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Features

Partners in Research: Martin Summers RI '08 and Wangui Muigai '09

By Cara Feinberg

Historian Martin Summers didn't know he needed a Radcliffe Research Partner . . . until he met Harvard undergraduate Wangui Muigai '09.



Nearly every Wednesday afternoon in a brown clapboard house on Radcliffe's Bunting Quadrangle, history professor Martin Summers RI '08 and Wangui Muigai '09 meet in his bare-walled office to discuss hysteria, insanity, and ghosts.

Muigai (whose Kenyan Kikuyu name is pronounced *One-goy Moi-guy*), usually arrives with a backpack brimming with books and an armful of neatly organized papers—Xeroxed turn-of-the-century African American newspapers; 1930s transcripts of interviews with former slaves; excerpts about race, poverty, and mental illness from archived medical journals.

Muigai has been helping Summers, a Burkhardt Fellow at the Radcliffe Institute and an associate professor of history at the University of Texas at Austin, research his upcoming book, "Race, Madness, and the State: A History of African American Patients at St. Elizabeths Hospital, 1855–1970." A specialist in the history and social construction of race, gender, and sexuality in the modern era, Summers is spending the year as one of fifty-two Radcliffe Institute fellows—a select group of scholars, scientists, artists, and musicians chosen annually from among 750 to 800 international applicants to work at Radcliffe for a year on a project of their choice. In recent years, the fellowship program has become more selective than Harvard College, accepting only six percent of its applicants.

Originally, says Summers, he had decided *not* to take on a research assistant during his fellowship; his year would be split between time at Radcliffe and regular trips to the National Archives and St. Elizabeths Hospital in Washington, DC, a sprawling 150-year-old federal mental institution he plans

to use as his book's central case study. Supervising a research assistant was not in the cards.

Sitting behind his metal desk across from Muigai on a sunny April afternoon, Summers shakes his head and chuckles. "I thought I knew what I needed—and what I didn't need," he says, running his hand back and forth over his salt-and-pepper buzz cut. "That was before I met Wangui."

Each year, the Radcliffe Institute selects forty to sixty Harvard undergraduates to participate in its Research Partnership program, one of several opportunities for student scholarship at the Institute. Other programs are the Carol K. Pforzheimer Fellowships for undergraduate research, Dissertation Completion Fellowships, and Radcliffe Science Events for undergraduate and graduate students [see sidebars "Resources I never expected to see as an undergraduate," "What it's like to be a working scientist," and "A glimpse of the academic world to come"]. But the Radcliffe Research Partnership is the Institute's only program that pairs students with professional scholars, providing a unique opportunity for undergraduates to work side-by-side with some of the finest scholars, artists, and scientists in the world. Since it began in 1991, nearly five hundred undergraduates have participated in the partnership program.

A junior majoring in history and science, Wangui Muigai knew little about the partnership program when, last September, she came across the 2007–2008 catalog of Radcliffe fellows. Born in Harlem, New York, to Kenyan immigrants, she has long been interested in both African American issues and the history of science. Casually flipping through the fellows' booklet, she was stunned to come across Summers—a scholar whose interests she says, "overlapped so completely with my own."

Tall and willowy with a halo of tight black curls pushed back in a headband, Muigai is not the type to sit still. Currently an editor and writer for the *Harvard Book Review*, she fills her days with a patchwork of other activities, including ballet classes (she has been dancing since age four), rehearsals for the Harvard



Black Community and Student Theatre (she is its technical director), and a six-hour-a-week job at the Harvard Business School alumni relations office.

Despite her busy schedule—and the fact that Summers had not requested an assistant—Muigai sent off an application for a research partnership. Summers read her cover letter and agreed to meet for an interview. “She spoke so passionately about her own research interests,” he says, recalling how struck he was by her clarity and focus. Within minutes of meeting her, he knew he would have to change his mind about hiring an assistant.

Seven months into her research partnership with Summers, Muigai still bubbles with excitement when she talks about their work together. Summers’s project, she explains, examines a cross section of the black patients housed at St. Elizabeths, an institution established in 1855 by an act of Congress, with the advocacy of mental health reformer Dorothea Dix. Originally called the Government Hospital for the Insane, the institution, situated atop a bluff overlooking what is now downtown Washington, treated Civil War soldiers (and, later, other members of the military) as well as patients under federal jurisdiction, including residents of Native American reservations and civilian Washington, DC, residents—many of whom were African American. At its peak, the sixty-one-building facility housed seven thousand patients and four thousand employees; today, only a few hundred remain.



Summers chose to focus on the hospital after discovering a trove of documents—correspondence, medical records, writings by patients—during a 2001 trip to the National Archives. “I have long been interested in how African Americans construct their identity in relationship to the state,” he explains, but “most of the existing research is focused on schools, prisons, or the military.” While there is significant scholarship on race and the history of medicine, he says, few works “situate race at the center of the history of mental illness,” examining both how race shaped mental health doctrines and practices and how those practices, in turn, produced ideas about race.

Over the past two semesters, Muigai has helped Summers research early ideas about mental illness in the black community. Recently, she has been sifting through leather-bound volumes of *The American Slave*, a twenty-five-book series of interviews with former slaves conducted in the 1930s by members of President Franklin Roosevelt’s Works Progress Administration (WPA). Her task: to find evidence of slaves’ ideas about illness and the supernatural—whether ghosts, spirits, and voodoo might have been used as explanations for mental distress.

For Summers, the narratives provide essential background about African Americans’ relationship to mental health and treatment, through either their discussion of or their silence on the issues. (Given that mental illness was rarely discussed in many black communities, says Summers, the WPA’s white interviewers “likely only compounded the silence issue.”)

For Muigai, the narratives are a gold mine of a different sort. Next year, she will begin a thesis exploring abortion and black women—a demographic whose perspective on the issue is rarely represented in scholarly literature. The slave testimonies, she told Summers in a recent Wednesday session, are rife with helpful passages about childbirth and midwifery.

Throughout the year, Muigai says, those regular discussions with Summers have taught her as much about the world of academia as they have about the research itself. After college, she plans to pursue a doctorate in history, and her work with Summers, she says, has been “invaluable in cementing that decision.” More immediately, the partnership has helped propel her toward new research opportunities: This summer, she will join fourteen other college sophomores and juniors at the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History in New York City, a selective summer scholarship program. It was Summers who suggested she apply.

“I now have a very clear idea of just how daunting—and exciting—a long-term research project like this can be,” she says, nodding at Summers from across the desk.

“It can take years and years,” he responds, flashing a smile, “even longer without a good research assistant.”

Cara Feinberg is a freelance writer whose work has appeared in the American Prospect and the Boston Globe.

Photos by Leah Fasten