

TRUTH

ASSOCIATION OF
BLACK WOMEN
HISTORIANS

SUMMER 2023



TENDING
THE
GROUND

THE CHALLENGES OF
RECKONING WITH OUR PASTS

DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

TENDING THE GROUND

THE CHALLENGES OF RECKONING WITH OUR PASTS

SHENNETTE GARRETT-SCOTT

'Tis the season, it seems, for the change up. For changing up what you were going to say. I was in the audience when Deborah Gray White changed up what the Berkshire Conference of Women Historians had asked her to say about women historians before the 1970s. And then I sat through what Lois Banner meant to say, which moved outgoing Berks Vice President Deirdre Cooper Owens to change up her talk to address Banner's comments. And now I'm changing up my original statement to the Association of Black Women Historians membership, in part to help add some context about *how* what happened happened.

The Berks is celebrating its fiftieth anniversary and assembled two panels of distinguished women historians to speak Friday night, June 30. The first panel, on which Deborah sat, was supposed to share reminiscences of the early Berks and its importance in changing the profession. The second set of panelists, which featured Deirdre, was supposed to talk about how the Berks changed the discipline.

The first panel featured foundational scholars who had been instrumental in organizing and institutionalizing the Berks in its early decades. Immediately, I raised an eyebrow. Deborah seemed to me a hasty footnote, a feeling confirmed as scholars like Mary Beth Norton, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, and Kathryn Kish Sklar shared memories of those earliest meetings through personal stories and pictures.

Black women simply weren't there.

Not at the beginning. Not at the 1930s retreats to Lakeville, Connecticut. Not at the Red Lion Inn in the 1960s enjoying beef tip and mashed potato dinners or walking New England nature trails searching for elusive trillium flowers. (Anyone who found a trillium won a free bourbon and bragging rights.) None of those first speakers remarked on how very white the Berks sisterhood was.

Deborah changed up her talk: She would not be speaking about white women historians. Instead, she used her six minutes to talk about why, before the

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GOOD NEWS

SPOTLIGHT ON MEMBERS

Dr. **Takeia Anthony** has been promoted to Interim Dean of the Whitney Young Honors College at Kentucky State University. She is currently a member of the 2023 Cohort of Bluegrass Tomorrow Academic Leadership Academy. She previously served as a member of the 2022 Cohort of the Council of Post-secondary Education's Academic Leadership Development Institute and was a Brown University 2022 inaugural Born Digital Publishing Summer Fellow; 2020-2022 Delta Research and Educational Foundation Vivian A. Ware Fellow; and member of the Howard University 2021-2022 Social Justice Consortium.

ABWH Publications Director Dr. **T. Dionne Bailey** guest edited with Garrett Felber a special issue of *Southern Cultures: The Abolitionist South* (Fall 2021). The issue focuses on a radical U.S. South that long envisioned a world without policing and other forms of punishment.

Texas A&M University PhD candidate **Makonen Campbell**'s paper has been accepted for the 2023 Urban History Association Conference.

Dr. **Karen Cook Bell**, ABWH Life Member, was promoted to Full Professor in the Department of History and Government at Bowie State University. The University System of Mary-

land selected her Elkins Endowed Professor in 2022-23. She won the 2022-23 NEH Dialogue on the Experience of War Grant, and she received Honorable Mention, ABWH Letitia Woods Brown Article Prize for "Fugitivity and Enslaved Women's Agency in the Age of Revolution" (*Journal of Women's History*, 2022).

Life Member Dr. **Deirdre Cooper Owens** will join the University of Connecticut as Associate Professor of History and Institute of Africana Studies this fall.

Dr. **Erika Denise Edwards** joined the Department of History at the University of Texas at El Paso as tenured Associate Professor of the Africana Diaspora. She published various articles, including the *Latin American Research Review* and the "1619 Project" Special Issue of the *American Historical Review*, and the op-ed "Why Doesn't Argentina Have More Black Players in the World Cup?" in the *Washington Post* (Dec. 8, 2022). Her op-ed was the most-read article in the *Made by History* section for 2022 with over 434,000 clicks. She conducted interviews with *Atlanta Black Star*, NPR's Futuromedia, and other media.

Dr. **K.T. Ewing** will join the Department of Gender and Race Studies at the University of Alabama in Fall 2023 as an Associate Professor of History.

National Director Dr. **Shennette Garrett-Scott** will join Tulane University this fall as the Associate Professor of History and Africana Studies and Paul and Debra Gibbons Professor in the Tulane School of Liberal Arts.

Life member Dr. **Everett Hardy** defended his dissertation "Making Black Power Pay: Black Banking in Philadelphia, 1900-1930" and was awarded his PhD in History at Lehigh University. His dissertation advisor is Dr. Natanya Duncan. He accepted a tenure-track position at Bates College.

Dr. **Ramona Houston** appeared on the podcast *The Empowerment Zone with Dr. Ramona Houston*, episode "Highlighting the Life and Legacy of Dr. Bertha Maxwell-Roddey."

Dr. **Stephanie Jones-Rogers** won the 2023 Dan David Prize, dubbed the "MacArthur-style 'genius grant' for history." The prize recognizes outstanding early and mid-career scholars in the historical disciplines.

Dr. **Jessica D. Klanderud** published her first book *Struggle for the Street: Social Networks and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Pittsburgh* (UNC Press, 2023).

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GOOD NEWS!

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ABWH Life Members Dr. **Talitha L. LeFlouria**, Dr. **Ashley D. Farmer**, and Dr. **Daina Ramey Berry** are senior editors of the new University of North Carolina Press series *Black Women's History Book Series*.

Dr. **Tondra L. Loder-Jackson** co-edited with Derrick P. Alridge and Jon N. Hale *Schooling the Movement: The Activism of Southern Black Educators from Reconstruction through the Civil Rights Era* (South Carolina UP, 2023).

Dr. **Channon Miller** will join Trinity College as an Assistant Professor of American Studies and History. She also won a Ford Foundation Postdoctoral Fellowship for the 2023-2024 academic year.

Dr. **Crystal Marie Moten** is the Inaugural Curator of Collections and Exhibitions at the Obama Presidential Center Museum in Chicago. She also has two new board appointments: Board of Directors, Labor and Working-Class History Association and Board of Editors, *American Historical Review*. She published her first book *Continually Working: Black Women, Community Intellectualism and Economic Justice in Postwar Milwaukee* (Vanderbilt UP, 2023).

Life Member Dr. **Amrita Chakrabarti Myers** published her second book *The Vice President's Black Wife: The Untold Life of Julia Chinn* (UNC Press, 2023). Her piece "The Erasure and Resurrection of Julia Chinn, U.S. Vice President Richard M. Johnson's Black Wife" on abwh.org was the most shared blog in 2019 with more than 6,000 shares.

Life Member Dr. **Donna J. Nicol** published "Racism and Conservative Philanthropy in the US," Unpack the Past Feature, *AlJazeera.com* (Feb. 17, 2022). She is also Co-Principal Investigator for the *State of Black Los Angeles County Report 2023*, which provides a historical and contemporary analysis of Black Angelenos in the areas of housing and homelessness, criminal justice, healthcare, education, and economic development.

Dr. **Tamika Y. Nunley**, 2021 ABWH Letitia Woods Brown Prize winner, published her second book *The Demands of Justice: Enslaved Women, Capital Crime, and Clemency in Early Virginia* (UNC Press, 2023).

Udodiri Okwandu, PhD Candidate in History of Science at Harvard University, won two fellowships: the American Association for University Women Dissertation Completion Fellowship and Institute for Citizens & Scholars WW Women's Studies Dissertation Fellowship.

Sierra Phillips, incoming third-year PhD student at Ohio State University, published a public-facing essay entitled "A Mother's Power: The Bravery of Mamie Till-Mobley" in *Picturing Black History* in April 2021, which is one of the most popular articles on picturingblackhistory.org. She was also interviewed on the podcast *Picturing Black History*. She also presented her paper "The War on Poverty in North Minneapolis: A Grassroots Perspective" at the 2023 SSRC-Mellon Graduate Conference in June. She earned her Master of Arts in History degree this summer.

Dr. **Ava Purkiss**, Life Member and Program Co-Director of Black Feminist Health Studies, Assistant Professor of Women's and Gender Studies and American Culture, and Clinical Assistant Professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology (by courtesy), published *Fit Citizens: A History of Black Women's Exercise from Post-Reconstruction to Postwar America* (UNC Press, 2023).

Dr. **Sonya Ramsey** has been promoted

to Full Professor of History and Women's and Gender Studies (WGS) at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, where she also serves as Director of the WGS Program. She also published *Bertha Maxwell-Roddey: A Modern-Day Race Woman and the Power of Black Leadership* (University Press of Florida, 2022).

Dr. **Briana Adline Royster** defended her dissertation, "Of Our Stock and Blood: Empire, Religion, and Afro-Diasporic Identity, 1838-1945," in May 2022 at New York University. She accepted a tenure-track position as Assistant Professor in the Department of Gender and Race Studies at the University of Alabama. She also won a 2023 AHA Beveridge Research Grant.

Dr. **Barbara Dianne Savage** gave the Wiles Lectures at Queens University Belfast in May on the topic "Uncharted Territory: The Future of African American History."

Dr. **Betsy Schlabach**, Associate Professor of History at Lawrence University, was awarded a travel grant from the Franklin Research Center to support research at Duke University's David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library. Her research project focuses on Black women's informal labor in southern cities during the Jim Crow Era.

Dr. **Michelle R. Scott** published her second book *T.O.B.A. Time: Black Vaudeville and the Theater Owners' Booking Association in Jazz-Age America* (Illinois UP, 2023).

Life Member Dr. **Brenda E. Stevenson**, Hillary Rodham Clinton Chair of Women's History at Oxford, published *What Sorrows Labour in My Parent's Breast? A History of the Enslaved Black Family* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2023).

Farwestern Regional Director Dr. **Crystal Webster** received the 2022 Biennial First Book Award from the Library Company of Philadelphia for *Beyond the Boundaries of Childhood: African American Children in the Antebellum North* (UNC Press, 2021).

Congratulations!

to our new ABWH officers!



Shennette Garrett-Scott
Director
Tulane University



Vanessa M. Holden
Vice Director
University of Kentucky



Amanda Joyce Hall
Treasurer
Northwestern University



Le'Trice Donaldson
Membership Director
Texas A&M University



Siobahn Carter-David
Parliamentarian
Southern Connecticut State U.



T. Dionne Bailey
Publications Director
Colgate University



Aleia Brown
Creative Productions Dir.
Public Historian and Curator



Adam X. McNeil
Social Media Director
Rutgers University



Keiara Price
Graduate Student Rep.
Rutgers University



Robyn Spencer-Antoine
Eastern Regional Director
Lehman College, CUNY



Sheena Harris
Southern Regional Director
Auburn University



LaKisha Simmons
Midwestern Regional Dir.
University of Michigan



Crystal Webster
Farwestern Regional Dir.
University of British Columbia

“BLACK WOMEN COULD NOT PENETRATE THE HOMOSOCIAL WORLD OF WHITE WOMEN HISTORIANS.”

DEBORAH GRAY WHITE

*"Black Women Historians," Big Berks' 50th Anniversary Celebration
Plenary "We Have Changed History: A Celebration"*

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1970s, few Black women were professional historians. Not because they didn't value history or stayed away because their attention was elsewhere but because their absence was no accident. She spoke about the "raw, unmitigated discrimination" that kept Black women on the economic margins, how Black women had been rendered not only without but also outside of history. She stressed the travails of "writing history without portfolio" and offered startling statistics. She closed with a simple but profound observation: "Black women could not penetrate the homosocial world of white women scholars." Black women hadn't been welcome in the Berks or profession.

Then Banner spoke. Audience members murmured their disapproval about problematic comments she made about lesbians and Muslims, but they made a full-throated protest against her comments about wishing to be darker skinned (Black) so that she'd have had an easier time making it in the profession. I'm not as interested in rehashing what she said as I am in what other Berks members said—and didn't say.

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Berks Co-President Barbara Molony took the podium to say that the comments did not reflect the spirit of the Berks and to ask people who had left the auditorium to please return. Not quite an apology. During the intermission between panels, I went backstage to see Deirdre. I heard multiple refrains from panelists and audience members of “I know her. This is not the woman I know.” “This is not like her.” “She is not like this.” No, this is her: your friend, your colleague, your co-founder. I will not speculate on the physiological reasons that may have led her to be so unguarded with her comments, but I feel confident that, surrounded by the sisterhood in which she had taken so much comfort over the years, she felt in a safe enough space to express her truest and deepest thoughts. Nor was Friday night the first time she had expressed those sentiments.

To the Berks’ credit, right before the second panel of speakers began, it offered an apology for Banner’s remarks. Vicki Ruiz changed up a moment from her talk about labor history to stress, “We are still unequal sisters.” Deirdre was supposed to discuss race and ethnicity in women’s history. Instead, she invoked Baby Suggs from Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*: “In this here place, we flesh. ...Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh.” She acknowledged both the self-hate in Banner’s remarks and the ways intersectional analyses that considered multiple facets of identity and experience had fundamentally transformed the profession.

The uncritically celebratory tone of the Berks history reflects the struggle to acknowledge fully the truths of history—especially our own. The recollections of most of those foundational women scholars failed utterly to reflect on their complicity in absenting women of color not only in the early years of the Berks but in much of their own historical work. The speakers were more forthcoming about their struggles around sexuality. They recalled Audre Lorde and her groundbreaking talk “Uses of The Erotic” delivered at the Fourth Berks in 1978. Lorde did double duty in these recollections, signaling an early moment of atonement around both race and sexuality.

It is a mistake to prop up Lorde as proof of enlightened feminist foremothers, to read her backward to burnish a long, self-proclaimed tradition of the Berks as a forward-thinking, progressive-minded, second-wave feminist organization. A more candid and reflective retelling should have noted that Lorde was an invited speaker; she wasn’t part of the Berks leadership. What became one of Lorde’s classic treatises was, for the Berks, fortuitous rather than prescient. At that meeting, the speaker recalled, Lorde also called on lesbians in the audience to identify themselves. The speaker, however, did not reflect on why that was one of first times the organization had made space for open acknowledgment of those who felt themselves and their histories excluded. It also needed to be said that even that crucial moment still left unacknowledged many other women who felt they and their histories had no voice in the early Berks.

The same aperture that failed to focus on the nuances of the Berks’ past misses a critical moment in the present. The chorus of “this is not the real Lois” mostly expresses the speakers’ dismay rather than acknowledge the truth of what many others already knew. Several conference participants

and others shared instances they personally and their colleagues experienced of Banner maligning faculty of color and marginalizing scholarship by and about non-white people in her classes and academic mentorship. She certainly isn’t the first or the only one. Posts that could read “#myberks” skirt a “#WhiteLivesMatter” sentiment in stressing an inclusive and welcoming Berks that frames Banner as a relic of a long-ago past. A bad apple. An anomaly. Let’s not forget the emails and conversations privately shared among Berks members and sympathetic others who feel Banner was treated unfairly, that *she* is the true victim in the events that unfolded Friday night. She is neither a victim nor a simple cipher. She is what the Berks has been and is now. She can be a bigot, homophobe, renowned scholar, and co-founder of an exceptional feminist organization. Like history, it’s messy.

To do Black women’s history—really good Black women’s history—you have to be comfortable with rolling in the both/and. Elsa Barkley Brown writes in her seminal essay “Womanist Consciousness” that doing Black women’s history requires operating within “a both/and worldview, a consciousness that allows for the resolution of seeming contradictions ‘not through an either/or negation but through the interaction’ and wholeness.” An essential part of Black women historians’ training is grappling with contradictions and silences. The Berks must embrace rather than edit its Lois-Bannered past, present, and future. One important acknowledgment of that complicated reality and a sign that it’s reckoning with its past would be to share the full video of the June 30 plenary celebration, with all of its glorious highs and that little bit of blood left at the bone.

The Berks serves as an affirmation rather than a reminder. Our mothers’ gardens are beautiful, but they have their brambles and thorns. Women’s organizations are spaces that promote freedoms and opportunities even as their traditions and values are rooted in pasts that systematically and willfully excluded, that did and continue to do violence. If we hope to continue to be, we cannot be content to celebrate the best of ourselves without interrogating the stories we tell about ourselves.

My original message planned to set forth my vision for the ABWH in the next year and a half, which included telling our own history in anticipation of our 45th Anniversary in 2024. National Vice Director Vanessa Holden’s planned comments spoke to, among other things, issues of inclusion and access within our organization. I have no illusions that ABWH’s history will be an easy or pretty one. I can only assure that it will express how far we have come but also how far we have to go.

On Friday night, I posted to Twitter the picture on the preceding page. It was not until much later that I really looked at the faces. I understand Banner’s deflated expression, but I don’t quite know how to read Deborah’s expression. I am sure it was probably one of a constellation of emotions and memories she experienced not just on that night but on so many others. I said in my post that she was “sitting in power.” She is. But the costs of that seat, of tending the ground of Black women’s history, are not lost on me. That responsibility, that burden, that joy rests on our shoulders. The very least we can do is be honest. And real.

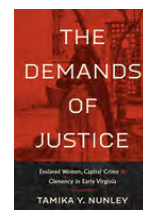
ANNOUNCEMENTS

The 41st Annual Gulf South History and Humanities Conference, hosted by Pensacola State College, welcomes proposals that address the culture and history of the Gulf South: the U.S. South and territories in Central America and the Caribbean. The conference will be held October 12-14 in Natchez, Mississippi. Submissions due July 31.

The Summersell Center for the Study of the South and the Charles G. Summersell Chair of Southern History at the University of Alabama are pleased to announce that nominations for the 2024 Summersell Prize for the best book on the history of the American South are open. The author of the prize-winning book will be awarded a cash prize and be invited to give an address and meet with faculty and students at the University of Alabama in Fall 2024. Nominations due October 1.

History of Education Quarterly seeks submissions for a forthcoming special issue on the 50th Anniversary of Congress's Education for All Handicapped Children Act, signed into law in 1975. Submissions due January 1, 2024.

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