

**Thurman Opening Comments**  
**Jonathon Kahn**  
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Good evening everyone. It is my pleasure to welcome you all--those in the room and those on Zoom from places far and near. Thank you Billie Davis Gaines, who I know is watching via Zoom. Getting to know Ms. Davis Gaines in preparation for this evening has been for me a true honor. Ms. Davis Gaines is too modest to introduce herself as the former president of the Alumni Association of Vassar College, the AAVC, as well as a recipient of the Spirit of Vassar Award for her lifetime work to effect transformative social change. So I will. Part of the goal of the Inclusive History Initiative is to introduce today's campus to alums and vice versa. Ms. Davis Gaines, the honor is entirely ours.

It is such a pleasure to be with everyone here tonight to celebrate Black History Month, to celebrate this moment for the Vassar Inclusive History Initiative--marking our first public event--and especially to introduce you to these four students who spent a semester researching and reflecting on the enduring influence of the Reverend Howard Thurman on Vassar college.

But before we get to their work, there are a lot of people I would like to thank and recognize at the start. First, we have some very special guests with us tonight. As you just heard from Ms. Davis Gaines, Howard Thurman was a Vassar Parent: his daughter, Olive Thurman was a graduate of the class of 1948. Well, I am delighted that Anton Thurman Wong, Olive's son and Reverend Thurman's grandson, is with us here tonight in the Villard Room as an honored guest.

I am also delighted to welcome two more special guests. With us in the Villard room is Sydna Altschuler Byrne, who was Reverend Th~~ur~~man's personal secretary the entire time he was Dean of the Chapel at Boston University (1953 - 1965). And Phyllis Lambert, who was Olive's classmate in 1948, and whose beautiful portrait of Olive is featured tonight, is with us on Zoom. Thank you both for being with us.

So many people at Vassar have worked so hard to make this panel a reality. President Bradley and her support of the Inclusive History initiative has been critical. Jim Sulley, [Craig Bonheur](#), [Colin Mealia](#), [Aidan Gallagher](#), Veronica Peccia, and Dan Lasecki have made all the technological and aesthetic aspects of tonight happen. The leadership of Liz Randolph has been invaluable. Thank yous go to campus dining who have created the beautiful reception following the panel in the CCMPR, to which everyone here is invited. Finally my deepest and heartfelt thanks go to Selena Hughes, the EP Program Administrator, and Angela DePaolo, the Director of Administrative Affairs in the President's Office. They coordinated every piece of this evening with such aplomb and grace. I feel lucky to be part of a community that reflects their touch.

Historical recognition and acknowledgment are crucial themes that weave throughout Howard Thurman's writings. And in the spirit of Thurman the theologian, I'd like to suggest that the act of acknowledgement represents a form of piety, not in the sense of having a super strong belief, but piety as a type of reverence, an expression of indebtedness to the sources of our existence. Piety, in this way, can be thought to

represent a form of ancestor worship. February, as everyone in this room knows, is Black History month. Black History month is a call for an expression of piety, an acknowledgment of Black ancestors, Black elders and their influence on our day. This is what I take us to be doing when we gather together now to learn about Howard Thurman and his legacy at our college. In a similar way, our land acknowledgement, which recognizes that Vassar stands upon the homelands of the Munsee Len-a-pay, peoples who have an enduring connection to this place despite being forcibly displaced, is similarly an utterance of piety. In this spirit may we have a moment of silent grounding to embody the tensions of this space and place, and the many ancestors on which we rely.

And in this spirit of acknowledging tensions, I'd be remiss not to acknowledge the talk that is happening across the campus. Michelle Horton is discussing her memoir, "Dear Sister," which focuses on her sister Nikki Addimando, a former Wimpfheimer employee. Nikki, a victim of domestic violence, was ultimately incarcerated for killing her abuser. Horton, along with other members of the Vassar community, came together in defense of Nikki, and their activism reveals not simply the countless other victims of domestic violence criminalized for their acts of survival, but how a majority of them are women of color.

Ok, let us finally turn to the event at hand. It is my pleasure to introduce you to the four students to my left, Croix Horsley, Maya Winter, Jarod Hudson, and Katie Varon. Each of these students accepted my invitation in the fall of 2023 to explore a set of questions

around the persistent presence of Howard Thurman at Vassar during the middle of the 20th century. What can we learn if we start to unpack the implications that Thurman, the philosophical and theological architect of pacifism and nonviolence for Black activists in the 20th century, was a consistent presence on this campus? How should we wrestle with the fact that Thurman was first invited to give a sermon by President McCracken in 1928 when the college was segregated, and that Thurman continued to return to give sermons, year after year, even as the college persisted in its racist admissions policies? Finally, surely there is much we can learn from Thurman's further connection to Vassar through his daughter, Olive, was part of that very first generation of openly Black graduates of Vassar.

We are going to learn tonight how this group of Vassar students wrestled with and approached this knotty nest of questions in their own distinctive way. And then we will all be able to talk about what we learned from them in q/a that follows. Looking more critically, and honestly, and fully at the college's history is difficult work. That's what the Inclusive History initiative demands. In the course of this work, the students encountered images and articles that were disturbing, particularly those that detail the college's troubling history with minstrel shows. Some of the images and articles that the students will share with you tonight reflect this history, and if you anticipate or at any time feel that you would like to step out, please take care of yourself and do exactly what is best for your well-being.

Before I turn it over to them, I want to offer one final observation about what I saw emerge over the course of the semester. As the students began to wrestle with the complexities of Thurman's place at Vassar, my sense was that they were really asking broader questions about the nature of activism and how to make social change. As scholars have pointed out, Thurman's own activist impulses can be hard for us to decipher today. Thurman's style of prophetic spirituality--rooted in his devotion to moral freedom and spiritual equality--has been caricatured as that of a detached and evasive mystic, as Walter Fluker writes. Better, as Lerone Bennett argued, to understand Thurman as "more than an activist, he was an activator of activists, a mover of movers." So as these students began to sit more deeply with Thurman and the details of his engagement and attachment to Vassar, they seemed to become energized and galvanized by the power of his life and thought. Instead of a mystic mist, Thurman presented to the students a radical vista, which is this: To persist unapologetically with who one is, no matter how implacable the context, while still striving to forge bonds of fellowship: That's Thurman's decisive radicalism. We at Vassar are fortunate enough to consider Thurman's legacy as potentially part of who we are, of who we at Vassar want to be. It is incumbent upon us as a community to take it seriously and honor it.

