

## Artist Statement

Vanderbilt University was established during the Reconstruction era, a period often framed as an effort to expand education and rebuild the South. Its founder, Cornelius Vanderbilt, was aligned with the Union during the Civil War and materially supported its efforts, even offering his steamship *Vanderbilt* to aid. Reflecting on this contribution, he emphasized the ship's unmatched power, asserting that no Confederate vessel could withstand it.

Vanderbilt later married Frank Armstrong Crawford Vanderbilt, a Confederate sympathizer who played a key role in encouraging his financial support for the university. In her own words, she wrote, "Com. is proud of my being a rebel. Takes pains to tell it."

The founding of Vanderbilt cannot be understood as separate from the historical conditions that shaped it. Vanderbilt emerges from a moment in which the promise of education was entangled with the unfinished project of racial justice.

To revisit this history in the present, particularly amid challenges to diversity, equity, and inclusion, is to recognize how these legacies endure. When institutional responses to such challenges remain limited, and when shifts in policy correlate with declines in Black student representation, I raise a critical question: not simply who has access to these spaces, but how meaningfully that access is supported, defended, and sustained.

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