


ARTICLE

Black Studies and Public Humanities

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The Lemon Project: A Journey of Reconciliation, William & Mary, Williamsburg, VA, USA

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Abstract

This essay brings Black Studies, now commonly referred to as Africana Studies, further into the public humanities dialogue. Scholars in the public humanities field are urging a practice of humanities that is collaborative and committed to racial and social justice, especially in the context of community-based scholarship. The origin and current protocols of Black Studies are also community-centric and operate within a liberatory framework in that it is ultimately concerned with the vitality of Black people across the diaspora. The essay describes the correlation between Black Studies and public humanities and discusses the usefulness of both disciplines in reckoning with slavery and its legacies at higher education institutions. In addition to giving a short genealogy of public humanities and Black Studies, the essay uses William & Mary's Lemon Project: A Journey of Reconciliation and Chesapeake Heartland: An African American at African American Humanities Project at Washington College as examples on how to possibly navigate the challenges ahead as public humanists and Black Studies scholars critically engage with the public on memorialization, reconciliation, and redress.

Keywords: Black Studies; Slavery; Reconciliation; Public Humanities

The movement in higher education to reckon with slavery is growing amidst legislative backlash to teaching African American history at publicly funded schools in the United States.¹ The Universities Studying Slavery Consortium, an international collective focused on telling the truth about institutional slavery, is acquiring more members.² New alliances are emerging, such as Legacies of American Slavery, an initiative of the Council of Independent Colleges. As higher education institutions with ties to slavery and contemporary forms of racial discrimination atone through research, teaching, and collaborating with descendants of people who endured systemic race-based inequities, Black Studies, now often called Africana Studies, has emerged as a vital disciplinary lens for doing liberatory public humanities work.

I.

Although the public humanities and Black Studies disciplines are intertwined ideologically, they have different histories. The humanities as a practice of engaging diverse publics in the United States formally came about with the passing of the National

¹ Johnson 2023.

² University of Virginia 2013.

Foundation of the Arts and Humanities Act of 1965 during the civil rights movement, a socio-political turning point in the nation.³ Public engagement with fine arts, literature, history, and performance has an extensive history; however, a federally established humanities endowment shaped institutional conversations and protocols of public humanities ranging from community-based undertakings to academic programs. The federal act ushered in state humanities councils, which provided people in remote areas access to the humanities and merged scholars with social actors who organized various cultural enrichment activities. In an essay on the rise and evolution of the higher education public humanist, historian Robyn Schroeder writes that “our critical thinking, in the humanities, has always been made into relationships, skills, social action, and cultural change” – transformative possibilities related to the liberating aims of Black Studies.⁴

In a 1980 article in the *Journal of Negro Education*, the late James Turner, among the early advocates in the Black Studies Movement of the 1960s, showed that the “field of Black Studies is not new; however, its legacy extends to the beginnings of Black intellectual history, over two centuries ago.”⁵ The phase of Black Studies that emerged by protest at universities following the civil rights movement was linked to a Black cultural practice on the U.S. landscape of transferring knowledge about labor, spirituality, community histories through performance, oration, and writing and was informed by numerous Black intellectuals and educators. W. E. B. Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson are often situated as the architects of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century formation of Black Studies. Du Bois was a publicly engaged scholar, and his contributions still have utility across disciplines. At the Paris Exposition of 1900, he designed an exhibit featuring hundreds of photos, books, and maps depicting African Americans’ social, cultural, and economic experiences.⁶ Woodson’s establishment of Negro History Week, which later became Black History Month, was one of the most significant public humanities initiatives in the first quarter of the twentieth century and continues to thrive. Woodson ritualized the celebration of Black history and culture in churches, schools, and the public square. Pioneer Black educator Anna Julia Cooper holds a special place in the early twentieth-century phase of the Black intellectual tradition. In the early 1900s, Cooper co-founded the first Colored Settlement House, a philanthropic program aiding African American migrants from the rural South to Washington, DC. At the settlement house’s crux were the humanities practiced through folk dancing, storytelling, choral, and other forms of musical performance central to Black life that likely changed the sociocultural landscape of that region, infusing it with new creative expressions.⁷ Although Du Bois, Woodson, and Cooper were academicians, the public humanities were a feature of their careers and service as educators and historians. Public humanities have been at the core of Black Studies for over a century.

Black Studies is the foundation of all race equity-centered work on U.S. college campuses and grounds current scholarship reckoning with slavery and its afterlives at higher education institutions. Black scholars such as historian Craig Steven Wilder accelerated conversations on institutional slavery with his book *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of American Universities*, which reveals the historical oppression of African-descended people and the production of racist ideas at some of the nation’s oldest universities. In an essay

³ National Endowment for the Humanities 2024

⁴ Schroeder 2020, 26.

⁵ Tuner and McGann 1980, 52.

⁶ Bridgers 2014.

⁷ Howard University Digital Achieves 2017, 10.

following a roundtable on the universities studying slavery, Harvard University history professor Tiya Miles illuminated the labor of Black women scholars who have cultivated the growth and development of this reparative enterprise.⁸ Former Brown University president Dr. Ruth Simmons, important in the early formation of universities acknowledging how they monetarily benefited from unfree people's labor, commissioned an investigation leading to the 2006 *Report of the Brown University Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice*, resulting in the erection of the Slavery Memorial in 2014. Subsequent reckonings include the Lemon Project: A Journey of Reconciliation at William & Mary, Call My Name at Clemson University, and the Hallowed Grounds Project at the University of Alabama – each doing public humanities scholarship that crosses disciplinary boundaries and employs methods centered on “process rather than on a finished product” and inviting a range of partners in and beyond the academy.⁹

II.

We did not know we were about to experience a global pandemic and the second wave of the Black Lives Matter protests in response to the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020. I was the Assistant Director of the Starr Center at Washington College, a public humanities-based center with a mission to explore the American experience and use creative approaches to interpret the past. I became one of the co-leaders of *Chesapeake Heartland: An African American Humanities Project*, a Mellon Foundation-funded initiative to “preserve, digitize, interpret, and make accessible materials related to African American history and culture in Kent County, Maryland.”¹⁰ The project offers a public humanities model where Black communities are integral in developing an online archive that reflects the diversity of their experiences while undergraduate students become apprentices and learn to do document preservation and oral history.

We prioritized gaining broad participation, as there are distinct Black communities on Maryland's Eastern Shore, particularly Kent County, whose identities are tied to places where their families settled, in some cases centuries ago. I was chair of *Chesapeake Heartland's* communication committee: we designed and distributed an informational brochure at the county-wide Martin Luther King, Jr. annual breakfast, where the project was launched with partners, such as local African American churches and the Center for Digitization and Curation of African American at the National Museum of African American History and Culture. One-on-one conversations about the project's goals that we had that day resulted in support that would be paramount when later we had to navigate the significant challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Before the Washington College campus shut down due to pandemic protocols, *Chesapeake Heartland's* community historians created a phone bank and contacted local supporters who loaned materials like yearbooks, family history memorabilia, and other ephemera to be digitized. The team acquired enough materials to continue the project during the early phase of the pandemic, but we had to pivot to conducting remote oral history interviews. As we social-distanced, we designed a humanities truck that brought digitization services to the Eastern Shore cities (see [Figure 1](#)). The truck bears an image of the Sankofa bird, a mythical symbol of the Akan tribe in Ghana, Africa, representing that historical knowledge for present

⁸ Miles 2020, 11.

⁹ Moffat 2024, 31.

¹⁰ *Chesapeake Heartland* 2019.



Figure 1. Humanities truck. Image courtesy of Chesapeake Heartland: An African American Humanities Project, Starr Center for the Study of the American Experience, Washington College. Designed by Gordon Wallace.

and future generations.¹¹ Black Studies traditions were evident at every phase of the project, from raising awareness of the rich Black heritage in Kent County to building an online database of primary sources.

As summer heated up and civil tension arose, some leaders at higher education institutions, including those at Washington College, started examining how their colleges and universities historically disenfranchised African Americans. I joined the Washington College History Project (History Project) initiated by the college president. A cohort of faculty, staff, and off-campus community members started to examine the consequences of the college's historical ties to slavery and, equally importantly, to ask how to reckon with these troubled pasts amidst civil unrest? Three committees developed by our second meeting: the *Find* group researched the college's connection to slavery, the *Reconcile* group recommended plans to help start the healing process, and the *Acknowledgement* team communicated our findings.¹² I served with the reconciliation group, recognizing the practice as never-ending given the centuries-long, fraught relationship between the college and surrounding African American communities. We suggested that public humanities might be one avenue in the healing process. We also faced the reality that reconciliation can consist of people

¹¹ Liberty African Memorial 2024

¹² Washington College 2013

historically harmed choosing to disassociate with institutions that caused trauma – a realization informed by the Black Studies framework. In addition to *Chesapeake Heartland* programs, the History Project members proposed ideas for an asterisk initiative and to prominently feature the online exhibition *Slavery and Freedom at Washington College*.¹³ The History Project implemented these ideas, and the Starr Center’s presence has evolved profoundly with leadership that includes descendants of free and enslaved people in Kent County, Maryland.

Public lectures on the harms of systemic racism and a digital humanities project laying bare a college’s ties to slavery are the first step in correcting erroneous narratives and engaging the public in conversations that elevate awareness. The more courageous work is listening to communities who endured race-based inequities and changing policies, practices, and procedures that harm minoritized people with the realization that higher education institutions are a public trust. Consider public humanities expert Steven Lubar’s rules for public humanists. The first encourages us to “start by not looking at what you, your discipline or university needs and wants but by what individuals and communities outside the university need and want.”¹⁴ Lubar emphasizes *polyvocality*, *alliance-building*, and *accessibility*. His approaches align with the decolonizing framework of Black Studies, but I also want to suggest that public humanities work on slavery and its afterlives must include the reflective principle of Sankofa – remembering as a practice to move forward constructively.

III.

Fall 2020. The pandemic was at its peak. Death tolls were rising. I had just become an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow with the Lemon Project at William & Mary. The pandemic waylaid my arrival to Williamsburg, Virginia. How was I going to connect with on and off-campus communities? Staying in place as part of pandemic protocols actually provided space to study and reflect on the project’s history.

The Lemon Project was established in 2009 by a Board of Visitors Resolution wherein the university acknowledged that it “owned and exploited slavery labor from its founding to the Civil War.”¹⁵ The project’s purpose to research and attempt to rectify harms perpetuated by William & Mary against African Americans through action or inaction came about because students demanded to know more about the university’s ties to slavery, the Commonwealth of Virginia’s statement of regret for slavery in 2007, and Brown University’s inquisition about its connection to slavery. Over fifteen years, the Lemon Project has grown to be more than a research initiative; it is an international model for bringing the campus community, partners around the world, and, most importantly, descendants of enslaved and free people into the process of reckoning with institutional slavery and creating pathways for the often strenuous process of reconciliation.

My postdoctoral position was part of the Mellon Foundation-funded project *Sharing Authority to Remember and Reinterpret the Past*. A colleague and I described the initiative as “a multi-site collaboration that might offer a model for public history moving forward that emphasizes shared authority and resources, including community-engaged curriculum development, equity-driven research, and creation of digital archives.”¹⁶ As a researcher,

¹³ Washington College 2013

¹⁴ Lubar 2014.

¹⁵ William & Mary, Lemon Project 2024

¹⁶ DiBenigno and Johnson 2022.

I continued to use our hyperlocal method to research slavery and to find enslaved people's identities in the university, local, and regional archives. After years of requests from African Americans in the Williamsburg area about possible family ties to people enslaved by William & Mary, I started the Lemon Project Genealogy Research Initiative. Through workshops, research consultations, and community collaborations, we have galvanized hundreds of family historians across the United States with direct or indirect ties to the university. They are uniting to tell a fuller narrative of Black history in Williamsburg, James City County, York County, and beyond. Through the mentorship of paid student interns, we have unearthed more names and details about people enslaved by William & Mary, further contextualizing the newly erected memorial commemorating unfree people who built and maintained the university. In this endeavor, public humanities collaborations are an exchange of communities sharing resources – local knowledge and rare records transforming how we see the past and our relationship to various interpretations of history.

As described in the *Engaging Descendants Communities in the Interpretation of Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites* rubric, structural parity or co-sharing in governance and project design must be a central feature of these reparative programs.¹⁷ Lubar's principles of *polyvocality*, *alliance-building*, and *accessibility* are evident in the Lemon Project's values and are necessary for navigating challenges in university memory work on slavery. Connection with the Universities Studying Slavery Consortium and descendant-led groups such as the Descendants of Enslaved Communities at the University of Virginia, "serving as voices for descendants of enslaved and free black communities," strengthens the Lemon Project's team as we collaborate with independent descendant groups in Williamsburg who advise us on our practices.¹⁸

IV.

Through these experiences, and too many more to discuss in this piece, the Black Studies approach and tradition resonate in my practice of gaining "greater understandings" and performing "excavations of silences, gaps, and erasures of resistances" with fellow descendants of enslaved people.¹⁹ There is no definitive process in public humanities, but it warrants the liberatory lens of Black Studies that "transform the present to anticipate and bring about a better and freer future."²⁰ For the Lemon Project, "Reckoning with slavery, racial segregation, and the production of racist ideologies are not ceremonial but a continuum marked by consistent and intentional reparative measures."²¹ Black Studies and public humanities are mutually reinforcing methodologies.

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¹⁷ National Trust for Historic Preservation 2019.

¹⁸ Descendants of Enslaved Communities 2020

¹⁹ Hine 2014, 14.

²⁰ Hine 2014, 14.

²¹ Allen, Johnson, and Thomas 2024, 212.

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