

Black at Bryn Mawr: Mapping Campus History

“Women’s History in the Digital World” Conference

Albert M. Greenfield Digital Center for the History of Women’s Education

Friday, May 22, 2015

The Black at Bryn Mawr project was developed as an independent study course for the Spring 2015 semester by myself and fellow student Emma Kioko, aided by the guidance and support of Monica Mercado, Director of the Greenfield Digital Center for the History of Women’s Education and CLIR Postdoctoral Fellow at the College, and Sharon Ullman, Bryn Mawr’s History Department Chair. The project was born out of community-wide conversations that occurred last fall after two students hung a Confederate flag in Radnor Hall, a dormitory that anchors the northeast corner of this sprawling Seven Sisters campus. In these conversations, community members repeatedly articulated a need to build institutional memory of Bryn Mawr’s engagement with racism in order to enable future students to hold themselves and the College community to higher standards of awareness and accountability to racial power dynamics both inside and outside the classroom. Black at Bryn Mawr was conceived as a direct response to this demand. We wanted to emphasize that Black women, in a variety of roles, had been part of the College since its founding in 1885, and especially in the aftermath of the Confederate flag incident, we wanted the College community to realize that racism was not something Bryn Mawr imported from the outside world, but was something deeply embedded in its history.

[SLIDE 2: *Image of writing on student’s arm that reads, “I shouldn’t have to question if I belong here. I will not be silenced.”*]

In mid-October 2014, shortly after the Confederate flag incident gained national media attention when 550 students, staff, and faculty gathered to protest the flag and demonstrate their commitment to changing Bryn Mawr’s legacy of unsafety for marginalized groups, Emma and I

met in a small seminar room in Canaday Library to discuss our ideas for a research project that would investigate how the College had chosen to record, remember, and represent racism in its history, as well as attempt to illuminate the experiences of Black students, faculty, and staff from the College's founding in 1885 to the present. Over the summer Emma had proposed a campus walking tour inspired by Tim McMillan's groundbreaking "Black and Blue" walking tour at the University of North Carolina, where she had interned over the summer. The Black and Blue tour attempts to alter the perceived landscape from its 'normative' reading by consciously reinserting omitted and half-told stories that cover the history of African Americans on UNC Chapel Hill's campus from enslavement to the present. She pitched the project to the College's Director of Diversity, Social Justice, and Inclusion over the summer, but felt that she was given a lukewarm response. After the Confederate flag incident, however, she felt strongly that her idea for a walking tour needed to be put into action. She composed an email to President Cassidy, who responded immediately and enthusiastically to her pitch.

At around the same time, I had a casual conversation with the Self Government Association President, Syona Arora, who suggested that my interest in archives and digital humanities might be useful to the project that Emma was trying to develop. After a flurry of emails at the end of September, I discussed the idea of supplementing the walking tour with some kind of digital record with Emma. We were inspired by student-led digital humanities projects on the histories of slavery at Harvard, Brown, Princeton, and Yale to make the histories we found at Bryn Mawr publicly accessible, and specifically by historical mapping projects at Sarah Lawrence College and Emory University to make a digital map of the tour. Ultimately, our goal was to gain a better understanding of the institution of which we were a part, viewing the

College not just as a place to learn, but as a place from which to learn. With much of the literature on Bryn Mawr's history either silent on or celebratory of Black student, staff, and faculty experiences, however, our expectations for what we might encounter in our research were uncertain.

In November, we drafted a learning plan for the independent study course that would launch Black at Bryn Mawr in the spring. We selected Bryn Mawr College Special Collections as our field site because its archives contained a wealth of information about the College's history, though as our project evolved over the Spring semester we scoured not just archival records but numerous published volumes on the College's history, census data, and old newspaper articles, and carefully inspected the campus' oldest buildings, nearby colonial cemetery, and African Art collection as well. From our initial overview of the archives, it was clear that incidents like the Confederate flag display were not exceptional at Bryn Mawr. In fact, they were deeply embedded in the College's history. [SLIDE 3: *Photo of student's dorm room ca. 1902-1905 with Uncle Tom and pickaninny caricatures on the walls.*] We determined that a major contributing factor to this recycling of traumas was that the College community is constantly in flux: as students graduate every few years, institutional memory is wiped clean. Fruits borne of past conversations and reconciliations gather dust, or disappear.

The pressing question that emerged from this realization was: how could we use the archives' "hidden" histories to intervene effectively in this cycle? We decided that our project needed to be structured in accordance with three core principles. [SLIDE 4: *Core principles.*] First, the project needed to focus on Black student, staff, and faculty experiences at the College from its founding in 1885 to the present. This was not because Emma and I deemed the histories

of other marginalized groups unimportant, but because we determined the project needed to have a specific focus given the sheer volume of materials archived at Special Collections. Centering Black experiences seemed most appropriate for a number of reasons, not least of which was the fact that the Confederate flag – the symbol that catalyzed this community (re)education project – was a symbol of American slavery, and Black students had been the ones to spearhead student organizing in response to it. Second, the project needed to be publicly accessible so that members of the College community could use our work as a resource to address this cycle of trauma. Third, the project needed to offer multiple avenues to engaging Bryn Mawr’s Black history so that as many community members as possible could partake in the project. (We did not want anyone to graduate this year without *at least* having heard about the project, and believe me, we delivered on that point in full force.) By December 2014 we had mapped out a semester-long project with three key components: a blog, a walking tour, and a digital historical record.

[SLIDE 5: *Outcomes*] Our research blog accrued a readership of over 1,300 by mid-March, and between April 22 and May 6 Emma and I guided a series of walking tours for more than 150 students, staff, faculty, administrators, alumnae, and members of the local public. Even though the project had minimal infrastructural support and no funding, these obstacles eventually became the project’s strengths: its success was built entirely on grassroots support, and with an entire community to answer to instead of a single professor to impress, Emma and I were able to take creative approaches to reconstructing Bryn Mawr’s Black histories that did not rest on the assumption that putting ideas down on paper is the only, or even the best, way to think. [SLIDE 6: *Participant feedback*] The feedback we received from the walking tours was

overwhelmingly positive. While the blog created a permanent digital record of our research, readers engaged with the material through a computer screen from the privacy of their offices, dorm rooms, or homes. Beyond the frenetic ephemera of “liking” and “sharing” posts on social media, the blog did not provide a lasting or memorable communal experience. The walking tours allowed a kind of deep and serious engagement with our research that was not possible over the internet.

That being said, the digital tour is not meant to replace the walking tours, even though I did try to make it as comprehensive as possible in order to make it accessible to people who could not meet the walking tour’s physical demands. Instead, I think it functions as an intermediate space between the blog and the walking tour. It supplements the walking tour by enriching each site with archived photographs, audiovisual materials, and links to other digitally accessible resources, as well as by adding information about sites that were too distant to include on the walking tour. It also serves as a permanent record of our work for future students. I chose Google Open Tour Builder, a free digital mapping tool, for its simplicity and user friendliness. With a map layout and user features familiar to anyone who has used Google Maps, I figured the digital tour would be easy for viewers to navigate. Moreover, the tour is a shareable document, which will allow future scholars to modify, update, and add sites and information as the project evolves.

[SHIFT TO DIGITAL TOUR] The digital tour, like the walking tour, starts at the location we are all gathered in today: Thomas Great Hall. We chose Thomas Great Hall as our starting point because we felt it was a site so vexed with meaning that its power resonated in every other space along the tour. M. Carey Thomas, second president of the College from 1894

to 1922, designed Thomas Great Hall as her personal library. Her vision for this library was actually vehemently opposed by the College trustees, who argued that she had already spent an inordinate amount on building luxurious dormitories she hoped would attract women from America's wealthiest families to College. In the trustees' view, these palatial living spaces went against the spirit of the Quaker charter of the College and were too opulent for proper "Quaker ladies." Thomas was not a woman to take "no" for an answer, however, and she gave the trustees a figurative middle finger as she fervidly raised funds for the library that would become a lasting shrine to her power. When we talk about the library, along with the two dormitories she built (Radnor and Denbeigh -- Radnor, interestingly, was the site where the Confederate flag was hung, and Denbeigh was where the first Black student permitted to reside on campus lived), we point out that these buildings were designed to inculcate and preserve particularly classed and racialized values in Bryn Mawr's student body. They sent a clear message to prospective students: that only white women of extreme wealth and privilege need apply.

If you were to exit through the door at the back of this room and go downstairs, then turn right and walk through the orange door at the end of the hallway, you would find yourself in the servant corridors that wrap around the entire building. We usually ask students to walk quietly through them to respect them as a space of historical silencing. When Emma and I first considered how to take a place-based approach to Bryn Mawr's Black history, we realized that most of the sites that contained a wealth of that history were located at the peripheries of campus. The servant corridors underneath Thomas Great Hall, however, allowed us to give an example of the ways in which the College's architecture was designed to marginalized Black bodies even at the heart of campus. The corridors beneath this building were used for office and storage space

as early as 1907, but to this day corridors under other buildings, including Rockefeller Hall, are used regularly by Housekeeping and Facilities services (of whom many, if not most, are still Black.) At Bryn Mawr, servant corridors communicated clearly the expectation that Black men and women should do their work without being seen or heard, thereby bypassing any need to acknowledge or credit them for their labor.

We use Merion Hall in particular to talk about how Black workers were responsible for curating an aesthetically appropriate environment in which white women could study and socialize, even though they themselves lived in cramped conditions that one student in 1922 described as so “dingy and horrid” that she couldn’t see “why the maids stayed for a minute.” We also use the space to talk about how Bryn Mawr boasted a reputation for being a desirable place for Black women to work and advertised itself as a place where they could receive opportunities to study so that the College would be a stepping stone to other kinds of work, like nursing and stenography. Students ran a night school, Sunday school, and biweekly Maids’ Club where students and maids would gather to sew and discuss current events. Black women were excluded from regular academic classrooms, however, and to incorporate them into Bryn Mawr’s “life of the mind” was unthinkable for most of its white students, faculty, and staff. Thus the College cast itself as a benevolent purveyor of Black women’s education but was careful not to disrupt the racial status quo. It’s worth remembering, I always say, that it was the same students who taught these educational courses to Black women workers at the College that were furious when the first Black student to graduate from Bryn Mawr, Enid Cook, tried to meet with a friend in a dorm common room and said they would be hostile to the idea of another Black student attending college here. The College let the prejudices of these students dictate their admissions

policies for decades to come. And the reason for this, I argue, is that Bryn Mawr relied too heavily on cheap, exploitable Black labor to secure its high altitude in the American imagination to interrogate the systemic racism which made its rise to prominence possible in the first place.

Interestingly, as we stretched and pulled and interrogated the narrative that the College tells about its Black history -- which, in general, tends to be told as a narrative separate from the “official” history of the College, and when it is told as part of the College’s history, its origin points are affixed to the first Black students to study here -- we found that the College’s relationship to Black labor could be traced back to more than a century before its founding. When we started our research, we assumed that Bryn Mawr, unlike UNC with its “Silent Sam” Confederate soldier statue at the heart of campus, had no ties to American slavery. Bryn Mawr has few historical monuments, and its history does not announce itself in the form of a heavily memorialized or monumentalized landscape. The clue that led to a discovery that upended all our assumptions was a plot of unmarked graves at the local colonial cemetery located in the woods at the edge of campus -- ironically, if you will, a series of *anti*-monuments. In our search for answers about these unmarked graves, we learned that Richard Harrison, who built the cemetery in 1719, had owned the northernmost tobacco plantation in the thirteen colonies prior to American Independence. To cultivate these highly profitable crops for the Philadelphia market, Harrison used slave labor. While most of the unmarked graves that had initially sparked our curiosity did not belong to slaves, we learned that two unmarked graves were thought to belong to Harrison’s house slaves, and that there was a separate cemetery on Gulph Road where his field slaves were buried. We learned that the College stood on land that had once been the Harrison plantation, and moreover, the Vaux family, related matrilineally to the Harrisons and also buried

in the cemetery, had made generous donations to the College throughout its history, including bequeathing English House to the College and donating the mineral collection displayed in the science building. Therefore the College has benefitted directly and handsomely from wealth built on slave labor.

There's more to explore on the digital tour, of course, but I only have a few minutes left. I would like to use the time I have remaining to talk about the ways I intend to expand the project this summer with a grant I secured from the College. One of the main things I hope to do this summer is to take a critical look at the role that gender plays in these histories and to place these stories in a broader historical context. The history of the Harriton Family Cemetery, for example, obviously disrupts the national myth that only the American South is implicated in the legacy of slavery, but it also leads to some pretty complex questions about the role of white women in that legacy. I mentioned that the Vaux family, who donated the College's mineral collection as well as English House, were related matrilineally to the Harrisons. Even though women could not will property under colonial Pennsylvania law, when Richard Harrison died in 1747 his daughter Hannah took over the plantation, and Hannah joined deeds with her husband Charles Thomson in 1798 to convey the property to the descendants of Hannah's son-in-law Robert McClenachan. Under this arrangement, the plantation went to Robert McClenachan's granddaughter Naomi, who bequeathed the property to her eldest daughter Sarah, who married George Vaux. Thus we know that the descendants of Richard Harrison worked around the law for generations to pass the property down to the women of the family. What we don't know is whether or not this means that any of them owned Harrison's slaves, or if any of them had control over the wealth built on slave labor. If they did, what did they do with it? There are also questions that arise around the

linked histories of abolition and early feminism. M. Carey Thomas was unabashedly a White supremacist and a proponent of eugenic theory, and one of the key takeaways we try to instill in students who take the walking tours is that her racism was not just a quirk or idiosyncrasy of an otherwise pioneering woman; it was fundamental to her vision for the College. She saw Bryn Mawr not just as a place where women could receive an education that would prepare them for social, political, and cultural leadership, but as a place where white women could be groomed to inherit a role that had up to that point belonged exclusively to white men: dominating over men and women of color. M. Carey Thomas' views were extraordinarily racist, even for her time, but when we consider that white women suffragists as a rule threw Black women under the bus, even though their feminism grew out of abolition activism in the 1830s, because they knew that they would never get the vote if they maintained that alliance, we see Bryn Mawr not as a politically progressive space but as politically reactionary and indubitably racist one. This becomes even more troubling when we think about the gendered and racialized nature of the labor that Black women performed at the College for much of its history, especially in comparison to coed schools and schools for men. One of the students on the walking tours asked if Haverford College also had Black maids in the capacity that Bryn Mawr did. My initial reaction was to laugh because the idea of maids of any color being as deeply involved in the curation of aesthetically acceptable living spaces for white men as they were for white women seemed absurd. But then I took a step back and thought, "That's actually a *really* good question." It *does* seem absurd that Black women would have performed the same kinds of labor to the same extent at Haverford as they did at Bryn Mawr, and I am almost certain that they would not have lived in the same dormitories as students. (I would actually be horrified if they did.) Did Bryn Mawr have

a particularly gendered relationship to Black labor, then, that other schools did not? These are the kinds of questions I hope to address in the coming months, and I hope that as we move to discussion some of you might have helpful insights, too.