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Containers for Belonging

Sophie Mak-Schram

Things add up in conventional history. A narrative is sequential, and rooted in evidence: letters, documents, photographs, accounts. We can tie events to dates, yoke people to places, and trace the material realities of what occurred. The historical account is a supposedly neutral one: a voice from the outside or above that tells us how things were. But, as various turns in theory have suggested since the 1980s, the methodologies and structures (one might even say strictures) of conventional history are far from neutral and often overlook, if not underwrite or elide entirely, other forms of knowledge and identities.¹

How do submerged histories re-emerge? Not via the same methods that led to existing histories. The public history of Alma Stone Williams, Black Mountain College's first African American student, one of the first African American students to enroll in an all-white institute of higher education in the South during the Jim Crow era, and a woman at that, is constrained to the accolading of the college for its admission of Stone Williams, and a note in the introduction to her archive that she "helped to make the Summer Institute of 1944 different from the rest."² Although a rise in interest in the diversity and racial integration at Black Mountain College (BMC) over recent years has led to more publications and discussions on and with Stone Williams,³ there are no clear photographs of her in the archives and she continues to be referenced mainly in relation to race history alone.

So too, Anni Albers's legacy as an artist and educator in her own right, rather than in primary relation to her husband, Josef Albers, has been slow in coming. Only in recent years have exhibitions and texts signalled her influence both pedagogically and aesthetically.⁴ Whilst Stone Williams's letters from the time do not explicitly note any racial discrimination, nor Albers's accounts any sexism, neither of them rise to the historical ranks of their male classmates and colleagues in the dominant historicizations of BMC.⁵ Instead, there are hints through material and social reference; a hairdressing contact sought out, a note about the dining staff, minutes from faculty meetings.⁶ Would a herstorical speculation, rather than historical research, make something more, or newly, imaginable about their lives beyond the relativity of their being black and/or female in that period of time?

Potential histories and herstories can most easily reside in the gaps in what we know; what the archive is missing and therefore cannot refute. These gaps exist in moments such as the fabled manner through which John Andrew Rice got in touch with Josef Albers—via Theodore Dreier’s well-placed New York aunt, who put them in touch with a curator at the Museum of Modern Art.⁷ Yet we don’t know why Philip Johnson was thinking of Josef Albers in this brief fifteen-minute meeting, nor do we know what Josef and Anni might have discussed upon receiving Rice’s telegram inviting him to Black Mountain College to teach. So too, the loose ease with which Alma Stone Williams narrates her arrival and integration at BMC to her family in letters belies the significance of her presence on campus, particularly given the faculty strife that led to the single scholarship for the Summer Institute and the departure of some students due to her presence at the College. Whilst we might have faculty minutes noting some of these discussions, we don’t know about the embodied realities of that 1944 summer.

To want to know about these realities, particularly those that were not logged or archived, involves a practice of desire that is more visible than the desire involved in conventional research interests. When looking into the history of Don Page’s physical activities at BMC, for instance, one can easily justify this interest by signaling to the numerous photographs of him shoveling dirt. The material matter would attest to the reason to find the narrative. Both Alma Stone Williams, and to a lesser extent, Anni Albers, don’t leave as many traces. My interest in them, and the conjectures involved in surfacing the threads of their possible stories, cannot claim to be contained within a box of letters in relation to some photographs, or a stray print alongside some textile remnants. Instead, what draws me to them drifts atop of material it does not fully map onto, and the speculation itself becomes the substance.

When speculation becomes substance, there is a risk of overwriting that which one is writing towards. To avoid the act of ventriloquism of certain approaches to history (a narrative approach of speaking for them, as them), the relation between present interest or desire and a past needs to be carefully unfolded. To queerly read Alma Stone Williams and Anni Albers here, is not an identification of their sexual or political identities⁸ but a proposition for how we might relate to them in the present that would allow them, and us, out of the binds of historical exclusion. The queering is of the method: an approach that seeks to allow speculation-as-desire to structure

a form for narratives that attends to the resistant material in the archives, its gaps and obscured elements of images, without enforcing this matter into legibility or visibility per se.

Elizabeth Freeman, in *Time Binds* (2010), argues that the current organization and division of time, including that of the present's construction of history, sustains a heteroproductive social space. There is, she suggests, a "teleology of living" instated by institutions such as the state that structures a narrative of cumulation and productivity from a past to a future.⁹ Against this hetero-capitalist organization of time, which she terms chrononormativity, she proposes a queer theory thought through the body. In this queer theory, longing allows for both the production of new social forms beyond the heteronormative, and importantly, produces these across space and time.¹⁰ In this, it becomes possible, and political, to long for a queer narrative for BMC without proclaiming the queerness of individuals there at the time.



Figure 1: Josef Breitenbach, *Summer Art Institute panel discussion*, 1944. Photograph courtesy of the Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina.

Searching for Alma

There is a note in Alma Stone Williams's memoirs about appearing "partially hidden" in a group picture included in Mary Emma Harris' book, *The Arts at Black Mountain College* (1987, 2002). Not only are the memoirs unpublished in their entirety, but the picture Stone Williams is referring to remains unclear. There is a pillar behind which someone is hidden during a drawing class, and there are some unidentified legs hanging off the balcony during an art lecture.¹¹ So too, there are many heads of black, coiffed hair but the black and white nature of the photographs and their age resist a clear reading.

In a collection of letters subsequently published by the *Appalachian Journal*, Stone Williams describes her experience of the 1944 summer at BMC to her family. She notes the difficulties of getting a shampoo in the local town, who she is sharing a room with and that everyone is being nice to her. She also asks for two things: a rose-brown tweed jacket to stay warm with, and a shoe bag that, when she receives it and thanks them for sending it, notes that it "fills a very important need."¹² This need is never explicated. What urgency would Stone Williams have had for a shoebag that summer?

Sara Ahmed, in *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) begins her thinking around orientation, bodies and space by attending to the contours of Husserl's writing table. Husserl's ability to be oriented towards his table, and to be able to attend to it in a manner that allows its material to become invisible both to him and subsequently, us, opens up the question of the orientation of phenomenology. For Ahmed, phenomenology, or the experience of a body in and with space, is not a given if even our perception and ability to reach things is impacted by our sexuality, gender and race. So the writing table becomes a space that certain oriented bodies can more easily access. Ahmed, in thinking this through, expresses a longing to know more about "about the objects that gather around him, as "things" he does "things" with."¹³ These objects would ground philosophy not in the nonspace of phenomenological heteronormativity, but in a space in which bodies, and their orientations, might align differently.

This longing for a thing as a means of longing for things to be (known) otherwise, is one that might allow a relation with Stone Williams that does not fix her into a new relativity in the process. Stone Williams's shoebag might have a

straightforward function, but it also allows for speculation. If close-reading is a form of attending to one's own desires, then it becomes important to find a way to do so without returning to a form of historical ventriloquism. I am drawn to the shoebag. The shoebag might be a thing Stone Williams does things with, but it also becomes a thing we can think with, into and past her with. As a container for herstorical longing, the shoebag is both a material reality (it existed, it is referenced as important) with a function (presumably, to hold her shoes), but it also remains ambiguous: why was it important, what did it look like, what happened to it? And in this ambiguity, it leaves space for a critical proximity—in close-reading the shoebag, there is a suggestion of close-reading Stone Williams—without the critical intrusion of transforming her into an object of study.¹⁴

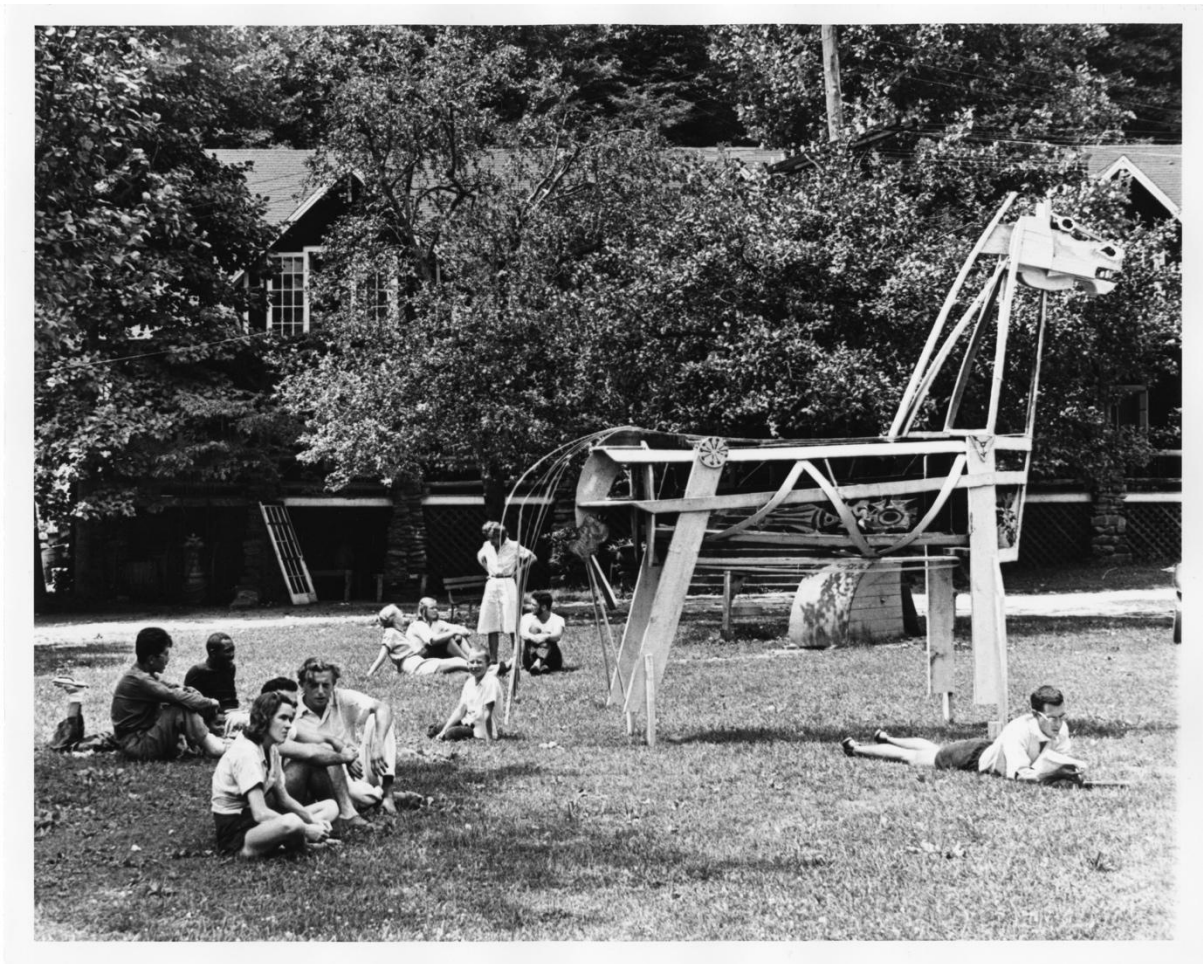


Figure 2: Beaumont or Nancy Newhall, *Trojan Horse*, summer 1946. Photograph courtesy of the Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina.

A Trojan Horse; a Container?

Conceptualising an object, event or occurrence as a container is an effort to accommodate the longing and belonging involved in processes of historicization without allowing them to shift focus from the (ambiguity of the) event itself. Approaching Stone Williams's shoebag as a container for belonging, rather than evidence for something, allows this text and its affiliated research to weave in the bias, the longing, the directed or oriented nature of its own research towards her. In speculating about the shoebag, and objects like it, the past is held but also put into relation with a present and a future, a sideways glance towards possible narratives that don't negate each other. Queer histories need not be delimited to identifying the sexual orientation of those present in a given moment. Instead, there might be queerness in all histories; in the speculation we make, the longings we express through the focus we give.

The lack of clarity around which of the photographs in Harris' text hide Stone Williams, "partially obscured", is not necessarily a disappointment. Instead, all those images become imbued with a potential to be read anew, for that which was not visible but always already in the frame. Without the resolution or ability to perceive something in a singular, fixed version of truth, the past and its traces become something comprehended through the relations we seek to set up in the present. This is not to suggest an infinite relativity of truth, but rather to point to the gaps and blurs as productive for an ongoing elision of teleological thinking about history.

Stone Williams herself points to the gaps in the narrative around her time at Black Mountain College, in her contribution to the Black Mountain College Museum + Art Center's Oral History project. Sat against a dark lilac background, she gently reflects that:

"There is no record of that summer at all in terms of my presence, which was funny. That was really the best part of it, that no fuss was made about it, but then it's also not part of the record."¹⁵

This record has since been amended, in manners that remain partial; Stone Williams's memoirs were partially published by the *Appalachian Journal* as part of a special issue on Black Mountain College in 2017-2018, and the Oral History project too attests to a desire to advocate as much as archive her and other presences. To

know what was funny, or what the 'but then' in her brief reflection denotes, emotionally or politically, remains however unclear. On 25 August 1944, she addresses her family in what appears to be Norwegian. "Dear Familien", the letter reads.¹⁶ Or might this be a misuse of the German plural form of family? Connections might be made with the German faculty or recently migrated students around her, as a form of affectionate proximity and mirroring or even as an effort of integration. To address her family through a foreign form, to address her family as a foreign form? And here, the desire involved in close-reading lies too bare, revealed through the lack of sufficient evidence to paper over the hyperfocusing.

One might think here of Julio Cortázar's short story, *Devil's Drool* (1959) or its film adaptation, *Blow-Up* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1966). In both, a photographer thinks they have captured a crime occurring in the background of their photograph and tries to zoom in sufficiently to work out what happened. The very possibility of the detail, of that which is unclear, is enough to invigorate the photographer to action and in so doing, the photographer experiences the possibility as true in his increasingly spiral towards paranoia. Archival fever exhibits some similarities, perhaps—an interest in spotting that which was overlooked, and tracing it until one finds enough evidence to claim it. But the practice in itself, to return to Freeman and a form of longing that allows us to escape the bind of chrononormativity, instates something too; the possibility of living in relation to something that might be nonsequential, not have existed in chronological time or be in other ways a patchwork of events, possibilities and present-tense orientations.



Figure 3: Josef Breitenbach, *Students during one of Josef Albers's colour theory classes, 1944.*
Photograph courtesy of the Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina.

Theories for Thinking With

This is not to, as both Cortázar and Antonioni's protagonists eventually do, spiral off into unbounded speculation. Nor is it a wholesale dismissal of the value of historical research that is tied to documents and archival proof. Instead, to return to the container and what it holds, and how it holds, there is still a rooting in the real. An image of Alma Stone Williams does exist, as does the knowledge that Anni Albers did translate for Josef Albers in his first year of teaching even if the relation between that and their subsequent books (hers on weaving, his on colour theory) is not one to which one can draw a singular line of direct reading. To closely read where these objects interact with the texture of the real we can more easily attest to (a real mainly of heteronormative making), allows for a tracing of what else might have been possible then, or now. There's elbow room in the gaps in the archive, particularly when they are neatly bounded by what we can more conventionally claim to know; there was once a photograph, there was once a lesson plan. And like the shoebag, things that served a clear directed function then can hold other needs, longings, meanings, narratives.

¹ One might think here of Hayden White and his suggestion that history follows tropes akin to literary ones (most famously in *Tropics of Discourse* (1986)), Donald Preziosi's argument that a historiography of art history is needed in order to make the disembodiment and proclamation of mastery of the art historical eye evident (most clearly in *Rethinking Art History: Mediations on a Coy Science* (1989)), or strands of decolonial thinking in which different understandings of time beyond the modern-colonial are espoused and gaps in archives and narratives are emphasised as evidence of power and violence.

² Jacob McIntosh, 'Alma Stone Williams Collection', blog entry, Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center, <https://www.blackmountaincollege.org/alma-stone-williams-collection/> (accessed 1 February 2023)

³ The main recent publication on and with Stone Williams is the *Appalachian Journal* 44/45 (2017/2018), which contains her letters as well as conversations with Percy Williams and Joseph Bathanti. For more on the racial diversity and BMC's forward-thinking position on this, Angel Bellaran's paper at *ReVIEWING Black Mountain College 13*, University of North Carolina at Asheville, 8 October 2022, titled 'Theory of Excellence: The Unknown Legacy of Diversity at Black Mountain College'.

⁴ Prompted by the Bauhaus centenary in 2018, new publications and exhibitions focused on themes of gender and internationalism in the Bauhaus' history. This included the large-scale show of Anni Albers's work at the Tate Modern, curated by Ann Coxon, Briony Fer and Maria Müller-Schareck in 2019, and its corresponding book of the same name.

⁵ It is worth noting that Alma Stone Williams does list two moments in which she was explicitly reminded of her racial identity whilst at Black Mountain College in her subsequent memoir, which was unpublished until 2017, when it was published as 'My Black Mountain Summer: A Personal Account' in *Appalachian Journal* 44/45 (2017/2018). 584-599. The two moments in question are listed on page 597.

⁶ Alma Stone Williams seeks out the contact of Mrs Butler for her hair in a letter on July 16, 1944 and August 25, 1944, as published in 'Selected Black Mountain Letters of Alma Stone Williams', *Appalachian Journal* 44/45 (2017/2018), 600-609. Anni Albers was often in favour of more progressive measures at Black Mountain College, including racial inclusion, as is discussed further in Angel Bellaran, 'Theory of Excellence: The Unknown Legacy of Diversity at Black Mountain College' *ReVIEWING Black Mountain College* 13, University of North Carolina at Asheville, 8 October 2022 (conference paper).

⁷ Helen Molesworth, *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College, 1933-1957* (Boston, MA & London, UK: Institute of Contemporary Art, Yale University Press: 2015): 33.

⁸ It is important to note here, as many queer theorists do, that queerness is not a term limited to sexuality but can also include wider practices of otherness and othering, particularly against dominant norms and forms.

⁹ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds* (Durham, NC: 2010): 3-5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, xvii.

¹¹ The photograph of Jean Charlot's drawing class is on page 102 of Mary Emma Harris' *The Arts at Black Mountain College* (1987, reprint 2002) and that of the Summer Art Institute's panel discussion is on page 98.

¹² Alma Stone Williams, 'Selected Black Mountain Letters of Alma Stone Williams', *Appalachian Journal* 44/45 (2017/2018), 600-609: 603 (16 July 1944).

¹³ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: 2006): 29.

¹⁴ This is a line of thought I first develop in 'Finding A', in *Masturbatory Reader* (Sticky Fingers: 2023): 47-57, which drew loosely on my earlier paper presentation, 'Finding Stone Williams with The Watermelon Woman' at *ReVIEWING Black Mountain College* 13, University of North Carolina at Asheville, 8 October 2022.

¹⁵ Alma Stone Williams, 'Alma Stone Williams Integration', Vimeo video, 02:10, Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center, Oral History recorded 20 April 2000: 01:47-02:00.

¹⁶ Stone Williams, Alma, 'Selected Black Mountain Letters of Alma Stone Williams', *Appalachian Journal* 44/45 (2017/2018), 600-609: 606 (25 August 1944).