



## FEATURE STORY

# TAKING STOCK:

## HARRIET TUBMAN DAY 3 YEARS LATER

BY DR. MICHELLE ROWLEY

Name changes are always monumental, a moment where we can choose to take stock. I am predisposed, it is a flaw, to thinking of large things in small moments; and, this propensity to seek out the monumental means that I want to begin by making it impossible for us to think of naming without simultaneously contemplating histories where the act was not to celebrate the uniqueness of identity but to mark beings as property, an act of dehumanization, heralding the power to name beings, black bodies as “chattel of.” When we claim the right to name ourselves, we are saying yes to a proxy that stands in for who we imagine ourselves to be, for who we desire to be. Naming, then, is never inconsequential. It is never small.

We, in WGSS, renamed ourselves (over quiche). It was not an unfraught process. We rubbed against our disciplinary investments, we haggled over genealogies of “gender,” and there was an eye-roll or two (the party wear of all academic gatherings). Still, I seem to remember intermittent bursts of laughter and quiche.<sup>1</sup> At the end of that Friday morning meeting, quiche fully devoured (okay, alright, I confess, I baked the quiche) – we were, in aspiration, The Harriet Tubman Department of Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies buoyed by the hope that this would serve as a constant reminder of our longstanding commitment to challenging anti-Black racism in our service/outreach, scholarship, and pedagogy. This aspirational proxy was approved by the University of Maryland’s Board of Regents on June 19, 2020, but not before our personal due diligence concerning our surrounding HBCUs, our colleagues in departments with similar disciplinary investments here at UMD, and meeting with the descendants of the Tubman line to secure their approval.<sup>2</sup> Significant to meeting with them was a promise on our part to Harriet Tubman’s descendants that the use of Harriet Tubman’s name would be more than an imprimatur, that we would think seriously about why we draw on her name and, by extension, her identity. Many of us have since taken up questions or crafted modules that broaden our students’ understanding of Tubman’s life, we have taken our

<sup>1</sup>A quiche-less version of the process that informed our name change can be found at <https://wgss.umd.edu/about/harriet-tubman>

<sup>2</sup>A wide cross-section of our community participated in this first Harriet Tubman Byway Tour – students, affiliates, staff, and faculty, groggily set off on a 6:00 a.m. departure to the Eastern Shore. This trip was integral to the self-education trajectory that we had crafted for ourselves as we contemplated the stakes of drawing on Harriet Tubman’s identity as part of our name.

students on the Harriet Tubman Byway Tour and the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad State Park to experience the landscape of Harriet Tubman's early life on the Eastern Shore. Our students have worked on annotated bibliographies, they have crafted pedagogy simulations that consider how they would teach non-college audiences about Tubman, and they have built digital platforms with civic outreach as their end goal. The inherent pedagogical and scholarly value notwithstanding, these are some of the ways that we have been working to honor promises made. Our Harriet Tubman Day, March 10, commemoration is another of the ways we do this.

We've now held three commemorative events; each has been recorded and can be found on the department's website. Our inaugural event, 2021, served to bring us together amid the pandemic. In this, and our subsequent events, we were joined by Ms. Ernestine "Tina" Wyatt, Harriet Tubman's great-great-grandniece. If you are ever interested in understanding the profound personal legacy, affection, and responsibility that Harriet Tubman's descendants feel about her name and legacy, then I offer these recordings as a destination point. If you are ever interested in Ms. Wyatt's lobby to ensure that Harriet Tubman's military service is nationally recognized and Harriet Tubman's induction into The Military Intelligence Corps Hall of Fame (June 2021), then these recordings offer invaluable archival materials. We can't thank Ms. Wyatt enough for her insight, ongoing support, and presence in our extended community.



Ernestine "Tina" Wyatt, attends the U.S. Army commemorative ceremony at the Washington, D.C. Hilton National Mall. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army; AFRO.com)

We have, in our commemoration's short life, aimed to open space for our students to participate in the day's events. This has resulted in the incorporation of student artwork, student presentations of their pedagogy projects, interview-based short films, and student moderators who are not at all afraid to say "TIME."<sup>3</sup>

Thinking through the lens of Tubman's capacity to work with allies and build networks has prompted us as a department to think in terms of outreach and community building within and external to our UMD community. In 2022, we collaborated with our colleagues in the Department of Art, Antwon Key and Jessica Gatlin. This began with our 2022 Harriet Tubman Day Poster designed by one of their students, Taylor Avent.

The Harriet Tubman Department of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

— Join us to commemorate —  
Harriet Tubman's Bicentennial

# RECLAIMING HISTORIES

*Dr. Julie Schablitsky,  
Chief Archaeologist with the Cultural Resources  
Division of the Maryland Department of  
Transportation's State Highway Administration*

## CREATING FUTURES

*VOLAR: Village of Love and  
Resistance (Baltimore, Maryland)*

*Ms. Ernestine "Tina" Wyatt,  
Harriet Tubman's  
great-great-great grandniece*

**Thursday,  
March 10, 2022  
12:00 - 2:30 PM**

Online: Registration is required  
to receive the attendance link  
[ter.ps/wgssTubman22](https://ter.ps/wgssTubman22)

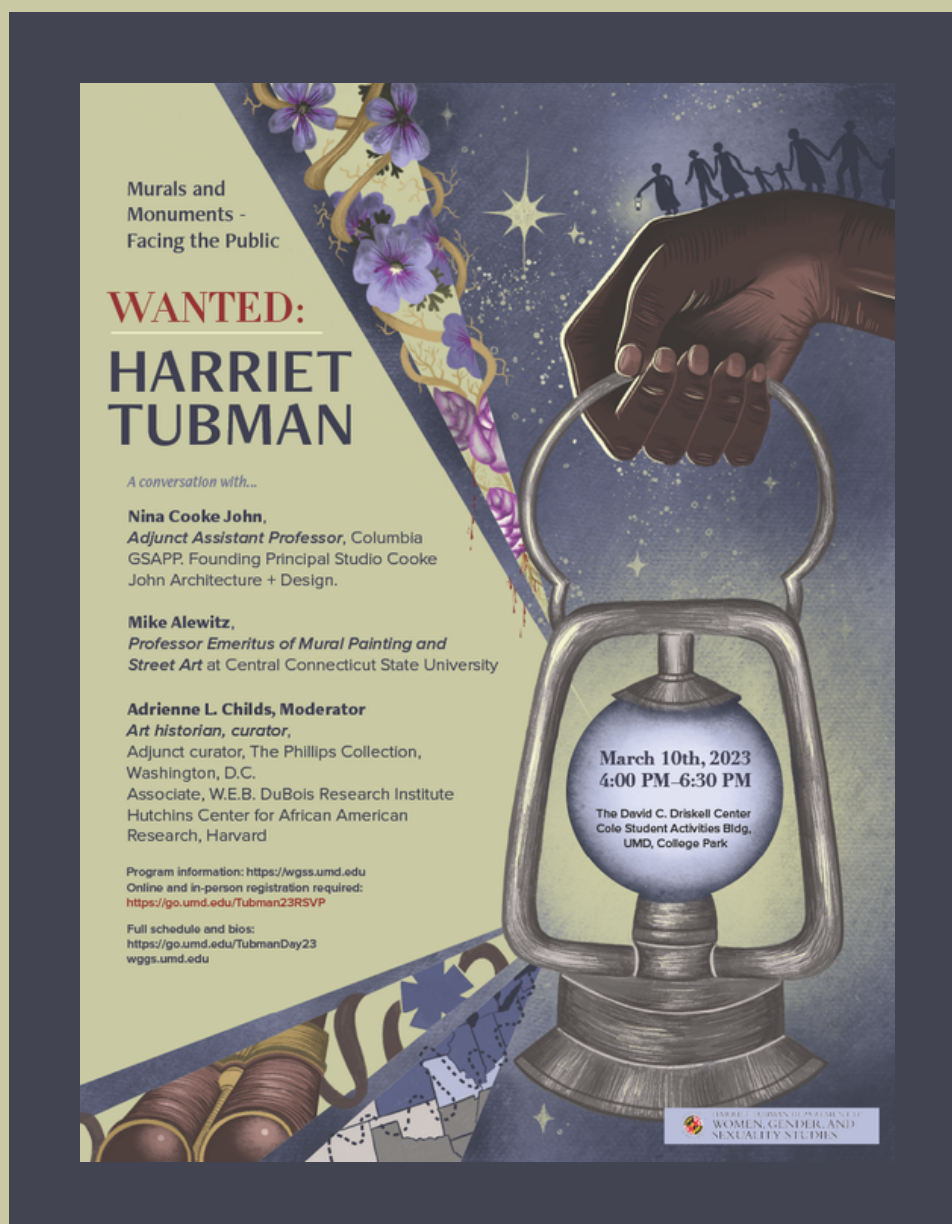
Full schedule: <https://wgss.umd.edu>

HARRIET TUBMAN DEPARTMENT OF  
WOMEN, GENDER, AND  
SEXUALITY STUDIES

Designer: Taylor Avent, Department of Art, '22

<sup>3</sup>The Harriet Tubman Department of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies thanks Brooke Mengistu, Janae Smith, Sydney Neal, Christina Wolfrey, and Lenora Knowles (Please insert list of names of students from 2021)

We have since formalized the relationship with the “Harriet Tubman Poster Design Award,” open to students in the art department as well as students who are enrolled in any one of the five programs that exist in WGSS. However, prioritizing our outreach to the Department of Art, we ask our WGSS students to think and work with a student from the Art Department. Winning recipients receive an award of \$500, and this year’s winning entry was designed by Ji Young Park, a studio arts major in the Graphic Design Program.



The 2023 Harriet Tubman Day Poster (Park, 2023)

I like to think of our Harriet Tubman Day commemorations as a placeholder, an annual appointment with our many communities—affiliates, faculty/staff – students, and other sojourners in Maryland writ large and farther afield. It is, in its fullness, a day of return for conversations and communion on issues of justice, liberation, and transformation. In 2022, to mark Harriet Tubman's bicentennial, we settled on “Reclaiming History | Creating Futures,” as our theme and gathered to think about questions of legacy and community. Ms. Wyatt was joined by her two daughters, Ashley Jackson, and Lauren J. Wyatt. Along with our student presenters, Dr. Marisela Gomez from The Village of Love and Resistance (VOLAR), calmed our spirits and activated our awareness of the work that VOLAR undertakes toward community change and transformation in East Baltimore, MD.



We ended the day with an archaeological consideration of legacy. Julie Schablitsky, Adjunct Professor in the Department and chief of the Cultural Resources Division at the Maryland Department of Transportation

walked us from coin to cabin -- carefully highlighting how her archaeological dig moved from an 1808 coin to the site on which Harriet Tubman's father Ben Ross' cabin once stood.

This year, our commemoration stridently entered the fray and debates about the racial histories and harms embedded in public monuments. Our theme “Wanted: Harriet Tubman (Monuments and Murals: Facing the Public)” found its conceptual beginnings in the 1849 poster that circulated after Harriet Tubman self-emancipated. The circulating poster, simply stamped “WANTED,” further noted that should she, Tubman, or her brothers be found, they should be lodged in “Baltimore, Easton or Cambridge jail in Maryland.” This idea of “wanted,” gave us an opportunity to gather to think (and self-interrogate) the exponential use of Harriet Tubman's name and likeness by a diverse and sometimes politically contradictory array of institutions and places. “Wanted: Harriet Tubman (Monuments and Murals: Facing the Public)” allowed us to think about Tubman as “wanted” as a fugitive from the law to “wanted” as a legacy and symbol. We grounded our planning in a consideration of the politics of invoking Tubman's identity; which Tubman do we expect to show up when we invoke her legacy, and what have been responses to artwork that reminds us, for example, Tubman's militancy?

We were in conversation with muralist, Mike Alewitz who in 2002 was commissioned to paint a series of murals throughout Baltimore, MD, commemorating Harriet Tubman. The first mural in the series “Dreams of Harriet” (25 x125 ft) depicted an armed Tubman and was subsequently decommissioned following Alewitz's refusal to disarm her. (See Milton C. Sernett, *Harriet Tubman: Myth, Memory, & History*). Alewitz brought us to this moment but moved us further to think about the economies and

politics of public art. We were also joined by architect Nina Cooke John, who at the time had unveiled what was then the country's most recent monument of Harriet Tubman, "Shadow of a Face" which replaced a statue of Christopher Columbus. Cooke discussed her process, the ensuing debates about the piece, the momentary refusal by the state panel to proceed with the piece, and the importance of community engagement to her work. This year's conversation would not have been possible without the skill and expertise of our moderator, Adrian L. Childs, David C. Driskell Prize winner (2022), and an adjunct curator at The Phillips, Washington DC. Childs brought it and in bringing it gave us the magic of a moderator who intuits the questions in the room and asks them even before we have fully consolidated them in our minds.



"Shadow of a Face" Nina Cooke John (Harriet Tubman Square, Newark NJ, 2023 ; photographs by Dr. Michelle Rowley)

We have been fortunate, in our three years, to have the support of our former dean, Dean Bonnie Thornton Dill, and more recently, Dean Stephanie Shonekan. This year's event also benefitted from the support of Arts For All, under the then leadership of Patrick Warfield, we hope for a continued relationship with the work that Arts For All facilitates. These events could not have occurred if our tech support – Nat Kuhn, Monica Milstead, Kathy Cavanaugh – were not walking alongside us, breathing life into all of our technical flights of fancy. Our students continue to be part of this journey collectively because the WGSS faculty my colleagues, continue to invest in the intellectual and pedagogical importance of this work. I owe Elsa Barkley Brown many dinners and missed hours of sleep for the way that she polices my margins and helps us be smarter about everything that happens on the day. Each Harriet Tubman Day requires teamwork, and over the last three years, the Day has relied on the careful work of Gwen Warman, Isata Mutu, Janelinid Baitwa Kyomuhendo, Julia Thompson, Robert Burgard, Karen Thompson, Natasha Hogston, and Stewart Williams. We, the faculty, staff, and students of the Harriet Tubman Department of Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies hope to see you at our fourth Harriet Tubman Day in 2024. Our theme, “Harmonies of Liberty,” will be a meditation on liberation as a reason for joy. Stay tuned. **Michelle V. Rowley**

