

Women Inspire Transcription: Elizabeth J. West, Professor of English

Presented Feb. 5, 2019 at Centennial Hall, Georgia State University

Kavita Pandit: I'm so delighted to welcome you all to the Spring 2019 Women Inspire lecture. I'm going to, in a minute, invite the provost to come up and introduce our guest. But before I do that, I want to give a big thanks to two individuals who helped make today happen: Chandler Brown and Demetra Watson. I would like to thank our student ambassadors for always doing an awesome job. Thanks to the IT folks. They're always assisting from behind the scenes and I thought it would be nice to give them a shout-out. So please give them a round of applause.

APPLAUSE

Kavita Pandit: For those of you who are just coming in, there are plenty of seats here. Please don't be shy. With that, let me invite Provost Risa Palm to come up and introduce our guest speaker.

APPLAUSE

Provost Risa Palm: Thanks Kavita and I also want to welcome you to the first women's inspire of this year and it's the last one of this semester so it's the first and last. As you know, today's speaker is Dr. Elizabeth West. She is a professor of English and affiliate faculty member in the department of African American studies. Dr. West earned her Ph.D. in English with a certificate in Women's Studies at Emory University and her scholarship focuses on spirituality and gender in the African Diasporic literatures of the Americas. She's the author of "African Spirituality in Black Women's Fiction" and she also coedited "Literary Expressions of African Spirituality." Her work has been published in numerous anthologies. She also is doing a great deal of service for the university and for her profession. She's the executive director of the South Atlantic Modern Language Association and she serves on the advisory board for the Obama Institute for transnational studies. She also was awarded an Obama Institute in residence, a research fellowship for 2019 and she's currently working on a biographical history of forced migrations and black family formations in the American south. Her talk today is titled "And They Raise Black Men: Black Women, Family, and Resistance in the American South." Please help me welcome to the podium Dr. Elizabeth West.

APPLAUSE

Dr. Elizabeth West: Good afternoon. I want to express my appreciation to the Provost for this opportunity and to the staff: If I don't look good, it's not your fault.

LAUGHTER

West: In his August 31, 2018 eulogy of the late performer and Queen of Soul Aretha Franklin, Reverend Jasper Williams Jr., Pastor of Salem Baptist Church in Atlanta stunned listeners with his insinuation that the great flaw in the life of this icon was that she had been a single mother and more specifically, a single mother of sons. His declaration that "A black woman cannot raise a Black boy to be a man" was met with fire and fury across social media. Franklin's family would respond afterward that they found William's eulogy to be offensive and distasteful. In what was expected to be a reflection of Franklin's life achievements and influence, Williams instead turned into a diatribe of what he deemed the ills of black folk and culture. In this vein, he expressed his anger over the multitudes of black households where "precious, proud, fine, black women head families consisting of children who are the images of

‘abortions after birth’’. Williams’ argument comes down to a simple premise: two parents, man led households, stand as the model for ideal family structure and that women led households signal a defect in both familial and social order. Numerous historical and cultural works tracing black women’s central role in survival of black families and communities, counter Williams’ uncritical assertion but my own ill ease over his words spawn from my familiarity with two black women central to my own personal history and my current research. The lives of Frances Cistrunk and Louisa Dent, two 19th century enslaved and later emancipated women in the rural South, show that contrary to Williams’ proclamation, Black women have for generations raised Black boys to be men and have played a key role in the cultural and economic survival of Black families and communities.

I want to share with you fragments of the lives of Frances and Louisa that illustrate the powerful roles of Black women leading single parent households and to ask that we consider the necessity of reshaping tales of Black women’s failures into narratives of their resistance and resilience.

Frances and Louisa do not seem to have encountered one another while alive but their lives intersected two generations later via marriage between descendants from each matriarch’s line. Their lives in South Eastern central Mississippi, just county lines apart, overlapped for at least two decades. Their descendants, Carl Cistrunk and Annie Denson married in 1920, and Louisa would live to know the children of this union. A generation apart, Francis and Louisa came through Emancipation each having to assume the role of household heads. They built close-knit industrious families that not only survived the aftermath of slavery and post Reconstruction, but paved a road for their future generations.

Looking at Louisa and Frances, we find both women enslaved in pre-1865 Mississippi. Having given birth to her children before Emancipation, Frances represents the legacy of forced female led households in Black enslaved communities. A mother of five sons and one daughter, she is able to sustain her children in a single unified household throughout their childhood, enslaved and free. As an enslaved woman, Frances is somewhat of an anomaly in the sense that the forced migratory path she has to follow does not result in separation from her children. The records suggest she is, however, separated from the fathers of her oldest four children and today, I have found no evidence of a sustained father figure that stayed with Frances and her children. Frances and her older five children are enslaved in Georgia before her enslaver, Jacob Sistrunk, moves them along with family to Mississippi in the years leading up to the civil war. Frances and children are listed on the slave schedule for Neshoba County with Jacob Sistrunk as owner. In 1861 at the onset of war, she gives birth to her youngest child and likely second child fathered by her master, Jacob Sistrunk.

Ten years after the 1860 slave schedule showing Frances and her children as property of Jacob, we find them intact in their dwelling in the 1870 census in Noxubee County with Frances as head of household. What happens between 1860 and 1870 for Frances and her household, and the later decade 1870-1880, is commendable especially when we consider the circumstances of her life. With one exception, I have been unable to locate Frances and her children between the time of the 1860-1870 census. I found the middle sibling Shad, however, on an 1865 Freedman’s Ledger report of offenses. He is cited for stealing a chicken from the farm where he was hired as a laborer. Shadrick is a young man at this time, 17 or 18 years old. As I reviewed that document, I thought about our present-day climate in which Black mothers face an environment where their children, sons and daughters, face economic and social challenges at disproportionately higher rates than the general population. Imagining the picture of 17-year-old Shadrick stealing a chicken, I think in a similar light to the young Black teenage males today who,

whether out of want or need, engage in nonviolent actions that put them at much greater risk of losing their lives. Whether the threat is actual or presumed, the results can be fatal for them. If one thinks of the devastation and the lack of resources and food in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the parallel to the Civil War aftermath is striking. When Whites were seen in grocery stores and drug stores helping themselves to supplies they needed, the news sources did not report these occurrences as looting or theft. In the case of Blacks who acted similarly, we saw their images plastered across newspapers and videocasts painting them not as hungry, desperate, or in need, but again as vagrant. I think of Frances facing those kinds of struggles in 1865, much like Black mothers face nearly a century and a half later in our own moment. What kind of challenges awaited Frances after the war? Not unlike today with Black women fearing for their children's safety in encounters with the law, Frances surely had to be concerned. She was the mother of five sons and one daughter. How did she manage to save Shad from going down a road of criminality? How did she redirect his hunger and anger to shape him into the father and provider that he would become?

The end of 1865 marks a destitute economic period in the South. If it is difficult for Whites, clearly Blacks are as well gripped by the poverty born out of this devastated economy. Here is Frances with six children, a son who has been accused of theft, likely out of need for himself and his family. Remarkably, they emerge out of that moment, which could have been fatal for Shad. In 1870, they are safe and together in a household under the leadership of their mother. By the mid 1870's, Shad and his brothers, John and Hilman, are landowners and we find their names on Noxubee county deed transfer ledgers. By 1880, the sons are married and heading their own households with farms that they own. Today, in the outskirts of Louisville, Mississippi, you can find a road named in honor of one of her great grandsons, Bill, displaying their conversion of the former master's spelling of Sistrunk with an "S" to their own self identifying Cistrunk with a "C".

While most enslaved African Americans did not have the luxury of recording their histories in writing, they utilized other means. Oral histories that were passed on generationally were key to many families linking past to present. This included family rituals such as burial practices, spiritual practices, food preparation, shared cosmologies, ways of being and knowing, the names of descendants as well. In some instances they were acts, that while unacknowledged as significant by enslaves, represented resounding measures of resistance. In the case of Frances, the naming of her third son, Shadrick, reveals her reach for autonomy and memory. While her children were otherwise given the Anglo western names common of the White Sistrunk enslavers, the name "Shadrick" was an exception. State of Georgia slave importation records for 1831 shed light on the possible inspiration for Frances' naming of her son, Shadrick. This record shows Dr. Samuel Oliver, distant cousin to Jacob Sistrunk, registering 22 enslaved persons into the State of Georgia, Elbert County. Among those listed, is 13-year-old Shadrick. At age 13, in 1831, Shadrick would have been Francis's peer. He is likely the father of Frances' son, Shadrick. Frances does not name Shadrick from the lot of Anglo or German names of her enslavers. She names her son Shadrick as a way of remembering and recording family lineage. Clearly when Frances names her son Shadrick, she has no idea that records would be preserved through archives or that science would advance to verify biological ancestors but perhaps what she counted on was the power of naming, the power of telling stories, and the power of instilling a deep-rooted ethos of family and kinship. Frances was drawing on traditions and belief systems that for generations and thousands of years shaped the lives of Africans before the middle passage.

In the case of Louisa, we find a contrasting set of familial circumstances from that of Frances. In her senior years, Louisa told the story of two great traumas of her life. By virtue of physical manifestation, the memory of her maimed foot stayed with Louisa and she shared the account with her great grandchildren the event that had nearly taken her life.

Whether Louisa suffered through this near death event before or after being sold away from her mother is unclear, but she was a young girl when she was torn away from her mother and sold. She passed on no details of the actual transaction. It is unclear whether she was sold at an auction or through a privately negotiated sale, but the final scene that stayed with her was being pulled away from her mother who, through a flood of tears, instructed her to remember “Jesus saves.” Louisa’s survival and later role as central ancestral figure for later generations, illustrates the ways in which African Americans imparted history, wisdom, and love to their descendants. A sense of self and worth had been embedded in Louisa and this is underscored in the parting message from her mother. In the split second she had to leave her child with some sense of family and a guiding ethos to sustain her, Louisa’s mother gave her those two words. There was no time for lengthy philosophy or prophecy. There was a flashing moment in which a mother might leave her young child a vision that would heal and help her to look ahead. Louisa’s mother was imparting upon her child a legacy of hope. Her words were not a call for her young daughter to remember specific Christian doctrine or history, but the two words embodied a cultural ethos that she hoped would serve her child into the future. “Jesus saves” was code phraseology for a world view anchored in love, resistance and hope. Louisa’s mother was telling her not to give in to despair and to believe in the coming of greater times.

In 1880, Louisa is a married woman in a household with children. She represents the masses of newly freed people in the aftermath of the Civil War who sought marriage to solidify family ties and kinship groups after the war. She is married and by indication of her married surname, Dent, her biological children are born out of this marriage to Levy. Strikingly, Louisa and Levy take on a sibling group whose parents, Louis and Leneza Jones, may or may not have been blood relations to either Louisa or Levy. During this time of economic hardships, they assumed surrogacy of six siblings whose parents had likely died. They took in the two younger sons who appear in their household in the 1900 census, but by 1910 Levy has died and Louisa is now a single, Black, widowed mother raising her two biological sons, the two surrogate Jones sons, and a younger son that has been adopted into the household. Census and oral stories of Louisa tell a remarkable story. As head of household, she guides her sons into adulthood. Her son, Watt, takes the role as family head by 1930 when we find the family now farming their own land. Watt is married with children and Louisa and Watt’s wife are listed as dependents in the household that he leads. Watt’s land was a revered piece of land that brought him much respect in his Jasper county community. He owned a spread that sat on top of a hill and according to family legends, all who drove in the vicinity could not miss the view of Watt’s house atop the hill.

How Louisa gets to the point of turning the reigns over to her sons is exemplary of the story of the perseverance and resilience of Black mothers. Unlike the children of Francis, Louisa is separated from her mother as a young child. She does not have the advantage of closeness of proximity to her mother during the formative years of childhood. However, she represents the informal but systematic structures of enslaved communities. As a young child taken from her mother, she was still nurtured and embraced into a family fold. She, in turn, held to this ethos of family and kinship into adulthood and as she formed her own family.

The stories of Frances and Louisa remind us that great numbers of single Black women headed up households since the 400 years of U.S. slavery. They raised men who were responsible and caring but who during slavery, too often were denied rights of fatherhood. In the absence of fathers, Black women raised children and it was a family and kinship system that brought them through centuries of enslavement. The structures and belief systems that have shaped Black family formations in the U.S., like familial designs among other population groups, are not perfect models but the answer to challenges faced by Black families and communities is not a makeover to White imposed ideologies of family and kinship. In fact, such attempts by Blacks to latch on to notions of American individualism and division of the nuclear family would have been an impedance to Black survival, during and immediately after enslavement. The lives of Frances Cistrunk and Louisa Dent illustrate this danger. Though their lives were remarkable, Frances and Louisa represent the level of extraordinary that marked the everyday in the lives of Black women. They were extraordinary in a sense but in reality, their ingenuity and perseverance did not mark them as singular. Frances knew, as did Louisa, that survival may not seem evident or even likely in the thralls of trauma, but wise and loving ones beforehand had brought generations to the present. Facing what seemed insurmountable obstacles in households they were called to lead, these women did not flinch. They did not blink. They were the steadying forces of family. Perhaps as the Queen of Soul called for in her signature 1960's hit, they too might have liked just a little bit more "R-E-S-P-E-C-T." Thank you.

APPLAUSE

QUESTION AND ANSWER

Kavita Pandit: Thank you Elizabeth. Would you be willing to entertain some questions from the audience? The floor is open.

Dr. Elizabeth West: Let me just say this: I'm passing out two handouts for those of you who are like and can't believe a story unless I see some documentation. Take a look at some of the documents that I uncovered that helped shape this story.

Pandit: So please, raise your hand and we'll get a microphone to you. This is being recorded so we'd like you to use a microphone for your questions.

Audience Member: Well I find this fascinating as an archivist, myself, and as a resident of Neshoba county Mississippi. I suspect that your handout is probably going to answer my question, but I'm interested in the kinds of documentations and records that you used to create these histories.

Dr. Elizabeth West: It's been a really fascinating journey and I actually should give a shout-out to my graduate research assistant because he has been phenomenal in assisting me with my research. I couldn't have presented much of this without the work that Josh has done with me. On the other side, the beginnings of this – that picture of Louisa Dent, speaking of archives, was the first archival piece to all of this. And this was a family picture that when I was a child was still intact and that's the danger of families not appreciating what they have and how delicate artifacts are. But when I was child, this picture was a clear image and it was one of those pictures that my mom and aunt always had a story to accompany it. That was the start and without that oral history, none of this would be possible. Oddly enough, it was the story of Louisa that gave me the path to run with. The image of Frances Cistrunk also played an important role in this research as well. I only knew her when I was a very young child and my lasting memory of her was that she was mean as hell but what I discovered, and only recently, was how important she was to the story of the Cistrunks. She found my mother's family when they had migrated from Jasper county when they were young and living in Jackson. They later lived in a house with my grandmother and it was through her that my mother's sister actually identified Shadrick and Shadrick's mother, just by name. So that story was left with my aunt and those were my starting points. So that was the beginning and then from there came all the archival work, which is like a major hunt but I don't think I've ever had so much fun in my life.

Audience Member: One of the things I wrote down as you were speaking that struck me as important because sometimes we talk about, especially in recovery of archives, we talk about "giving voice" but one of the things I wrote down was "raising the voice of our ancestors" because the voices were already there and we just made them more prominent. So, thank you so much for making us realize that the voices were already there and for bringing them back. In my class we're talking about the politics of memory and how we construct stories and what gets remembered but also what gets left out. So can you talk about how it was for you to bring back this personal history of memory but also connecting it to the public history of memory?

Dr. Elizabeth West: I think that's been the excitement of this project for me because it started off as a personal project. Somebody in my family needed to write all this down because people's memories aren't getting any better. As I started recording what was known, I became more and more curious.

When I started this project, most of my family didn't know the history past Noah, who was my grandfather's father and they didn't know much about him. I realized that there was a story there that underscores the experience, the silenced experiences, of African Americans in the south, especially during slavery. The other thing that really caught my attention was the migration. In the oral stories of my family, no one ever told stories about going past the border of the Mississippi. I just always thought that they had been in Mississippi for forever but they had actually only been there for a generation. They had just come right before the Civil War and I was amazed how people were moving and moving so rapidly. Frances was born in Georgia but Frances' mother, as I'm tracing back, was likely coming over the border with the White Sistrunks at the turn of the century. They hadn't even been there two generations. So within two generations, these people have moved all over the place. It's amazing to see the movements of these folks.

Audience Member: How did these biases against single mothers start in the Black community or any community?

Dr. Elizabeth West: I think they start out of the necessity of those who originate these stories. When you have bred a society in the way in which you have separated families the way an enslaver separated African American families throughout the South, you have to create a narrative to explain that and you don't want to put it on yourself. For instance, we don't want to point to Thomas Jefferson and say "This was a man who fathered children, lived right with them, and would not acknowledge them and their children. He left their mother to be a single mother." So instead of acknowledging that, we create a different narrative and we say "Boy, ain't that a shame the way Black women raise their children and there's not a man present?". It's the narrative that works for the social power that White patriarchs structured that came out of colonial America and these are very difficult stereotypes to get beyond.