preserve the illusion that the Sabbath is a day of rest. At first, the three of us played marbles and jacks and jump rope (what boring games!), then a couple of years later, we were sitting on our porch steps talking like preteens. Sometimes I'd play Scully with bottlecaps if the boys let me. I hung around until they needed someone for a game. They never let Helen or Jackie in — the boys were proud when they said the game had been invented on Wabon Street. This lasted just a couple of years.

Having friends on Wabon became less important after I entered Girls' Latin School. By now, Devonian had finished Boston University and was away in grad school at the University of Pennsylvania. Lena and Edwin seemed more determined than ever. My place wasn't here on this block — though it was closer to my aunt's house. The two of them had emigrated separately from Old Harbour and Kingston with more education than they would be allowed to use in this country. Now that I was at Girls' Latin, there was no escaping their mantra: "Forward, MARCH!"



A corner of the reading room in Lorraine O'Grady's storage space in New York, 2013

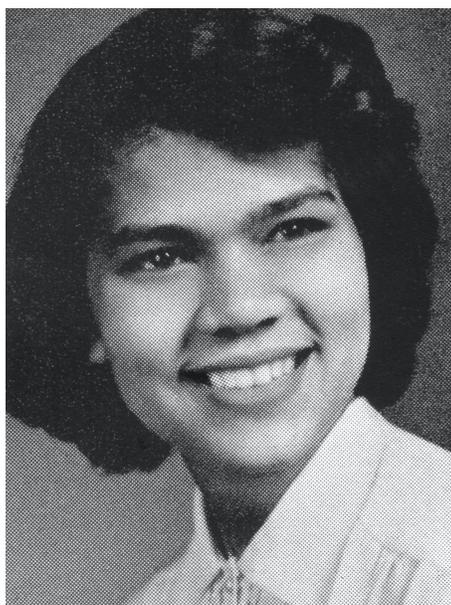
2.

*I've been invited to reflect on Thomas McKeller, my father, Edwin O'Grady, and on Boston as the matrix of their lives, and asked to suggest how my photomontage *The Strange Taxi* might relate to them. Since our first discussions in January 2018 of the McKeller-Sargent exhibit, the Gardner Museum curator Nathaniel Silver and his team have uncovered much new documentary evidence of who McKeller might have been, how he might have lived. Our perceptions have become more refined and changed. I also have never thought about Edwin this much before. It's been an evolutionary roller-coaster for me. The limits of the archive are severe. And when I try to picture Thomas and Edwin, two black immigrants to the city encountering it in the 1910s and '20s — while simultaneously thinking about my own life growing up in Boston in the 1930s and '40s (I was born in September 1934 and graduated from *Girls' Latin* in 1951) — the myopia of childhood memory intersects with all the questions I didn't ask my parents. Who, and why, do people leave? Who, and what, do they expect to find waiting for them?*

A Wilmington, NC, newspaper notice in early 1912, less than a year after his father died, announcing a court-ordered "public auction for cash" of his brother's (and his?) land to be held in just two weeks, must have been a red flag to Thomas. Surely he was aware of the uni- directional black-white land transfers now in full sway across the "Redeemed" South since Reconstruction had been successfully rolled back. He had so many reasons to want to leave.

In the first documents I open for him, which we have since found are inaccurate, McKeller's World War I draft card gives 1892 as his birth year, while the discharge papers indicate a birth date of 1891. This strange discrepancy makes me try to account for it. In 1912, the age of majority was still twenty-one for males. It would not be reduced to eighteen until the 1970s. Had McKeller lied about his age just as my

father, Edwin, had to join the army when he left Jamaica the first time? If Thomas were born in 1892, he would have to wait a year and a half after the auction to leave North Carolina. If he added one year, claimed he was born in 1891, he could be gone in six months.



Lorraine O'Grady's yearbook photo, Girls' Latin School, Boston, 1951

But what strikes me most on Thomas's World War I draft card is the Registrar's physical description: "Tall, medium, or short (specify one)?" Short. "Slender, medium, or stout (which)?" Medium.

It is disorienting. From the John Singer Sargent frontal nude painting of McKeller in Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, I'd imagined Thomas as tall and slender. The Registrar's answers to Question One on the draft card force me to return to Sargent's earlier drawings of him. Looking more closely, I can see that even a hundred years ago a body like Thomas's was not accidental. It must have taken relentless work to make a delicate frame that strong. I recall the Charles Atlas "95 lb. weakling" ads

filling the magazine, newspaper, and comic-book back-pages when I was growing up and want to laugh and cry at the same time. It's not hard to see why Sargent drew inspiration from Thomas's body for both his male and female forms.

No one knows the reasons why Thomas left the South; we still do not have definitive information. But the psychic pressures must have been enormous. Whether the inner battles were life preserving — the need to escape social and cultural suffocation, even fear for his physical life and of other depredation — or romantic (had he met someone?), turmoil made him brave. It took courage to leave when Thomas did. He left three to four years before the beginning of the Great Migration, before folk wisdom had accumulated on where you should go and what you should do when you got there. It took even greater courage when one considers that men like McKeller wouldn't leave the South in large numbers until more than a quarter century later.

Historians now divide the Migration into two phases: The First Great Migration (1916–1940), in which 1.6 million African Americans moved from the South to Northern cities, especially in the industrial Midwest. In the Second Great Migration (1940–1970), another five million people, often more urban and skilled, as was Thomas himself, dispersed more broadly, from the Northeast to the West Coast. The two phases together are considered one of the largest internal migrations in world history, and the largest not prompted either by famine or threat of genocide. At the

end of it, a primarily rural people had transformed itself into a people that was overwhelmingly urban.

But Thomas made the move alone. And what we actually know about his leaving is as sad as those words sound. In an “archive failure” as extreme as the one surrounding Thomas, the answer to almost every question seems to be: “We just don’t know.” Did he buy a one-way ticket to Boston? Was someone waiting for him there? Or did he stop first in Philly or New York and then leave because they didn’t suit him? Sadly, it doesn’t take long for so many we-don’t-knows to become one big No. The life soon appears like a blackboard that has been erased too often. What is now written there can be seen only faintly. But I have to hold on to what I feel I do know. Thomas left a home where he was deeply loved. His brother even named his first son after him. And Boston, like Granada, is where the train dies. The next stop would be the ocean.

According to the birthdate given on his World War II draft card, 1890, confirmed by later information, Thomas was eight years older than my father, Edwin, born in 1898. They were both in their early twenties when they landed in Boston. Thomas is first recorded in the city in 1913. Edwin came in 1919, weeks after being mustered out of the British West Indies Regiment when its Jamaican companies returned from Europe to Kingston.



Lorraine O'Grady, "The Strange Taxi: From Africa to Jamaica to Boston in 200 Years" (1991/2019) gelatin silver print on rag paper, 127 × 101.6 cm; (courtesy the artist and Alexander Gray Associates, New York)

O'Grady's mother Lena, second from left, and three maternal and paternal aunts are pictured emerging from the roof of a New England mansion as it rolls on wheels on a ground formed by an African woman's back.

The two had grown up in overwhelmingly black worlds — Edwin in a Jamaica roughly 95% black, Thomas in segregated North Carolina — and in tropical and subtropical climates. What must they have made of a place where the population was

98% white and snow fell from mid-November to mid-March? They would stay there the rest of their lives. But they had come to different cities, I think.



Father Edwin O'Grady, 1923, this photo for Edwin's Naturalization "First Papers" application is signed with his original British-styled name at birth in Jamaica: Evelyn James O'Grady. After legally changing his name, his final Naturalization papers would be signed with the new name: Edwin James O'Grady.

Most emigrants seem to flee from as much as they flee to. In Edwin's case, from an insupportable home life to a place where he might reinvent himself, where, somehow, he might make things turn out better than they would have been. But Thomas's home, despite the Redeemers' violent threats, seems to have been filled with love. Perhaps it was a love he could not accommodate? I sense him fleeing, not so much to reinvent himself, but to become more who he was. Edwin would be joining others who had done earlier what he was doing now. His older sister had been living in Boston since before the war, and he'd arranged to meet up with mates from his old school. Edwin knew where he would stay, and his mother would telegraph money until he found a job.

The Gardner's research shows that Thomas McKeller had no family in Boston when he arrived, and that none would join him later. But it is silent on any social circle that may have awaited him or one he might have entered after settling there. Clearly Thomas got connected quickly. Not long after his arrival in 1913, we find him employed as a bellman at the Hotel Vendome, perhaps Boston's most tastefully appointed and well-run hotel (the manager lived on the premises). This was hardly the easiest job to get. Turnover at the Vendome was low (my father had a friend from Jamaica who'd worked there for decades), and most of the employees were older. Then not many years later, in 1917, we see that Thomas has secured an added morning job, which nearly doubles his income, as John Singer Sargent's model. He is twenty-five, in an alien city, but in the context of that time and place, he seems a young man who knows how to take care of himself.

3.

World War II had benefited Edwin and Lena. It had entertained their minds. They read every newspaper article, listened to every news broadcast. Troop movements didn't interest them. Instead, they followed speeches delivered to the American public or to foreign governments plus the published debates on legislation, not to mention the mountains of editorial opinion each of the above produced. Night after night, they

explored and dissected, agreeing globally but disagreeing violently on the minutiae. The skills and reflexes I developed as I tried to follow their lightning-fast analyses and summaries, tried to contribute without seeming an idiot just talking nonsense, would carry me through public debates over six years of Girls' Latin School and beyond. Would political leaders have realized how privileged they would be to sit at our table and hear the sound of policy being sifted and weighed as people fought for their lives? Mama and Papa weren't arguing platonically. They were trying to divine their own future. It was clear things had changed during the war, but what happened after? White women would be sent back to *küche und kinder*. But black people would be sent back where?

The money was good, and the vocabulary of war changed the ways people thought. For Mama, being a dressmaker and designer-stylist had been creative and genteel, had preserved the illusion that she was a housewife with a hobby, not someone who worked at home. It took her a year after "hostilities" began to become part of the "war effort." Now that I was in school and Devonia had begun college, being at home felt boring. War work could be exciting, and the money was dependable. She applied to a factory making army overcoats and, after the interview, was assigned to putting on collars — the most technically demanding, physically difficult job on the floor (the coats were almost finished by the time they got to her). It was also the highest paid. She shared the two-person section with her new buddy Connie, another smart housewife, an Italian from East Boston. It only took a few weeks for the owners to realize what they had in Lena O'Grady. Government contracts were relentless, and they were in over their heads. Mama had come to America with the dream of entering university to study mathematics, but it hadn't worked out for her. In Jamaica, she had had servants and never learned to clean or cook. After leaving New York for Boston, she'd felt lucky to join the small cadre of pretty, educated black girls, "nice to have around," who were ladies' maids on Beacon Hill and didn't have to do those tasks. After she married, a dozen of the Yankee women she'd met there became the core of her home business. Now the factory's owners were relieved to let her run things. As a dress designer, she could deal with the "princes," the old-world Jewish and Italian tailors drafted to become pattern cutters. And as a seamstress, she understood the stitchers, an odd collection of Boston women with children and wildly differing levels of skill, who seemed to originate from every corner of the globe: Russia, Italy, Armenia, Syria. Lena's actual job title — forelady — (and her salary) disguised the fact that she did everything including supervise the bookkeepers. Everything except attend the official meetings where contracts were awarded and monitored.

The war had been good even for Papa. A quarter-century earlier, as soon as World War I began, he had lied about his age to get away from Jamaica and problems at home. By law, the British West Indies Regiment had only white officers, and noncoms were white as well. But as a result of his upper-middle-class background, Edwin had been inducted as



Mother Lena O'Grady, Age 85, Boston, 1983. Lorraine's last photo of Lena was taken on an outing from her mother's apartment in Coolidge Corner to visit a cousin living in the Prudential Center.

a sixteen-year-old corporal. In France, he speedily became one of the tiny handful of brown and black sergeants. But the mail to the trenches wasn't good. Back home in the islands, nothing had stopped. In Jamaica, where his mother had *not* made a safely arranged marriage like her sisters, his cousins were already coming in to their inheritances, taking their positions. There would be nothing for him. In 1919, he said goodbye to his mother, his favorite cousin, "Puckoo" DeSouza, and to their friends and got on the next boat to Canada. From there he made his way down to the States. With options now even more limited, he chose the "best" of them and joined all the other educated, well-mannered, well-spoken, and handsome black men who could only find work in the country's Pullman sleepers and their railroad

dining cars.

Progress would be slow but sure. First he was a waiter, some years later a steward, and at the very end a bartender. But there was a difference between him and the other men. Early on, Edwin had added a small sideline. The official job would become the source of clients for his own private gig, one with real possibilities — the card games he ran in spaces rented at either end of the Boston and Albany line. It was risky. Discretion was required, of course. But though he could be as temperamental as any Jamaican man, his family upbringing and natural elegance would help him be discreet. And he recognized discretion in others. Still, it was an uphill battle to keep the numbers high enough and the presence quiet enough to guarantee a trustworthy game. World War II had come as a blessing: it seemed to fill the Boston and Albany line with an increased crop of businessmen and legislators looking to lose money the *right* way.

"We could be *rich!*" Mama would wail plaintively. If only he didn't gamble it all away, every bit of it down the drain! Papa didn't care much for card games. Although he made the arrangements, adjusted the disputes, took the house cut, the table itself didn't tempt him. The math and human psychology cards employed were not so much alien as not of *the* moment to him. Essentially a dreamer and poet, there was nothing that moved he wouldn't bet on. But for him, betting wasn't just betting really, it was the casting of spells, a magical aligning of forces. Weekends, Papa would come alive. Suffolk Downs for the horses, Revere for the dogs. He would pore over the green-colored handicap newspapers, then set them aside to translate their ingredients into ingenious systems of his own. Occasionally, he would win an encouraging amount, more often he would lose. Some weekends, Mama would go out to Suffolk Downs with him. A chance to show off a new outfit, enjoy the spectacle, exchange pleasantries with

the women she met there. Sometimes, she'd place a small bet based on how the horse's name resonated. It invariably won big. On the way home, Papa wouldn't speak to her.

With Devonian at Penn and Mama and Papa gone so much, from having a home that was once too present, I had become a "latchkey kid." I had to keep my own schedule. Now every morning, I jumped from the Brigham bus, ran madly down Mission Hill and made it to homeroom seconds before the bell rang. In the evenings, I didn't study at the huge office desk they'd bought for my bedroom. Instead, I commandeered the living room floor, the only space large enough for multiple connections, where I could cover the entire Persian rug as the air around me filled with the mental dots I made between books, notebooks, piles of paper. As I straddled the thin line I believed was all that separated an A from a D, the goal stayed firmly in front of me — college, glory, getting away from Mama and Papa to become me. When she was at B.U., Dee had been elected basileus, or president, of the Boston chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha. I had seen the impossibly beautiful, bright, and poised girls who came to sorority meetings from colleges all around Massachusetts, as well as the Seven Sisters, to maintain their links to black social life. I tried imagining those young women when they were my age, spread-eagled like me in blue jeans on the floor, but I could only see them seated properly at desks. I knew I could never be like them, that joining a sorority or coming out in a cotillion were not parts of my goal. I didn't know what I wanted, but I wanted more.

4

It's a small detail, I know, but Thomas's formal signature changes dramatically between his World War I and World War II draft cards. Starting from slightly beyond cursive, it now stops just short of calligraphy. The new version is gorgeous and took hours of focused energy. For what end? We may never know. But his handwritten letters during this time show only standard variation. I can't assign an educational level to them, as I've seen more errors in scripts by published poets. Did McKeller graduate from high school? Might he have attended a Southern historically black college? These and other questions are for future research. Still, by comparison the florid letters of my father, Edwin, educated privately in the British colonial school system (which he left when he was sixteen), are perfect. But, to me, there is a difference between the two men so great, it can't be measured. Sadly, I admit that every line of Thomas's letters bristles with reflections of a personality in touch with itself that we feel we know, while, across Edwin's pages, there is an endless march of acceptable "literary" thoughts. Literature reference may have been a family trait. One of his cousins had been named Lucien Ivanhoe. He had given my sister Devonian the middle name Evangeline after the heroine of a Longfellow poem. But when I compare Thomas and Edwin, the most important question for me now becomes: Did his family upbringing allow, or did the world force, Thomas to become an individual?

Before Sargent's death in 1925, facing a need for greater, more secure income, McKeller left his bellhop job at the Vendome to work at the Post Office. Until midcentury, of all the major U.S. cities, Boston was reputed to have the greatest

disparity for blacks between educational and cultural access — we had been attending Ivy and Seven Sister colleges since before the 1870s — and economic opportunity. Government and service industries were the main employers while corporate positions were almost nonexistent, and the city's tiny black population was too small to support the vibrant professional and entrepreneurial communities found in cities with larger black demographics. Many black college grads left Boston to make a life elsewhere. Others, including some with law degrees, stayed and worked at places like the Post Office.

I learned all this the summer I began going to a black camp as a preteen. Camp Atwater in East Brookfield, MA, in the 1930s and '40s, was a networking venue of the black middle class before institutions like Jack and Jill Club and the Oak Bluffs summer resort were popular. Children of the black elite would come to Atwater from as far away as Houston and Los Angeles. The handful of us from Boston were disoriented when others laughed at our broad Boston accent, which we wore as a badge of honor. And we were mystified when they taunted us with phrases like: "Why do folks from Boston think they're so fancy when they're so poor?" We hadn't noticed before. At the end of the season, I returned home not knowing where I fit. As usual, I didn't speak about this to my parents. But for the first time, I realized that my sister and all my cousins, from eight to fifteen years older than I, were already gone. Now I really was an only child.

When I receive the most recent documents from the Gardner, they shock me. Thomas's death certificate lists his occupation as mail handler. Even today, with motorized vehicles, the job description is hard: "Mail Handlers work in an industrial environment. Duties include the loading, unloading and moving of sacks of mail and packages up to 70 lbs." This isn't what I imagined for him. I'd pictured him like the postal workers my family knew, first as a mail sorter or a clerk answering the public's questions, then as a supervisor at a corner desk and even, near the end, in management with a room on an inner corridor, all the while finding his dry wit appreciated. Perhaps he'd tried and found the native black Bostonians, with pear trees and patio furniture in the backyards of single-family homes, too boring to cope with? Perhaps they had let slip that they were put off by his Southern accent? Or did he see mail handling as a way of staying fit while getting paid? But he couldn't live forever.

Boston can put up invisible barriers. My mother, Lena, was one of the first two West Indian women admitted to the, at the time, impossibly exclusive Women's Service Club. She had come in with her best friend, Lucille Lippman. They were pretty and smart and worked hard. They both also tried to develop friendships with the club's officers. I found it sad and annoying by turns to listen to Lena distorting her Jamaican



Lorraine O'Grady in her apartment at 55 Wildersgade
Christianshavn Copenhagen, 1962

lilt when she spoke with them. But though valued as a club member, she could never become intimate with those black Brahmin women, many of whose ancestors in Boston dated to before the Revolution. Yet I think any view of Lena as ultimately excluded is deceptive. Though her core world would remain the old family and friends from “home,” she was always simultaneously moving into new worlds with her daughters, adding their stories to her own.

I hope Thomas was able to craft the life he hoped for when he immigrated to the city fifty years previously. But perhaps Boston lives are as complex and contradictory as the city itself. Details of

McKeller’s physical and psychic life may always remain elusive and shadowed. We may only be left with the work he did with John Singer Sargent, his accidental partner, with the beauty, the discipline, the sobriety and intelligence of the effort he brought to it. And that will be enough.

Looking at the death certificate, I receive still another shock. It says that when Thomas died on 15 July 1962, he was living at 28 Wabon Street. Wabon is the same small dead-end street we moved to after Albemarle. I hadn’t lived on Wabon since 1953, but my parents were still there in 1962. I had visited them the week of 9 July, just days before Thomas’s death in a hospice. It seems an amazing coincidence. I hadn’t seen Lena and Edwin since the previous July, when they came to see me off on the S.S. Liberté when I moved to Scandinavia. But this visit would not be joyous. Six months after I’d sailed, Devonia, living in Stamford, CT with a husband and three kids and working to set up the first program in the country to put social workers in public schools, had suddenly and bafflingly died. It happened on 13 January, when I was in a ski cabin seven hours north of Oslo. I was snowed in and couldn’t make it to the funeral. This was my first trip to the States since then. The following year, Lena and Edwin would move from Wabon to the Jamaica Plain–West Roxbury border to make a new start, beyond the grief of losing a daughter. And I would return to Europe to try to teach myself how to write so I could say what had to be said. It had been seven years since graduation from college and more than a decade since Girls’ Latin School. I hadn’t got very far.

For six years, my real world was Girls’ Latin School. Nothing could compete with my “gang.” In homeroom, on the first day of sixth class, I met two girls I’d known at our old elementary school on St. Botolph Street in Back Bay—Froso Metalides from the

Fenway and Shirley McClain, African American from the South End. Shortly after, we added another girl we all liked, Ursula Miranda from East Boston. Homerooms at Latin went alphabetically, so this meant our group from 6-D would be together all day every day for six years. In 5-C, we added Evie Weinstein, a tuition-paying transfer from Chelsea. When new girls entered in fourth class, Anna Gallo from East Boston wasn't in our room, but she chose us to be with. And that was our "gang." You couldn't make it without one.

The gang became more important to me than ever starting sophomore year. Nineteen forty-eight was the year I turned fourteen, an age when many immigrant kids seem to realize that, no matter how ambitious your parents might be, they don't have a clue. In key ways, you are on your own, navigating a system in which they'd landed you from the outside. Papa was still isolated in his own world. No surprise there. And though Mama understood the *who*, *why*, and *how* of competition — God knows, she'd given her daughters every tool she could to meet it — the what of the competition was totally opaque to her. Perhaps her perceptions might have applied in an orderly, class-based society like the old Jamaica, but in the free-for-all the USA still constituted in the '40s? What intellectual ideas, what intellectual emotions, needed to be cultivated and expressed? Via what techniques and in what modalities? These were things Lena didn't have questions, let alone answers for. And neither did my gang nor most of their parents. Perhaps that's why we all studied so hard. It was the only answer we could think of.



50th Reunion, Girls' Latin School Class of 1951, 2001. During their 50th reunion, Ursula and Anna become reacquainted with the old Girls' Latin School courtyard, which is now completely contained within the new Mass Art.

For me, 1948 brought more information. It was the year Devonia married a young dental grad she'd met at UPenn.

Surprisingly, Eddie's older sister Billie was a dancer on Broadway. And when not performing, she modeled for ads in black magazines. It was a lifestyle I'd not thought of before, and its freedom and creativity intrigued me. But I didn't want to use my body, I wanted to use my mind! That's what I'd worked for!

In those years, *every* item in *every* course, other than the sciences (and sometimes even those), had to be translated — examined for meanings so skewed in one direction they needed readjustment to permit the existence of whole worlds that had not been considered by the author, worlds like mine and those of almost everyone I knew. By the time I arrived at Girls' Latin

as an eleven-year-old, I was already expert at this kind of simultaneous translation. But as a four-teen-year-old, I felt a greater need to belong. So I had to become a "multi-

simultaneous” translator. It wasn’t enough just to translate for myself, I had to soften the translations I shared with others so as not to frighten them, so they could hear and understand me. Then I had to retranslate the softened translations part way back again so as to hold on to thoughts and emotions that were my own. All while being a particularly unsophisticated teenager.

Sometimes I short-circuited. *Ivanhoe*’s Rebecca the Jewess was the first literary character I’d easily identified with. But Scott’s anti-anti-Semitic argument was so reminiscent of what it was supposedly refuting, I felt tortured in class as I reflected on my Jewish and non-Jewish classmates’ secret thoughts. When I was called on, I couldn’t say a word.

Translation was easier in some courses than in others, of course. Ancient history was similar to science fiction — another time, another place — both shone in the light of the present. Reading Julius Caesar’s *The Gallic Wars* in fourth-class Latin, I loved Vercingetorix waging his hopeless campaign against the Roman legions in a way I could never love Caesar (and the gorgeous nude statue of *The Dying Gaul* in our textbook didn’t hurt!). And perhaps because I was older, Caesar’s dry reports gave flesh to childhood understandings I had gained from my beloved *King Arthur and His Knights of the Round Table* at the BPL — that though victors and vanquished may be equally gallant, their fates were unfairly decided by opportunity and chance. Seeing this explained so much about how my family and their friends had to live.



Lorraine O’Grady, “The Fir Palm,” 1991/2019. Gelatin silver print on rag paper, 127 × 101.6 cm; (courtesy the artist and Alexander Gray Associates, New York)

In one of O’Grady’s most directly autobiographical works, from the African woman’s navel grows a Caribbean palm trunk that is surmounted by the foliage of a New England fir.

On the other hand, American history was hard. I accepted facts as presented— I might not do so now — but everywhere I found interpretations I disagreed with violently. I

had my own opinions about Manifest Destiny, a quasi-religious belief that Europeans were predestined to own the Americas from the Atlantic to the Pacific, but I kept them to myself. I couldn't hold my tongue, though, on slavery, the Civil War, and, especially, Reconstruction. But because I had no facts for my instinctive case, I would quickly fall silent. Despite that, I won the Sons of the American Revolution history prize.

Looking back, I wonder if our generation may not have had the longest childhood in America.

A world beyond understanding by adults had paradoxically provided its children a cocoon of isolation and stasis. Yes, we'd gone without a pause from the impoverishment of the Depression to an unprecedented wartime prosperity and on to unfathomable postwar revelations — Hiroshima! Dresden! MacArthur in Occupied Japan! Concentration camps! A Marshall Plan for Europe! The GI Bill in the United States! Milton Berle on TV! From there we seemed to move directly on to the self-righteous fantasies of the '50s ... the power of the last country left standing, with every enemy in its place ... communists ... the USSR ... Joe McCarthy and Roy Cohn ... and help always at hand ... the triumph of advertising ... exurbanites ... *Kinder, Küche, Kirche*

Children were still mostly seen and not heard. Homelife became turbulent, it seemed, only when parents caught new waves of opportunity.