

12-Tara Bynum-Final.mp3

Mary Mahoney [00:00:00] From Trinity College. This is Hidden Literacies.

Mary Mahoney [00:00:18] Hello and welcome to Hidden Literacies, the podcast. On this show, we'll hear from contributors to the Hidden Literacies Anthology on the sources they've selected, how they became hidden, the lessons we can learn from them, and what they reveal about the stakes of each contributor's scholarship.

Mary Mahoney [00:00:36] My name is Mary Mahoney and I'm the Digital Scholarship Coordinator at Trinity College. On this episode it's my privilege to bring you a conversation with contributor Tara Bynum. Professor Bynum contributed Cesar Lyndon's account book to Hidden Literacies. In it, Cesar Lyndon, an enslaved man in Newport, Rhode Island in the 1760s and 70s documents financial transactions with slave traders, merchants, and enslaved and free persons. As we'll hear, this text offers significance for its time and our own. To begin, I've asked Tara to introduce herself.

Tara Bynum [00:01:13] I'm an Assistant Professor of African-American Literature and Culture and I am a contributor whose essay is looking at a man named Cesar Lyndon, who is enslaved in Newport, Rhode Island, who has an account book. An account book is a book of financial transactions, and he keeps an account book from at least the part that is extant from 1761 to 1771.

Mary Mahoney [00:01:40] As Tara explains, her research focuses on 18th-century black people and the way they experience pleasure and joy. As she notes, she focuses on the 18th-century and just the 18th-century because of its lack of attention to black writing, a limited focus that may be due in part to questions of form.

Tara Bynum [00:01:59] My overarching project is to talk about the way that black people feel good in the 18th-century, and I'm very particular before 1799 and even more particular before December 31st, 1799. I do not deal in the 19th-century very much. I'm willing to go on record to say that. It is and I mean it in that way. I do. Don't talk to me about anything that happens after January 1st, 1800. And I mean I'm so intentional and so fundamentalist about it because I think that as someone who is in literary studies in particular, it's almost as if black writing, black thinking does not, is not known to exist other than Phillis Wheatley. Or maybe if you're lucky, you get a John Mayer. Maybe if you're really, really lucky, you get Venture Smith, who I mentioned since we're in Connecticut. Otherwise, it's almost as if black people weren't doing anything until, you know, the good fortune of the nineteenth century. So I'm so intentional because there is a lot that's happening in the 18th century then that that literary studies has not done a ton of real good deep dive into, and I think part of that has to do with something like form.

Mary Mahoney [00:03:19] Her own assumptions about form, bear this out.

Tara Bynum [00:03:22] So one of the things that I hadn't thought about and I guess, you know, to stick with our theme of hidden literacy is one of my limited literacies that became apparent to me was the fact that I had never thought of an account book as a literary document. I hadn't thought of an account book as a form that would even be accessible to black people. And I hadn't thought about my assumption that it would not be accessible. So upon seeing it, it was like, oh, you know, there's this way of of making meaning through numbers that I have never thought to pay attention to. And it yet again made me aware of my own position as reader, as thinker, as scholar. And it had me all the more curious

and certainly wondering what I could do with my assumption and how I could use this document to ask those questions that reflect the assumptions that I was inclined to make and find those answers that would help me dismantle my assumptions while also learning about this man and his community in seventeenth century Newport.

Mary Mahoney [00:04:36] Her curiosity about the question of what counts as a text allowed her to access Cesar Lyndon's experiences. First, it's important to situate him in time and place. Cesar lived in Newport, Rhode Island, a central point in the slave trade in the years prior to the Revolutionary War.

Tara Bynum [00:04:53] First and foremost, Newport, Rhode Island is presently a small town kind of or maybe a small city. I'd say a small city. But in the seventeenth century it's almost like a boomtown. It's cosmopolitan, it's port is a very serious Atlantic seaport, ships are in and out of it, and it is the center of American slave trading, so it has I believe this is right, the largest number of rum distilleries in New England and maybe in colonial America. I think they're about twenty-two -- twenty-two or twenty-four rum distilleries. So if you need rum in the 18th century and you are in Rhode Island, it's easily accessible and the rum is the the currency of the slave trade. So rum leaves Newport, heads east to West Africa. They then use the rum to buy men, women and children and bring those men, women and children from the West African coast to the Caribbean to South America, to ports along the Eastern Seaboard. And ultimately, the triangular trade begins and ends in Newport, Rhode Island. So Newport has an enslaved population, I believe, of about 25 percent. So one in four in Newport, Rhode Island, is enslaved. The thing that I always want to convey to people about Newport is that it's known it's cosmopolitan and it has this movement of different types of people in ways that we might not think about it present day. And because Rhode Island is this is also this hub of religious tolerance.

Mary Mahoney [00:06:49] Cesar Lyndon's life also serves as an important entry point for histories of enslaved people prior to and during the Revolutionary War.

Tara Bynum [00:06:56] It feels like an important opportunity to get to think about this enslavement experience of the build up to the what becomes the Revolutionary War and in real time.

Mary Mahoney [00:07:06] This speaks to a larger significance of Tara's work, which gets at the notion of hidden literacies that we can carry with us as we examine Cesar Lyndon's account, book and life.

Tara Bynum [00:07:16] I think too about this question of what is hidden, hidden and to whom it's hidden. What parts of our history are we not willing to engage with because they don't quite tell the right kind of story? And what then does that mean for how people understand who they are now?

Mary Mahoney [00:07:41] Cesar Lyndon's account book offers an example of the complexities of everyday life, a life not defined solely by trauma, but also by moments of celebration, joy and pleasure. In her commentary included in *Hidden Literacies*, Tara writes of the account book, quote, It's not a method of storytelling that a present day reader knows to expect from an enslaved man. It's not a prose story about freedom or escape like Douglass or Harriet Jacobs. It's both a literate and numerate text that does not aim to prove Lyndon's humanity or even admit to his education. Instead, Lyndon offers us his readers numbers and lists as a way to read his life in the lives of those with whom he transact business, end quote. We can see this in his accounting record of a pig roast.

Tara Bynum [00:08:31] So the pig roast receipt is my point of entry into the account book. Cesar Lyndon talks about taking a pleasant ride out of town, and then he lists the names of the friends that go on that pleasant ride with him. And then he lists all of the food that they are taking. There's a pig to roast. There's rum, sugar, limes for punch. Obviously, there's going to be a rum punch is what I'm trying to say. There's green corn, there's tea, there's coffee there. All sorts of imported goods that this enslaved man is bringing to this pig roast that they are about to have.

Mary Mahoney [00:09:18] The account book gives us an opportunity to appreciate complexity and an account of pleasure in an enslaved person's life that also demonstrates how he's implicated in the slave trade.

Tara Bynum [00:09:28] I think the importance for me is that it puts an enslaved man in Newport, Rhode Island. It puts him in a place and it also puts him in this slaving economy, not just as the commodity, but also as an active participant in it. So limes don't grow on Rhode Island. They grow elsewhere, have to get picked up by someone and shipped by another set of someones to Rhode Island. Sugar sugar doesn't grow in Rhode Island. Sugar grows and is I mean booming and various various Caribbean locations in the mid 70s and 60s when this pig roast happens. And it's absolutely true that the labor that is being used to pick that sugar is enslaved and it's being processed in New England. So Cesar Lyndon is very much an active participant in this slaving economy. And I don't know, you know, I don't know that we're always inclined to talk about the the black person in this case, the black man who who is who is not separate and divorced from that economy as an as an agent in that economy.

Mary Mahoney [00:10:51] Through an accounting, we see Cesar Lyndon's life rendered in numbers and occasionally text. This rich source of one man's experience allows Tara to create a more fully realized representation of his life. For example, some of the text appearing in the book documents his grief at a personal loss.

Tara Bynum [00:11:10] There's also another moment in the account book that I believe is featured in *Hidden Literacies*, and that's when his son dies. He's a baby boy named Pompey, who is twenty eight months old, I believe, and he dies of the bloody flux. And the funny thing is or not funny. Ha ha. But he makes note of it. And, you know, in the way of 18th century writing, there isn't necessarily language that that reflects his own grief. But what he does is put up a very thick black line underneath underneath the announcement of his son's death. And those thick black lines are known as mourning lines. And in other types of print material, you'll see very dark lines announcing either the death of someone or imminent death of someone. So the actual look of the page is what helps convey the grief. And I think it's another another sort of moment for Cesar Lyndon to come alive. So if the numbers don't move us as present day readers, there's there's this acknowledgment of date, the date and time of his son's death. And then you get this very simple quiet line just beneath it that I don't know, just helps remind me that Cesar Lyndon is a father, Cesar Lyndon is somebody's husband, Cesar Lyndon is someone who will will at some point enjoy this this pig roast and at another point be the secretary of his local free African Union society. And I think that that's what I'm always trying to figure out, is how do I how do I make the the folks that I hang out with? It almost feels like who who live in the 18th century, how do I make them become the real people that they were, especially for us, who I think we're in a moment where identity matters so much. Their political status then matters so much, so much so that I think we we do forget, you know, that Cesar Lyndon was a man who loses his son. How do we talk about that?

Mary Mahoney [00:13:27] With its numerical records and memorials to a lost son, Tara was able to mine the account book as an archive of a multifaceted black life. As she noted, the notation on the death of his son helped to bring Cesar to life off the page. This could offer a lesson on how we think of archives. While many are aware of the problems created by centering archival collections around great white men, meaning it tends to lead to histories of great white men, Tara argues, we need to focus on archives and special collections that have been designed to decenter white supremacy.

Tara Bynum [00:14:02] You know, I think that the archive, or maybe it's a library with special collections, I think is a space right now that is a hot topic. You know, everybody wants to talk about what's inside of an institution, special collections, what is there, who gets to be there, what are the terms of the archive and, you know, almost to who it belongs. Those questions are great ones to ask. I think that the conversation that has been had is one that does a very good job of censoring the fact that there are archival libraries that were founded oftentimes by white men collecting white men things that then puts us in the position to read white men's things. But I think that the focus on what has now become a critique of that centering of white men does obscure the fact that communities of color have worked hard and diligently to collect their own stuff. And I use that to mean whatever forms of material, culture, books, etc.. So, you know, as the question of the archive has come up, you know, I've wondered at what point are we going to remember that, let's say historically black colleges have their own special collections, libraries, and have had librarians and archivists in those special collections doing the work of collecting, remembering, cataloging, organizing. And there are so many examples of this. All historically black colleges have their own special collections. And if we think about the history of those special collections, it's those librarians and archivists have oftentimes been black women who have done the work of cataloging and remembering and recording and organizing those collections and that history. So how do we make sure that we're going to those special collections to look through what they have? And also remembering that work.

Mary Mahoney [00:16:16] A focus on texts and archives that privilege the black experience can help recover histories of pleasure and all the things that give life meaning. The need for this kind of analysis, one which would complicate histories mostly focused on representations of trauma, is evident in a story Tara shared about her own teaching experiences. After showing students the receipt of the pig roast, they presumed a very specific meaning or context for what they read.

Tara Bynum [00:16:45] In just a funny aside, I showed the pig roast receipt to my students and the first comment was, Oh my goodness, were they all about to go die? And I was like, no, actually. And I'm no, they're not. And, you know, I ask more questions like, why do you think they're going to die? And this student responded and said, well, this is an African-American literature class. I'm assuming that they're black. It's seventeen sixty six. They take a pleasant ride. They must be going to die or they must be about to get killed after whatever, whatever this activity is. And I hadn't told them anything about the pig roast. I just showed it to them and I asked them to tell me what they see, tell me what they want and tell me what they think. It was a see, think, wonder exercise. And that was the first comment. Are they about to go die?

Mary Mahoney [00:17:43] Tara notes this to emphasize the importance of this work for the field and for herself.

Tara Bynum [00:17:48] And this is why I do this work, you know, to to help people get to a place where they understand that that you yeah black living is not always burdensome and black living is not always a harbinger of of death. You know, I get it in some way that, you know, we're all making that march towards towards the end. But I think there's still a whole lot of living involved and my hope, in being a part of Hidden Literacies, my hope in writing my book, which is called Reading Pleasures, by the way, and is currently under contract with the University of Illinois Press's New Black Studies series. My hope in doing all of this is to yeah, have people accept and reflect the fact of black living. Like not only that it matters, but that black living is something that happens and has always happened, because if it hadn't happened, I wouldn't be sitting here, Mary, in this chair having this conversation with you because yeah, I wouldn't have ancestors.

Mary Mahoney [00:18:52] Listeners interested in hearing more about Professor Bynum's work can look forward to her forthcoming book, Reading Pleasures, which examines the ways in which 18th century enslaved and or free men and women feel good or experienced pleasure in spite of the privations of slavery, unfreedom or white supremacy.

Mary Mahoney [00:19:13] Hidden Literacies is a production of Trinity College, edited by Hilary Wyss and Christopher Hager with support from the English Department and Information Services with technical support by Mary Mahoney, Joelle Thomas and Cait Kennedy. This podcast was produced by me, Mary Mahoney, with the support and permission of the contributors to Hidden Literacies for more information on Hidden Literacies and to explore the text and commentaries described here, please visit www.HiddenLiteracies.org.

Tara Bynum [00:33:26] You know, I think that the archive or maybe it's a library with special collections, I think is is a space right now that is a hot topic. You know, everybody wants to talk about what's inside of an institution's special collections, what is there, who gets to be there, what are the terms of the archive and, you know, almost to who who it belongs. Those questions are great ones to ask. I think that the conversation that has been had is one that does do a very good job of centering the fact that there are archival libraries that were founded oftentimes by white men collecting men, things that then puts us in the position to to read white men's things. But I think that the focus on what has now become a critique of that centering of white men does obscure the fact that communities of color have worked hard and diligently to collect their own stuff. And I used up to to mean whatever forms of material, culture, books, et cetera. So, you know, as the question of the archive has come up, you know, I've wondered at what point are we going to remember that, let's say historically black colleges have their own special collections, libraries, and have had librarians and archivists in those special collections doing the work of collecting, remembering, cataloging, organizing. And there are so many examples of this. All historically black colleges have their own special collections. And and if we think about the history of those special collections, it's those librarians and archivists have oftentimes been black women who have done the work of cataloging and and remembering and recording and organizing those collections and that history. So how do we how do we make sure that we're going to those special collections to look through what they have and also remembering that work?

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pleasant ride. They must be going to die or they must be about to get killed after whatever whatever this activity is. And I hadn't told them anything about the pig roast. I just showed it to them. And I asked them to tell me what they see, tell me what they want and tell me what they think. It was a sea think wonder exercise. And that was the first first comment. Are they about to go die?

Tara Bynum [00:48:23] And this is why I do this work, you know, to to help people get to a place where they understand that that you have black living is not always burdensome and black living is not always a harbinger of of death. You know, I get it in some way that, you know, we are all making that march towards towards the end. But I think there's still a whole lot of living involved in my hope, in being a part of hidden literacies, my hope in writing my book, which is called Reading Pleasure, by the way, and is currently under contract with the University of Illinois, presses New Black Studies series. In my hope. And doing all of this is to yeah. Have people accept and reflect the fact of black living. Like not only that it matters, but that black living is something that happens and has always happened, because if it hadn't happened, I wouldn't be sitting here, Mary, in this chair having this conversation with you because. Yeah, I wouldn't have ancestors.