

Primus Project Podcast Episode #1: History, Complicity, and Lamentation with Will Thomas

Summary of Episode

The Primus Project Podcast, hosted by Scott Gac and Nicole Ankrah, explores Trinity College's history with white supremacy and slavery. The project, launched in response to demands from Trinity's Umoja Coalition, released three reports in November 2023. The first report detailed the financial ties of Washington College (later Trinity College) to the Atlantic slave economy, highlighting the involvement of founders and alumni in slavery. In this episode, guest [Will Thomas](#) emphasized the importance of understanding and demythologizing this history. The discussion also touched on the emotional and intellectual responses to this research, the concept of complicity, and the need for lamentation and action to address past injustices.

Action Items

- Continue researching the full extent of Trinity College's historical connections to the slave economy and white supremacy.
- Explore ways to share this history with the broader Trinity community and facilitate discussions around lamentation, reconciliation, and action.
- Investigate how current Trinity endowments, fellowships, and other financial structures may be tied to the college's problematic past, and determine appropriate steps to address this.

Outline

Introduction to the Primus Project Podcast

- Voiceover artist introduces the Primus Project and the Primus Project Podcast, which explore the relationship between Trinity College, white supremacy, and slavery.
- Scott Gac, co-hosts the podcast and is a professor of history and American studies at Trinity College.
- The podcast aims to empower the Trinity community to think through the college's challenging histories and begin efforts of repair.
- Scott mentions the co-founders of the Primus Project, including Davarian Baldwin, Cheryl Greenberg, Chris Hager, and Alexander Manevitz.

Introduction of Nicole Ankara and Her Role

- Scott introduces Nicole Ankrah, a sophomore at Trinity College, as the co-host of the podcast.
- Nicole shares her background, including her interest in racial justice and African American history.
- Nicole is a researcher for the Primus Project and is passionate about writing new histories of the college from the perspectives of slavery and the slave economy.

- Nicole mentions her involvement in various on-campus activities, including the advisory board for the Trinity Center for Hartford Engagement and Research.

Overview of the Primus Project Reports

- Nicole explains that the Primus Project released a series of three reports in November 2023 as part of Trinity College's Bicentennial celebrations.
- The first report focuses on the financial aspects of Washington College from 1823 to 1845, highlighting the involvement of founders connected to the slave economy.
- Scott provides a detailed explanation of the Atlantic slave economy and its impact on the greater Washington College community.
- The discussion includes specific examples of enslavers, Hartford merchants, and the founder of Trinity College and leader of the Episcopal Church, Bishop Thomas Church Brownell.

Introduction of Will Thomas and His Role

- Nicole introduces Will Thomas, a proud graduate of Trinity College and a historian specializing in American legal and constitutional history.
- Will expresses his excitement about the research conducted by the Primus Project and its importance in understanding the history of Trinity College.
- Scott asks Will about his intellectual and emotional responses to the material, highlighting the challenges of dealing with difficult histories.
- Will emphasizes the importance of lamentation and sorrow in acknowledging the past and moving towards reconciliation.

Emotional and Intellectual Responses to the Research

- Nicole shares her experiences as a Black student researching the history of slavery and the challenges she faces in explaining the importance of the research to others.
- Scott discusses the emotional challenges of dealing with the research and the importance of community in processing these histories.
- Will highlights the need for a full understanding of the past and the importance of demythologizing certain narratives.
- The conversation touches on the normalization of slavery and the importance of recognizing the moral arguments against it.

Complicity and the Atlantic Slave Economy

- Scott and Will discuss the concept of complicity in the Atlantic slave economy and the challenges of drawing lines of responsibility.

- The discussion includes examples of how various individuals and institutions were involved in the slave economy, including merchants and enslavers.
- Nicole raises the question of how families today should address their ancestors' involvement in these systems.
- Scott and Will emphasize the importance of understanding the broader implications of complicity and the need for action to address these histories.

The Role of the Episcopal Church in Trinity College's History

- Scott and Will discuss the significant role of the Episcopal Church in the founding and early history of Trinity College.
- The conversation highlights the split within the Episcopal Church between high church and evangelical orientations and their respective roles in slavery.
- Will mentions the founding of Virginia Theological Seminary and its significance in understanding the historical context of Trinity College.
- The discussion includes the involvement of notable figures like Francis Scott Key in the founding of the African Mission School—an educational, religious, and colonizationist project—at Washington College.

Challenges of Normalizing Slavery and the Importance of Black Abolitionism

- Nicole and Will discuss the common justification that slavery was just how society was and the importance of challenging this narrative.
- Will emphasizes the significant opposition to slavery, including petitions, court cases, and slave revolts.
- The conversation highlights the role of Black abolitionists and the moral arguments against slavery.
- Nicole shares her learning about the diagnosis of Drapetomania in slaves and the absurdity of considering the desire for freedom as unnatural.

Contributions of the Primus Project to Understanding Trinity College's History

- Nicole asks how the historical research into Trinity College's ties to the Atlantic slave economy contributes to contemporary discussions on race and higher education.
- Will emphasizes the importance of broadening the understanding of the community of Trinity College and acknowledging the contributions of individuals and families who have been written out of the narrative.
- The research helps the institution understand itself better and move forward in a more authentic and self-aware manner.
- The conversation touches on the ongoing work of repairing the community and the importance of naming and demythologizing historical narratives.

Conclusion and Call to Action

- Scott and Nicole reflect on the importance of lamentation and sorrow in addressing difficult histories and the need for action to bring about change.
- Nicole asks listeners to consider what they will do with their sadness over these histories and whether it will spur change within their hearts.
- The podcast concludes with a thank you to the listeners and an invitation to stay tuned for future episodes.
- The research of the Primus Project was made possible by the Office of the President at Trinity College, the Henry Luce Foundation, the Office of the Dean of Faculty, and the Public Humanities Collaborative.