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**The Birth of the Bryn Mawr College Black Studies Program and the Herbert Aptheker Appointment**

**Emma Ruth Burns**

**Bryn Mawr College**

*Content warning: racist, racial apologist, and homophobic views and language published in the college newspapers and in letters to the Bryn Mawr College President have not been censored in this essay. The author wishes only to represent accurately the views of the time, not to promote them.*

*The author also wishes to indicate that they are aware of Bettina Aptheker's allegations made against her father. They have affected the research process and author's personal views on Dr. Aptheker, but are not explicitly included in this essay.*

## ***Introduction***

“I have waited thirty-ones years for this moment,” Herbert Aptheker is recorded proclaiming the morning of September 2, 1969. Dr. Aptheker stood before a packed classroom of students interested in “A History of the Afro-American People” – or at least interested in the latest campus drama. Aptheker, one of the most notorious Marxists in the United States during the McCarthy Era, had been hired to teach at Bryn Mawr College shortly after the blacklist on him for his political beliefs was lifted in the Spring of 1969. His appointment had been vehemently opposed by many across the country.

Herbert Aptheker was involved in one of the most pivotal movements in Bryn Mawr College history – the development of a Black Studies Program.<sup>1</sup> These courses were developed by a group of student activists working closely with faculty and administration. Dr. Aptheker was brought to Bryn Mawr College in relation to these courses and acted as advisor to the Black Studies Committee to develop courses as well as corollary resources for the Black students during his time at Bryn Mawr.

This essay aims to uncover how Herbert Aptheker the card-carrying Communist ended up at Bryn Mawr. The controversy surrounding Dr. Aptheker’s appointment serves as a focal point

<sup>1</sup> Technically, the courses were not a Black Studies Program yet. The 1969 Course Catalog refers to the courses in aggregate as “Black Courses” – they were, however, commonly referred to as a Black Studies Program in correspondence and the newspapers. See Bryn Mawr College, 1969-1970 Catalog. Retrieved from Bryn Mawr College Special Collections.

to analyze attitudes of the communities at and surrounding Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges at the time. In this essay the stakeholders who will be considered are Bryn Mawr College's powerful and interconnected alumnae network, media outlets at local and national levels, and, most importantly, the students at Bryn Mawr College – white and Black – and their parents. The administration will be considered as well through their interactions with these stakeholders. This essay aims to consider the politics of the decision to hire Dr. Aptheker – how and why he was chosen and hired – by interrogating the college (and the appointment itself) as at the nexus of knowledge production, capitalism, and racialized discourse.

### ***The genesis of the Black Studies Program***

In the November 22, 1968 issue of the newly merged *Bryn Mawr-Haverford College News*, a letter to the editor written by Brenda Jefferson '70 announced:

“The time has come to stop lamenting the irrelevance of the Bryn Mawr-Haverford educational experience... We need action and we need it now. The Black Student's League is taking a step. Next semester we will run a course on the black man's existence in America. The course will give us a chance to compare the theory we've been choking on to reality. Reading will include some theory, policy statements from agencies dealing with blacks, and material drawn from the fields of community organizations, social work, psychology, sociology and politics. Each week we will have a guest who is actually working in the field under discussion. These people will not be executive directors, policy and program designers, 'experts' or theoreticians. We want people who are actually in the field. We want people who are... actually working under a system and know how it works or doesn't work instead of how it's supposed to work... If this and other courses of this type are to effect any change in the college situations, it must be recognized by both colleges and granted credit by both colleges. Other courses like it must be established.”

The demand for a Black Studies Program was influenced by the development of the African and Afro-American Studies faculty committee at Harvard College referenced by student Virginia B.

Gunn in her letter to the *News* editor in the same issue.<sup>2</sup> At the time, Black Studies programs were exploding across the country. The first Black Studies program was instituted at San Francisco State University in the Spring of 1968, and three years later the programs were a feature on over 500 four-year college campuses.<sup>3</sup>

The call of Jefferson and the Black Students' League was picked up by the school, and in January 1969 the *News* reported, "Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges are developing separate black studies programs to be instituted this semester and next year."<sup>4</sup> The courses developed this first semester of fall 1969 were Interdepartmental 105b (Black Writers in the American Scene) and Sociology 215b (Field Work in Urban Studies) at Bryn Mawr College, and a linguistics course at Haverford College studying African-American urban dialect. The Bryn Mawr courses would be taught by professors already at the College, the Haverford course by visiting lecturers from Washington, D.C.

To continue the progress, a set of "Proposals" by the Bryn Mawr Black Students' Committee, "which consist[ed] of five Black students, two white students, and three faculty advisors, Mr. Baratz, Mrs. Dunn, and Mr. Schneider, together with the help of other Black students and interested whites" was published in the *News* on April 15, 1969.<sup>5</sup> The announcement read:

"As Black Students we are deeply concerned that Bryn Mawr College break with the patterns of falsification and omission that have characterized the treatment of the role and contribution of the Black people to America, and all over the world. Bryn Mawr must deal with racism on its campus and in its courses. We demand... (1) Recognition of the Committee and its functions; (2) Addition of the five proposed course[s] to the

<sup>2</sup> Virginia B. Gunn, Letter to the editor, *The College News*, Jan. 31, 1968. "Haverford Afro-American Seminar Has Harvard Speaker, Workshops," *The Bryn Mawr-Haverford News*, Apr. 11, 1969.

<sup>3</sup> Noliwe M. Rooks, "The Beginnings of Black Studies," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 52, no. 23 (Feb. 10, 2006): B8.

<sup>4</sup> "Two Colleges Develop Courses Studying Black Culture, History," *The College News*, Jan. 31, 1968.

<sup>5</sup> "Bryn Mawr Black Students Submit Proposals on Studies to Community," *The Bryn Mawr-Haverford News*, Apr. 15, 1969.

curriculum. These include: Black Intellectual History, the History of the American Working Class, the Black Family, Black Political Participation, and the Black Urban Experience; (3) Reviewing and changing courses presently in the curriculum to insure[sic] that they adequately deal with the role of the Black people and instituting a training course to prepare faculty to include this material in their courses[:]; (4) Hiring of four faculty members in the area of Black Studies; (5) Updating the library adequately to deal with Black Studies and in particular full representation of the Black authors in the field; (6) Provision of funds to cover the costs of this program.”<sup>6</sup>

The timing of the proposals was likely influenced by a number of factors. Since the development of the first three Black Studies courses at the beginning of the semester, on February 14, 1969, discussion of racism on-campus had flared surrounding an article published in the *News* entitled “The Student as Ni\*\*er: Relationships in the University”.<sup>7</sup> The article argues that students are on an equal standing as the enslaved. The article was protested immediately and over the next weeks letters appeared in the *News* denouncing the premise and the use of racial slurs, and subsequently denouncing the denouncers for their own use of racial slurs.<sup>8</sup> Students and professors in the *News* reported feeling angered and threatened by the comparisons, which no doubt fueled the desire to improve the program and test the institution’s commitment to the cause of racial equality. The timing of the Proposals’ release in mid-April was sufficient that it allowed Bryn Mawr College and the Black Students Committee time to negotiate the demands before the end of the semester, but not so long that urgency was lost before classes ended for the summer and campus dispersed.

The administration acted quickly on at least some of the Proposals. A joint faculty-student committee meeting held on April 23, 1969 included a student delegate from the Black

<sup>6</sup> “Bryn Mawr Black Students’ Proposals,” *The Bryn Mawr-Haverford News*, Apr. 15, 1969.

<sup>7</sup> Jerry Farber, “The Student as Ni\*\*er: Relationship in the University,” *The Bryn Mawr-Haverford News*, Feb. 14, 1969.

<sup>8</sup> Ethel Sawyer, Letter to the editor, *The Bryn Mawr-Haverford News*, Apr. 8, 1969. H. Williams, Letter to the editor, *The Bryn Mawr-Haverford News*, Apr. 11, 1969. Steven Gerber, Letter to the editor, *The Bryn Mawr-Haverford News*, Apr. 11, 1969.

Studies Committee, Renee Bowser '70.<sup>9</sup> Bowser “reported that Mr. Herbert Aptheker had already met with members of the Appointments Committee and Mr. Clifton Jones and Mr. Bryan Rawlins [*sic*] would be meeting with them this week” and “Miss [Katharine] McBride said that the Curriculum Committee had approved in principle the inclusion of courses in Black Studies in the curriculum under departmental auspices”.<sup>10</sup> McBride commented on the haste, “Ordinarily in appointing a visiting lecturer I... do not think it important enough to be checked with the Board. In the case of Mr. Aptheker,... I called as many of the officers of the Board as I could reach. All agreed that... we should go ahead with the appointment.” McBride had been given a deadline by the Black Studies Committee of April 25 – ten days following the publishing of the Proposals – to approve someone for the new position. The Proposals were released on Tuesday, April 15; a week from that date, Tuesday, April 22, Dr. Herbert Aptheker visited Bryn Mawr on the recommendation of the Black Studies Committee to meet with students, History department faculty, and school administration; the history department approved him immediately, and on Friday the statement in support of his hiring was received from the Appointments Committee.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Approaches to radicalism***

The movement to establish a Black Studies Program at Bryn Mawr College was never meant to be a radical movement, if radical can be defined as “advocating... complete political or

<sup>9</sup> This is essentially the same as the Black Students Committee – which had changed its name when the College recognized it. It had changed a bit in form when the college recognized it – it now consisted of five Black students, two students of no proscribed race elected from the student body as whole, and three faculty advisors – these adjustments were the result of a compromise between President McBride and the Committee.

<sup>10</sup> “Curriculum Committee, April 23, 1969, Joint Faculty-Student Committee Meeting,” (minutes, Bryn Mawr College, 1969), in *Digitized Documents, History of Race at Bryn Mawr: Black Studies*. Accessed online via Bryn Mawr College SGA Archives: [http://archives.blogs.brynmawr.edu/files/2016/11/BlackStudies\\_001-014.compressed.pdf](http://archives.blogs.brynmawr.edu/files/2016/11/BlackStudies_001-014.compressed.pdf). Professor Jones would teach Political Science 231 (Black Participation in American Politics) and Professor Rollins would teach Sociology 230a. (The Negro Family in the United States); an interdepartmental course for faculty and interested advanced students was shared between the three professors.

<sup>11</sup> Mindy Thompson, for the BSC, “BMC Black Studies Committee Statement,” Apr. 25, 1969.

social change;... extreme.”<sup>12</sup> In her pieces for the *News*, spokesperson Mindy Thompson ‘71 referred to herself and the Committee as “Progressive”.<sup>13</sup> Their aim was not to fight the power of the institution, but to work with it for good. Within this framework, many of the decisions made by the Committee and the administration can be better understood.

Take the format of the courses, for example. In her letter to the Bryn Mawr College Board, McBride writes “The plan is not a ‘Black Studies Program’ but a series of three courses for undergraduates.”<sup>14</sup> The argument McBride made against an independent Black Studies Program was that the courses would reach more people if they were interspersed throughout departments. The Black Studies Committee also did not want Black Studies to become “compartmentalized” by being separate from the rest of the courses.<sup>15</sup> The College and Committee chose to emphasize the racial inclusion aspect of the project. The goal was “to give Black culture a place without isolating it.”<sup>16</sup> Bryn Mawr looked to “diversify predominantly white curricula... promote integration, and, perhaps most important, give what was then seen as the more militant version of separatism and black nationalism a wide berth.”<sup>17</sup> Not isolating Black culture implied, however, that it did not have the value to uphold an entire department: that perhaps they would run out of content, that Blacks were not human enough on their own to be analyzed historically, sociologically, psychologically, etc. Aptheker would recognize this and advocate after his appointment for the expansion of the courses into a full department (including

<sup>12</sup> Oxford Dictionary Online, “Radical,” accessed Dec. 20, 2019: <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/radical>.

<sup>13</sup> Mindy Thompson, “Anti-Communism Masks Attack On Progressives,” Oct. 10, 1969.

<sup>14</sup> Katharine McBride, Letter to the Bryn Mawr College Board, Jun. 5, 1969 in *Digitized Documents, History of Race at Bryn Mawr: Black Studies*. Accessed online via Bryn Mawr College SGA Archives: [http://archives.blogs.brynmawr.edu/files/2016/11/BlackStudies\\_001-014.compressed.pdf](http://archives.blogs.brynmawr.edu/files/2016/11/BlackStudies_001-014.compressed.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> “Bryn Mawr Black Students Submit Proposals on Studies to Community,” *The Bryn Mawr-Haverford News*, Apr. 15, 1969.

<sup>16</sup> “Bryn Mawr Controversy on Aptheker Goes On,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Jul. 13, 1969.

<sup>17</sup> Noliwe M. Rooks, “The Beginnings of Black Studies,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 52, no. 23 (Feb. 10, 2006): B8.



graduate courses), and connecting this institutional recognition with general understanding that “[Black Studies is] a legitimate field of human knowledge, just like any of the other courses taught in colleges and universities.”<sup>18</sup>

In comparison to the approach taken to the academic field of study, the isolation of – a better term might be concentration upon – Black culture was not an issue in the annual student-organized Black Arts showcases, which celebrated Black artists, writers, poets, dancers, musicians, and playwrights by letting Black Arts stand on its own.<sup>19</sup> If they gave students of color what they wanted without removing the expectation for these students to learn white curriculum and integrate into the predominantly white culture of Bryn Mawr College in order to obtain their degree, the College could turn complaints of isolation based on the color of an individual or group’s skin back on them: *we gave you the opportunity*. This attitude of victim-shaming is evident in the Bi-Co in an editorial in the *News* on the subject of a Black Studies Conference organized and sponsored by the Black Studies Committee held at Haverford, where one participant is recorded as commenting, “‘I think blacks are largely responsible for creating the race problem.’ [because they] often sit in groups by themselves at meals”.<sup>20</sup> By integrating Black Studies into the preexisting white framework, as Noliwe M. Rooks argues, Black Studies programs were viewed and understood “as a means of solving the longstanding ‘Negro Problem’.”<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> “Black Studies Conference,” *The Bryn Mawr-Haverford News*, Apr. 10, 1970.

<sup>19</sup> Jackie Williams, “A Cry For Black Awareness,” *The College News*, Feb. 2, 1968.

<sup>20</sup> “Colloquium Wednesday at H’ford Will Concentrate Solely on Race,” *The Bryn Mawr-Haverford News*, Apr. 10, 1970.

<sup>21</sup> Noliwe M. Rooks, “The Beginnings of Black Studies,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 52, no. 23 (Feb. 10, 2006): B8.

Neither students nor administration wished for the protest to become negatively confrontational.<sup>22</sup> Throughout the weeks of the end of the spring 1969 semester students, administration, and faculty worried that the situation would become uncommunicative. McBride's response to the Proposals and the impatience of the Black Studies Committee was to pacify them, to avoid their anger. In appointing Aptheker, she writes that she would have waited for the full Board to approve this decision but decided to go on without their input, since "the Black Studies Committee was beginning to feel that no progress was being made and to question our intentions. It seemed important to act quickly and that we did."<sup>23</sup> The Committee let their grassroots power simmer in annoyed but not accusatory *News* articles, and President McBride took every day of her allotted ten days to make the decision on Aptheker. Student opinion in the Bi-Co also hoped to avoid violence. In an editorial published concurrently with the Proposals entitled "It Can't Happen Here", the *News* reflects with horror on protests turned violent at the University of Pennsylvania, Harvard University, Columbia University, UC-Berkeley and Swarthmore College within the last years and asks, "Can we... remain attached to our belief in the commitment to reason and nonviolence here?"<sup>24</sup> The Committee's desire to work with the administration did not mean that they trusted them, though. They felt like they were not being taken seriously when the Appointments committee failed to produce a list of potential hires to match their own. On April 25, the day appointed for administration to make their announcement about hiring Aptheker, Thompson wrote, "It is not yet time for rejoicing. But if Herbert Aptheker

<sup>22</sup> Terry Krieger and Doug Johnson, "Radicals, Rightists Are Opponents of True Liberalism on the Campus," *The Bryn Mawr-Haverford News*, Apr. 18, 1969.

<sup>23</sup> Katharine McBride, Letter to the Bryn Mawr College Board, Jun. 5, 1969 in *Digitized Documents, History of Race at Bryn Mawr: Black Studies*. Accessed online via Bryn Mawr College SGA Archives: [http://archives.blogs.brynmawr.edu/files/2016/11/BlackStudies\\_001-014.compressed.pdf](http://archives.blogs.brynmawr.edu/files/2016/11/BlackStudies_001-014.compressed.pdf).

<sup>24</sup> "It Can't Happen Here," *The Bryn Mawr-Haverford News*, Apr. 15, 1969.

is appointed soon then we Black students at Bryn Mawr will begin to have confidence in the good intentions of the administration.”<sup>25</sup>

Both students and administration bent under the power of the other when reaching a compromise. President McBride and her successors eventually agreed to all of the Proposals of the Black Students Committee. However, they exercised power by inserting the two elected positions onto the Black Studies Committee. The power in the demand then lie with the students, but the Black Studies Committee necessarily (and un-radically) left the power of execution to the administration. These are the two groups whose power came head-to-head in these early stages of the development of the Black Studies Program. Soon more players would begin to fight their way onto the field, each with their own mite of power and each with opinions to share with anyone who would listen.

### ***Stakeholders: voices for and against Herbert Aptheker and/or Black Studies***

The news that Herbert Aptheker had been offered a position as history instructor for Bryn Mawr’s Black Studies Program was leaked on April 25 in the *News*. In the press release, Aptheker’s biography was listed first among the three professors to be hired for the coming semester, which may have been because his name came first alphabetically, or because Dr. Aptheker’s name and biography as a Guggenheim Fellow, Heritage Award recipient, and custodian of the W.E.B. DuBois papers held a certain cachet. “He has specialized in the fields of Black history and Marxism,” the announcement casually declared, neither hiding nor emphasizing what would be the main objection to Dr. Aptheker’s appointment: his outspoken Marxist political beliefs.

<sup>25</sup> Mindy Thompson, for the BSC, “BMC Black Studies Committee Statement,” Apr. 25, 1969.

The story was picked up quickly by local and national news sources, mostly reporting in outrage. The newspaper reports from across the country depicted Aptheker, Bryn Mawr, President McBride, and the Bi-Co students in varying degrees of inaccuracy, but all focused on Dr. Aptheker's position as a leading Communist. Some of the reports verged on 'yellow' journalism, clearly intended to provoke a response in their readers – even when the appointment would have minimal to no impact on readers such as those in Richmond, Indiana<sup>26</sup> or Santa Monica, California.<sup>27</sup> An agitated reader of the *New Orleans Times* wrote from Fresno, California about an article which named Aptheker “Moscow’s intellectual disciplinarian in the U.S.”, and claimed communists infiltrated police departments and were all homosexual.<sup>28</sup> Editors fanned the flames of the outrage by printing letters which claimed, among other mischaracterizations, that Aptheker was a “self-proclaimed Nazi”.<sup>29</sup> All of these newspapers had their political orientation and a readership which depended upon the stability of this orientation, much as *The Bryn Mawr-Haverford News* was oriented towards the college-age white liberal. In creating and deliberately misrepresenting the news surrounding Aptheker and other communists, President McBride, and the Bryn Mawr College Board, these news outlets are an interesting source to analyze the ways in which the history of the College can be changed so quickly, in just a few words. For example, few of the reports noted the involvement of students in the selection of Aptheker, and those that did characterized the students as dangerous Black radicals.<sup>30</sup> One article observed itself the editing of the history surrounding Bryn Mawr: “[the appointment of

<sup>26</sup> “This Kind Of Teacher We Don’t Need,” *The Palladium-Item and Sun-Telegram*, Jun. 5, 1969.

<sup>27</sup> See Nany Noble Evans, Letter to the President, Jun. 17, 18, or 19, 1969.

<sup>28</sup> Victor Riesel, “U.S. Reds, Panthers Plan ‘People’s Party’,” *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, Jul. 30, 1969.

<sup>29</sup> *Mary Ann Amato, Letter to the editor, The Evening Bulletin, Sep. 25, 1969.*

<sup>30</sup> “Bryn Mawr Hit On Appointment of Communist,” *The Main Line Chronicle*, Jul. 3, 1969.

Aptheker] gave substance to the growing impression that the college is becoming a hotbed of Red-oriented professors and students.”<sup>31</sup>

Through the newspapers, and through the official press release concerning the establishment of Black Studies courses at Bryn Mawr College, the alumnae network discovered that a Communist would be teaching at Bryn Mawr. Responses from alumnae began arriving in May and ranged from strongly pro- to strongly anti-Aptheker, although the letters received by the Office of the President represented largely two tips of what was probably a standard curve of passion. The most vehemently anti-Aptheker agitator was Sheila B. Nickerson '64, the president of the Bryn Mawr Alumnae Club of Colorado. Nickerson, supposedly speaking on behalf of the entire Club under the heading “Alumnae Committee In Opposition to the Aptheker Appointment”, wrote to alumnae, “We feel that this appointment is a gross abdication of responsibility to all members of the Bryn Mawr College community... we urge you to make your dissent known immediately to members of the Bryn Mawr College administration.”<sup>32</sup> Nickerson wrote to congressional delegates, senators, the F.B.I., President Nixon, and national newspapers, and printed out copies of the press release and her appeal for a response and sent it to all of the alumnae and parents she could. Chairman of the Board Edmund J. Spaeth, Jr. wondered “where she [was] getting her funds, for it would cost approximately \$600 to circularize[sic] the alumnae and a quite considerable amount to send letters to parents.” He continued, “[I wonder] if this is really Sheila’s campaign... or whether she is working for someone else.”<sup>33</sup> If anything was

<sup>31</sup> “Legislators Hit Hiring of Aptheker,” *The Main Line Chronicle*, July 3, 1969.

<sup>32</sup> Sheila Nickerson, Letter to the Bryn Mawr Alumnae Association, Aug. 25, 1969. President of the Board Edmund J. Spaeth records attempts to make sure that not the entire Colorado club had been in cahoots with Nickerson’s muckraking: “Though she is president of the Bryn Mawr Club of Colorado we have thought that we should be in touch with other opinion there...Mrs. Blum [the Colorado district councilor] is not concerned about the action of the College and thinks that Mrs. Nickerson has probably been in touch with those who would share her point of view.” Edmund J. Spaeth, Letter to “Ned”, Jul. 18, 1969.

<sup>33</sup> Edmund J. Spaeth, Letter to “Ned”, Jul. 18, 1969.

discovered about a financial backer for Mrs. Nickerson, it was never communicated to President McBride or not saved, indicating that Nickerson was likely spending large amounts of her own money, along with what she could fundraise, in her campaign against Aptheker – her personal wealth allowed her to compose an alternate history of Bryn Mawr for those who didn't agree with the College's political leanings and disseminate it.

Other members of the alumnae network were angry enough about the Aptheker appointment that they rescinded or denied funding to the College. Mrs. Edred J. Pennell '15 wrote to express her opinion that the College had become anti-patriotic, and that she thus did not want to give a gift to a fund founded in honor of a recently-deceased fellow-student;<sup>34</sup> Eleanor Davis O'Connor '20 phoned that she would “remove [the] bequest to Bryn Mawr College from her will”.<sup>35</sup> The question of funding was certainly of import to the College, and the alumnae network is an important source of funding. In 2019, gifts made up eleven percent of Bryn Mawr College's annual income, the fourth highest-grossing activity of the college, equaling over fifteen million dollars.<sup>36</sup> Aptheker wrote in a letter, “the [Bryn Mawr] administration is letting out that this is costing the College a million dollars in gifts and how can they repeat that etc. etc.”<sup>37</sup>

Anticipating this need to pacify the alumnae, the Office of the President had prepared seventeen sample letters, picking and choosing from a selection of phrases to address different objections. Of these, the most common assertions, appearing in sixteen of the seventeen letters, were first that Aptheker was a “pioneer” and “highly qualified” for the position, and second that the Bryn Mawr community – faculty, students, and administration – were smart enough to come

<sup>34</sup> Eldred J. Pennell, Letter to Peggy Stone, Aug. 1, 1969.

<sup>35</sup> Eleanor Davis O'Connor, Telephone message to Office of the President, June 17, 18, or 19, 1969.

<sup>36</sup> Have yet to find statistics on the budget for 1969, but it seems safe to assume that the numbers wouldn't have been terribly different.

<sup>37</sup> Herbert Aptheker, Letter to Jesse Lemisch, Nov. 28, 1969, quoted in Gary Murrell, *The Most Dangerous Communist in the United States* (U. Massachusetts Press, 2015): 213.

to their own conclusions regarding communism and the worst Aptheker could do was inspire lively debate. These assertions reclaim the narrative of Aptheker's viability as an academic against Nickerson's claim that Aptheker's works are "propagandist".<sup>38</sup> One of the jobs of the administration is to manage the image of the school, and through these letters they hoped that spinning a different perspective on the Aptheker appointment which aligned with their perceived reality would talk sense into the livid alumnae.

Mrs. Nickerson's campaign also reached out to the parents of current students. These parents, prompted by Nickerson to express their disapproval of the appointment to President McBride, responded in surprising numbers: thirty-eight letters from parents regarding the Aptheker appointment remain preserved in the College Special Collections fifty years later. The responses to the news were as varied as the responses of the alumni. One parent whose daughter was a member of the Class of 1971 wrote, "The appointment of Herbert Aptheker to your faculty casts some grave doubts of (their daughter) returning to BMC [after a year off]."<sup>39</sup> The parents were another important potential source of income –tuition. The sample letters were also sent out to parents, along with personal notes regarding their daughters at Bryn Mawr, hoping to pacify this other source of income.

Student opinion was likely similarly fractured. However, *The Bryn Mawr-Haverford News* records only a series of letters supporting the appointment and none opposing.<sup>40</sup> The opposition of the students was more subtle than the opposition of the parents, news outlets, and alumnae, but the quiet should not be taken for agreement:

<sup>38</sup> Sheila Nickerson, Letter to the Bryn Mawr Alumnae Association, Aug. 25, 1969.

<sup>39</sup> Harold McGeorge, Letter to the President, Sep. 14, 1969.

<sup>40</sup> My favorite of these reads: "We could not agree more with those who could not agree less with those opposed to the appointment of Mr. Aptheker. [Signed,] The Ad Hoc Committee of the Opposition to the Appointment of Aptheker." Karl weaver, Mark Love, Charles Olson Lerche III, Jon Ives, Owen Trainer, and William Levin, Letter to the editor, *The Bryn Mawr-Haverford News*, Oct. 10, 1969.

Mindy Thompson, one of the students at the forefront of the development of the Program the year before, wrote in an October 10<sup>th</sup> Op-Ed for the *News* comparing the furor surrounding Aptheker's appointment to Angela Davis' battle with the California Board of Regents: "Anti-communism is wrong for civil libertarian reasons, for revolutionary reasons – for many reasons. But mainly it is a smoke screen for the attack on the progressive forces which does not and never has helped solve the real problems of the country... such as racism."<sup>41</sup> Indeed, latent racism appears to have been rampant on both campuses. An article written by Patricia Burks '71 and Valerie Hawkins '69 records with disgust the low percentage of the white students represented at a civil rights rally hosted by the Bryn Mawr-Haverford Negro Discussion Group in 1968. "We think it significant (and sad) that so many white students saw fit NOT to come... there was almost complete attendance by black Bryn Mawrers and Haverfordians – not to mention the support of black students from Princeton, Temple and Franklin and Marshall."<sup>42</sup> The lack of active campus support outside of the tight-knit circle of students of African and African-American heritage shows the apathy of the white community on campus. However, other events such as an anti-Vietnam War fast which featured Black Power speakers, saw massive participation.<sup>43</sup> It is perhaps because of this uneven pattern of participation that Professor Eugene Schneider, one of the members of the Black Studies Committee, commented to the *News*, "It really is very hard to predict what the Bryn Mawr students are going to do" and expressed his hope that the support for the Black Studies Proposals would be general "rather than coming just from the more radical students."<sup>44</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Mindy Thompson, "Anti-Communism Masks Attack On Progressives," Oct. 10, 1969.

<sup>42</sup> Patricia Burks and Valerie Hawkins, Letter to the editor, *The College News*, Mar. 1, 1968.

<sup>43</sup> "Concern Over Urban Crises Leads to Fast and Teach-In," *The Bryn Mawr-Haverford News*, Feb. 16, 1969.

<sup>44</sup> "Proposals for Black Studies Win Dean Marshall's Favor," *The Bryn Mawr-Haverford News*, Apr. 18, 1969.



Demonstrating misunderstanding at the least, in the fall of 1968, Brenda Jefferson, the writer of the letter from November 1968, returned from a Black students' conference at Princeton University in 1969 to discover that F.B.I. agents had been searching for her over the weekend, allegedly for involvement in riot-planning, monument-defacing, and consorting with Black power radicals.<sup>45</sup> Jefferson's whereabouts the weekend before, she told the Bryn Mawr College News, could only have reached the F.B.I. through "an undercover agent [at Bryn Mawr College], or else (a friend or a fellow resident of Pembroke East) went running to the free phone in the middle of the night [to report her]".<sup>46</sup> Jefferson's visibility on campus as a person of color and as a popular student (Jefferson had been elected Traditions Songsmistress by her class the year prior, one of the most prestigious positions a sophomore can hold on-campus) made her a target for racist slander. "Perhaps the reporting was done by a frightened girl who mistook harmless comments for sinister threats," an article in the *News* proposed.<sup>47</sup> The anonymous apologist did not consider that this student was empowered because of the attitude of the country towards perceived radicals, in particular those of African and African-American heritage. That an anonymous student could simply walk to a telephone and bring down the force of the Federal government upon her peer meant that she should perhaps be more thoughtful about what frightened *her*.

Further signs of a separation between Black and white students at Bryn Mawr are scattered throughout the *News*. A colloquium on the topic of Race came under fire by students threatening to picket the event because it happened during an anti-war fast, and featured white students expressing their annoyance that Black participants failed to be open.<sup>48</sup> It was discussed

<sup>45</sup> "FBI Investigates Brenda Jefferson," *The College News*, Apr. 26, 1968.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> S.D. and N.M., "Frightened By Investigation," *The College News*, Apr. 26, 1968.

<sup>48</sup> 2.23 "Haverford Colloquium: Day-Long Discussions on Problems of Race"

that students often ate with groups of their same race, indicating a lack of understanding and cross-racial friendships. In a feature titled “Radicals, Rightists Are Opponents of True Liberalism”, ‘Radical’ and ‘Black’ are used interchangeably, and this Black Radical threatens the institutionalized white liberalism of the Bi-Co.<sup>49</sup>

The racial tension among students at Bryn Mawr no doubt led many to disapprove of Aptheker’s appointment, as he had advocated for racial equality for decades. While there are no articles published in the student newspapers which actively oppose Aptheker’s appointment, Thompson’s article outlining how opposition to the appointment stemmed from a racist culture was addressed to students, not to the alumnae, parents, or conservative American newspaper-readers. Because of this, it can be assumed that students were discussing their opinions on-campus even if they didn’t express them in printed form: Thompson’s letter was reactionary, which requires something to be reacted against.

A rather nasty letter published in the *News* on May 2, 1969 expressed the voice of one minority which felt that their history was being silenced in the upheaval about Black Studies in the Bi-Co. The letter read: “Thank God – they’ve initiated a Black Studies program without allowing their energies to be dissipated or side-tracked by dilettantish, irrelevant alternatives – Asian studies. ...Black studies are so much more contemporaneous! So well-meant! Such a liberal-minded undertaking!”<sup>50</sup> The students brought up a valid point, although not articulated in the most respectful manner. At a time when Black Studies programs were exploding all over the country, those who wished to institute them had a certain degree of power that was based on their

“Colloquium Wednesday at H’ford Will Concentrate Solely on Race,” *The Bryn Mawr-Haverford News*, Apr. 10, 1970.

<sup>49</sup> Terry Krieger and Doug Johnson, “Radicals, Rightists Are Opponents of True Liberalism on the Campus,” *The Bryn Mawr-Haverford News*, Apr. 18, 1969.

<sup>50</sup> Mary Yee and Leslie Wilson, Letter to the editor, *The Bryn Mawr-Haverford News*, May 2, 1969.

relationship to current social and radical movements in comparison with other campus minorities. There is no reason why course offerings in Black Studies and other minority studies cannot coexist; however, the institution of the courses proposed by the Black Studies Committee required money from the College and time from the faculty and staff, money and time which other minorities may have envied.

Unlike the two students of Asian heritage, the majority of the students, parents, and alumnae were careful to separate their disapproval of the man teaching the course from their supposed support of the new Program in their letters, whatever their true motives were. As can be gathered from the evidence above, the decision to hire Herbert Aptheker as a member of the Black Studies Program rallied opposition around the program from the very start. It provided an outlet for those who did not wish to express outright racism, and who would not otherwise have written were they not prompted to do so by Mrs. Nickerson. Aptheker had come up against similar opposition in the past in trying to publish the W.E.B. DuBois papers. In 1948, Dr. Aptheker wondered in a letter to DuBois, “How much deterring effect on the accomplishment of [the] prime task is my association with it having?”, the prime task being the publishing of the letters as a resistance against the silencing of the voices of African-American academics.<sup>51</sup> At the time, DuBois assured Aptheker that he was the right man for the job. In 1970, Aptheker ran up against the same issue when his application for a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to support the project was denied. “What bothered those ‘scholars’... was the name of the person to whom Dr. Du Bois entrusted his Papers,” he wrote in a letter.<sup>52</sup> This later statement shows none of the worry of the 1948 letter – the intervening twenty years had seen

<sup>51</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, *The Correspondence of W.E.B. Du Bois* Vol. 3, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Amherst: U. Massachusetts Press, 1997): 177.

<sup>52</sup> Herbert Aptheker, Letter to Henry I. Tragle, Dec. 28, 1970, quoted in Gary Murrell, *The Most Dangerous Communist in the United States* (U. Massachusetts Press, 2015): 218.

Aptheker repeatedly rejected on the basis of his political beliefs and it appears that his skin had thickened. Individual grant and manuscript reviewers bent to the power of the academic industrial complex, which in turn bent to the power of the McCarthy Commission. Aptheker did not express in writing his misgivings about his position at Bryn Mawr. He likely would have agreed with Mindy Thompson's article arguing that anti-Communism on-campus disguised latent racism and, as he had before, carried on.

***“Quick and powerful with life”***

Beyond his Marxist approach, Aptheker's experiences with McCarthyism lent him a unique perspective on the experience of those who had experienced discrimination in the United States. In 1938, Aptheker was blacklisted and banned from teaching because of his well-known political stance. He searched for a job for thirty years before being hired at Bryn Mawr. Aptheker himself had pondered the comparison between the persecuted Communist and the Black American twenty years earlier, during the 1949 trials of the national leadership of the Communist party of the United States. Then, W. E. B. DuBois had responded frankly to Aptheker's inquiry about the famous Black scholar's being able to leverage his considerable influence in the favor of the Communists: “I think the analogy between the American Negro... and the Marxists is not good. ...[T]here is the initial and vast difference that working people are always the vast majority; while the Negro slaves were usually a minority.”<sup>53</sup> Emerging on the opposite side of two decades of the Civil Rights movement, it seems likely that Aptheker had learned, as DuBois had, that Communists and Black Americans were not comparable. However,

<sup>53</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, *The Correspondence of W.E.B. Du Bois* Vol. 3, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Amherst: U. Massachusetts Press, 1997): 261-62.

in studying their history and advocating alongside them for their rights, Aptheker did have individual experience with the creation of false narratives about him.

Herbert Aptheker was aware of the drama surrounding his appointment, and aware that as the advisor to the Black Studies Committee he was helping students create the history of the College. The malleability of history was one of Aptheker's main academic interests. In 1956, Aptheker wrote in "Negro History: Its Lessons For Our Time": "One of the areas in which racism has been most apparent in our own country, and... with which we are here directly concerned is history writing. A Jim Crow society produces a Jim Crow historiography. ...[H]istory, far from being 'dead' is quick and powerful with life."<sup>54</sup> History, to Aptheker, was a method of combating racism and inequality.

The Black Studies Committee likewise was interested in the creation of history, and showed this same rationale for being interested: "It is not the truth when American History leaves out the part Black Americans played in building this country... Black History did not develop apart from American History. It is part and parcel of it and must be taught that way."<sup>55</sup> In the spring semester of 1969, Herbert Aptheker had come to Bryn Mawr College to give a talk on Nat Turner. Aptheker no doubt addressed his well-publicized argument with author William Styron over his novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, which Aptheker and the vast majority of the African-American academics in the country condemned as criminally rewriting an iconic African-American historical figure.<sup>56</sup> Thompson would later recall that Aptheker's first presentation "created the potential for me to be Black at Bryn Mawr. My fellow agitators and I

<sup>54</sup> Herbert Aptheker, "Negro History," in *Aptheker on Race and Democracy*, ed. Eric Foner and Manning Marable (Chicago: U. Illinois Press, 2006): 2.

<sup>55</sup> "Bryn Mawr Black Students' Proposals," *The Bryn Mawr-Haverford News*, Apr. 15, 1969.

<sup>56</sup> Gary Murrell, *The Most Dangerous Communist in the United States* (U. Massachusetts Press, 2015): 212.

were determined that he would join the faculty.”<sup>57</sup> It seems likely that Aptheker’s reclaiming of Turner’s narrative inspired the Bryn Mawr students in their efforts to reclaim their own narratives, and they sought him out because of his experience in framing Black history: how he framed narratives such as Nat Turner’s rebellion could have been how the students wished to learn to frame their own narratives. The Committee’s interest in reclaiming and creating history can be seen in their phrasing of the Proposal and their choice of the five classes they wished to be taught. Their first demand, that the College recognize the Committee, demonstrates their awareness of the erasure of Black movements in the past; they wanted to be not only heard but officially acknowledged. The courses that they chose to propose (Black Intellectual History, the History of the American Working Class, the Black Family, Black Political Participation, and the Black Urban Experience) show an awareness of the necessity of both learning about their subject to create history for the future, as well as learning about how the subject has come to be what it is.

### ***Conclusion***

Aptheker’s presence lent the Black Studies Program at Bryn Mar College an air of remarkable radicalism, although whether he were truly as exciting as the masses were hoping – or fearing – he would be was debatable.<sup>58</sup> The Black Studies Program was the result of determined and surprisingly effective negotiation between the College’s administration and a contingent of outspoken activists who were inspired by the trends of higher education and the recognition of their ability to reclaim lost history. The decision dragged alumnae from the

<sup>57</sup> Gary Murrell, *The Most Dangerous Communist in the United States* (U. Massachusetts Press, 2015): 212.

<sup>58</sup> Office of the President, Sample letter. “I gather [Aptheker] has no ‘charisma’, and is liable to expect a good bit of hard work from [the students].”

woodwork, sparked a small media furor, and forced parents to evaluate their students' strength of mind. For students, the last years of the Sixties were full of racial tension and the realignment of the existing social stratification at the College. The decision to hire Aptheker signaled a willingness by the administration to lean into the Proposals of minority students at a time when higher education was experiencing a shift towards a more inclusive system where students' voices were both respected and feared.

Aptheker arrived on campus in the fall of 1969 ready to teach. "Fifty-five students attended his first class, over twenty of whom were Black."<sup>59</sup> Also present staked-out on-campus were television cameras and reporters, and likely some of the pickets mentioned in the *News*.<sup>60</sup> Some of the students who continued in his class that semester felt that he was an excellent professor, some felt that he was not, some simply declared him "a very sweet, sweet man".<sup>61</sup> The *News* declared "*La guerre est finie*".<sup>62</sup> Indeed, Aptheker was in an office, the flood of letters ebbed; this particular war had been won – by whom and for whom would be determined in the next years of the Black Studies Committee.

<sup>59</sup> Susan Walker, "I Have Waited 31 Years for this Moment: Aptheker Holds First College Course; A Gentle Man," *The Bryn Mawr-Haverford News*, Sep. 19, 1969.

<sup>60</sup> Gary Murrell, *The Most Dangerous Communist in the United States* (U. Massachusetts Press, 2015): 213. "La guerre est finie," *The Bryn Mawr-Haverford News*, Sep. 16, 1969.

<sup>61</sup> Susan Walker, "I Have Waited 31 Years for this Moment: Aptheker Holds First College Course; A Gentle Man," *The Bryn Mawr-Haverford News*, Sep. 19, 1969.

<sup>62</sup> "La guerre est finie," *The Bryn Mawr-Haverford News*, Sep. 16, 1969.

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