

“Surrounded by Cellophane”

Histcollages and Memories of Black Mountain College by Mary Parks Washington

Journal of Black Mountain College Studies

Volume 11: The Practice and Pedagogy of Writing at Black Mountain College (Fall 2020)

Article URL: <http://www.blackmountainstudiesjournal.org/surrounded-by-cellophane-histcollages-and-memories-of-black-mountain-college-by-mary-parks-washington/>

Published online: October 2020

Published by:

Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center

Asheville, North Carolina

<https://www.blackmountaincollege.org>

Editors:

Thomas E. Frank, Wake Forest University

Carissa Pfeiffer, Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center

Production Editor:

Kate Averett, Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center

Note:

The *Journal of Black Mountain College Studies* is a digital publication, intended to be experienced and referenced online. PDFs are made available for offline reading, but may have changes in layout or lack multimedia content (such as audio or video) as compared to the online article.

“Surrounded by Cellophane”

Histcollages and Memories of Black Mountain College

by Mary Parks Washington



Figure 1: Mary Parks Washington, *A Special from Home*, 1979. Serigraph/watercolor, 12 x 24 inches.

“When one moves from his original environment, away from familiar sounds, scents, and tastes, it’s always a comfort to get something from home. My mother used to special deliver mint for my iced tea. You wouldn’t think of drinking tea without a slice of lemon and a sprig of mint.”

Mary Parks Washington (1924-2019) attended Black Mountain College in the summer of 1946. Her artistic medium was what she termed “histcollages,” layered surfaces of paint, drawing, and documentary ephemera. Her works evoke the connection between individual and collective memory, thoughtfully historicizing personal experiences and cultural life (especially that of pre-Civil Rights Black Atlanta) with superimpositions of insurance policies, programs, letters, lists, contracts, and other documents. In the context of narrative, Washington’s work provides a powerful reminder of the centrality of lived experience in the ways history is remembered, constructed, and reconstructed—casting personalized landscapes upon the fixed written word.

The conversation reproduced below is excerpted from an oral history interview conducted by Connie Bostic on April 29, 2000 in Black Mountain, North Carolina. With the sole exception of the last image, which is held in the Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center Permanent Collection, the artworks and descriptions

here are reproduced with permission of the Auburn Avenue Research Library on African American Culture and History and the Estate of Mary Parks Washington. They were previously included in Mary Parks Washington's solo exhibition *Atlanta: Remembrances, Impressions and Reflections*, held March 2 – May 23, 1996, at the Auburn Avenue Research Library on African American Culture and History.

Connie Bostic: Could you tell us a little bit about your early life and how you came to go to Black Mountain?

Mary Parks Washington: Well, I'm originally from Atlanta, Georgia. And I went to Spelman College, and I had a teacher by the name of Hale Woodruff, and he was a very prominent artist also. So he came to me one day and told me that I had a scholarship given by the Rosenwald Foundation to Black Mountain. Now, I'd never heard of Black Mountain. (Laughs). But I was finishing college, getting a degree in painting, and he didn't tell me too much about Black Mountain. He said it was a very unique school, and I would have a lot of experiences. He said I'd have to have a pair of dungarees—we called them dungarees then instead of blue jeans. So I went out and got a pair of dungarees, because we didn't wear pants at Spelman. Spelman was a very traditional school, maybe more than traditional. You didn't wear pants, you had to board in your last year even if you lived in the city, which I lived in the city of Atlanta. And if you had a date, it was only an hour. (Laughs.) Well, it was just a very restrictive school. Now I had no idea how Black Mountain would be, but I was willing to try the experience.

CB: So, Black Mountain was a little different?

MPW: Well, when I arrived it was. Also, when they told me I had to have an evening dress, because sometimes on Saturdays they had a dance, I thought that was interesting. I liked that, because I went to a lot of long dress parties so that was okay.

CB: What else was different about Black Mountain?

MPW: You know, when you get down to it, really it wasn't that different. But it appeared to be different. Now I didn't know what was going on, but you know you have real instincts about something. First when I arrived [...] I was brought to this lodge, and I

think I had about seven roommates, and that was kind of interesting. I'd never had seven roommates before. And then I had my own workspace, which I liked very much. That was—I can't remember the name, the long house, where we had our own individual [studios]—the Studies Building. This was the first time I'd been in a real integrated group. Now at Spelman, Spelman had a white president, and they didn't get a Black president until maybe several years after I'd finished in 1946. The school was opened after the Civil War for Black women, and many of the Northern white women came down. There were a lot of white faculty members, so that I was used to. But just being in a diverse community—but you know, I blended in, I didn't seem to matter. (Laughs).

CB: What did you study at Black Mountain?

MPW: I took design and color from Albers, and painting from Jean Varda. And then photography from Beaumont Newhall—that was only for a week; he was only here a week. And then sculpture from—I can't remember her name, I think it was Italian.

CB: Which of those teachers was most inspiring to you?

MPW: Well, let's see. Varda and Albers were very different. I learned quite a bit in Albers' class. In fact, I still have my notes from his class, and also Varda's, which I never kept before. I found Albers' class very interesting. I'd never had a class where you would sit on the floor and sit in a circle. It was very informal. My classes were always formal: you'd face the teacher. On the other hand, Varda's class was—he was so dramatic. (Laughs.) Very interesting person. And I felt that Albers was very intense. I couldn't quite relax. We had some interesting projects. He would give us different things to do—for instance, it was called, let's see, *matière*. It had to do with blending things together. They looked alike, but they weren't alike. So I came up with an idea. I rolled some white paper, I got some cotton, I went to the cafeteria and borrowed the egg beater. I borrowed two egg whites, beat those up very stiff, and beat some soap suds. Now I had all that together, it looked very much alike. So we would put our exhibits down on the floor, and Albers had a stick, and he would come by and he just passed mine. I said, "Would you go back and look at that one?" because I thought I did a great

job. (Laughs.) So he came and he said, “Yes, yes.” So I took that to be, you know, quite good. Because he was very harsh with his opinions.

CB: So he was very critical of anything he didn’t think was quite right?

MPW: He would just ignore, which maybe was (laughs) just as bad. He would just overlook, you know.

CB: And how was Varda’s class different?

MPW: Well, like I said, he was so dramatic. He would strut before the class, and it was mostly collage, and I still have a collage that I did in his class. He talked about color and a lot of humane things. It was just very different.

. . .

CB: Can you tell us a little bit about the extracurricular activities that summer, and what other faculty members were around?

MPW: Well, you know, it seems like we had a short day. I can’t remember how long the classes lasted, because that was fifty years ago. Maybe if you’d asked me (laughs) you know, some time before, I would remember. But we had sort of duties. I was very impressed to see people on tractors—girls on tractors. People out in the sun pulling weeds. I mean, that didn’t appeal to me. (Laughs). I wasn’t a volunteer for that. I volunteered along with another Southerner from Florida to be in charge of the tea time. There was tea every day, and we made peanut butter—it was very proper—peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and there was another kind—tomato sandwiches. So we did that. I thought that was a pretty good job. (Laughs) But you know, in my subconscious mind, I must have been impressed, because now I’m pulling weeds in the sun. (Laughs.) I’m doing a lot of construction work because I like it, but I never did anything like that before.



Figure 2: Mary Parks Washington, *Homemaker*, 1996. Acrylic/collage on canvas, 20 x 26 inches.

“Hattie Parks was the original ‘Atlanta hostess with the mostest.’ Visiting guests couldn’t resist her tasty rolls, cakes, and southern hospitality.”

...

CB: What about some of the other students who were there? Do you remember who was there?

MPW: There was another, what we would call Negro at the time, a student named Ora Williams. Now she went to Clark, the neighboring school on the Atlanta University system. Now, we’d met. We saw each other at Spelman because that’s where the art was, but I wasn’t friendly with her. We were still roommates, but we sort of went our different ways. There was Ruth Asawa. But Ruth was very busy. She was very much into the labor force, and I had some classes with her. There was Jacob Lawrence and his wife, I met them for the first time. We have remained friends, because they came out

to live in California for a while. And of course, Ruth was in San Francisco when I moved to Campbell, California.

...

CB: So the Lawrences were there, Ruth Asawa was there. It sounds like a very international group.

MPW: Well, it was, but a lot of students were from the East, like New York. I think I have the exact roll of the classmates. Maybe there were about four people from the South. Mostly people from Massachusetts, New York, places like that. Now, you were asking me what were some of the things we did. Well, we sat down a lot in front of the dining hall, and just discussed different things. I met Leo Amino—have you ever met Leo Amino? We got into a conversation, and I learned something I never learned before. [...] He was telling me all about the Japanese [internment camps during World War II]. Now, I didn't know anything about that, because when I moved to California, I found out about it. And I guess I was impressed. You know, it's funny how things strike you. I never thought about it again, but I did a painting of that situation. I found a bulletin telling the Japanese they would have to leave within 48 hours and so forth, so I did a collage using that bulletin and at the top I had two silhouettes of Japanese looking out of a barbed wire fence, and at the bottom I had the—I think it's called *taiko*—drummers. These are very spirited, so I was trying to show the bleakness, come into a celebration, because, you know, now that's no more. So I took photographs. Now, I didn't bring a camera, I borrowed a camera from one of the students. And I took a lot of pictures. and then when I took Beaumont Newhall's class, he loaned us his camera, so I went around and took a lot of pictures with that. Someone took a picture of me, and then Black Mountain sent it to me—I'd forgotten about that. I went into town one time, because, you know, segregated. Well, I had no interest in going in the first place, but I did go in. Then, I can't remember how I got to go to a sanitorium. A TB sanitorium. I remember that I had a friend from Morehouse, in Atlanta, who was in the hospital, but when I went to visit him, there were three other fellas that I knew that had TB. So, those are the only times I remember leaving the campus.

CB: When you went into town the other time you left campus, did you go into Asheville or into Black Mountain?



Figure 3: Mary Parks Washington, *Georgia Out-of-State Tuition*, 1996. Pencil drawing/collage on canvas, 16 x 20 inches.

“Under the plan to forestall integration, Georgia paid the difference between out-of-state tuition and Georgia tuition and also funded a round trip between the student’s home and school. I was the first to get ‘Out-of-the-Country Tuition.’”

stereotyped sometimes, and you are asked those questions, and people who are asking those questions are innocent, but you might be sensitive to what they’re saying, so that sort of told me that, you know, I’m doing the same thing, so I never forgot that.

(Laughs.) I saw Ike at the San Francisco reunion, after many years.

CB: The political tone in the country at the time you were there was beginning to sort of ferment in a lot of ways. Could you talk a little bit about the political tone of the country and its effect, how things were starting to change?

MPW: I think I went to Asheville. And we took a bus, and I remember we went to the back, ‘cause that was where Negroes went. And I was with a young woman from New York, ‘cause she wanted to go to the back, but I told her she better stay in the front. (Laughs) That’s where we came back, because you know that was a law at the time.

CB: Other students who were there—I believe this Japanese student was originally from Hawaii, is that right?

MPW: Yeah, let me see, what was his name? Ike [Nakata]. Ike had been at Black Mountain for quite a while, and when I first saw him—well, I heard he was from Hawaii, so in a conversation I asked Ike, “Do you do the hula?” (Laughs.) Which is a stupid question, really. (Laughs.) He said, “No, all Hawaiians don’t do the hula.” You know, that kind of taught me a lesson. It’s interesting how you learn lessons, because see, being Negro, you’re

MPW: No, not in '46. Not until '50, not until '50. No. It was very, very segregated, as far as I know. All over the South, there was colored water and white water. (Laughs.) And well, you know, the signs are very prominent, the colored and the white signs. But I lived in a sort of an insulated community. I would describe it as being surrounded by cellophane. Not glass, you could punch out. But you couldn't go out but so far. And you would observe, but you were still protected. That was my life. I knew that there was prejudice around, but in my community, because of the situation—Negroes were in business, and many times you didn't have to go out for these different things that you needed.



Figure 4: Mary Parks Washington, *Recycling of the Old*, 1992. Pencil drawing/mixed media, 22 1/4 x 32 1/4 inches.

“Poverty had its own simple genius, forcing one to improvise with materials at hand. Every spring, fresh newspapers were used to cover walls, substituting for wallpaper, and scraps of fabric made excellent quilts. They were the original recyclers.”



Figure 5: Mary Parks Washington, *Savior of a Million Soles*, 1989. Acrylic/collage on canvas, 30 x 36 1/4 inches.

“A. W. Parks was a successful businessman who ‘saved a million soles’ with his shoe repair shop located on Martin Luther King Drive (known in years past as Hunter Street). He was an oral historian and philanthropist for Friendship Baptist Church. As a leader in the Boy Scouts, he received the Silver Beaver Award. He was an active board member in the Lincoln Golf and Country Club. He was also a supporter of the ‘Negro’ community with many strong ‘Negro’ husband-fathers of his era.”

...

CB: Did you feel that the fact that the school had no money made a difference to what happened there, educationally?

MPW: No, I didn't. In fact, it probably—sometimes when you don't have things, you're more apt, and see, I was brought up like that. If you're denied something, I think you make more of an effort. So I wasn't particularly impressed. It was just something that I was brought up with. But I do remember Black Mountain needed nails, so when I left—and nails were hard to find at the time—I was going to send them some nails. But I don't know what happened, maybe I couldn't find the nails. (Laughs)

CB: What about the physical environment there? Had you been in a really rural place before?

MPW: Oh yes, because we would spend time with my grandmother, that was very rural. Even outhouses. So that was not different. It was interesting to have my own studio. I didn't have that at Spelman.

CB: Did you make a lot of work that summer at Black Mountain?

MPW: Not as much as I should have. (Laughs.) But I did.

...

CB: How much interaction did you have on weekends and that kind of thing with the other students and with the faculty?

MPW: Well, you know I'm trying to look back. You were always busy talking to someone, and there was a lot of conversation, especially at mealtimes. I remember—now, see, I didn't smoke. And that was the only time I sort of wished I smoked, because



Figure 6: Mary Parks Washington, *Love Letters*, 1989. Pencil drawing/collage, 25 1/2 x 33 1/2 inches.

"Letters of love to his sweetheart, later marriage and a reflection of the first daughter of four."

if you didn't have anything to say, you could always puff on the cigarette. (Laughs.) And much of the conversation took place after meals, and then we had lectures and—seems like we were always busy. It wasn't necessary for me to go off the campus. I don't know why I would go off anyway. I was always busy interacting with someone.

CB: I understand there was a dance that summer, that was a pretty big deal.

MPW: Oh, that was the Greek Ball, I think that's what it was called. That was Varda's. They had the Trojan horse, and I went as a column or something. I don't know if it was Corinthian or what. But I got this sheet, and I hope I didn't tear it up, but anyway (laughs), that was what I went as. But some people

were very fabulous. Yeah, it was a big thing. In fact, I think Black Mountain was dry, and someone went over and got some wine. I didn't care for wine that wasn't sweet. I put sugar in it. It was terrible. (Laughs.) It was awful. (Laughs.)

CB: What else do you remember about the dance? Did it go on to the wee hours, or—?

MPW: Oh, the wee hours of the night. And I think some people were disturbed about it, as I found out the next day. In fact, you know it was interesting to me. Now I was at this liberal school with these way out ideas—I mean, that was what I was told. But, now Varda—well, you know what a beatnik was—Varda was all of that. But he seemed to have upset a lot of people, and I didn't understand that. It seems like he intimidated them. They were sort of afraid, and I didn't understand that. Because he was Varda, he was himself. After I got married, and after so many years, I moved to California. And I looked up Varda, and we became very good friends. He lived on a houseboat in

Sausalito. He was a gracious host; my kids loved to go there, and once he had a—this was for adults only—he had a big party, and women couldn't wear black, you had to wear a color, a flower behind your left ear. Let's see, and then they had—was it a goat, a lamb or something—there was a procession with carrying the lamb on a pole. And he just did fabulous things like that. Once he came down and spent the night because he was on his way to Los Angeles, and I live further south. So I fixed him a nice lunch, and he was so appreciative. He was also having a show there, and I went with him to some people who had bought his painting. Now, Varda didn't work with the money. Mostly trading his paints. He had a daughter in private school. He would pay for her schooling with paintings. He bought his car with a painting. And this car didn't have brakes, and we were going down a hill with no brakes, so—we made it okay though. But that's just the way he was. A very kind and sensitive person

CB: There was a dance program at the school the summer you were there, is that right?

MPW: Yeah. Well, they did have a program, but I wasn't into it. Jacob Lawrence's wife, Gwen, taught some classes. I love dancing, I don't know why I didn't, I must have been too busy.

CB: Do you think it affected the rest of your life, having been there?

MPW: I think it has to a certain extent. I didn't at first, but, it's like—I don't crochet, but I've seen people start crochet, and they have this long string, then you hook it up—well, it seems like the string started at Black Mountain, and as time went by something would hook on, like the working, and the art—the different things I would do would reflect back to Black Mountain. And frankly, I never thought it would have an influence on me, but I think it has. And I guess that's why Black Mountain is Black Mountain. I'm sure there are a lot of flaws, but I think the idea, and what was transpiring, must have had a big effect on many people.

CB: What do you think made it unique?

MPW: I'm sure there were other schools where you went in your bare feet, and that was different for me, and I'm sure there were other schools where you wore pants, and



Figure 7: Mary Parks Washington, *Aunt Gussie*, 1996. Acrylic/collage on canvas, 30 x 30 inches.

“Aunt Gussie loved her umbrella and carried it rain or shine. Perhaps it was her shield of protection from the unhappy world she lived in. Her focus was paying her weekly insurance policy and planning for a fine funeral.”

maybe you had an evening dress on a Saturday night. That’s a good question. I wish I could answer that. I really do. (Laughs.) Maybe I haven’t thought about it. I just took it for granted that it must be something. . . . Maybe it was an experience that you weren’t aware of at the time. In fact, I know I wasn’t. That you would reflect back on. That’s just about all I can answer.

CB: Is there anything that you’d like to add to the discussion that you remember or think was particularly important to you? Anything we haven’t covered?

MPW: Well, let’s see. I found Albers a very interesting person. Like I said, he was very stern. But some things took place at Black Mountain that I didn’t quite understand, and I didn’t pay too much attention to. Once he had a party, and he invited all the students, but the two Negro girls didn’t go. Now, he had us at another gathering, with some faculty people. I never understood that. Then, let’s see—there was an incident where he would come and visit students, and, like I said, he expected a lot out of people, and I don’t know if he—maybe he didn’t think I was reacting like I should. Because once, a group was singing, he came over and made us get up. I don’t sing. I really don’t care to sing. (Laughs.) But I think he thought we should be in the crowd. . . I had finished college, so I had a job in September. I told him I didn’t think I was quite prepared, because I’d never taught before, and he was so sympathetic. I had said to myself, I said I’m going to give him what I think he wants to hear. I think he thought maybe I was a little arrogant, or maybe I wasn’t appreciative or something, but that was

just my way. But then he turned about, after that. And he saw me different. So something changed. (Laughs.) But you know, I never had a discussion with him.

...

MPW: I think I would like to say this. I went to both reunions, one in San Francisco and one in Black Mountain. I never understood why Varda wasn't mentioned at the first one or the second one. Because he was a great influence. I mean, he carried the summer, whether people liked it or not. Now the students loved him, but I think the faculty thought that he was going to do something, and it puzzled me, because I came from a very, very (laughs) severe and, well, a whole different background, and he didn't bother me. So there was this person who is connected, I wish I could think of the name of him, I think he's in New York; he's writing a play about Black Mountain. And he had never heard of Varda. I was trying to tell him, because that should have been part of his play. Because there was so much drama that summer, because of Varda. I think maybe Jacob Lawrence wasn't mentioned, unless somebody was on the panel. Some people were really—of course I didn't know them all, so I don't know. I will say this: being only two Negro girls when I first went to the reunion in San Francisco, well, I didn't know anyone, I said, but people will probably recognize me because I was one of the two. Well, that was just the most interesting thing. There were people there from my class, but they didn't remember me until I went up and made myself known. I reflect back on Duberman [Martin Duberman, author of the history *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community*—in his chapter, when there was sort of a split because some faculty were for and I just said, I think I said this on the panel: If the faculty had known, and the people in Asheville, that I would come and—well, wouldn't create anything anyway—wouldn't even be remembered. (Laughs.)

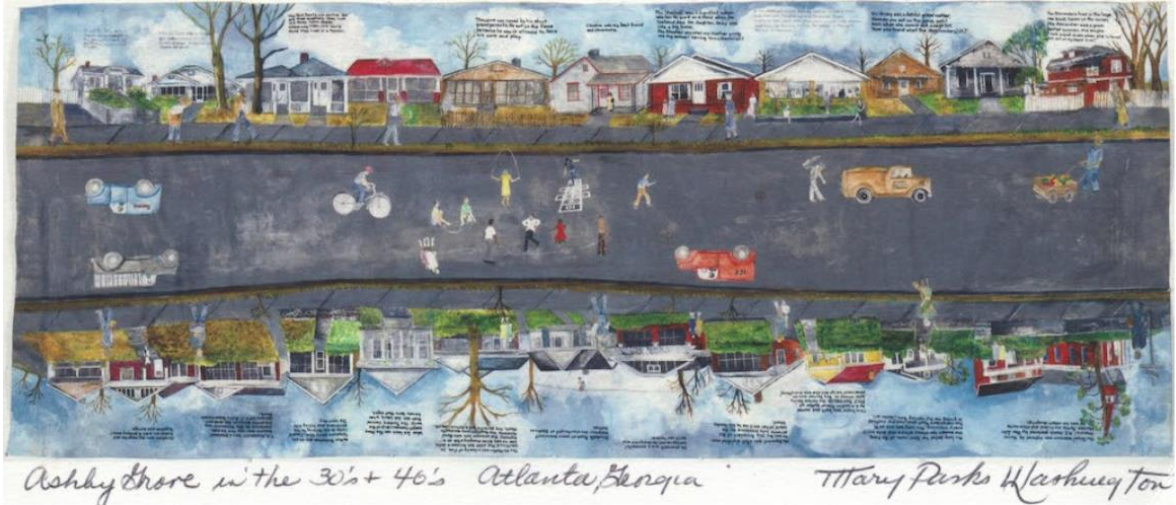


Figure 8: Mary Parks Washington, *Ashby Grove in the '30s and '40s, Atlanta, Georgia*, ca. 1980s-1990s.

This mural of Ashby Grove (now Joseph E. Lowery Boulevard SW) features the names of several prominent Atlanta individuals, including Elizabeth Prophet, E. Franklin Frazier, T. M. Alexander. The neighborhood is close to the Atlanta University Center (Clark Atlanta University, Morehouse College, Morris Brown College, and Spelman College).

CB: What was your feeling about the faculty's attitude about your being there that summer? Do you think that the people who were against the integration were against it because of fear of reprisals from the community, or something else?

MPW: Well, see, I didn't realize when I was there. It was 1997 or whenever the book came out. I didn't know there was anything about it. The only experience I had—there was a woman who came on the campus in a car, and I was walking down the road, and she asked me for directions and I gave her directions. Some person's mother was ill, and she needed a nurse. So she was very cordial. But in the dining room, we sat anywhere we wanted to sit. Well, she was sitting down, and when I sat down, she hopped up. And then my friend, Ora, from Atlanta, sat down at the table where she had moved. She hopped up again. (Laughs.) And, you know, we didn't know what was going on, but some people did. So other than that, I didn't know anything, and I didn't know there was a split, or there was a contradiction. But I could see, because okay, this is Carolina, and that was a law, and this was something different. I think they tried to get many students to come, and I think some came from Fisk, but they didn't come back, and the main reason was because, see, being a Negro, Black, African American—you

had to have a degree. I couldn't go to Black Mountain and say that I went. I had to have a degree to get a job. In other words, you had to be a little *better than*. But see, when I came, I'd gotten my degree, so it didn't matter.

CB: Well, thank you so much. Thank you so much.

MPW: Well, you're certainly welcome, and it's nice to be back.

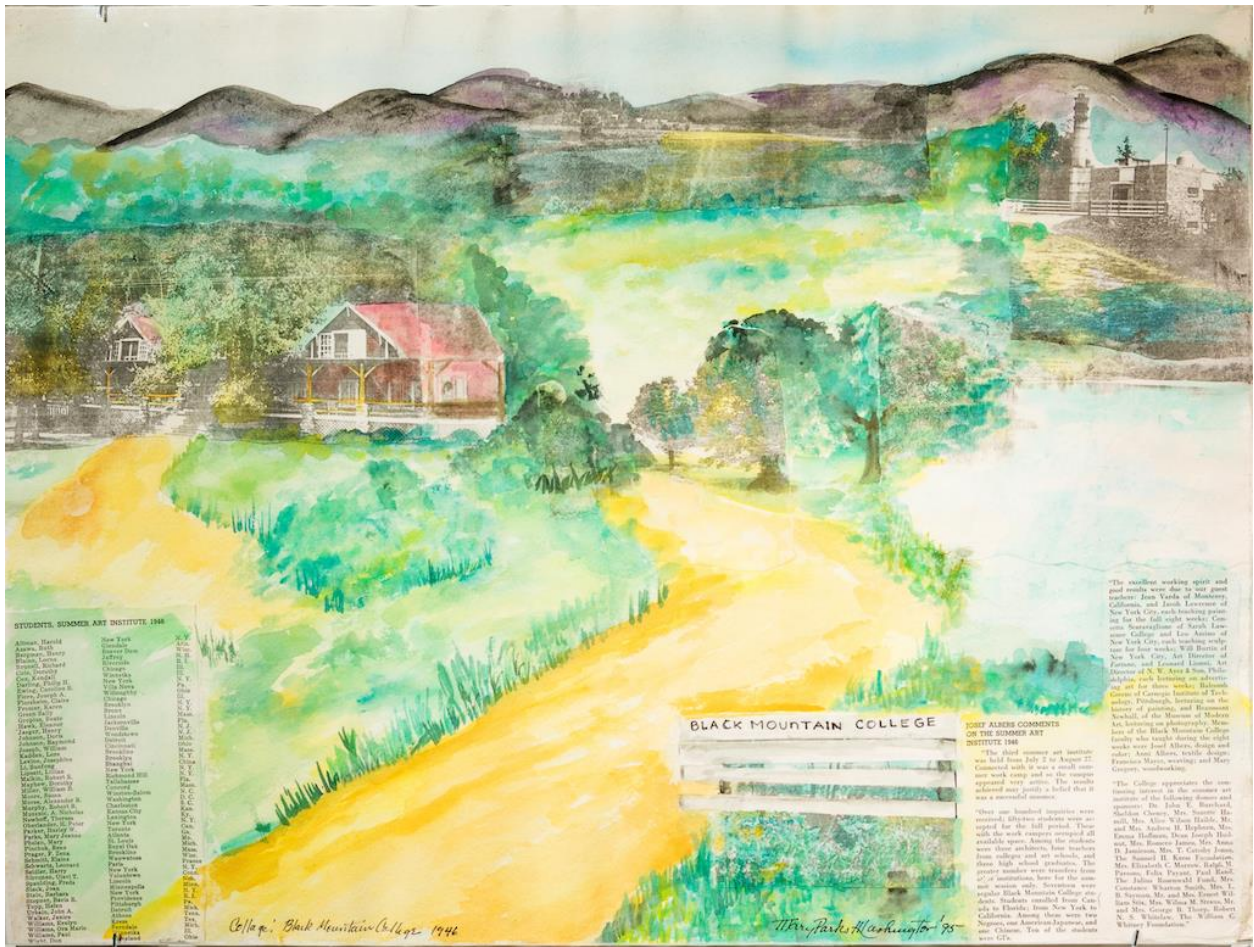


Figure 9: Mary Parks Washington, *Untitled (Black Mountain College histcollage)*, ca. 1995. Mixed media (watercolor and newsprint) on paper. Collection of Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center. Gift of the Artist.