

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

MAPPING THE HISTORY OF BLACK WOMEN AT U-M

Michigan in the World walking tour brings Ann Arbor's past to life

By Michael Gawlik

There's a new tour in town this fall—and rather than discuss the origin of the UGL's name or the best dining hall on campus, this one tells a story about the University of Michigan unlikely to be heard anywhere else.

That's because six undergraduate students spent their summer uncovering the history of black women at the university for this year's Michigan in the World (MITW) program.

Since 2015, MITW has offered undergraduates paid internships to engage in a significant public history project under the guidance of a faculty member and graduate student. Undergraduates immerse themselves in the archives at the Bentley Historical Library, read existing scholarship, and craft narratives about what life at Michigan was once like. The program is a partnership with the Bentley, which funded this year's internships with a donation from Thomas C. Jones (BBA 1968, MBA 1971).

MITW's goal is to make the past accessible to the public. This year's cohort, working on a project titled "The Social World of Black Women at the University of Michigan, 1920-1975," found particularly innovative ways of doing just that.

Together with Professor LaKisha Simmons and graduate student Severina Scott, undergraduate students Bryan Foster, Lakyrra Magee, Taniya Moore, Brittany Simmons, Mahal Stevens, and Chelsea Vergiels created a walking tour of Ann Arbor that brings participants to sites where black women lived, studied, and socialized. A tour of this kind is not only new for MITW—it is also groundbreaking for the university as a whole.

"Michigan's official tour is all about presenting the best face of the university," said Brittany Simmons, who worked as a campus tour guide before taking part in MITW. "This tour allows [people] to see for themselves what black women at Michigan experienced, which is very different than the student experience today."

The self-guided tour is intended for Ann Arbor newcomers and locals alike. Participants aren't simply told that African Americans were long forced to live on the periphery of town. Instead, they venture to off-campus sites like 1102 E. Ann Street, a former boardinghouse where many black women resided. Participants don't merely hear about the Negro-Caucasian Club or its founder, Lenoir Beatrice Smith. Instead, they visit the site on Church Street where Smith led meetings alongside faculty advisor Oakley Johnson.

"I'm really interested in geography—how the built environment around us influences how we understand ourselves and informs our everyday experiences," said Professor Simmons. According to her, navigating Ann Arbor through black women's lives "helps you get into the past in a way that's different than reading a book."

Professor Simmons, a historian of African American gender history, was uniquely suited to lead this year's cohort. Her first book, *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans* (2015), examines how girls navigated urban spaces in the Jim Crow South. In other projects she evaluates the experiences of students at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in the early twentieth century.

"I've done a lot of work on black college students, but never in a predominantly white institution," said Professor Simmons. "At HBCUs, black students had all of these various spaces to gather, to be, and to do ... whereas at Michigan, there were very few black students here at the same time. The community was so small that I think it must have been pretty isolating."

Indeed, a prominent theme on the MITW tour is the way in which black women experienced marginalization during their time at Michigan. Though students developed their own social communities, which garnered national attention in the black press, they were also barred from university housing and refused service at many Ann Arbor establishments. They received little support or protection from the university's administration, which long resisted activist calls for gender and racial equality.

"As a campus tour guide ... I seldom speak about activism, racist incidents, or other difficult topics that will make prospective students and families uncomfortable," said student Brittany Simmons. The MITW tour, however, aims "to show people that Michigan has not always been diverse or inclusive, that it was not equal," she said.

Black students at Michigan also felt the burden of being "race women"—that is, representatives of all African Americans, rather than just themselves. Coming primarily from elite backgrounds, these women were acutely aware of their uncommon educational opportunities and the implications their success or failure might have on perceptions of the entire race.

This was a burden, however, that the MITW tour suggests many black women bore with pride, and used as motivation to succeed in their studies. They earned advanced degrees in mathematics, zoology, law, and medicine—fields that, Professor Simmons notes, remain difficult for black women to gain entrance to today because of racism and sexism.

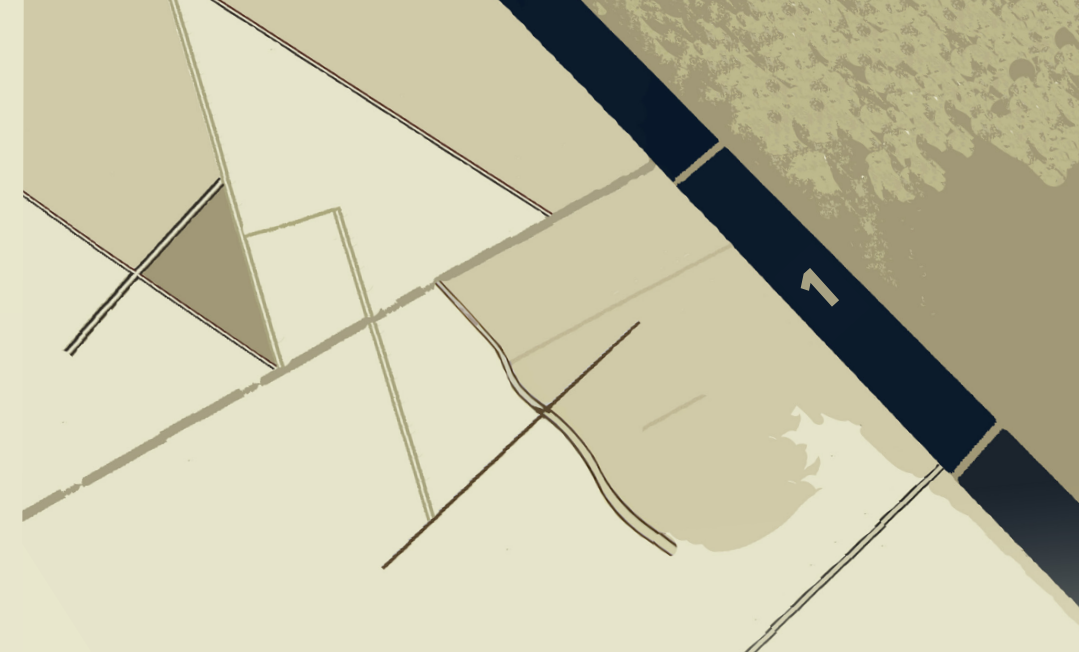
To Professor Simmons, this year's MITW project has significance beyond what it teaches about the past. "I think this project ... helps us reflect on what black students' lives are like on campus now," she said.

Undergraduates who worked on the project agree. "I'm so grateful to have had this opportunity to share and amplify the stories of these women," said Brittany Simmons. "From my research ... it's clear that documenting the history of black women had not always been a priority in the past, but it's reassuring that a strong attempt is being made now."

In addition to the walking tour, this year's MITW cohort contributed to an online mapping project and developed a web exhibit depicting the lives of black women at U-M. They also plan to create a physical exhibit that will be displayed on campus and open to the public this fall.

"I hope people will see our work and want to give us more stories, and tell us more about what happened," said Professor Simmons. "Once we get more leads ... there will definitely be places to take it in the future."

Visit michiganintheworld.history.lsa.umich.edu/blackwomenatu-m/ to learn more and access the walking tour.



Photos from top: Left to right, Severina Scott, Bryan Foster, Chelsea Vergiels, Taniya Moore, Brittany Simmons, Lakyrra Magee; Brittany Simmons, Chelsea Vergiels; Lakyrra Magee (left) and Severina Scott. (photos: Michael Gawlik)