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### Pieced Together: Community Engagement Through Collaboration

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# Pieced Together:

## Community Engagement Through Collaboration

*Susan Dreher and Andrea Packard*

*Swarthmore College Libraries and Swarthmore College's List Gallery engaged in an innovative collaboration in 2018 that celebrated the quilts and quiltmakers of the remote and historically Black community of Gee's Bend, Alabama. Their close collaboration, along with strong support from academic departments and faculty, enabled the gallery and the libraries to extend their capabilities to present an ambitious program that promoted artwork, student scholarship, and community engagement. The successful completion of the project established a protocol for the libraries and gallery to maintain their transformed relationship as they consider and plan future projects.*

### Introduction

In 2018, Swarthmore College Libraries and the List Gallery, a fine arts exhibition space at the college, initiated an innovative collaboration that celebrated the quilts and quiltmakers of the remote and historically Black community of Gee's Bend, Alabama titled *Piece Together: The Quilts of Mary Lee Bendolph*. The exhibition emphasized the historic and communal aspects of Gee's Bend quilting. The partnership also allowed Swarthmore College to concurrently present an exhibition that was co-organized by the List Gallery and took place in Swarthmore's main library titled *Responses to Gee's Bend*. That companion exhibition featured works by seventeen quilters from throughout the United States who were inspired by the legacy of Gee's Bend. Many of those quilters participated in the programming related to both exhibitions and interacted with students,

faculty, and the community. The artists raised important questions about history, society, and identity. The historic significance of Gee's Bend and the variety of collaborative outreach projects related to the concurrent exhibitions enabled students to apply their course learning, meet diverse populations, and participate in community engagement.

## Collaboration at Swarthmore

An ongoing goal at Swarthmore is to integrate art and library projects with student scholarship and engagement. This can be challenging at Swarthmore because although students are consistently excellent at academics, most classwork does not directly engage the community. The Gee's Bend project was well suited to accomplish this goal as it provided many different avenues of exposure. There were ongoing exhibitions with artwork on display, talks, panel discussions, and receptions that engaged Gee's Bend community members together with quilters, scholars, and artists from around the country. The project also involved a course co-taught by a history professor and local quilter. Finally, a grant-funded project sent two students to Gee's Bend, Alabama, to record oral histories and then to integrate these histories into the ultimate exhibition.

The gallery and the libraries had successfully collaborated on large grant-funded exhibitions and shared programming for over twenty years. The way for this level of collaboration began with joint exhibitions of sculptural works by book artists in the late 1990s and subsequently featured artists working in varied media such as photography, painting, ceramics, and sculpture. Through teamwork, List Gallery and McCabe Library staff organized concurrent exhibitions and related symposia that were increasingly complex, offering opportunities for interdisciplinary learning. One such collaboration was *Artist in Wartime*, an examination of artistic responses to the effects of war. When the List Gallery presented *Bearing Witness, Recent works by Daniel Heyman*, a solo exhibition that highlighted the torture conducted by US soldiers at Abu Grahیب prison, McCabe Library presented a concurrent exhibition featuring artists from around the world: *Printmakers Go to War: Works by Daniel Heyman in collaboration with Nick Flynn, Damian Cote, Eric Avery, Ehren Tool, and Michael Reed*. In conjunction with these exhibitions, the List Gallery published an exhibition catalog with an essay by the noted sociologist Robin Wagner-Pacifici and organized a series of artists' lectures and workshops. In addition, McCabe Library hosted a well-attended poetry reading by Nick Flynn. Collectively, these events offered varied insights into the effects of institutionalized violence and they reasserted imaginative space for critical thinking, restorative justice, and transformative creativity.

The opportunity for such collaboration is encouraged on an institutional level. Collaborative engagement is integral to the job descriptions of key employees involved in mounting exhibitions on campus. Interdisciplinary projects are

also facilitated by the close working relationship between List Gallery Director Andrea Packard and the libraries' Visual Initiatives and Exhibition Librarian Susan Dreher. Serving in a somewhat unusual position, the visual initiatives and exhibition librarian oversees the exhibition program at the libraries, which includes not only the main atrium exhibitions but also smaller exhibitions in other library spaces as well as faculty-generated or student-generated pop-up displays responding to current news or events. Because the number of staff at a small college is limited, the visual initiatives and exhibitions librarian position was created to handle diverse needs, including library-wide graphic design and curation of the artists' books collection, programming, and communication. The libraries' exhibition programming and successful collaborations with the List Gallery have been made possible through dedicated library exhibitions funding, grants from a college-based foundation, and dedicated staff time.

When considering the "collaboration continuum," as described in the OCLC report "Beyond the Silos of the LAMs: Collaboration Among Libraries, Archives and Museums,"<sup>1</sup> the relationship between the List Gallery and Swarthmore College Libraries had long been a combination of cooperation and coordination relying "on informal or formal agreements between groups to achieve a common end."<sup>2</sup> Through the collaborative dialogue between the library and the List Gallery, "information is not just exchanged; it is used to create something new."<sup>3</sup> With the year-long process of planning and implementing the Gee's Bend project, we reached a deeper level of collaboration described by the same OCLC report, as when participants "discover new ways in which to leverage their combined assets, and over time realize the transformational quality which is the hallmark of deep collaboration."<sup>4</sup> The difference between this collaboration and our earlier efforts was in the depth and breadth of the collaboration and the overall impact of the project. The interdisciplinary reach of the project across multiple programs was unprecedented in our previous endeavors. Furthermore, the opportunities that arose for student scholarship as a result of this new connection were transformative: through our program, students integrated their curricular studies and connected with faculty, staff, and external communities. With the successful completion of the project, we now have a roadmap and strengthened relationship that will improve planning for future projects.

## The Gee's Bend Project

The *Piece Together* exhibition project and related collaborations began in January 2017, when the List Gallery Director Andrea Packard conceived of the List Gallery exhibition of quilts from Gee's Bend. She initially partnered with Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, South Hadley Massachusetts (MHCAM), which had already begun organizing the exhibition titled *Piece Together: The Quilts of Mary Lee Bendolph*. As Packard considered ways to adapt the larger exhibition

to the List Gallery, she reached out to Susan Dreher to see if the library would showcase a number of works in its Upper Atrium space and explore complementary programming. By March 2017, the William J. Cooper Foundation had funded Packard's funding proposal to mount *Piece Together* in both the List Gallery and library Upper Atrium from September 6 through October 28, 2018.

Although the Gee's Bend quilts had garnered national and international acclaim through numerous touring museum exhibitions, MHCAM's concept for *Piece Together* and its initial inventory of approximately eighteen quilts (all by Mary Lee Bendolph, except for a lone surviving quilt by her mother, Aolar Mosely) was notable in that it would be the first exhibition to focus on the creative trajectory of a single quilter from Gee's Bend. Packard determined that she could install approximately nine quilts and four prints by Mary Lee Bendolph in the List Gallery and that the library's Upper Atrium space could comfortably feature six more quilts. She traveled to Gee's Bend in the summer of 2017 to connect with the community, further fostering the academic mission of the project. Researching the exhibition and accompanying catalog, she discovered several extraordinary quilts by Mary Lee Bendolph's daughter, Essie Bendolph Pettway. Packard proposed adding them to the library Atrium portion of *Piece Together* along with the surviving quilt by Aolar Mosely in order to emphasize the historic and communal aspects of Gee's Bend quilting. Hung side-by-side, the quilts represented three generations of women who responded to the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow with remarkable faith, resilience, and creativity.

As Andrea Packard then organized, edited, and wrote the introduction for an eighty-two-page exhibition catalog, *Piece Together: The Quilts of Mary Lee Bendolph*,<sup>5</sup> with interdisciplinary essays by faculty and staff from both Mount Holyoke College and Swarthmore College, she also began to coordinate with Susan Dreher to extend the scope of the exhibition, plan for community engagement, and create opportunities for student scholarship. In fall 2017, as Packard and Dreher began collaborating more closely, they met with Swarthmore College Professor of History Allison Dorsey, who introduced them to Alicia Ruley-Nock, an independent quilt maker and resident of the borough of Swarthmore. At that time, Professor Dorsey and Ms. Ruley-Nock were preparing for their 2017 spring semester course titled *Black Art: Quilting as History and Culture*,<sup>6</sup> a class that would incorporate quilting with learning in the classroom. Packard and Dreher then invited Ms. Ruley-Nock to help them curate a companion exhibition that would hang in the Lower Atrium exhibition space, directly beneath the planned installation of Gee's Bend quilts in the Upper Atrium, connecting quilting communities nationwide with both Gee's Bend and the Swarthmore College community.

Together, Packard, Dreher, and Ruley-Nock envisioned and curated *Responses to Gee's Bend*. They sent out a call for proposals to artists and quilters who felt inspired by the aesthetic legacy of the quilts of Gee's Bend. The resulting selection

of work by seventeen artists reflected a wide range of approaches and aesthetics, but all of them responded, not only to the quilts of Gee's Bend, but to the broader qualities and values associated with the quilters, including beauty, craftsmanship, resourcefulness, ingenuity, spiritual faith, empathy, and resilience. Such was the enthusiasm for this exhibition that one of the artists selected later designed and published a catalog, *Responses to Gee's Bend*,<sup>7</sup> of all the works included in the *Responses to Gee's Bend*. This exhibition was one more piece in the overall collaboration that allowed a broader connection among our students, Gee's Bend, and the larger quilting community.

## Student Scholarship

An ongoing goal throughout the planning of both exhibitions was to use the opportunity to promote teaching and student scholarship. As previously mentioned, the History Department at Swarthmore College provided a valuable connection between the exhibition and the curriculum, promoting scholarship through the design of a one-time special projects course entitled Black Art: Quilting as History and Culture, taught in spring 2018 by Professor of History Allison Dorsey and Alicia Ruley-Nock, who became an artist in residence at Swarthmore College. With Professor Dorsey, the students examined the long, rich history of African American quilt making. The students were then introduced to basic quilting skills and terminology by Alicia Ruley-Nock. The students designed and sewed their own quilts while working together on two larger collective class quilts, which were eventually displayed as part of *Responses to Gee's Bend* exhibition.

Further student scholarship related to the exhibition was supported by the List Gallery and the Swarthmore College Department of Sociology and Anthropology. When Andrea Packard visited Gee's Bend, Alabama, in July 2017, Tinnie Pettway, an elderly resident and quilter, asked Packard if she could help document the stories and cultural values of Gee's Bend, especially those of older quilters, before they are lost. Many of the quilters of Gee's Bend are in their eighties while many younger residents have moved away in search of educational and employment opportunities. Now that most homes have electricity and quilting is no longer a basic necessity, many community members fear the distinct style of quilting that originated in Gee's Bend will diminish. In September 2017, Packard partnered with Professor of Sociology and Anthropology Sarah Willie LeBreton, who now serves as Swarthmore's Provost, to oversee student research. They drafted and sent out a call for proposals from rising juniors or seniors with experience working with human subjects. They selected two students, Yixuan Maisie Luo '19 and Catherine Williams '19, and guided their application for Swarthmore College Humanities Grants to fund their travel to Gee's Bend to conduct an oral history project in summer 2018. Packard established a network

of Gee's Bend community members who would support the students during their travel and research. During the students' conversations with Gee's Bend quilters, they recorded numerous stories about growing up in the community, practicing their religious faith, farming, and participating in the Civil Rights Movement. The students' research resulted in a forty-four-page book designed by Yixuan Maisie Luo '19: *Gee's Bend: Oral Histories*. Overseen and edited by Packard and published by the List Gallery, *Gee's Bend: Oral Histories* is comprised of transcribed interviews as well as photographs taken during the students' visit. The book was shared with members of the Gee's Bend community, visitors to Swarthmore, and online to help preserve intangible and ephemeral aspects of Gee's Bend's cultural heritage.

## Programming: Community Engagement

Varied public programming for the two exhibitions was designed to have broad appeal, with the goal of engaging both Swarthmore College and external communities through a variety of interactive experiences related to the theme of Gee's Bend. The enthusiastic participation of members of the Gee's Bend community provided the connection between their community and ours, built upon previous student classroom learning, and encouraged new forms of creative engagement. The following events took place:

**Screening of *While I yet Live***—a short documentary about Gee's Bend directed by Maris Curran. The film was followed by a panel discussion including Maris Curran; Rubin Bendolph, Jr., curator of Bendolph family quilts; quilter Essie Bendolph Pettway; and Hannah W. Blunt, associate curator at the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum.

**Personal Narratives and Artistic Legacies**—a morning-long panel discussion featuring Gee's Bend residents and members of Mary Lee Bendolph's family; Yixuan Maisie Luo and Catherine Williams, the oral history students; Ellen M. Alvord, Weatherbie Curator of Education and Academic Programs at Mount Holyoke Art Museum.

**Quilting and Conversation**—an informal public gathering in the Library Atrium with quiltmakers from Gee's Bend, local quilt maker Alicia Ruley-Nock, and numerous artists who participated in *Responses to Gee's Bend*. Essie Bendolph Pettway had a prepared set of discussion points and brought one of her quilts, with which participants could interact. Ruley-Nock brought quilting materials and had participants make individual squares, which she then pieced into a single quilt.

**Curators' Talk for the exhibition *Responses to Gee's Bend*** —featuring prepared comments by curators Andrea Packard; Alicia Ruley-Nock; Susan

Dreher; *Responses* participant and Gee's Bend Oral History researcher, Yixuan Maisie Luo '19. *Responses* artists in attendance were also invited to address the large gathering of more than 40 visitors.

**Publications:**

*Piece Together: The Quilts of Mary Lee Bendolph* (82-page exhibition catalog)

*Gee's Bend: Oral Histories* by Yixuan Maisie Luo and Catherine Williams (44-page book)

*Responses to Gee's Bend* (40-page exhibition catalog published by William Johnson)

**Lectures:**

Andrea Packard distilled lessons learned from the above events and exhibition projects through public lectures in fall 2018 to the Swarthmore Rotary Club and the community of Kendal at Longwood, Kennett Square.

**Community School Group Engagement:**

More than 100 first-grade students from the Wallingford Elementary School toured both exhibitions, participated in discussions led by Andrea Packard and Alicia Ruley-Nock, and completed subsequent classroom projects based on their experience.

## Assessment

The complementary exhibitions *Piece Together* and *Responses to Gee's Bend* received rave reviews in the major regional newspaper *The Philadelphia Inquirer*,<sup>8</sup> in *Artblog*,<sup>9</sup> an online publication focused on Philadelphia area art and culture, and in *The Swarthmorean*, the local Swarthmore newspaper. Both exhibitions and all events were extremely well attended, with some of the largest numbers of visitors ever seen for both the List Gallery and the library. There was a great diversity in the audiences for exhibitions and events, from six-year-old students to a multitude of visitors from outside the College community. For many participants, it was their first visit to Swarthmore College. Within the campus community, there was an enhanced awareness and appreciation of the exhibitions and related projects due to the high caliber of the art and interpretive programming, the large number and variety of events, the interdisciplinary character of programming, and the diversity of locations used throughout campus.

## Conclusion

The List Gallery and Swarthmore College Libraries strive to create easily navigable paths to ideas, people, places, and things and to engage with centers of excellence on campus. The Gee's Bend project was uniquely suited to this due to its broad appeal, the enthusiasm of the participating quilters, and the varied possibilities for student involvement. The success of the Gee's Bend project and



the interdisciplinary dialogue it fostered was underscored when the college purchased two of the quilts from the *Piece Together* exhibition for its Permanent Collection. Ken Soehner, chief librarian at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, has stated, “True collaboration that goes beyond cooperation towards partnership, may be able to give us the resources and generate the pressure to force us... into a new and more dazzling performance.”<sup>10</sup> The close collaboration between the List Gallery and the library, along with the strong support from academic departments and faculty, did just that, enabling both the gallery and the library to extend their capabilities, achieving a new level of community engagement, connection to the curriculum, and promotion of student scholarship.

## Endnotes

1. Diane Zorich, Diane, Gunter Waibel, and Ricky Erway, *Beyond the Silos of the LAMs: Collaboration Among Libraries, Archives and Museums* (Dublin OH: OCLC Research, 2008), <https://www.oclc.org/content/dam/research/publications/library/2008/2008-05.pdf>.
2. Zorich, Waibel, and Erway, *Beyond the Silos*, 11.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 12.
5. Andrea Packard, *Piece Together: The Quilts of Mary Lee Bendolph*, Swarthmore, <https://www.swarthmore.edu/cooper-series/piece-together-quilts-mary-lee-bendolph>.
6. “College Bulletin—Course Catalog,” Swarthmore, [http://catalog.swarthmore.edu/preview\\_course\\_nopop.php?catoid=7&coid=63499](http://catalog.swarthmore.edu/preview_course_nopop.php?catoid=7&coid=63499).
7. *Responses to Gee’s Bend*, Blurb, 2019, <https://www.blurb.com/b/8985673-responses-to-gee-s-bend>.
8. Edith Newhall, “What to see in Philly galleries: A Gee’s Bend genius, a big group barn show, more,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (October 10, 2008), <http://www2.philly.com/philly/entertainment/arts/philadelphia-galleries-mary-lee-bendolph-david-brewster-art-at-kings-oaks-20181010.html>.
9. Michael Lieberman, “Piece Together, The Quilts of Mary Lee Bendolph at Swarthmore’s List Gallery,” *Artblog* (blog), October 13, 2018, <https://www.theartblog.org/2018/10/piece-together-the-quilts-of-mary-lee-bendolph-at-swarthmores-list-gallery/>.
10. Kenneth Soehner, “Out of the ring and into the future: The power of collaboration” (paper presented at the RLG Members Forum: “Libraries, Archives and Museums—Three Ring Circus, One Big Show?” 2005, 3), <http://worldcat.org/arcviewer/1/OCC/2007/08/08/0000070504/viewer/file1201.doc>.

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