History, Complicity, and Lamentation with Will Thomas

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SPEAKERS

Scott Gac, Will Thomas III, Nicole Ankrah, Voiceover Artist

Voiceover Artist 00:00
Music, welcome to the Primus project podcast. The mission of the Primus project is to explore the relationship between Trinity College, white supremacy and slavery. The purpose of this podcast is to empower the Trinity community to think through the college's challenging histories and begin efforts of repair the Primus project podcast is recorded in Trinity's raythe library studios in Hartford, Connecticut.

Scott Gac 00:43
I'm Scott Gac, a co host of this podcast series, co director of the Primus project and professor of history and American studies at Trinity College in fall. 2020 I helped co found the project with my faculty colleagues, divarian Baldwin, Cheryl Greenberg, Chris Hager and Alexander manovits. 2020 for those of you who can remember, that far back, was a moment of great upheaval in the United States, and in the wake of the killing of George Floyd, Trinity's Umoja coalition, an organization that brings together several black student groups, issued an important series of demands. The spirit of the Umoja Coalition, a spirit in which high quality scholarship can forge new understandings and change. Launched the Primus project. Today we start the Primus project podcast to highlight some of the research we have produced and to talk about why it is so vital to engage with the challenging histories around the founding of Trinity College. Next to me today is my co-host, Nicole Ankrah, Hi, Nicole,

Nicole Ankrah 01:42
Hi. Scott, feels a little bit awkward calling you by your first name. Think I'm just gonna stick to professor. Gac, okay,

Scott Gac 01:49
okay, why don't you tell everybody a little bit about yourself and your role in the promise project.

Nicole Ankrah 01:55

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I'm Nicole Ankrah, a sophomore at Trinity College right now. I'm thinking of majoring in Human Rights, American Studies, or International Studies, maybe even a double major, still figuring some things out, but hopefully I'll get that figured out by the end of the semester. To name a few of my on campus involvements, I'm on the advisory board for Trinity Center for Hartford Engagement and Research. I'm a Nest Fellow planning events for the Bantam Network for the student body, and I work at the Mather front desk. Ultimately, I'm interested in race justice and African American history, and that's what drew me to the Primus project. I'm a researcher for the Primus project, and being able to write new histories of the college, new histories from the perspectives of slavery and the slave economy, is something I've become passionate about. Can we tell everybody about the Primus project reports? I think we have to, all right, the promise project released a series of three reports called the founding of Trinity College in November 2023 these reports were released as part of the college's Bicentennial celebrations. The first episode focuses mainly on the first report. So why don't we talk a little bit about that first report? Gladly. All right. So the first report kind of follows the money that was used to paid for the buildings and grounds that became Washington College in 1823 until 1845 Trinity College was called Washington College, and many of its founders a set of important white men, and they were all white men, and all men were connected to what is called the slave economy in a number of ways.

Scott Gac 03:21
So let me interrupt for one second before you go on. The slave economy, or to be a little more specific, the Atlantic slave economy, refers to the flow of people and goods connected to human enslavement in all the lands touched by the Atlantic Ocean. This, of course, includes places like Africa and Europe, as well as North and South America. The time frame that we're talking about here for this economy is the 16th, 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. Many people learn of this through the so called triangle trade to describe the pathways of exchange in the Atlantic slave economy. The historian Barbara flow explains what moved in the Atlantic in these centuries was predominantly slaves, the output of slaves, the inputs to slave societies and the goods and services purchased with the earnings on slave products. Nicole, why don't you tell us a little bit about how the greater Washington College community fits into this system?

Nicole Ankrah 04:19
Yeah. So there are three ways the greater Trinity College community supported this system: enslaving a Black person; trading with enslavers in the American South or the West Indies; and bank rolling, insuring or otherwise supporting key institutions or efforts that helped keep slavery in place.

Scott Gac 04:33
When we're thinking about Trinity College/Washington College, we have in our history for enslavers, in particular, Samuel Seabury and Abraham Jarvis, Episcopal Bishops who own slaves in Connecticut. We also have the second and third presidents of Washington/Trinity College. That's Nathaniel, Sheldon Wheaton and Silas Totten, each of whom enslaved Black persons after leaving Hartford and the Washington College community and moved to the American South in the 1840s and 1850s. Then there are enslavers among Washington College alumni. One example in this last category is Paul Carrington Cameron, class of 1829, who would own several hundred Black people in North Carolina.

Nicole Ankrah 05:16

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I'd also like to highlight the next category, Hartford merchants who traded with the American South. They participated in the manufacture of cotton goods in New England, or participated in lucrative trade with enslavers in the West. Indies,

Scott Gac 05:30
And so when Trinity College has passed, we're thinking about merchants like Samuel Tudor, Charles Sigourney, William Imlay, David Watkinson, but also thinking about our founder, Bishop Thomas Church Brownell, who helped expand the Episcopal Church throughout the growing expanse of the enslaving South places like Louisiana, Alabama, and Mississippi.

Nicole Ankrah 05:56
Today, we're excited to welcome our first guest to the Primus project podcast. Will Thomas

Will Thomas III 06:02
I'm delighted to be here. I'm a proud graduate of Trinity College and a proud parent of a 2020, graduate, and I'm currently on the board of trustees. I'm a historian, historian in the American South, and I study and write about American legal and constitutional history, and I'm exceedingly excited to talk about all of the topics for our podcast.

Scott Gac 06:26
So Will, you've had a chance to look at some of the research that's recently been developed by the Primus project. And I want to start with kind of a more general question, and that is, you've introduced yourself as a scholar of the American South, and of course, of the the histories that abut that field, but you're also deeply involved in the Trinity College community and and I'm wondering, like, first, what your intellectual response is to this material, and then I'm going to follow up with kind of, what's your emotional response as somebody, as a member of the community? And how should we start to understand this Sure.

Will Thomas III 07:02
Well, my intellectual response as a scholar is to first applaud the research. There is an amazing amount of detailed research in these papers about early national Connecticut and early national United States society, about the Episcopal Church, early history of the Episcopal Church, and its relationship to Trinity College, and about the aftermath of the American Revolution and its relationship to Trinity College, and about the institution of slavery and its relationship Trinity College. And so I think the research behind these papers is exciting and points to the need to know more. I'd like to see more research in these subjects, and I have some thoughts about that to share with you. So my first response as a scholar is excitement and applause for what you're doing.

Scott Gac 07:59
Thank you. You almost stumped me. I have to say that as I have worked with students in both a classroom, right a seminar that has been dedicated to researching this early history of Washington and Trinity College, and then guiding students who have worked as researchers for the Primus project in the last few years, as we have been working so hard to assemble all this information, there is that kind of intellectual slash scholarly pride, but at the same time, I've had this emotional response that has

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been a lot more challenging. I sometimes don't even know where to push some of the emotions that have arisen, and I'm falling apart,

Will Thomas III 08:43
Yeah, well, if I might, yeah, please. I think it's natural to feel uncomfortable challenged by this history. These are difficult histories and difficult subjects in American history. And as you know, a scholar at Johns Hopkins University, Martha Jones, has created a hard histories project. This is hard history, and it's hard to take at times. There is a lot of pain in this history. So I think we feel many emotions when we're reading this kind of history and when we're researching this kind of history, I suspect for your students, that encountering the rawness of this enslavement in American society in documentary form is difficult. It hurts and it takes time to process it and share it with others. And I think one of the things that you're doing at Trinity is doing this in community. You've got a team that is working on this together, and so I would hope, and I expect, that your students are, you know, sharing. With each other, the difficult emotions that these documents raised and the stories that they contain present for us. So doing this in community is important, and sharing this history is important. I mean, I think you asked, What do I feel? What do you feel as a Trinity person say, you know, I think one of the things that I've thought a lot about is how we can lament the past, how we can go through a process of, it's a fancy word, but lamentation, right? I don't think we can, as a nation, as a society, as individuals, move toward reconciliation about our history without first experiencing lamentation, just sorrow or what one finds in the historical record. And that sorrow is a recognition that that it has meaning today, right? It's felt today by people, by descendants, by those who read this. And so we need to acknowledge that, and I think that's an important part of what your project is doing.

Scott Gac 11:11
Nicole, I know you actually had some questions around this very issue, but do you want to share a little bit about what it's been like to be a researcher on this?

Nicole Ankrah 11:20
Yeah, especially encountering this research from the perspective of a Black student, I think that researching it was both shocking it's disappointing when you hear like, the responses to the research and how I feel like for some people that have responded harshly, there's no grasp on why this research is being done, why it's important, how it affects students like me, and how it affects future generations as well, especially when thinking about how like this is going back to 1823, this is when the institution was founded, I guess, like in a time where things like this were normalized, where it was okay to own a slave, it was okay to profit off of slavery. It was okay to treat people as second class citizens, as subhuman, and growing up in a world that says that's okay, and hearing about how descendants of the people that we've researched, counter the research, or just don't want it to be displayed or edit it, and just to like, I don't know, I'm having a hard time, like, trying to explain what I'm saying, but it's just disappointing to like, learn that you know has to be like, you have to, like, hold people's hands to get them to understand why things like this are important and how it affects other people. And yeah, but I am really proud to be part of this research. I'm really proud to like, offer, like, my personal experiences. And yeah, I don't know if I explained that

Scott Gac 12:54

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That was excellent. Thank you. Sorry. No, no, no, no, these are not, as Will has said, like, these are not easy histories. They are, you know, by definition, challenging. And it's been wonderful to have you and many other students involved in this work and willing to do this work and undertake this challenge. Well, Nicole raises for me a somewhat different question, if we can take a little step away from all the emotional, all the emotion right now to one of the real difficulties of navigating this past, and that is, you know, we have, we're exploring, or we explored, right, this global system of oppression that involved many, many, many people, you know, literally millions of people in a variety of different ways. And if you look at our economic report in particular, it's kind of that report that follows the money, right? Where did the money come from to help establish Washington College in 1823, and one of the questions that you have to ask yourself when you're following the money is this question of complicity, right? And complicity, you know this idea that systems, you participate in a system through a wide number of entry points, and that, you know, pretty much anyone who kind of can participate in that system, thus becomes complicit, because the system can't function without, for example, in the Washington College context, right? The system can't function. The slave trade can't function the enslavement of people in the West. Indies in particular, can't function without a variety of agricultural goods from Connecticut. And it's the farmers in Connecticut and the merchants who bring the goods to the West Indies to sustain, in particular, sugar plantations in the West Indies, that that's a major way in which Connecticut wealth has helped sustain human enslavement right around the moment right of the founding of Trinity College, and many of the Trinity College founders, or Washington College founders, right, are involved as merchants in this West Indian trade, and the kind of struggle that one always has. To deal with in these scenarios is this question of complicity, right? At what point like, do you draw lines in this trail of complicity? Right? Is the person who helped to shoe horses for the farmer who plants onions? Right that then get sold to to the West Indies like, how do we understand this large concept of complicity is line drawing, maybe not even the right question.

Will Thomas III 15:25
Yeah. Well, one of the things that your paper made me think about is this very question about, where are those lines and how are they drawn? Because in 1823, certainly one of the lines that was drawn by founders of Washington College and other institutions in the early national period had to do with the slave trade, right? So the line that they drew, often, and it was self justifying, of course, was that the slave trade was evil and monstrous and barbaric, but slavery was something we just couldn't do anything about. It was inherited. It was God ordained. It was a necessary evil. All of those things come up in your research, and we might talk about a couple of examples in particular, but the slave trade as the line that was drawn at the time is something we might want to just pause over because essentially what many slaveholders and non slaveholding, let's say merchants did was Hillary characterize slave traders as the source of the evilness of slavery and enslavement. So that's the kind of line that's being drawn at that time. But of course, today, we take a different view that textile manufacturers profiting off of slave produced cotton is something we see and consider right as complicit in a way that contemporaries barely did. I mean, they started to I certainly abolitionists wanted to wear clothing that was not produced by enslaved labor. All of those kinds of boycotts and things that we think of as contemporary of 20th and 21st century actions are ones that appear in early national United States, and that's one of the most important things to get across right to our audience, is the opposition to slavery was there from day one of the United States people had moral arguments, legal arguments, religious arguments, against slavery. And of course, enslaved people and Black Americans raised

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significant arguments against slavery and the constitutionality of slavery, the legality of slavery, the morality of slavery. So that question, I think, in your work, really sunk in for me with William Imlay's iron production, because I wrote in the margins of your report, did William Imlay's firm literally forge the shackles, or did his firm produce pig iron, as it was called, that was transported to slave states, and then blacksmiths there, some of them perhaps enslaved, being forced to forge the shackles that would enslave people and hold them in bondage. What's the difference, right? And,

Scott Gac 18:34
and there's the line, right? I mean there, there becomes like, this moment of like, well, and we did. We face that, and we face that with Emily too, right? Because it's abolitionists who are saying, hey, iron is a bad thing, you know, broadly, right? Iron is a bad product because it is turned into shackles. But of course, their worlds were dependent on iron in a variety of ways. There isn't, to my knowledge, a widespread boycott of iron, the where there was of a boycott of sugar, right? Or the boycott of cotton cloth, those things were both also very difficult, and it signals a world that understands how important money was to to this whole system, right? That that if we can't convince you of the moral collapse that slavery represents, if we can undo the profits of the system, then the system will collapse, which also just didn't seem to pan out, right? That's, you know, unfortunate but true. Nicole, did you have a question?

Nicole Ankrah 19:29
I have a comment, actually, on what we've just been talking about. I was just thinking about families today that are still benefiting from their ancestors involvement in these systems, and thinking about complicity like, a question I've always had is like, okay, maybe some of these families when they don't necessarily know the extent to which their family was involved in these systems, and like, again, thinking about complicity, like, how do we approach things like that?

Scott Gac 19:58
Well, what if we shift that question? Just a tiny bit. And instead of families, we turn to Trinity College, you know, right, which, which? Still, there are ways in which monies right that were donated way back right in 1823 that formed the foundation for fellowships and endowed chairs to this day, one of the things Nicole and I felt we needed to discuss just a little bit more is this notion of complicity that we were talking about with will, because it's complex to bring out another "com" word. Complicity is a complex concept, and over time, as we've looked back on the 19th century, we've drawn the circle of complicity around human enslavement ever larger and right and ever more, ever broader strokes. But Nicole, you had a really interesting observation about complicity, about even when people see themselves or understand themselves as supporters of an unjust system, that that may not even be enough,

Nicole Ankrah 20:59
One of the things I often think about whenever I'm engaging in conversations about complicity is this question of, what do we do when we all agree? So we're agreeing that slavery is bad, slave trade is bad, but do we just stop at that? Like, where do we go from there? It's interesting to analyze.

Scott Gac 21:19

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So what changes would people bring to their own lives once they have the knowledge right, like once you if you would, once you see the moral light, what then do you do? And one of the things that I think you raised in a conversation we had once was like that, a lot of times people do nothing. ,

Nicole Ankrah 21:34
Yeah, they're so comfortable with their way of life. They're so comfortable with how it's benefited their livelihood that shaped their families, it shaped the families that came before them, and they can't even imagine a world where these systems that have funded and supported the way that they move about the world, they can't imagine what would happen if it were discarded.

Scott Gac 21:54
Yeah, and so this is another problem, if you would, of complicity. It's one thing for us as historians looking back at the past to draw lines, but it's another then, which this is the view that you're bringing to us to look at, well, how does this knowledge of complicity, or how might this knowledge of complicity, right, have changed people's minds? And what we were talking about with Will Thomas was like, how abolitionists, you know, how activists were, were drawing that line in ways that we would probably draw those lines today, but the rest of society, as you just pointed out, like, what happens when everybody agrees that something's bad but doesn't do anything about it, right? Because it'll affect their lives. It affects their economy. It affects, literally, how they move throughout the world. This is a conundrum, right of, of complicity. It's a conundrum of of these histories that we do but, but if we think back a little earlier to our conversation with Will and his notion of lamentation and sorrow, right of, what is the point of complicity in our talk about complicity in 2024 you know, what are we trying to bring about? We're trying to bring about, I think you can correct me, right? This sense of inner reflection, this sense of sorrow over the institutions and abuses in the past, and then eventually, hopefully, that lamentation leads to action to improve things, to improve things in the present, some of which will be directly connected to those older, the older manifestations, the money that was collected to create Washington College, and some of things that will be even different and changed.

Nicole Ankrah 23:38
I think lamentation really is truly beautiful because it's about bereavement. It's about sorrow. And I think often when people feel that emotion of lamentation or sorrow or bereavement, they internalize that guilt as kind of thinking out loud, you can either use the sorrow or bereavement or pain that you feel about a situation to well, you can convert it into action and into change, or you can use it just to feel bad about yourself and do nothing.

Scott Gac 24:12
That's what I'm trying that's exactly what I was trying to explain here. I mean, I think that's, you know, that's, that's the challenge. That's the challenge of the Primus project. That's a challenge that faces our community today. Why don't we get back to Will's interview? How do we move forward? Is a question that's still like, while we understand these histories, the moving forward part and the how do we as a community grapple with this?

Will Thomas III 24:38

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That's up in the air still. Yeah, that was one of the reactions I had to your research, and that is hope for the future. So because I think that as painful and as difficult as these histories are, we can move forward with a fuller understanding of the past. And so I think first of. All I feel like, both as a scholar and a human being, that we for our institutions, for ourselves, we're obligated to know this history in its fullest extent. So the first part of this is to do what you're doing, which is the research, to understand as fully as possible the extent of this history in our institutional life, or in the life of a family or in the life of an institution, right? And other institutions are doing this, of course, and that includes Scott, as you mentioned, gifts or endowments to particular fellowships or chairs. It's our obligation to know this history. And I think once we know the history, the next piece of this is not to mythologize the history, because Nicole, something you raised right at the beginning, I think is so important the normalization of certain stories, or the normalization of slavery, as you pointed out, is so disturbing because we normalize other things today. So it struck home for me with your description of Reverend Silas Totten and when he when he goes down to William and Mary to be, is it president of William and Mary? Right? He's headed down to William and Mary, and he's being interviewed for the job. He's going there to be a professor. He's going there to be a professor, right?

Scott Gac 26:32
So at this point in our interview, will Thomas is highlighting Silas Totten, who was a professor at Trinity College, Washington College in the earliest of years, Professor of Mathematics and natural philosophy, starting in 1833 at the college. In 1837 he was appointed as the third President of Washington College, after Thomas Church Brownell and Nathaniel Sheldon Wheaton. The third president of the college is Silas Taunton, and he stays in Hartford and at Washington College until 1848 which is actually by this time, the college had been renamed to Trinity College. And in 1849 Totten received an offer to teach at the College of William and Mary, where the Episcopal Bishop John Johns, who was an enslaver of six Black individuals, was was now president. And the offer to Totten came with a stipulation right? He had to submit himself to an interview with these southern leaders. He had to make them feel comfortable that he was not going to challenge the institution of slavery, that he could come and teach at the College of William and Mary and he was interviewed by the bishop John Johns and former US president, and also an enslaver, John Tyler, after Totten moved to Virginia, the 1850 US Census notes Totten as an enslaver of three black individuals, a 50 year old female, a 27 year old male and a 13 year old female. He had this interview in Philadelphia, and this is what will Thomas is referring to at this moment in the interview.

Will Thomas III 27:59
Andhe's basically presented with a litmus test on where he stands on slavery, and he immediately essentially says, Well, I did not approve of the introduction of slavery, okay, but he's unable to then condemn slavery. Really, it's a system. He says that we've inherited and it's a necessary evil. And so that's a part of the mythology of American history that we need to move beyond. And so we have an obligation to know the history, and we have an obligation to really demythologize much of the history that we find so comfortable, some people find comfort.

Scott Gac 28:41
And one of those comforts, and this is something we actually highlight in the final report, one of them, the mythological presences in the American past is, is this kind of monolithic North, right that's against

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slavery and this monolithic South that's for slavery? And the story of Washington and Trinity College really challenges us to see the history of the North before the Civil War as much more complicated and much more divisive, and to understand, as most of my students probably are tired of me saying, but to understand that anti slavery is not anti racism, right, that the North is full of positions that are of people who are against the institution of slavery but are also for positions of white supremacy. And that plays out in a variety of ways in the history of Washington College. One of the things that that I wanted to ask you about is you just talked about monies, and I know that a lot of those monies were associated with the real central focus of our second report, which is the Episcopal Church. That the Episcopal Church and Washington College are so intertwined in ways that are unrecognizable to us today, and kind of unearthing that history was really a surprise for me, just because I've worked in higher education. For 20 years. And I don't think I've ever, you know, come across right this, this situation where I also never explored it, but a college that in 2023 is not considered denominational in any way, shape or form. But you know, from 1823 to about 1870 or 1880 which is when it starts to drop off. Trinity College is almost this arm of the Episcopal Church, and that brings with it a whole other sorts of exclusionary practices and segregation that the Episcopal Church brings that then maps out onto the college. I was wondering if you had anything to add to that?

Will Thomas III 30:38
Well, sure, one of the things that I thought about as I read these reports and thought about Trinity College in 1823 so 200 years ago is what else was happening in 1823 and it just so happens that Francis Scott Key and others are founding a seminary in Virginia called Virginia Theological Seminary, and I happen to be on the Board of Trustees of that institution, and have been for a long time, and it's also in its 200th year, obviously. But what really struck me about Washington College, Trinity College and its early history, is how significant this sort of schism. The split in the Episcopal Church was between the high church, general Theological Seminary oriented, founding of Washington College, right and what its purpose was, and the founding of the Evangelical, lowercase, evangelical oriented, non formalist, you know, opposed to the high church, general theological training that Virginia represented. And both, of course, are complicit in the ways that we were just describing with slavery. Virginia more directly, because most of the founders were slave holders. But the trajectory of you know this evangelical Seminary in Virginia, founded by slaveholders who become colonizationists and then the high church general theological founders who turned to Washington College as a training ground for priests to go to ministers to go to general.

Scott Gac 32:26
I should add to people that Francis Scott Key that is mentioned is actually that Francis Scott Key right, that associated with the national anthem, Francis Scott Key is also plays a major role in the founding of the African Mission School at Washington College and in Hartford.

Nicole Ankrah 32:40
I feel like a common justification for everything that we've been discussing today is that this is just how society was. This is just the norm, like we were just talking about normalization. I remember once talking to someone and they said that, well, that was just the time. How do you respond to those justifications, and how can we shift that narrative from whitewashing and complicity to holding people accountable and prioritizing truths?

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Will Thomas III 33:08
That's a great question. Nicole, I think first we have to recognize, as we were talking about earlier, that 10s of 1000s of people were signing petitions to abolish slavery in Great Britain, and eventually, of course, those go to Parliament. They go to the US Congress, where they're tabled perpetually, essentially under the gag rule so called. But the point there is that, you know, it wasn't just the way it was. People were challenging slavery and it was not ordained, or it didn't go uncontested. And I want to speak about Black abolitionism and black action against slavery too. There were cases that came before British courts in the 17th century that essentially ruled slavery as odious and unnatural and a violation of natural law. And eventually, of course, there's a major case that comes before the king's bench in England in 1772 the Somerset case, that declared just that that slavery was a violation of natural law and natural rights, and odious to odious to be tolerated in England, so obviously, people understood that there was a real moral problem at the Heart of slavery in early modern society and in early national America. And I guess Nicole in direct answer to your question, when people who assume that it was just natural have not paused to ask, What did enslaved people think? Did they think it was natural? And the answer to that is obvious, they didn't. Not, and every slave narrative tells us so, culminating with David Walker's appeal that you all write about in one of your reports. So so it was opposed. It was opposed by 10s of 1000s of people, and opposed by those enslaved through running away, through slave revolts, through there's a long history of these revolts in American history, and so it just doesn't hold up to any kind of inquiry. Right?

Nicole Ankrah 35:26
That position I recently learned in one of my classes that a way that White Supremacists perpetuated the system and, like, kept it in place, was diagnosing slaves with this illness called Drapetomania, or something like that, and it just described, like, the act of wanting to be free, they considered it unnatural to want liberty, which is so insane to me, especially when talking about how, like slaves, were aware of the fact that this is not what their positionality in society should be, and that they're worthy of liberty. They are human, even though the narrative is that they aren't.

36:00

Scott Gac 36:01
One of the things, sorry to jump in on you, but hold that thought. I mean, one of the things that we try to do, particularly in the in the second and third reports, right, is to even though we're talking about the founders of Washington College and by default, right the and I don't see by default saying by default, is somewhat that normalization right there, but the founders of Washington College are white men, and we tried our best, right to infuse the reports with voices, particularly from Hartford's Black community, but definitely from Connecticut's Black community, someone like Amos Bemen, who's in Middletown, who's a staunch opponent of colonization in particular, but also is an advocate for Black education in in the state, to someone like much earlier, like Venture Smith, who opposed enslavement in a variety of ways, but not through the traditional means that most people think of through like he did not choose violent resistance or running away. He saved money and worked and purchased his own freedom, and then he purchased several enslaved people in the expectation that they would work for him and then,

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kind of pay right, pay him back for having purchased, you know, enslaved people, and try to undo the system, if you would, by playing by its so called, you know, monetary rules on enslavement. But you you had a question.

Nicole Ankrah 37:18
I was wondering, how this historical research into the college's ties to the Atlantic slave economy contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the institution's history and its implications for contemporary discussions on race and higher education?

Will Thomas III 37:33
Well, Scott, I'll go ahead and jump in here. I think the major contribution, and I'm sure it's still developing, right? The research that you're doing as a team, I think one of the major contributions is to broaden our understanding, our institutional memory, our understanding of what constitutes the community of Trinity College, Washington College, I mean the very title of your project, the Primus project. Who has contributed to the building up of this institution or to the life of this institution that we simply have not recognized, not acknowledged, not put in the story at all, not been part of our narrative, not been part of our institutional understanding and self awareness, and that is what I think these reports help us see, is there are individual people and families who are part of this story and Part of this institution. And we in pursuing this research, are going to broaden our understanding of the community that is Trinity, college historically, and that helps us. I think it helps us understand ourselves better and therefore in a more authentic and clear, self aware way as an institution move forward in the 21st century.

Scott Gac 39:05
I want to follow up with a more pointed question. Will, I have you here? You're a member of the Board of Trustees at Trinity College, and you engage in these histories, and you understand how once a community has grappled with kind of a new history and redefined itself, that these histories can lead to change. And one of the things that recently took place at the college last spring actually is a mechanism to possibly rename what we call commemoratives and buildings right spaces at Trinity College, and the colleges have been involved in that in that in a few different ways in the last several years, removing a Confederate carving in the chapel, renaming a residential hall that was named after Nathaniel Sheldon Wheaton, the second president of Trinity College, who was a slave owner and a colonizationist. And I'm often tossed right on I do agree that space. Is at Trinity, like spaces at many institutions, right, are predominantly named after white men, and that fact, in and of itself, should be problematic to all these institutions in 2023 but there's also a particular history here and and I'm wondering, and I don't ask you this to be like, Oh, particular we should do this. But what as a community, should we be discussing more broadly, perhaps even beyond renaming places like what are some of the things that might be on our plate as we look to set a more equal and accepting course forward for this institution?

Will Thomas III 40:36
Well, you know, you just referred to these new histories that redefine ourselves. And I happen to think we have a lot of work to do in that area. And I suppose I'm speaking we as in Trinity College, but also other institutions I'm involved with and American society, there are so many residual and also, I think, encrusted mythologies that we are contending with, naming buildings and really thoughtfully

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considering the what we honor in our spaces, I think is very important. It's an important conversation to have, and it's going to be ongoing. It's not like we and I'm speaking about all the institutions I'm involved with. It's not like we're going to rename everything and then we're good on that, like we can all move on. You know that renaming will somehow magically change the narratives or the mythologies that are still encrusted into our systems, into our personal relations, into our structures of governance. So we have a lot of work to do, and I think that naming is one part of this work of repairing our community, and that's what I mean, going back to broadening our Who are we? Who are we, who have we been, helps us understand who we are and who we might become, but it doesn't determine who we become. And so also, I think who we have been as an institution needs to be more broadly construed, right? And that's the research that you're doing the people who have been written out of the story of Washington College or Trinity College, and your work is bringing them back in. And we're going to need to take time as an institution, as a community, to fashion these stories into a new narrative of ourselves, of our community. And that doesn't happen overnight. So a part of it is naming. Part of it is the kind of work you're doing, this really original research, and then, yeah, living out that demythologizing of our history.

Scott Gac 42:54
So we're really grateful that we had will Thomas available for this podcast, and what we covered today, right is the importance of slavery to the founding of Washington College, both in terms of White supremacy and also the economic foundations of Washington College, we talked about the idea of lamentation and sorrowful histories and the importance of them. And we also talked about the idea of complicity. Nicole, I think you wanted to ask our listeners a question as we close out.

Nicole Ankrah 43:24
I think it's important for us to circle back to that important question of, what do we do? And we all agree, what will you do with your sadness over these histories? Will you engage with these histories as a grievance? Are they enough to spur change within your heart? Thank you for listening to this episode of the Primus project podcast, and we hope you'll stay tuned for our next episode.

Scott Gac 43:43
Research by the Primus project was made possible by the Office of the President at Trinity College, the Henry Luce Foundation, the Office of the Dean of Faculty and the public humanities collaborative.

Voiceover Artist 43:55
The research of the Primus project was made possible by the Henry Luce Foundation and at Trinity College, the Office of the President, the Office of the Dean of the Faculty and the public humanities collaborative, please search Primus project Trinity College in your browser to find more information about the project, including its research and contact details. Thank you for listening to the Primus project podcast. We look forward to connecting with you in our upcoming episodes. You.

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