

History in Focus
**S2 E9 Collaborative History +
Revisiting Marion Thompson Wright**

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Daniel Story

Welcome to History in Focus, a podcast by the American Historical Review. I'm Daniel Story, and in this episode (number 9 for season 2), we're talking collaborative history with Arlene Diaz and Kalani Craig. And, with Hettie Williams, we revisit the life and work of historian Marion Thompson Wright. A few years back, historian Arlene Diaz was deep into a new research project on the Spanish American War. Awash in source material, Arlene went a few office over and knocked on her Indiana University colleague Kalani Craig's door. Arlene hoped that Kalani, a medieval historian but also an expert in digital history methods, could help her puzzle through how to go about analyzing the mountain of evidence she'd compiled. Out of those early conversations, the two struck up a partnership of sorts that has yielded not only historical insights but also insights into the process of historical research. Their AHR piece deals with the Spanish American War as well as with digital history. But it is centrally about that partnership and, more fundamentally, the idea of collaborative history.

So, Arlene, I was hoping that you could maybe start us out with setting the historical context for this piece, as well as talking about some of the research questions that led you into this work.

Arlene Diaz

I started this project about 10 years ago, you know, little by little. Basically, I was never very convinced by the normative narratives of the War of 1898. It never made sense to me, as a historian. We usually hear about the Spanish-American War. In reality, this was the Spanish-Cuban-American war. And the reason for that is that Cubans have been fighting for their independence since 1868. That first war was from 1868 to 1878. Then was a little war between 1879 to 1880. And then the third war from 1895 to 1898. This article deals with that third war. In 1895, the major newspapers from New York sent war correspondents to Cuba to interview Cuban generals, in particular Máximo Gómez. Okay, and Máximo Gómez was an intriguing figure for Americans. Because he was a strategist, he loved to use what they call irregular warfare, use the machete, guerrilla type of tactics, but also Gómez loved to talk to journalists. He loved to see how he could entice the American public to support Cubans. So it is in this context that these three different journalists were sent to Cuba to actually interview

Máximo Gómez. We thought that this gave a very interesting context for us to use digital humanities to see how different were the ways or similar the ways that these war correspondents represented Máximo Gómez to an American audience. The other thing was that I started this project as a way to get at the Cuban and Puerto Rican exile communities in New York in the late 19th century. By doing work on that community, I found that there was a consulate of Spain who was producing correspondence. And that led me you know, you keep looking like a detective, and I found the archives, where all of the documentation was housed in Spain. And to my surprise, I found a whole deal of Pinkerton reports, you know, from those detectives from Chicago, and I started to digitize a lot of those things. I went to Cuba, I went to Washington DC, I went to New York, and I actually put together a mountain of evidence. I didn't know what to do, because it was huge. I was so lucky, that Kalani's office was very close to mine, and I knock on IDAH's door,

Daniel Story

IDAH being the Institute for Digital Arts and Humanities.

Arlene Diaz

Exactly. And I also knock on Kalani's door. And she, she started to tell me all the things I honestly could not understand. I then realized I had to record her. And I had to repeat those recordings. And I think that now I understand the, the the language. So with Kalani, we started to do some tests. And I started, you know, started to use topic modeling, and also AntConc. And when I started to see what these programs started to show me it opened new doors.

Kalani Craig

I'm going to go back to something Arlene said in her description, which is she started recording our conversations. So there's this moment where we had seminar conversations, sort of. A deep, long, wide-ranging tangential, talking about whatever we saw in the documents, having these great debates about what we were seeing me coming at it without any training at all as a late 19th-century Caribbean historian, but understanding what was happening with the output of the topic models, and seeing these really cool patterns, articulating them to Arlene as a novice to the the historical context, but as an expert reader, and then Arlene coming back as a novice to the method but an expert in the content and it was just fascinating. The amalgamation of all those conversations over time really did become something I was invested in and as we thought about how we wanted to acknowledge that one of the things that we realized is that all of those conversations were in fact co-writing events, where we had sat down, quite literally and co-wrote any number of times, but without acknowledging that that's what it was. So I started looking at collaborative digital history tool development processes.

I've been doing those with educational researchers, and they have all of this rich literature on how to collaborate methodologically like they've got systems for when you do get involved with someone else's analysis, and when you don't. How do you take boatloads of different analytical processes where you're asking the same questions of very different documents because you have so much data and they have to bring it back together and make sure that everybody on the team was doing their analysis the same way. So from the systematic integration of quantitative and qualitative data to two different readers analyzing different transcripts, and then looking at how they analyzed and marked up those transcripts and agreeing to come to a norm when they diverged. There's rich literature. And I was pulling on that, to think about how we could make that collaborative process visual for historians. And out of it came some of the adaptations of quantitative and qualitative integrations, from social sciences, there are a bunch of differences for historians that we felt were important to mark. And that's where we started really thinking about, what have we been doing, in all of these conversations. What does it mean that we recorded them? What does it mean that we come back to them? How is that a system? Does that fit in a system that historians can adapt and use? It's the learning that we do when, as historians, we bring our different expertise to the table and debate to a consensus. It's historiography. But instead of written historiography, in an article that can be cited, it's the tracking of the historiographic development of the project team itself, so that that's all transparent. And that solves the second problem, which is, how do you explain nerdy DH stuff to people who don't want to do it but need to read and engage with the argumentation that comes out of those articles? So this was a really easy way for us both to think about the systematic collaboration processes that we needed as a team and also to present those processes to the world of historical argumentation as replicable process.

Daniel Story

Yes. And so you came up, adapted, you formulated this, this approach, which I was pronouncing to myself as match.

Kalani Craig

I say it match too, Arlene can say a m-match. I don't care.

Daniel Story

Right. Okay. Yeah. So what is MMATCH?

Kalani Craig

Mixed methods approaches to collaborative history. And the idea is that there are sort of definable cycles in a historical project, where you're identifying research questions, you're

figuring out what your primary source collection looks like. But then in a digital humanities project that's collaborative, you diverge a little bit from the standard, single-author process. And it's in that divergence, and the feedback loop between two authors or three authors, however many people are on the project. It's in that feedback loops that we developed for MMATCH allowed us to use all those old recordings to come back to them to look at our notes to refine our research questions to help us identify when the research question required a parallel development that was separate so that we could come to our own conclusions, and then negotiate them, or a research process that allowed us to work together to debate the way that we would in a seminar.

Daniel Story

And so what are those five steps, I guess that you outline for this MMATCH process?

Kalani Craig

Right? The first one is gonna sound really familiar to most historians, and it's really about sourcing and periodization. Right? This is where we formulate our research questions. Think about the time period in which the documents we're collecting, are best suited to answer those research questions. And then, for the digital humanists, among us, sourcing and periodization is also intimately implicated in Corpus building. So what sets of text are we applying our topic modeling and our corpus linguistics to because the way that you take a whole corpus and segmented into sub corpora also matters a lot. And so we had to figure out what the the sourcing of periodization divisions were, based on our research questions, and apply that to the methods that we took on the digital humanities side. Step two, we took from the idea of social science researchers analyzing their work separately, so that they could come back together and talk about it with some independent conclusions. So it's not quite a null hypothesis approach, right, but it does allow us to think differently about what we're doing. And in this version, and the practical outcome of it was that Arlene was close reading a lot of the interviews with the generals, and I was doing the topic modeling and the corpus linguistics initial piece. But then step three is where we come back together. It's dialogue-based triangulation. The other word we're using for it that makes more sense to historians is informal historiography, right? Essentially, we're tracking the debate that we had about our different analytical outcomes to try and understand why. And to try and get at where in the sources our different analysis was coming from so that we could figure out what the sources were trying to tell us. So step three, in some ways is very much the history seminar, but formalized. Step four is revising the boundaries of our sources. So this is where we're acknowledging that in a history oriented research project, you aren't bound to the original dataset. So that's the other place where this diverges from sciences and social sciences is that collecting new data for historians, when you

have a question that you can't fully answer, is part of the standard process. And what that allowed us to think about was whether or not we need to go all the way back to sourcing and periodization. Whether we wanted to do some parallel separate analysis, or whether we wanted to push the new sources straight to step three and do that negotiation piece, right? So there's some flexibility to it. Step five is the writing, we wanted to make sure that the results in the writing were embedded together, because that too, is part of the historian's process we write to figure out what we're answering sometimes. And it's been really uncomfortable, for me anyway, I don't know about Arlene to sit in some of the super social science, heavy digital humanities style conference papers and in some of those articles and say, I totally get this, I'm really like this in this context, but I don't understand how to adapt this as a historian. And that that step five piece that seems really easy, and it's just results in our subtitle really is about the integration of writing, argumentation, analysis, and refinement of source reading, that is part of a historian's last pass.

Daniel Story

What was the process like for you, Arlene, in what kind of formalizing this process?

Arlene Diaz

It was a learning process, but in a wonderful way in which I would say, intellectually, it was constantly opening new doors for me with my conversations with Kalani, because she would tell me I'm seeing this, and that I'm like, how is she seeing that? And how would this fit with what I know? What would I, what other sources would I need to look into to really test what Kalani is saying that I am not seeing yet. To give you an example, on step four, when we were revising, you know, the parallel or joint interpretation. In one of our seminars, I told Kalani, I think that maybe would be a good idea to also check Máximo Gómez 'diary and his chief of staff's diary, which were written in Spanish, to test if what we're saying now is true or not. And actually, that opened another set of cycles in all of this, which added another complication will quote unquote, to the method now we're working with sources in Spanish. So what I would say is that I am constantly learning with Kalani. And what I love about the process is that it keeps you transparent and truthful to the evidence that you have.

Kalani Craig

I'll hop in and say that I think Arlene's transparent and truthful is really key. Because there were a number of moments where, and this is one of the things that I really like about this for people who are skeptical of Digital Humanities approaches, there were a number of moments where I saw something in the sources and Arlene could explain it as trivial. Pulling on some of the work that Michelle Moravec has done, one of the things that we chose to do was leave in

pronouns, in a lot of Corpus Linguistics and topic modeling approaches, those little words, "a" "and" "the" "uh" "she" "her" "him" those those sorts of small words get pulled out. Michelle's research has suggested that those really matter for historians in ways that they are less valuable for like lit review scholars. And so I was sort of primed to look for that because of some of the work that she's done. And especially in Spanish, where I'm not as fluent as Arlene. When we were looking at some of the ways that the pronouns worked. There were a few things that I saw that did end up following the close reading trajectory that Arlene was seeing. There were also a few moments where Arlene was like, "Okay, I see why you're seeing that. This is why it's happening. It doesn't matter for this argumentation." So it was really nice to have that set of expertise together to give us a sense of how to handle the moments when there was a disagreement between our analytical approaches.

Daniel Story

Could one or both of you talk a little bit about this idea of, and I'll quote you here, "digital output as an analyzable primary-ish source"?

Kalani Craig

Yeah, absolutely. The first thing to address is the way that digital tools output results. So in topic modeling, you were asking the computer to say how often do these words co-occur together? And how significant is that in each of the documents that is in this corpus? When we look at the output of it, it comes in topics that are numbered, top to bottom, the topic with the most words that are the most frequent is at the top. And it just lists the words. There's a huge literature on topic modeling and whether you can should interpret those topics, give them names, even that encapsulate how the research team sees the topics functioning in the documents, whether that's appropriate to do in the first place, whether topic modeling is even useful. And so one of the things we realized, as we were looking at the primary sources, when we decided that we wanted to do something formal and collaborative, as opposed to some of the informal conversations we had had, as Arlene was developing the book project, it became really apparent that we were treating the output of the topic modeling the output of the corpus linguistics as a sort of middleware layer to use a computer term, right? It's this interpretation of sources that we then have to interpret, it is itself a primary source-ish. It's not all the way the original words of the authors that were reading. But it isn't a secondary source output. It's not another historian making interpretation. So we felt like both to be honest to how we were using those outputs as a basis for debate. And the way that the outputs have been treated in other lit reviews, where they are fungible, they're not hard-coded into the, the DNA of those texts, right? If you run a topic model several times with a different random seed, you get different results. We wanted to acknowledge that middleware layer status and use it to our

advantage, as opposed to treating it as a weakness. So instead of well, this doesn't have the results, we wanted the statistical value of this topic model and its divisions, the topics aren't distinct enough, they don't communicate enough to us as researchers, what we decided to do instead, which I think is one of the things that a lot of digital historians do anyway, was to treat it as an interpretable object that we could work with to help us test and push back against our own preconceived assumptions about what those sources said.

Kalani Craig

Yeah and if I may add that one of the interesting things for me was to try to explain and understand why topic modeling was putting those words together. And when there was a model that actually had a lot of female pronouns, it had machetes in it. Kalani told me, this is really interesting. So then we use AntConc to actually see how those words were used in context. And so we started to look at that. And I started to put that in the context of the primary source itself. So that other layer of conversation was happening between the primary source and the output of the detail analysis. So here, we're seeing different layers and degrees of analysis. And it was actually in those conversations that we found something really, really interesting that I doubt that I could have done it by myself. And that is the beauty I would say, of this process with MMATCH and with Kalani is that the results were much richer, much more profound, than I would have ever thought I would have been able to do it by myself.

Daniel Story

Taking a step back, what do you hope readers will take from this piece? And in what other contexts? Could you see these kinds of things being applied?

Arlene Diaz

Well, I would say that digital humanities gives us something that we need to use as human beings to understand the semantics that, that sometimes those programs can show us, you know, this is interesting, but that they cannot explain. And that in order to explain this collaboration is key, because it allows us to see more. And the more we see, the more profound we can get at the meanings of and the repercussions of what we're seeing. So I think that this is a way in which we can stress the importance of Humanities and this and the importance of human conversations.

Kalani Craig

The emphasis on the human, on the idea that ChatGPT can tell us something, but not help us understand what it means.

Arlene Diaz

Exactly

Kalani Craig

That is really a valuable takeaway. So as a as a digital historian, that's great. Like, it's, it's absolutely fantastic, too, and Arlene is a digital historian too, even if she tells me she's not. I think that that's a really easy way in for folks who are skeptical or who are still learning or who want to engage with digital humanities and digital history scholarship, even if they're not going to produce it. This makes that more approachable because you can see the people involved in the process. And I think there's an assumption that in digital history of Digital Humanities if you're not actively producing it, and part of the lit review and part of the conversation around how to do digital humanities, honestly and transparently. The assumption is the computer does all the work and we're just prepping sources. That's absolutely not true. On the other hand, I think as a, as a person, as a human being, I would, I would pull back even more, and say that the real value of this is a model for historians to be kind to each other to give each other grace in ways that the structures of the disciplinary rewards don't allow us to do. There's a lot of limit in what one person can do in a book. And I'm thinking about all of the, like, 1950s, my wife typed this, how many of those wives were there, the editors of those books, and that credit is missing, we don't have a really good infrastructure for saying this is how collaborative work functions in history. And part of what has built up that infrastructure for other disciplines are these methods that explicitly specify how people can work together, the methodology in the middle doesn't have to be topic modeling. It doesn't even need to be digital humanities, it could be anything. And I think the goal here is that transparency piece, but transparency, not just in the what did a computer contribute, and what did a human contribute to the project, but transparency in how different people bring different expertise to a project, and make it more than the sum of its parts, that we really need something that's specific to historians specific to our practice. And we're very much hoping that this helps fill one of those gaps and give other people a model to develop and iterate and build on and publish a new version of what it looks like to collaborate as a historian with another historian. It's not the end, if you look at social sciences and sciences, they have all these different methodologies for for collaboration that have developed over the years. And I'd like to see us as a discipline begin to do some of that so that we have really good concrete ways of talking to each other, and then to our public audiences.

Daniel Story

That's terrific. Well, Arlene, Kalani, thank you very much for spending time talking about this terrific article.

Arlene Diaz

Thank you for the opportunity, yes.

Daniel Story

That was Arlene Diaz and Kalani Craig discussing their joint work on the Spanish Cuban American War and their reflections on the idea of collaborative history. Their piece, “The Coded Language of Empire: Digital History, Archival Deep Dives, and the Imperial United States in Cuba’s Third War of Independence,” appears in the June 2024 issue of the AHR. Up next, my conversation with Hettie Williams on the work and life of historian Marion Thompson Wright.

Over the last few years, the AHA and the AHR have been actively wrestling with and seeking to address their own racist past and complicity in racist structures within the discipline of history. For the AHR, that means looking back through its own pages, not just at what’s there but also what’s not there, in particular the absence of reviews of many important works by scholars of color. In an effort to address those omissions, the journal has begun commissioning retrospective reviews, and in the March 2024 issue we have another important entry—this time a look at Marion Thompson Wright’s 1941 book *The Education of Negroes in New Jersey* reviewed by historian Hettie Williams.

Yeah, so a good place to start perhaps would be just to hear you talk a little bit about Marion Thompson Wright herself, her background maybe, and the path that led her to the point of publishing *The Education of Negroes in New Jersey*.

Hettie Williams

Dr. Marion Thompson Wright was born in New Jersey in 1902 in Northern New Jersey in Newark and she essentially grew up in a poor working-class home. Her parents were direct descendants of enslaved persons, and she proved to be a very bright student while she was at then Barringer High School and excelled in her studies, though her parents split up as she was growing up. She took that very hard as a child and even through her adult years, but had a very strong relationship with her mother who really realized how bright she was as a child and encourage her to complete her education. But during her high school years, she began a relationship and eventually became pregnant at a young age at about age 16. With a man she met William Moss, with whom she had two children. This meant that she had to drop out of school before she could graduate. She ended up living with her husband, they had their first child, and within two years she had another child, she took a job as a domestic to help raise her children with her husband, but she had this hunger and desire to return to school. She had no

interest in living her life as a domestic worker. And I think her mother, really, her mother's name Minnie Thompson, who really encouraged her to return to school, but at the time, obviously, in the early 20th century it was frowned upon for women to seek an education, no less a higher education for which she hungered greatly. This also meant leaving her children with her husband and essentially ultimately abandoning her children. So essentially, she comes from a poor and working-class background, a teenage mother. She carried that with her for some decades because it meant the loss of her children. And access to her children. As Graham Hodges points out in his really monumental biographical introduction in the book that he published off her writings a couple years ago, she regretted this choice and made attempts to see her children several times, only living a couple of doors down from them really just a couple of blocks down from her husband, who had eventually taken a new wife to help raise her children. So that's her story. Makes it ever more remarkable when you think about the fact that she didn't come from wealth, she did not come from an upper-class Black family or Black elite family. She essentially came from a poor working-class background.

Daniel Story

Yeah, really astounding journey. You spend a pretty good amount of time in the review, unpacking the concept of dissemblance. And I wondered if you want to talk a little bit about that maybe for those who are less familiar with the term, where does it come from? And how do you see it as an important lens for understanding Wright's journey as a person and as a scholar?

Hettie Williams

So this term dissemblance was coined by a historian Darlene Clark Hein, and it has been used by several historians of Black women's history and scholars looking at not only Wright's life, but other women. Hodges uses the same application in his biographical essay, I believe it's used in other places as well. So this culture of dissemblance or secrecy is this sort of pressure that African American women felt at the turn of the century and beyond to conceal their identity and or their background, especially those who had a hunger or desire to lead and achieve or acquire an education. So this was the case for Wright. But it was the case for other women at Howard at the time. Lucy Diggs Slowe, I would argue, was a part of this larger culture of the dissemblance. She was a woman who was in a same-sex relationship with her partner for some years and was concerned that this would be found out. So concealment of one's background. It might even have to do with compartment. And the language that one uses. When Wright is writing to her children. She admonishes them several times not to call her mother because she was afraid that if someone saw the letters or open the letters, and realized that she had two children, that this would mean that she would be dismissed from the

college either first as a student, and then later as a faculty member. So this culture of concealment, there's a book that actually does study this from a psychological and or sociological perspective, it's called *Shifting, Based on the African American Women's Voices Project: The Double Lives of Black Women in America*, Charisse Jones, and Kumea Shorter-Gooden, are the authors of this study. And they interview hundreds of Black women who talking about the fact that they had to change their compartment, conceal aspects of their lives. And this is in a contemporary context. So we're talking about a century of this culture of dissemblance that can be found and located in lives of Black women, not just Wright. So you find it among Black women at Howard at this time.

Daniel Story

We can perhaps return to that aspect of Wright's life in a moment, but from Howard, Wright eventually makes her way to Columbia. Is that right?

Hettie Williams

Yes, so she stays at Howard to complete her undergrad and her first master's degree after that, she actually does marry a student who's also at Howard at the time. And she returns back to New Jersey for time, and gets involved in some sociological studies of the Black population in the state, and eventually does decide to go on to secure her PhD. And it was largely due to the work that she was doing, essentially, as a social worker collecting social science data on African Americans in New Jersey, especially regarding education. So she gets involved in the study of something like 10,000 African Americans in the state at the time, and decides that that will make a good basis for a larger dissertation project. So at Columbia's Teachers College is where she comes to encounter Merle Curti, the esteemed historian who is regarded as the architect of not only intellectual history, but the new social history at the time, so but it's by then this is mid-1930s, late 1930s, where she's working on her dissertation regarding the education of African Americans and the state.

Daniel Story

And so Wright's time at Columbia, her dissertation is, if I understand correctly, eventually what became the book *The Education of Negroes in New Jersey*, which was published in 1941. This is a book that was not reviewed by the AHR at the time, is being reviewed now. Could you take us into that book a little bit, give us a sense of what Wright was doing in that study, and maybe where it sat in terms of the progression of the historical profession at the time.

Hettie Williams

So Wright embarks on essentially a history of the entire state looking at the experiences of African Americans from the 17th century through early 20th century and focusing on the discrimination against African Americans with a focus on access to education. She discusses the fact that there were different patterns of segregation in the state even though by 1888 there's a law in place that says this is illegal to separate students based on race. But what she finds in her study is that by custom African Americans were kept out of schools and that school districts across the state would have one school for Blacks one school for whites, or they would segregate them within schools and by grades. Asbury Park, for instance, through the 40s, would segregate Black students and white students within the context of the school. On one side of the school, you have Blacks on the other side, you'd have whites, Trenton, New Jersey would segregate students between schools. The case in Princeton was similar. She's saying despite this law in 1888 you still have, in fact, segregation in the state. Now at this time, Wright had also become active in you know, ASALH, The Association of African American Life and History, The Historical Association for African American Scholars of History, by then had a journal she's able to publish her work too, beyond this monumental study that was recognized by several authorities at the time, and why Columbia chose to publish it. It becomes important because Wright's data is essentially the historical work for the litigation that eventually becomes the Brown case. My larger argument, and a forthcoming book that's coming out called *The Georgia of the North* is essentially that the civil rights movement begins in New Jersey with historians and social scientists like Marion Thompson Wright, who identifies this pattern that's happening that allows the NAACP to take this data into the courts and say, this must stop. So you get *Hedgepeth Williams v. Trenton Board of Education* in 1944. They're using the data that is collected by Wright in her study to make their claims. Robert Queen is the NAACP lawyer in Trenton who takes the case all the way up to the New Jersey Supreme Court. And in 1944, the Supreme Court of New Jersey states that segregation must end now in the state. The NAACP papers indicate to us that the NAACP used and understood New Jersey as a test case, because of this case, in 44, which is the only precedent-setting case in the nation prior to Brown involving Black kids in the public school system that is successful at the state level.

Daniel Story

Yeah, you also note how Wright's work several times you use the word data, which prompts me to think about Wright as both a historian and a sociologist or social scientist, how would you characterize Wright's scholarly methodological approaches with this work and others?

Hettie Williams

Yeah, so I like the question. And it's important one because several scholars across many different fields, educationists for instance, claim her, scholars of American education. My argument is she, alongside Curti, is one of the architects of this new social history that's not yet taken a hold in a discipline until really the 60s. So she's a couple of decades ahead, as is Curti, and as is Dubois, right? Sociologists like to claim Dubois, I claim him as a historian and sociologist, his dissertation is a historical study, her dissertation is a historical study. And I think she's clear about that, although she's using methods that white historians get credit for in the 60s and 70s. She's doing that as is Dubois 20, 30 years before the white male scholars quote unquote, invent, right, they don't invent it. It's already being used by scholars such as Dubois and Wright, in their work. And so I claim her as a historian, but I also think she can be more than one thing, if you situate her in historical context, she's ahead of her time, in that the new social history has not yet been invented. But she's doing it. It was brilliant, right? She was a brilliant woman who was capable of being proficient in more than one discipline, Langston Hughes, I think it was who famously said there are no terms for Black genius, right, this Black genius and because we don't accept or have the language, right, the language is there. We don't want to use it. So I kind of, she's like a Dubois in a lot of ways I think.

Daniel Story

I love the way you put that. And yeah, it's just incredibly impressive when you step back and survey the breadth of what Wright engaged with and did and the impact of her work. It's pretty astounding. I wonder, can we, you know, take a little tour through Wright's life as a scholar through the 40s 50s into the 60s, she finished at Columbia and went back to Howard. What does she do at Howard in that period of time?

Hettie Williams

So when she returns to Howard she's one of the few really professors at the time with a PhD. One of the few women. And this is at a time where Mordecai Johnson, who's president presiding over Howard at the time, who was notorious for his negative views towards women. She returns there with her PhD, and it takes her several years to get tenure where the males around her don't even have their PhDs yet. That's the world that she enters. She eventually through the 1940s eventually does obtain tenure, gets heavily involved, starts to get involved in NAACP does also get involved in the Association for the Study of African American Life and History. The Journal of Education is formed at this time, The Journal of Blacks in Education in which she is able to utilize to publish some of her work. So by the 40s and 50s, this is a time in which African American history is starting to become more formalized as a result of the rise of scholars like John Hope Franklin, and others who are doing African American history at the time at Howard. Howard becomes obviously a place where African American History and

eventually Africana Studies, it becomes a center. And so she's in that world of esteemed scholars in this field, and helping to, I think, define it really. By the 50s, she's recognized in her field because of the fact that she's writing through the Journal of Negro History which becomes The Journal of African American History. Eventually, The Journal Blacks in Higher Education become two outlets for her. She eventually divorces her second husband buys a home and her mother's I think dreams for her came to fruition, right, she's able to buy a respectable home in Montclair, New Jersey, live a middle-class life and elevate herself as a result of her education, into the Black middle class, right.

But she's still by in the 40s, and 50s, she's still admonishing her children not to call her mother, she signed her letters MT, Marion. And in the letters that her son in particular refers to her that way. She becomes a fairly prominent scholar, but at the same time, she struggled emotionally, after living this life of concealment and the dissemblance. And struggled in her personal life, really, but she had a robust life and the Academy and joined multiple organizations wrote for different outlets, some of the groups that she was a part of Society for the Advancement of Education, American Association for the Advancement of Society, National Education Association, National Association of College Women. So I think that she had a substantial scholarly life. And there's a whole documentary record of that in the reader, that Hodges has put together too. And then eventually gets involved in the Brown v. Board case by 54. Right. Because of all this activity that was happening in New Jersey NAACP came to recognize that New Jersey was really a leader in some of these cases. And she's asked to join that team in the early 50s that would eventually culminate and successful case of Brown v. Board in 54. But within that, of course, we know her tragic end a few years later after that. So she had these professional successes, where she struggled was in her emotional life and her personal life. And but even then, when you look at the letters between Wright and her colleagues, few months before she took her own life, you still she was working on a biography of Merze Tate, she was still working and producing, and maybe happiest in a lot of ways in her professional output or her professional life. So, Lorenzo Greene, she's writing to him, and he's a social worker in New York. And there's like her last letter to him. She's telling him about all these things that she's planning to work on but struggled with depression, and that eventually overcame her, in the end.

Daniel Story

Do you want to say anything more about her death? That was in October of 1962? Right?

Hettie Williams

Yes, she she eventually. So there been some a little bit of controversy about it. But you know, I really look to Graham's work in terms of his access to some of her personal papers. In terms of scholars writing about her, there had been some hesitancy, but there's enough of a documentary record in terms of her colleagues finding her in her car and the evidence that was there. But Graham also points out in his autobiography that there was a previous attempt, she attempted to take her life, you know, prior to this incident when she passed, so there's nothing of a documentary record about that. There's secrecy in the archive, and there's also an attempt to want to protect her, I think and her legacy is a part of it is just sort of substantiating what actually happened then. But through oral histories, a great deal of her papers are now available at Pepperdine. So now we have access, direct access. And that's only happened in the last, say, two or three years, that scholars now have more access to her life and legacy. And some of her papers are held in private collections that are not available at all. So hopefully, with work coming out, there'll be a greater interest in learning about her.

Daniel Story

Yeah, I hope so. And I'm sure that your review will help with that. And speaking of that, I wanted to ask you, what was it like approaching this review? Did you say yes to it immediately? Did you have to think about it?

Hettie Williams

No, I didn't have to think about it at all. I was actually very honored that I was asked to write it. And I commend the American Historical Association, AHR for their work to just go back and have these reviews written and I really look forward to reading more. It's just a very important endeavor. And I'm very proud to have been asked to write this review.

Daniel Story

Well, we're really grateful to you and others like you who are engaging in these efforts to revisit and give due respect to this really monumental work and really appreciate your input and your perspective, both in the review and on this podcast. So thank you very much for the time that you've taken.

Hettie Williams

Thank you so much for allowing me to talk about this.

Daniel Story

Absolutely.

That was Hettie Williams discussing the life and work of Marion Thompson Wright. Williams's review of Wright's 1941 book *The Education of Negroes in New Jersey* appears in the March 2024 issue of the AHR. Earlier we heard from Arlene Diaz and Kalani Craig on their approach to collaborative historical research, which they outline in their June 2024 piece "The Coded Language of Empire: Digital History, Archival Deep Dives, and the Imperial United States in Cuba's Third War of Independence."

History in Focus is a production of the *American Historical Review*, in partnership with the American Historical Association and the University Library at the University of California, Santa Cruz. This episode was produced by Conor Howard, Phoebe Rettberg, and me, Daniel Story. Audio engineering and transcription support was by Phoebe Rettberg. You can find out more about this and other episodes at americanhistoricalreview.org. That's it for now. See you next time.