

Washington Park Cemetery / Ferguson Academic Seed Grant / Project Proposal Fall 2015/ J Colten

The neglected history of Washington Park Cemetery reveals a pattern of practices that are representative of larger, systemic issues of race, politics, and power that we still grapple with in our region and the country at large.

Narrative

Washington Park Cemetery, located near Lambert St Louis Airport in the city of Berkley, MO was established in 1920 as a burial ground for African Americans at a time when rigid segregation was common practice. For nearly 70 years, it was the largest black cemetery in the region, the final resting place for many prominent African Americans as well as lesser well-known citizens. The cemetery's long and tragic history reveals a complicated tangle of social injustice, racial politics, imbalance of power, and dismal neglect. I began my work at this site in the 1990's soon after moving to St Louis. The cemetery's land was not only beautiful, it also happened to be very valuable. The adjacent airport wanted part of the land for its runway expansion, and the Bi-State Development's MetroLink wanted the land for its rail route connecting to the airport. On three notable occasions, the peace of the grounds was disturbed: first in the late 1950's with the construction of Interstate 70, in 1972 when Lambert Airport acquired nine acres for its use, and again in 1992 when bodies were disinterred to make way for the Airport runway expansion and MetroLink's extension to the airport.

When I began my artistic research at Washington Park Cemetery I knew very little of its history. What I saw as I wandered the site: the beautiful decade's old trees, the once careful landscaping, the quiet environment, all sat parallel to the upheaval caused by controversial politics. What I found was a story I could not ignore. I began following the story – documenting, making work that was guided by the need to honor the families who had little or inadequate representation.

My photographs are in part protest, in part tribute, and in part historical documentation. The 50-60 photographs I took in the 1990s reveal the beauty of this landscape, nature taking over the order of the cemetery, and the disruptive process of the excavating graves. With the addition of the current day photographs, a resiliency and the power of family and community is presented. My work offers an effort and a promise toward acknowledging the cultural and historical significance of Washington Park Cemetery, and toward honoring the people touched by decades of oversight, neglect, and disruption.

Project Proposal /Overview

In partnership with the Missouri History Museum and the Sheldon Art Galleries, I have been working toward an exhibition to be displayed at the Sheldon. Scheduled for early 2017, the proposed exhibition "*Higher Ground: Honoring Washington Park Cemetery Its People and Place*", takes its title's inspiration from Stevie Wonder's 1973 song "Higher Ground" which presents lyrics that express a resiliency and spirit of perseverance.

Support from Washington University Ferguson Academic Seed Fund would help provide necessary funds for:

1. Printing and framing of the 40-50 photographs that will become the central component of the exhibition.

2. The video documentaries that will incorporate present day oral and video histories and interviews with families and will provide the opportunity to link past and present histories as parallel stories. The oral accounts from living family alongside the photographs and documentation, will allow memory and historical record to reside in the space of the exhibition.
3. The sculptural installation pieces will provide the lived expression of a search for cultural heritage and a collective journey.
4. Historical land views and, maps, will link these places, people, and events over time, and will provide a view of a complex community, its landscape and traditions.
5. Meredith Evans from the Washington University Olin Libraries has offered support for compiling an on-line and a physical archive of the Washington Park Cemetery work, and an on-site exhibition.
6. The discussion of building a website with Olin Library assistance or producing an exhibition catalogue with the Missouri History Museum, to provide lasting components to the exhibition is also underway. With much of the tangible evidence covered over, destroyed or yet to be discovered, the ability for families and members of the larger Saint Louis community to own a keepsake of this significant history becomes important.

We will be seeking matching funds from the library to achieve the specific goals of the traveling exhibition, archiving of the exhibition, and building a website which will provide a resource and virtual space for engagement about the cemetery.

Challenges

The fullest expression of the exhibition is an ambitious goal with many components. In addition to presenting the photographs, we plan production of the video/oral documentaries, the installation of the sculptural pieces, the development of a website, and archiving a selection of the photographic works to reside in the Washington University Olin Library and the Missouri History Museum collection. If library research support is secured through graduate student or research assistant funding, historical information can be provided to help place the works in the larger context of the St Louis region and African American cultural experience.

Because of the significant need for funding, all participants are searching independently for sources of support and have made personal investments to the project.

We have also worked to develop a clear plan for reducing the components of the exhibition, if necessary, without compromising the overall message. If we can secure only minimal funding, the photographs along with historical maps and text will comprise the exhibition and plans for the work to be shown at the Sheldon Art Galleries is still intact.

Project Partners and Contributions to Goal

Principal Investigator, Jennifer Colten, Senior Lecturer in Photography at Washington University, will be printing and organizing photographs made in the early 1990s and a selection of current day photographs. These will constitute the core of the exhibition. As documents of history and touchstones for memory, photographs can provide a powerful opportunity for reflection. The images reveal the beauty of the Washington Park Cemetery site as it rests alongside a struggle both literal and symbolic.

Partner Artist, Denise Ward-Brown, Associate Professor of Sculpture at Washington University, will be constructing the oral/video histories. Interviews with families, current cemetery owner Kevin Bailey,

pastors, airport officials, and city personnel, will show a multi-dimensional view of this complex narrative. As oral documentaries present past and present histories in parallel stories, our current social, political, and economic condition is seen wrapped in the climate of race and power and embodied in the narrative of the Washington Park Cemetery.

Partner Artist, Dail Chambers, installation artist and community activist has focused a large part of her artistic practice on issues of personal and cultural identity. Chambers' grandmother is buried in Washington Park Cemetery and her 3 dimensional pieces act as memorial and powerful contemporary expression of creative and cultural terrain. Her journey to locate her grandmother's gravesite reflects both a personal and collective voice.

Partner Institution, The Sheldon Art Galleries, Olivia Lahs Gonzales, Director, The exhibition is scheduled to be presented at the Galleries in early 2017. Text panels and contextualizing information will be written by Ms. Gonzales. Promotion of the exhibition event will be provided by both the Sheldon and The Missouri History Museum.

Partner Institution, Missouri History Museum, multiple curators, principally Gwen Moore, Curator of Urban Landscape and Cultural Identities, The Museum has offered research help to provide historical context to the exhibition. Ideally, the Museum will provide funding for the inclusion of an exhibition catalogue or book, which will act as a sustaining memorial for the St Louis community and Washington Park Cemetery families. The museum will also provide necessary publicity for the exhibition.

Olin Library, Washington University, Discussions to preserve a part of the exhibition at Olin Library have been ongoing. Both a digital archive and a selection of photographs to reside at the University providing a physical archive have been proposed. Additionally, building a website that would act as a lasting space for information has been discussed.

Budget

These figures represent **only** the costs to print and frame the 40-50 photographs. The above proposal includes many more components and costs. Producing the photographs ready for exhibition will exceed the Ferguson Academic Seed Grant allocation. The partners will continue to seek additional funding.

- 1) Cost to print approximately 40 prints @ 24"x26" on Canson Platine paper is \$1700.00.
 - 2) To print 4-5 prints @ 40" x 44" on Canson Platine paper would be approximately \$1500.00
 - 3) Mounting these to some kind of support like sintra or dibond will cost approximately \$40.00 each \$1,600.00
 - 4) Cost to frame approximately 40 prints @26"x28", \$75.00 each, approximately \$3000.00
 - 5) Purchase of 2 External hard drive units –Seagate Backup 2 Terabyte each- for dedicated storage and back up of photographic Image files @ \$109.99 each- approximately \$220.00
- Total \$8020.00 (approximate)

ConclusionAs we work to connect the pieces of these histories we continue to find depth in the significance of Washington Park Cemetery. The power of art links people and can inspire an awareness of culture, history and community. There is a certain urgency here. Before nature completely engulfs the site, before present day family members go to their graves with valuable untold and unshared stories, before time erodes all trace, this narrative must be documented, shared, and preserved.



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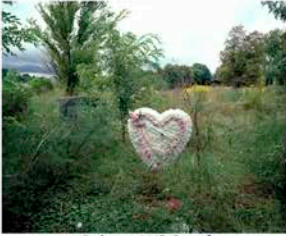
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