

A Mission Toward Restoration: The Practice of Biography in the History Classroom
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XAVIER UNIVERSITY
OFFICE OF INSTITUTIONAL
DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Dorothy Day
Center for
Faith & Justice



BLACK LIVES LOST MEMORIAL BENCH

The Black Lives Lost Memorial Bench honors Black lives tragically lost due to systemic racial violence, oppression and police brutality. The Memorial Bench provides a space for deep reflection on how we are called to stand in solidarity with the oppressed and advocate for racial justice.

The Memorial Bench was designed by local artist and Xavier alumna, Adoria Maxberry ('09). It consists of thematic imagery, words that capture the purpose of the memorial and the names of those whose lives were lost due to racial violence.

The Memorial Bench project began in spring 2021 under the direction of Pastor Justin West and the Fred Shuttlesworth Leadership Team in the Center for Faith & Justice. The project was supported by the Truth, Racial Healing, and Reconciliation Grant from Xavier's Office of Institutional Diversity & Inclusion as well as a grant from Interfaith America.



Adoria Maxberry ('09)

CURA PROPRIA: BUILDING A RADICAL CULTURE
OF BELONGING AND INCLUSIVE EXCELLENCE

INTRODUCTION

During the 2023 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Spirit Celebration the Xavier University campus community had the opportunity to witness the unveiling and blessing of the **Black Lives Lost Memorial Bench**. The Memorial Bench is a beautiful and powerful creative expression that acknowledges and honors numerous known and lesser-known members of the Black community whose lives were tragically lost due to systemic racial violence, oppression, and police brutality. The artist, Xavier alum Adoria Maxberry ('09), stated that “the Memorial Bench provides a space for deep reflection on how we are called to stand in solidarity with the oppressed and advocate for racial justice.”¹

Throughout the remainder of the Spring semester, I began to visit the Memorial Bench in the Center for Diversity and Inclusion. The colors, shapes, and images garnered my attention, but it was the intricate inscriptions of names on the Memorial Bench that continued to captivate me. At each visit, I would see a different name. *Who were these people named on this Memorial Bench? What can be learned from their lives? How can I honor their lives?*

As I continued to spend time with the Memorial Bench and reflect upon how I have been called to stand in solidarity with the oppressed and advocate for racial justice, I identified that my stance in solidarity with the oppressed and advocacy for racial justice is done in a mission towards restoration. Incorporating the practice of biography in my courses, allows both me and my students to speak to the fullness of Black life and return dignity to those who have been violated.

THE COURSES

200-level: Survey courses – These are 2-semester surveys of major areas (Africa, African American, Asia, Europe, Latin America, United States, World) intended to provide broad geographical and chronological coverage for History and Education/Social Studies majors and minors. In addition to challenging students to think about history on a large scale, the courses reinforce and develop skills introduced at the 100-level.

HIST 220: African American Experience to 1877 and HIST 221: African American Experience since 1877 are a two-part chronological and thematic survey overview of the history, life, and culture of African Americans in the United States.

Course Descriptions:

HIST 220 – African American Experience to 1877

This course examines the experiences of African Americans beginning in 15th century Africa and continuing through the Reconstruction Era in the United States. Using primary documents, historical texts, film, images, and historical theory we will explore the major social, cultural, economic, political, and regional trends, practices, institutions, and developments that shaped, and were shaped by, the everyday experiences and lives of African Americans. The course will cover such topics as West

African history and culture, slavery, resistance, freedom, liberty, institution building, organizational activism, work/labor, cultural expression, religion, family, racial identity, and sexuality. This course presents African American history, generally, as an integral part of United States history, and, specifically, as a unique subject of historical investigation.

HIST 221 – African American Experience since 1877

This course examines the experiences of African Americans from 1877 to the present in the United States. Using primary documents, historical texts, film, images, music, and historical theory we will explore the major social, cultural, economic, political, and regional trends, practices, institutions, and developments that shaped, and were shaped by, the everyday experiences and lives of African Americans. The course will cover such topics as resistance, freedom, citizenship, leadership, institution building, organizational activism, social movements, work/labor, cultural expression, religion, family, racial identity, and cultural expression. This course presents African American history, generally, as an integral part of United States history, and, specifically, as a unique subject of historical investigation.

Course Objectives and Student Learning Outcomes:

All History courses must address the four student learning objectives (PSLOs) identified by the History Department as central to our program:

- Identify sources
- Analyze sources
- Construct arguments about the past
- Explain change over time

PSLO 200-level benchmarks

PSLO: Identify sources

- Students are able to differentiate among types of secondary sources (textbooks, monographs, articles).

PSLO: Analyze sources

- Students are able to articulate the argument in a secondary source (not a textbook).
- Students are able to place a primary source within its historical context.

PSLO: Construct arguments about the past

- Students are able to discuss cogently questions and arguments about the past.
- Students are able to use appropriate evidence to build a logical argument.

PSLO: Explain change over time

- Students are able to explain how historians explain change over time.
- Students are able to identify different categories of change (social, political, economic, technological, etc.) and their complex intersection.

At the conclusion of this course, students should be able to:

1. Develop a capacity for sustained and independent inquiry into the body of knowledge that comprises African American experiences,

2. Describe appropriate critical and analytical approaches to the study of African Americans in the United States,
3. Describe key concepts, theories, and ideological debates in African American life and history,
4. Assess key concepts, theories, and ideological debates in African American life and history,
5. Demonstrate proficiency in clear writing and critical thinking about key concepts, theories, and ideological debates in African American life and history,
6. Utilize a variety of sources to interpret information about African American experiences, and
7. Utilize a variety of sources to communicate information about African American experiences.

THE ASSIGNMENT: Black Lives Lost Memorial Bench Biographies

Assignment Description:

Local artist and Xavier University alum Adoria Maxberry ('09) heeded a call from students seeking a space where they could silently reflect on the community's current standing and where they want to go from here." In response, Maxberry designed the "Black Lives Lost Memorial Bench." Under the direction of Pastor Justin West and the Fred Shuttlesworth Leadership Team in the [Center for Faith & Justice](#) and supported by the Truth, Racial Healing, and Reconciliation Grant from Xavier's [Office of Institutional Diversity & Inclusion](#) as well as a grant from Interfaith America, the Memorial Bench "honors lives tragically lost due to systemic racial violence, oppression and police brutality [and] provides a space for deep reflection on how we are called to stand in solidarity with the oppressed and advocate for racial justice." ²

In alignment with Universal Apostolic Preference #2 – "To walk with the poor, outcasts of the world, those whose dignity has been violated, in a mission of reconciliation and justice" and the course objectives, each student in this course will complete primary research and submit a 300-400 word brief biographical statement of the lived experiences of two people named on the Black Lives Lost Memorial Bench. The final biography will provide further testimony of each life inscribed on the Memorial Bench.

*While your biography will discuss how each person died, **your biography should focus as much as possible on the lived experiences of the person**—that is, who they were, where they lived, what family and friends said of them, activities/hobbies, etc. In addition to the biography, you should provide a list of sources that offer additional information on the person you selected. This may consist of relevant books, newspaper or magazine articles, videos, documentaries, songs, speeches, etc.

*After submitting your biography, each biography will be closely edited for historical accuracy and grammatical consistency. This biography will then appear on the Office of Institutional Diversity & Inclusion's webpage on the Xavier University website during

Fall 2024. **You may choose whether or not you would like your name published as an author.**

*Your paper must demonstrate your thoughtful and critical approach to the topic and your findings.

*You are encouraged to use specific examples and reference the primary sources and other texts; however, you may not have more than 2 block quotes that exceed 30 words.

*Capitalize the “B” in Black. (See Nancy Coleman, “Why We’re Capitalizing Black,” *The New York Times*, July 5, 2020 and Kwame Anthony Appiah, “The Case for Capitalizing the B in Black,” *The Atlantic*, June 18, 2020.)

WHY BIOGRAPHY

The practice of biography is an act towards restoration. Biography attests to and of the lived experiences of a person. In recounting, documenting, and preserving the lived experiences of individuals, biography enables the writer and the reader to not only share the joys and sorrows of known and lesser-known individuals, but it encourages us to revel in their lives. Biography also helps us to understand people and society. Through this craft, the writer and reader gain an intimate and insider look at the lives of people in relation to family, in relation to friends, and in relation to institutions. Most importantly, biography offers the writer and reader an insider look at community—how people interacted and engaged with the world around them during a particular moment in time and space. In so doing, biography provides a pathway to redeem moments in one’s life and reaffirm the innate human dignity that is within us all.

EXAMPLE BENCH BIOGRAPHY

Name: Ricky Byrdsong
 Born: June 24, 1956
 Died: July 3, 1999
 Location: Skokie, Illinois

Ricky Byrdsong, born June 24, 1956, spent summers as a boy at his family’s farm in Lithonia, Georgia.³ He grew up poor in southwest Atlanta with his sister Marcia under the guidance of his mother.⁴ Byrdsong attended Frederick Douglas High School, where his height gained the attention of the head basketball coach.⁵ After high school, Byrdsong’s strong work ethic and discipline earned him a scholarship to play basketball at Pratt Community College, later transferring to Iowa State. While attending college, Byrdsong became a devout Christian and social activist, developing a “passion for life and for giving”.⁶ In 1979, he married his long-time high school sweetheart Sherialyn, with whom he would have three children. Byrdsong’s nineteen-year coaching career began as a graduate assistant at his alma mater Iowa State. After brief stints as an assistant, he became the youngest Division I head coach accepting a position at Detroit

Mercy in 1988.⁷ In 1993, Byrdsong became the “first African American head basketball coach at Northwestern University”.⁸ In his first season as coach, the Wildcats experienced their “first winning season in eleven years”.⁹

On July 3, 1999, Byrdsong was gunned down by Benjamin Smith a “neo-Nazi on a hate-filled shooting spree” while jogging with his eight-year-old son and ten-year-old daughter.¹⁰ Smith was a member of The World Church of the Creator, a white supremacist and antisemitic religious movement. Smith’s racist rampage intended to ignite a racial holy war known as RAHOWA. His plan targeted Rogers Park, a city known to be one of the “most racially diverse neighborhoods in the country”.¹¹ His rampage targeted Orthodox Jews and minorities, leaving ten injured and two dead.¹² Smith killed himself before police could apprehend him.

Byrdsong’s death highlighted the racial violence and white supremacy then and still prevalent in America. His death sparked community, state, and national leaders to come together to address race relations along with gun violence.¹³ Byrdsong is remembered for his deep faith, love for his family, and actions on and off the court. He was an active member of the community and involved in youth basketball camps in Chicago’s inner city. In 2009, the University of Northwestern produced a documentary in his honor. His family holds an annual race in Evanston, Illinois in his honor titled *Ricky Byrdsong Race Against Hate*. The race brings together thousands of Chicagoans together to “run and walk in unity against racial hatred and violence”.¹⁴

Works Cited Page

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- “Ricky Byrdsong Becomes New Basketball Coach at Slumping Northwestern.” *Jet* 84, no. 1, May 31, 1993.
- “Ricky Byrdsong Memorial Race Against Hate.” *Eliminating Racism Empowering Women Young Women’s Christian Association Evanston/North Shore* (Evanston, IL), July 18, 2023. <https://www.ywca-ens.org/get-involved/events/rah/>.

Additional Resources

University of Northwestern documentary: “Fly Like a Byrd”
<https://nusports.com/news/2009/6/18/Fly-Like-the-Byrd-Documentary-Now-Available-Online>

The *Ricky Byrdsong Race Against Hate* website:
<https://www.ywca-ens.org/get-involved/events/rah/>

CONCLUSION

The Black Lives Lost Memorial Bench offers an entrance into the new and current directions of African American history by not only serving as a material archive of the African American experience but by incorporating the Bench Biographies, students in HIST 220 and HIST 221 have contributed to a dynamic Public History and Digital History project that will serve generations to come. Moving forward, with the assistance of the Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship, two students will assist me in fact-checking and editing the Bench Biographies for grammatical consistency and content. During Fall 2024, next to the Memorial Bench, now located on the 1st floor of the McDonald Library, there will be a QR code that will link onlookers to the Office of Institutional Diversity and Inclusion's webpage on the Xavier University website where they can access the Bench Biographies to learn more about the lives and legacies inscribed on the Memorial Bench.

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¹ "New Memorial Bench Honors Victims of Racial Violence," *Xavier News*, January 19, 2023. Available: <https://www.xavier.edu/now/2023/new-memorial-bench-honors-victims-of-racial-violence>; For more information about the artist Adoria Maxberry, see Erokwu, Chike, "The Art of Communication," *Xavier News*, February 27, 2023. Available: <https://www.xavier.edu/now/2023/the-art-of-communication>

² "New Memorial Bench," *Xavier News*, January 19, 2023.

³ Dave and Neta Jackson, *No Random Act: Behind the Murder of Ricky Byrdsong* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 2002), 22.

⁴ Gabriella Boston, "Praising Life of Ricky Byrdsong: Recalling ex-Atlantan's works and feeling 'no hate,' family buries victim of racist killer," *The Atlanta Journal Constitution* (Atlanta, GA), July 11, 1999.

⁵ Jackson, *No Random Act*, 22.

⁶ "Aon Mourns the Death of Ricky Byrdsong," *Business Wire* (Chicago, IL), July 3, 1999.

⁷ Jackson, *No Random Act*, 129.

⁸ "Ricky Byrdsong Becomes New Basketball Coach at Slumping Northwestern," *Jet*, May 31, 1993, 48.

⁹ William Rhoden, "Sports of the Times; Unfulfilled Dream of Ricky Byrdsong," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), July 11, 1999.

¹⁰ Bonnie Rubin, "Daughter Reflects on father's shooting; Ricky Byrdsong's death 15 years ago changed her life," *Chicago Tribune* (Chicago, IL), July 6, 2014.

¹¹ "Former Coach Shot to Death Near Chicago; Others Injured," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), July 4, 1999.

¹² "Former Coach Shot," *The New York Times*.

¹³ Rubin, "Daughter Reflects on father's shooting," *Chicago Tribune*.

¹⁴ "Ricky Byrdsong Memorial Race Against Hate," *YWCA Evanston/North Shore*, Young Women's Christian Association, December 3, 2023. Available: <https://www.ywca-ens.org/get-involved/events/rah/>.