

Episode 5 Field Recording – Laura Edwards

Interview published: April 26, 2023

Transcript edited: February 22, 2023

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Guest: Laura Edwards, Professor of History, Princeton University

Meggan Cashwell 00:00

I'm here with Professor Laura Edwards, whose podcast episode I hope you'll check out, if you haven't done so already. Laura is going to describe a really important photograph for us. I discovered this photograph, which features three unidentified women on the balcony of Pavilion X, the home of UVA law professors from 1833 to 1936. It is the only photograph we have come across so far of women at Pavilion X, at least for this period, which based on the attire is presumably the late 19th, or very early 20th century. What is most striking about the photo is that in addition to being rather candid, it features an African American woman and two white women. Laura, I know you study clothing and the legalities surrounding textiles. Would you tell us what you see in this photograph?

Laura Edwards 00:52

So, it's an African American woman with her hair tied up in a headscarf and a white apron, and a dark dress, with white collars and cuffs. I mention all of this because she is very well dressed. This is, I think, significant, and suggests both her sense of herself, but also her place, you know, within the University. She's seen, and so she is well dressed. She's probably a domestic servant who has lots of contact with white people in the community. She's sort of in the doorway sitting on the steps and behind her standing up by windows, which are encased in shutters, are two white women. One of them is holding a big wide-brimmed hat. They're wearing light dresses that are fashionable and, again, well-fitting and well done. And they're looking off away from her, the African American woman's looking at the camera, and they're looking more off and away. But the placement of them is eerie. Again, it is while the 19th century suggestive of slavery, which I think is telling, like I said, but it also suggests to me the separated but intertwined lives of white and Black women, right? So white women have authority and power over African American women, both before and after the Civil War. African American women's labor is exploited, even though it is central to the University. And she's sitting there, ever as a reminder of that. But behind them are also women who will ultimately be on the fringes of the University themselves, even though they see themselves as central to the institution, and they also see themselves as different from African American women. But their lives ultimately become entwined and ultimately white privilege alone has very different implications for women economically than it does for men.