

**NASHVILLE'S FIRST PUBLIC HISTORIAN:  
JESSIE CARNEY SMITH AT FISK UNIVERSITY**

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## ABSTRACT

Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated on April 4, 1968, in Memphis, Tennessee. On that date, almost sixty years later, I conducted my interview with Dr. Jessie Carney Smith. Smith is now retired from her position as director of the Fisk library, a position she held for 55 years. No longer an occupant of the grand office she helped design, in the corner of the John Hope & Aurelia E. Franklin Library, she remains an active writer and public historian. Currently, Smith works on editing new volumes of her acclaimed encyclopedias. Smith's remarkable career has been the subject of one dissertation by Christa Hardy.

Christa Hardy, PhD graduate from Smith's alma mater University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign completed her dissertation, "Piecing of a Quilt: Jessie Carney Smith and the Making of African American Women's History," in 2010. Smith's successor at the Fisk library, Dr. Brandon Owens, completed his dissertation titled "'A History of Fisk University Library: 150 Years of African American Public History and Culture, 1866 – 2016" in 2020. The storied legacy and career of Jessie Carney Smith incorporates several elements of black history and culture. Smith witnessed and became a scholar-activist in the black freedom struggle. Smith became one of the most prolific librarians in the United States and became one of America's prominent black women historians. Smith's work is a part of the development of black history, black librarianship, black studies, and public history in the United States. Her role in the development of black public history is not so well known, and that topic is the focus of this thesis.

In 1965, Smith began her career as head librarian at Fisk, making endless contributions to black history. By the time of her retirement, several contemporaries concluded that her encyclopedias promoted black women's history and helped public education. Though there has been increasing interest in black librarianship, Smith somehow slips through the cracks. While

Arturo Schomburg, and Dorothy Porter were exceptional at both Fisk and Howard libraries, Smith furthered their pursuit of black history. Not guilty of self-adulation, Smith rarely mentions her accomplishments. Instead, she insists that Fisk should commemorate her great mentor and predecessor Arna Bontemps.<sup>1</sup> After all, it was those early years with Bontemps that introduced her to librarianship, and that formed the ethos of her first decade as head librarian.

Lastly, my thesis chapters are titled after Jessie Carney Smith's seminal reflective essay, "The Four Cultures" in *Black Librarian in America*. She concluded that the four cultures inspiring her career included: being a librarian, a woman, a black person and a southerner. Jessie Carney Smith's cultures are reflected throughout my thesis and inform my conclusion.

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<sup>1</sup> Jessie Carney Smith, interview by the author, April 4, 2023.

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## I. PATTERNS IN HISTORY OF BLACK LIBRARIANSHIP

*“There is the definite desire and determination to have a history, well documented, widely known at least within race circles, and administered as a stimulating and inspiring tradition for the coming generations.”<sup>2</sup>*

Black librarianship has been understudied in the field of library science and black history, leading to ignorance of significant scholarly contributions. Few attempts intersect the history of black librarianship into the broader study of intellectual history. Black librarianship is rooted in nineteenth century black intellectualism. This thesis makes the connection between black intellectuals and the development of black libraries, librarians, and the field of library science. Since the establishment of black/africana studies departments in the late 1960s, certain black libraries and librarians have garnered the attention of mainstream scholarship, such as Arturo Schomburg and Dorothy Porter Wesley.

Arturo Alfonso Schomburg, Puerto Rican and black bibliophile has been written about extensively in recent years. Scholars have often linked his career to the development of several libraries at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU), as well as several black intellectuals and scholars at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> However, Schomburg lacked a degree in library science, nor did he intend to pursue librarianship as a profession. Schomburg’s career is proof of the intersectionality between black intellectual history and librarianship, and thus underscores my primary argument: the field of black librarianship was a product of the black intellectual tradition.

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<sup>2</sup> Arturo Schomburg, “The Negro Digs Up His Own Past” in *New Negro: An Interpretation* (New York, Albert and Charles Boni), 1925.

<sup>3</sup> See Vanessa Kimberly Valdés, *Diasporic Blackness: The Life and Times of Arturo Alfonso Schomburg* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2017); Elinor Des Verney Sinnette, *Arthur Alfonso Schomburg – Black Bibliophile and Collector: A biography*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989).

I contend that black librarianship should be viewed as a part of the much larger black intellectual movement, a movement that produced generations of scholarly activism. Black librarianship should also be viewed as an integral part of the formation of black women's history and public history. Simply tracing the start of black librarianship to the first African Americans who attained degrees in library science contributes to the false assumption that the American education system has been historically fair to people of color. African American intellectuals, like Schomburg, took interest in archival methods long before the field of library science was established. Within higher education, pioneers in black history concerned themselves with preservation even before the modern concept of an archive. George Washington Williams, author of the first overall history of African Americans, shared he often frequented the library because he was convinced that there was an "inestimable" amount of material on African Americans.<sup>4</sup> Historian John Hope Franklin described his pursuit of African American history as an investigation, inferring that black history was a history that had to be rediscovered.

Even once the library profession was established, professional programs excluded black students and limited their opportunities in the field. By failing to recognize those who did the work of librarians as pioneers in history, such as Jessie Carney Smith, does a disservice to history and the field at large. Among the many distinctions given to black thinkers, a distinction that completely gets ignored is their achievements as archivists and/or preservationists.

Due to scarcity in documentation concerning African Americans, black intellectuals desired to document, preserve and commemorate the past. Making distinctions based on American academic standards ignores the shared missions of both black librarians and historians.

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<sup>4</sup> John Hope Franklin. "George Washington Williams, Historian." *The Journal of Negro History* 31, no. 1 (1946):65.

Ignoring Williams's achievements as an accomplishment in black archival methodology fails to encapsulate his significance to black librarianship.

For the purposes of analysis, black historians have often been segmented into generations.<sup>5</sup> For example, George Washington Williams is considered a member of the first generation of black historians while John Hope Franklin is considered a third-generation scholar. The first generation of black historians made it possible for Franklin and others to fully chronicle African American history.

### **Du Bois and the Black Librarian Ethos**

A central event in black history remains Booker T. Washington's 1895 Atlanta Compromise Speech at the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta. Washington's endorsement of industrial education, during the famous speech, led to friction between Washington and scholar activist W.E.B Du Bois. Du Bois initially supported Washington's speech, but later opposed its accommodationist tone. Du Bois's endorsement of a full liberal arts education inspired the establishment of the black library. For instance, the first stand-alone library at Fisk University dates to 1907. Du Bois's activism and academic vision can be linked to almost, if not all, black libraries. Du Bois, and many following his footsteps, dedicated the twentieth century to investigating the black past through scholarship.

The primary literature on black librarianship exists in the form of edited collections, and biographies.<sup>6</sup> Literary scholars have also investigated the archival method of certain black

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<sup>5</sup> See David Blight's review, David W. Blight. Review of *The Restoration of Black History: Benjamin Quarles and the Paradox of Race*, by Benjamin Quarles, *Reviews in American History* 17, no. 1 (1989): 152–58.

<sup>6</sup> Janet L. Sims-Wood, *Dorothy Porter Wesley at Howard University: Building a Legacy of Black History* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2014); Sinnette, *Arthur Alfonso Schomburg—Black Bibliophile and Collector*; and Ethelene Whitmore, *Regina Anderson Andrews: Harlem Renaissance Librarian* (Urbana, Chicago and Springfield, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2014).



bibliographers.<sup>7</sup> Recently, scholars have turned to histories of black library schools and training programs. Aisha M. Johnson-Jones's *The African American Struggle for Library Equality: The Untold Story of the Julius Rosenwald Fund Library Program* chronicled the history of black library programs funded by businessman and philanthropist Julius Rosenwald. Brandon Owens's dissertation focused, specifically, on the Fisk Library.

Outside of Owens's dissertation, scholars have ignored the practice of black librarianship as an active field in the black freedom struggle. Libraries were not only pivotal in the promotion of black scholarship, but black libraries also served as training grounds for activists in the civil rights movement. Historians have written at length about the founder of black history, Dr. Carter G. Woodson.<sup>8</sup> Though those biographies discuss at-length his role in building HBCU libraries, scholarship has overlooked the role of librarians as being of equal importance in founding black history. One of Woodson's major partnerships remains his collaboration with Dorothy Porter, library pioneer at Howard University. Even Wesley's biographer, Janet Sims-Wood, stressed that her biography of Wesley did not do justice to Wesley's career significance at Howard.<sup>9</sup>

After the Civil War, emphasis on black education became of great concern to both the North and the South. Prior to the war, though there were a small number of African Americans formally educated, they were primarily educated in the North. Slavery's end led to the formation of dozens of black colleges, many of whom are now HBCUs. During the era of Reconstruction

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<sup>7</sup> Referring to Laura Helton, "Making Lists, Keeping Time: Infrastructures of Black Inquiry, 1900–1950." In *Against a Sharp White Background: Infrastructures of African American*, edited by Brigitte Fielder and Jonathan Senchyne (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2019), 82-108.

<sup>8</sup> For information about Carter G. Woodson, see Pero Gaglo Dagbovie, *The Early History Movement, Carter G. Woodson, and Lorenzo Johnston Greene* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Jacqueline Anne Goggin, *Carter G. Woodson: A Life of Black History* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1997); Jessie Carney Smith, eds. "Carter G. Woodson," in *Notable Black American Men, Book II* (Detroit: Gale, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> Sims-Wood, *Dorothy Porter Wesley at Howard University*, Preface; Library of Congress, "Dorothy Porter Wesley at Howard University," Filmed February 2015 in Washington, D.C.; Library of Congress, Video. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2021689678/>.

(1866-1877), blacks experienced political, educational, and economic progress. Some African Americans were able to hold political offices and gain rights to vote. However, the end of reconstruction meant the reversal of almost all the progress made by African Americans. The infamous Compromise of 1877 meant the beginning of Jim Crow segregation. Although free from enslavement, Jim Crow legislation, southern terrorist groups, and widespread lynching deterred African Americans from any political participation. During the era of Jim Crow, the South suffered from a lack of formal schools and education compared to the North.<sup>10</sup>

Outside of prejudice, another factor limiting colleges was that its faculty was exclusively white. Predominantly white faculty and leadership meant an absence of black culture on campuses, leading to a generation of educated blacks in search of their history. There had been no attempt to even broach the subject of black history at formal schools. Rather, it was up to the determination of black scholars to pursue an ignored subject. Prior to the twentieth century, most African Americans were denied access to libraries. By the end of the nineteenth century, there had only been one African American, Edward Christopher Williams to gain formal education in a library school, in his case Western Reserve University in Ohio. Williams was formally trained at Western Reserve University from 1892 to 1894.<sup>11</sup>

In contrast, both Tuskegee Institute and Hampton Institute prioritized vocational training and education.<sup>12</sup> After graduating from Hampton Institute, Booker T. Washington became the president of Tuskegee institute in 1881. His education differed from the liberal arts education provided to black intellectuals who would later oppose him. Washington's success at Tuskegee

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<sup>10</sup> Aisha Johnson-Jones, *The African American Struggle for Library Equality: The Untold Story of the Julius Rosenwald Fund Library Program* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 2-3.

<sup>11</sup> E.J Josey, "Edward Christopher William: A Librarian's Librarian," *The Journal of Library History* 4, no. 2 (1969): 106-22.

<sup>12</sup> Earl E. Thorpe . "Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Dubois and Booker T. Washington, " *Negro History Bulletin* 20, no. 2 (1956): 39-42.

Institute justified his accommodationist approach, an approach that supported African Americans becoming skilled laborers. Washington's solution to what historian Rayford Logan would call the "nadir of race relations" was to prioritize blacks becoming valuable members of the American labor force, Whites in the North and the South endorsed his approach.<sup>13</sup> Booker T. Washington was also able to establish partnerships and friendships with white philanthropists including Andrew Carnegie, Julius Rosenwald, and John D. Rockefeller.<sup>14</sup> He succeeded in getting white philanthropists to support black education across the South. However, his intentions caused an uproar among more radical intellectuals. As it pertains to black librarianship, his connections with Carnegie and Rosenwald proved vital to the establishment of black libraries and library schools.

HBCU education, particularly in the nineteenth century, did not mean a black education. At the institutions run, taught and funded by whites, black students were not exposed to black history or black subjects. Instead, they were indoctrinated with a Eurocentric view of the world. White teachers at HBCUs intended to train a generation of educated blacks who were accommodationist and assimilated into a white American society. These private, elite institutions chartered a white Christian, liberal arts education. Adam K. Spence, dean at Fisk during Du Bois's tenure, stated that "if he is superior, give him inferior training; but if he is equal, give him the same."<sup>15</sup> Two students of Fisk University, Ida B. Wells and W.E.B Du Bois, became advocates for a new intellectual approach, an approach that contributed to the concept of black librarianship.

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<sup>13</sup> Booker T. Washington, "What Education Does for the Negro," *The Journal of Education* 61, no. 15 (1905): 397-98.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Norrell, *Up from History: The Life of Booker T. Washington* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 154, 274-76, 368-70.

<sup>15</sup> David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B Du Bois: A Biography of a Race 1868-1963* (New York: Henry Holt, 1993), 59.

Du Bois and Wells were both advocates for social and political change. At the turn of the century, Ida B. Wells became the face of black women's activism. She spoke against rape, lynchings and Jim Crow. As an educator, she mentored and stewarded black women scholars. Despite the lack of recognition given to black women as intellectual and scholars, Wells was one of Du Bois's greatest influences. Both Wells and Du Bois were students at Fisk University. While Du Bois graduated from Fisk in 1888, Wells briefly attended the institution for summer sessions. For Du Bois, Fisk introduced him to the Jim Crow south. Although trained in the classics and inundated with European philosophy, he became well-aware of the rise in southern lynchings. Du Bois's journey to Fisk demonstrated class divisions among Black Americans during the late 19th century. Although HBCUs were schools for Black Americans, institutions such as Fisk were elitist. In the words of historian David Levering Lewis, "dancing off a pinhead of privilege, the sons and daughters of affluent Afro-America came to Fisk, as they did Atlanta, Talledega, Howard, Lincoln, and a handful of other colleges, in such numbers that, although never the majority, they set the tone and defined the institutional character".<sup>16</sup>

While Ida B. Wells' family had the economic means to send her to Fisk, Lemoyne and Rust College, Du Bois relied on the community of Great Barrington, Massachusetts for financial support.<sup>17</sup> In contrast, Ida B. Wells came from an educated, middle-class family in the South. After the Civil War, her father served on the board of trustees at Shaw University.<sup>18</sup> The first iteration of the "New Negro" class shared radical views of how to attain freedom and equality, establishing a new pathway for all African Americans.

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<sup>16</sup> Lewis, *W.E.B Du Bois: A Biography of a Race 1868-1963*, 61.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 52-56.

<sup>18</sup> Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *The Memphis Diary of Ida B. Wells: An Intimate Portrait of the Activist As a Young Woman* (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 1995), 7.

Ida B. Wells's work as a journalist should be viewed much in the same way as Frederick Douglass or Du Bois. There was no way she could have been a PhD in the south, or a "librarian." But looking at her obvious impact on and in scholarship, she is one of the preeminent African American scholar-activists, chronicling the traumatic period of Jim Crow. Wells also fits into the category of documenter. Her career as a scholar, activist, and journalist should also be seen as an early practice of public intellectualism. Though she did not directly work in a library, Wells served on several committees that supported desegregated libraries and education. Her role in the Women's club movement could also be seen as a precursor to the radical leadership styles of future librarian women. Future black women librarians would cite Wells as an inspiration for their black feminist ideology put into practice.

Edward Williams, representative of the black middle class, stressed the importance of library services for African Americans. Like Du Bois, he was trained in the classics, and felt that a liberal arts education was essential for African American progress. While Williams's experience came primarily from the North, Du Bois's time in the South inspired his investigation into the Black past. As it pertained to the quality of education, Fisk's liberal arts education made it a "good college for students of color."<sup>19</sup> However, it was the reality and the brutality of southern lynchings and segregation in the South that sparked his further investigation into the color line. Fisk's library was one of the most robust amongst HBCUs. As an undergraduate, Du Bois spent most of his time learning about the "literary lore of the past and present" on the second floor of his male dormitory.<sup>20</sup> After Du Bois's departure from Fisk, the university's library developed one of the most significant black collections in the country.

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<sup>19</sup> Lewis, 77.

<sup>20</sup> *Fisk Herald*, April 1889, 5

1895 was significant for Du Bois for two reasons. In 1895, Du Bois became the first African American to gain a PhD from Harvard. In the same year, Washington gave his famous speech in Atlanta, a speech that proved to be “one of the most consequential announcements in American history.”<sup>21</sup> Du Bois’s experience at Harvard symbolized the racist attitudes towards black institutions. Upon acceptance, Harvard refused to acknowledge Du Bois’s Fisk degree credits despite his curriculum being of equal value. Subsequently, Du Bois was forced to earn an additional bachelor's degree from Harvard in 1890.<sup>22</sup> Du Bois’s thesis and dissertation at Harvard signaled the dawn of a new black intellectual age. Du Bois’s graduate thesis and dissertation focused on the Atlantic slave trade. Identifying Du Bois’s career as the central point in African American scholarship demonstrates that nineteenth century intellectualism influenced the values and visions that later shaped the black librarianship. Du Bois’s education at both Fisk and Harvard made him an impassioned advocate for education reform. It was no longer acceptable for Blacks to be taught just how to read and write. For Du Bois and his mentor Ida B. Wells, there needed to be a specific education for Black America, an education that centered the black collective past and experience. A radical and active education needed to be chronicled, studied and then preserved. Out of these turn of the century thoughts and ideas, the black archival methodology would emerge in the twentieth century.

Though Du Bois had not always opposed Washington, the Atlanta Compromise would mark the start of their famous feud. No African American had more political, social, or economic power than Washington at the start of the twentieth century. After all, Washington had built Tuskegee Institute and influenced many other colleges and schools. Coined the wizard of Tuskegee, Washington was a shrewd businessman who established an economic pathway for

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<sup>21</sup> Lewis, 174

<sup>22</sup> Lewis, 72-78.

blacks. Before Du Bois took his professorship at Wilberforce University, Washington offered him a job as professor at Tuskegee Institute. Du Bois ultimately concluded that Tuskegee's program was not in need of his services.<sup>23</sup> Du Bois's refusal to work at Tuskegee demonstrated the negative perception for industrial education and Du Bois's growing desire for a more radical education for blacks.

### **Intellectual Organization, Establishing A Black Archive**

In 1897, Du Bois joined the American Negro Academy (ANA). Referred to as "the first major black learned society," The ANA was run and led by only black men.<sup>24</sup> Led by intellectual Alexander Crummell, an elite class of black men encouraged African Americans to become leaders and scholars. This period of Du Bois's career shaped his later controversial Talented Tenth philosophy. While men such as Du Bois and Crummell claimed black middle class intellectual leadership, black women served as intellectual leaders and organizers as well.

Black women formed the National Association for Colored Women (NACW) on formed July 21, 1896.<sup>25</sup> The NACW inspired the later scholarly activism seen in twentieth century black women librarians. Like the ANA, the NACW explored the color line both domestically and abroad. The growth of women's clubs in the late nineteenth century illustrated the strategic activism of black women. Together, both black middle-class men and women opposed Washington's accommodationist vision.

No ideology formed during the 19th century demonstrated black elitism more than Du Bois's Talented tenth philosophy, introduced in 1903. While scholars have criticized the

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<sup>23</sup> Mark Bauerlein, "Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois: The Origins of a Bitter Intellectual Battle." *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 46 (2004): 108

<sup>24</sup> Quote "the first major Black learned society" is from Alfred Moss, *The American Negro Academy: Voice of the Talented Tenth* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 1.

<sup>25</sup> Beverly W. Jones, "Mary Church Terrell and the National Association of Colored Women, 1896 to 1901," *The Journal of Negro History* 67, no. 1 (1982): 22.

talented tenth for being elitist in principle, historian Stephanie Shaw argued that it was neither an elitist nor conservative philosophy.<sup>26</sup> Instead, the talented tenth was a thoroughly radical proposition put forth at a time when many thinkers, writers, and activists were proposing alternatives to what people regularly described as a “Gospel of Wealth.”<sup>27</sup> Du Bois’s *Souls of Black Folk*, published in 1903, remains one of the foundational texts in African American history. Furthermore, Du Bois’s work inspired and shaped the values of black scholars and librarians of the twentieth century.<sup>28</sup>

Booker T. Washington’s relationship with philanthropist Andrew Carnegie has been long documented.<sup>29</sup> To Washington’s and Carnegie’s credit, their partnership established several HBCU and academic libraries. However, their partnership highlighted the class contradictions in Washington’s Tuskegee machine. While Washington and his family benefited from middle class status, his mass philosophy denied the low-income blacks the opportunity of an equal chance at a quality education. Evidence of the Washington-Dubois debates, Du Bois was critical of Andrew Carnegie’s public library system due to Carnegie’s support of segregated public libraries.<sup>30</sup>

One could argue that Du Bois’s philosophy was responsible for conceptualizing the black librarian. By 1905, Du Bois had become a staunch opponent of Washington and arguably the second most prominent Black man in America.<sup>31</sup> That year also marked the formation of the Niagara Movement. Unlike the ANA, the Niagara Movement was a more concentrated group of

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<sup>26</sup> Stephanie Shaw, *W. E. B. Du Bois and The Souls of Black Folk* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 8.

<sup>27</sup> Shaw, *W. E. B. Du Bois and The Souls of Black Folk*, 9.

<sup>28</sup> Rhonda Evans, “Libraries and the Color Line” in *The Black Librarian in America: Reflections, Resistance, and Reawakening*, edited by Ana Ndumu, Nichelle M. Hayes, Shaundra Walker, Shauntee Burns-Simpson (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2022), 9.

<sup>29</sup> See Louis Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee, 1901-1915* (Oxford University Press, 1983), 133-38; David Nasaw, *Andrew Carnegie* (The Penguin Press, 2006); 714-15. Norrell, 274-76.

<sup>30</sup> W.E.B Du Bois, “The Opening of the Library,” *Bulletin of Atlanta University*, 1902.

<sup>31</sup> Bauerlin, “Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois: The Origins of a Bitter Intellectual Battle,” 114.



the talented tenth, one that exclusively featured prominent black elitist men. From 1905 to 1908, the Niagara Movement had become the face of Black intellectualism.

At the same time of Niagara's founding, New York Public Library's 135th Street Branch in Harlem had been opened to the public. Harlem had been home to a predominantly Jewish population, but in the following years, Harlem would become almost ninety-five percent Black. Starting in 1910, African Americans migrated North to escape the Jim Crow south.<sup>32</sup> With an influx of migrating Black Americans, Harlem would become an African American culture center.

The fight for library equality undoubtedly started with the public library system. In the north, attitudes toward Black library access were more progressive than in the south. During the antebellum period, a combination of Quaker, abolitionist, and literary societies made efforts to provide free Blacks access to library services.<sup>33</sup> After the Civil War, the north led the way in library development by having African American leaders and administrators.<sup>34</sup> Evidenced by the lives of W.E.B Du Bois and Edward Williams, Northern Blacks experienced a more progressive education than their southern counterparts.

The progress made in the New York public library system was a central point in black librarianship. Although there had been African Americans working in libraries, Catherine Latimer's hire, in 1920, at New York Public Library marked a turning point in black librarianship. Latimer represented the new generation of black scholars who were products of the previous generation of black elites. Latimer's mother, Minta Bosley, was a women's suffragist

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<sup>32</sup> For information about the Great Migration see, Isabel Wilkinson, *The Warmth Of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York: Random House, 2010).

<sup>33</sup> Johnson-Jones, *The African American Struggle for Library Equality: The Untold Story of the Julius Rosenwald Fund Library Program*, 2-3.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

and a member of the NACW. Bosley was also a graduate of Fisk University, and she later married a real estate agent who represented Du Bois.<sup>35</sup> Latimer's career was clearly rooted in the nineteenth century intellectual movement.

### **Building Historical Knowledge, Black Women Librarians**

Carrying the organizing spirit of her mother, Latimer's career was determined to be one that promoted racial equality. More importantly, Latimer shouldered the responsibility of preserving black history. Latimer's hire coincided with the birth of the Harlem Renaissance, a movement of young Black creatives, up-incoming artists, and scholars. Several Renaissance writers and scholars served as compilers and bibliographers at libraries. Renaissance scholars were also products of the Great Migration. Harlem joined Washington D.C as an intellectual epicenter of black history and culture.

For Renaissance scholars, taking after the philosophy of Alaine Locke, blacks needed to recognize its culture and work to preserve it.<sup>36</sup> Latimer might have been the first librarian to head a New York Public Library, but she was far from the first to do the work of a librarian. There is no secret as to why Du Bois was outspoken about the Harlem branch library.<sup>37</sup> He saw it as a sign of achievement in African American economic and social progress. The occurrence of a black woman in-charge of a public library, in a black city, demonstrated Du Bois's vision for Black America. Harlem became an epicenter, but more importantly it had become Black in every sense. In Harlem, black elites mingled, collaborated, and lived as middle-class Americans.

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<sup>35</sup> Nancy Page Fernandez, *Biographical Sketch of Minta Bosley Allen Trotman* (Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street, 2018).

<sup>36</sup> David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (Oxford University Press, 1981), 147-51.

<sup>37</sup> Letter from W. E. B. Du Bois to the New York Public Library, March 1, 1930, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312), Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries

Central to black librarianship was the mission to acquire and collect. More than anything else, black intellectuals looked to collect anything produced by black artists, writers, and scholars. There is a clear connection between acquisition practice and the organizing vision at the turn of the century. Black librarians, if nothing else, were always organizers. Therefore, the organizing efforts by the NACW and the ANA were embodied by the “new negro”.

Daniel Murray Payne, first black librarian to work at the Library of Congress (LOC), created a pamphlet of works by black authors. Payne’s collection was used at the 1900 Paris exhibit and is now housed at the LOC. He and his wife Anna Murray were black elites who worked closely with W.E.B Du Bois. In D.C, the Murrays were fixtures in the burgeoning black elitist community. While Anna Murray focused on child education, Daniel Murray Payne investigated the history of black literature. Biographer Elizabeth D. Taylor credited Payne as a “black history pioneer”.<sup>38</sup> In addition, Payne was an early advocate of publishing black encyclopedias and bibliographies. He believed that a people’s historical tradition built a sense of racial nationalism and group pride.<sup>39</sup> Joining the LOC staff in 1871, Payne served as one of the earliest examples of black librarians’ contribution to black historical scholarship. Payne and W.E.B Du Bois’s collaboration, leading to the acclaimed 1900 Paris Exhibit, marked one of the earliest instances of black public history.<sup>40</sup>

HBCU libraries came despite sexism and racism in the library profession. Even during the early career of Edward C. Williams, the American Library Association (ALA) did not

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<sup>38</sup> Elizabeth Dowling Taylor. *The Original Black Elite: Daniel Murray and the Story of a Forgotten Era*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2017), 526.

<sup>39</sup> Billie E Walker. “Daniel Alexander Payne Murray (1852-1925), Forgotten Librarian, Bibliographer, and Historian,” *Libraries & Culture* 40, no. 1 (2005): 26.

<sup>40</sup> “The American Negro at Paris,” W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312), Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries

support African Americans attending meetings.<sup>41</sup> In 1876, the institution's founding, the ALA saw only 13 women at the inauguration conference. The ALA would not see a female president until 1911. Theresa Elmendorf, the ALA's first woman president, was a product of the women's suffrage movement. The ALA would not have a black woman as president until 1976. Library history, and the history of American Library Association demonstrated that black women were excluded from professional leadership positions. Once united in their stance against Washington, Ida B. Wells later accused Du Bois of intentionally excluding her from being recognized as a NAACP founder.<sup>42</sup> Black history, librarianship and activism have all been guilty of misogyny. Misogynistic views on leadership, education, and labor led to generations of black women being overlooked as respected scholars.

After World War I, the American labor force saw a shift. Men who fought in the war, came back home, and worked in factories, businesses, and industry. Positions such as librarian would see an increase in women leadership. The increase of women in the workforce was not due to society "righting their wrongs," instead it was that professions such as nursing, homemaking, teaching, and social work became the acceptable professions for women workers.<sup>43</sup> Most black men associated with building black libraries in the 20th century worked in business or academia. Not until World War II would several black men turn back to librarianship as a profession.

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<sup>41</sup> For information about the ALA's attitudes toward African Americans, see Rosemary Ruhig Du Mont. "Race in American Librarianship: Attitudes of the Library Profession," *The Journal of Library History* (1974-1987) 21, no. 3 (1986): 488-509.

<sup>42</sup> Ida B. Wells, *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*, Second Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 278.

<sup>43</sup> Stephanie Shaw, "Creating a Black Female Professional Class after the Civil War," *Negro History Bulletin* 63, no. 1 (2000): 32.

For most of the intellectual movement, librarianship was the only opportunity for black women to do historical work. Anna Cooper, the first black woman to receive a PhD in history, would not receive it until 1924, and even that degree was received outside of the United States, at the University of Paris. Like Du Bois, Cooper was also an early advocate for a radical education, evidenced by her attendance at the 1923 Pan-African Congress.<sup>44</sup>

Cooper also attended the famous 1900 Paris Exposition, an event where black men received most of the recognition for its success. Cooper along with Ida B. Wells, and Mary Church Terrell, established themselves in D.C and served as leaders in the black women's club movement. Although her associates were not professional historians, they clearly shared her values for history and education. Cooper's life and career serves as an example of the efforts by black women to participate in black historical production. But it was also a testament of how Black and white men continued to marginalize black women.

The Renaissance era saw the emergence of one of black librarianship's greatest founders, Dorothy B. Porter. Dorothy Porter, librarian at the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center (1930-1973), epitomized black librarianship and public history practice. Benjamin Quarles, third generation black historian, claimed that "Porter would be destined to live in history."<sup>45</sup> Needless to say, Porter inspired a new generation of historical scholarship. For Porter, the work of librarianship and historical practice were connected. In addition to publishing several bibliographies, Porter published several biographical profiles on African Americans.

Later black women historians carried Porter's mission and furthered her pursuit of African American biography. Porter's significance to black librarianship has been long

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<sup>44</sup> Letter from A. J. Cooper to W. E. B. Du Bois, September 4, 1923, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries

<sup>45</sup> Esme E. Bhan, "Dorothy Porter" in *Notable Black American Women*, edited by Jessie Carney Smith (Detroit: Gale Research, 1992), 864.

chronicled, however, her significance goes far beyond librarianship. Porter was as one of the founding and central figures in establishing African American history. While Rayford Logan, John Hope Franklin, and Benjamin Quarles are acknowledged as prominent third-generation historians, Porter was a historian in her own right. If not for the work of Porter at Howard, black historical scholarship would not have been available to black researchers and students. Credited as building the Moorland-Spingarn center, she used her valuable connections with Renaissance scholars to acquire collections. Like most HBCU librarians, Porter was tasked with building the library with insufficient funding. With the help of Alain Locke, Carter G. Woodson, and Arturo Schomburg, she helped establish Howard as a prominent black library, a library that preserved African American history and culture.

In much the same way Du Bois gets credit as pioneering Pan-Africanism, Porter supported Pan-Africanism and frequently invited Pan-Africanists to Howard's campus. Crucial to the progress of black librarianship, Porter advocated for a new cataloging system at the LOC, the library that employed Daniel Payne, a generation prior. Porter's career connects several periods of black history. Porter, a graduate of Howard, became arguably one of the institution's most significant faculty members. She spent over 40 years married to James A. Porter, one of the most admired Renaissance artists of the time. Porter was the result of the intellectual evolution that had taken place in the nineteenth century. Darlene Clark Hine, prominent black woman historian, credits Porter as being a "beacon of light" in the field of history.<sup>46</sup>

The hallowed generation of black women historians, emerging in the late 1970s and early 1980s, viewed Porter's work as pioneering in black history.<sup>47</sup> Black librarianship remains an

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<sup>46</sup> Bhan, "Dorothy Porter," 864.

<sup>47</sup> "The hallowed generation of Black woman historians, who emerged in the late 70s and early 80s" refers to black women historians Darlene Clark Hine, Nell Irvin Painter, and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham.

extension of black historical scholarship and an achievement in black public history. Unique to the black scholar has been the responsibility to archive, chronicle and preserve the past. Black public history and black librarianship are inextricably linked, one is not possible without the other. The role of the black librarian and the black historian remains multi-faceted and layered, requiring a nuanced perspective. One must not solely look at black historical production from a purely academic perspective. Rather, black history has more value when one looks outside the academy and into the people it continues to affect. Jessie Carney Smith was clearly influenced by years of black public history practice before her. Smith was a product of the long lineage of black librarians and historians. Long before the professionalization of public history, Smith and her predecessors made black history into black public history.

## II. THE SOUTHERNER, 1930-1957

### Early Life

Jessie Carney Smith was born in Greensboro, North Carolina on September 24, 1930. Born and raised in the Jim Crow South, she was a member of the New Deal generation. Smith grew up with three siblings and was raised by her parents James Ampler Carney and Vesona Bigelow Carney.<sup>48</sup> Smith's parents were college educated, a rare occurrence in African American households at that time. Smith's father received a degree in engineering and automobile mechanics from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College (A&T College), while her mother worked as an elementary school teacher. Although she did not graduate from A&T college, Smith's mother was a passionate classroom teacher. James Ampler was a small business owner, owner of the J.A Carney's Square Deal Service Station.

During her childhood and adolescence, Smith attended Mount Zion Elementary School and James Dudley High school in Greensboro, North Carolina. James B. Dudley high school was the first African- American high school in Guilford County. In addition to being a Rosenwald school, it later served as a landmark location for Greensboro residents during the 1960s Black Power movement. Greensboro was also the site where Ella Baker started the first sit-in strike at a downtown department store in 1960. During her time at Dudley High School, Smith received a background in black history. A testament to Smith's early education, Dudley High School's library was attractive and pleasant, and the library collection was considered good by the standards of the school's faculty.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ancestry.com. *1940 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012.

<sup>49</sup> Jessie Carney Smith, "The Four Cultures," 192.



Smith believed that Greensboro public teachers were more progressive in teaching black history than other states in the south. Smith stated that, “we were required to take a course in black history at schools. I think it is because of the number of black colleges in the state, and we did have one state official who supported black education.”<sup>50</sup> Smith referred to the administration of state governor J. Melville Broughton, governor from 1941-45. Broughton was one of twelve candidates nominated to be considered vice president under President Franklin Delano Roosevelt.<sup>51</sup>

Since Smith and her siblings were encouraged to pursue a college education, she enrolled in North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State University. The North Carolina General Assembly established as the Agricultural and Mechanical College for the Colored Race in 1891. At A& T, she was both an academic scholar and socialite. Smith and her sisters were empowered at A&T. Not only were they familiar with the campus, but the Smith sisters also felt protected by their own.<sup>52</sup> In her senior year, she was elected Miss A&T. In this position, she served as an ambassador for the university. As Miss A&T, she famously took a picture with four baseball players responsible for integrating the Major League Baseball Association (MLB). These players were Jackie Robinson, Satchel Paige, Don Newcome, and Roy Campanella.<sup>53</sup>

At A&T, Smith was a student under the administration of Ferdinand Douglass Buford, president of A&I from 1925-1955. Buford served as vice president, under Smith’s high school's namesake, James B. Dudley.<sup>54</sup> Under Buford’s leadership, A&T became one of the highest rated public HBCUs. By the time Smith graduated, A&T had grown exponentially. In Smith’s early

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<sup>50</sup> Jessie Carney Smith, interview by author, Nashville, TN, April 4, 2023

<sup>51</sup> “Truman Nominated for Vice Presidency,” *The New York Times*, July 22, 1944.

<sup>52</sup> Christa Valencia Hardy. "Piecing a Quilt: Jessie Carney Smith and the Making of African American Women's History." PhD Diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2010, 63.

<sup>53</sup> Jessie Carney Smith, interview by author, Nashville, TN, April 4, 2023

<sup>54</sup> *Greensboro Daily News*, December 22, 1955

education, she did not suffer from a lack of quality educators. Smith's early education was an impetus for the eventual civil rights generation. No one could tell the generations that followed that they could not have a seat at the lunch counter or hold political office, when they were surrounded by black professionals and scholars.

Smith was not ignorant of the black past or history, even though the history textbooks often ignored. In her Greensboro upbringing, she had seen the intellectual capabilities of both the Black elite and the working class. During that time, it was not unusual for her to encounter black businessmen, homeowners, and educators. And although her mother worked in the home, her father encouraged her to pursue education. After graduating from A&T, Smith would attend predominantly white universities. The combination of traveling out of the South, and attending white institutions sparked her passion for equality. She had clearly known the capabilities of Black America, and like most Black scholars, Smith began her investigative journey into race relations.

After graduating from A&T, she pursued studies in textiles and clothing at Cornell University, but for only one semester. Like many who attended HBCUs, Cornell was her first experience in an integrated classroom setting. While at Cornell, Smith experienced racial and cultural stereotypes from her white counterparts. There was an assumption that southern education was inferior, particularly the southern black education. In 1956, received a master's degree in child development from Michigan State University. Smith's childhood undoubtedly shaped her perspectives on education and race. Empowered by her family, educators, and environment, Smith came to Nashville fully aware of the harsh reality of Jim Crow. While the end of segregation was a sign of societal progress, it also led to the destruction and decline of a black communities and neighborhoods. After 1954, with the closing of all-black schools,

businesses, and stores, the next generation of black students would not experience Smith's unique southern black education. Education, for the Smiths, was of utmost importance. Smith's childhood witnessed nothing but black educators, businessman, professionals, and college graduates. And although resources were insufficient in comparison to white schools, Smith argued that her teachers were better, and some were highly educated. In fact, one memorable childhood teacher graduated with a graduate degree from Columbia.

In 1956, Smith and her family moved to Nashville, and she immediately looked for employment. Smith said of Nashville at the time,

“Obviously there were always positions available in remote areas where segregationists’ activities ran rampant and wise black men feared to tread. In Nashville, too, teaching was about the only thing that black people could do to obtain a fair income.”<sup>55</sup>

Though she had “a strong dislike for clerical work”, she was hired as a clerk-typist for the English and Religion departments at Fisk University.<sup>56</sup> In those departments, she worked for Robert Hayden in the English department and William J. Faulkner, dean of the Fisk chapel.<sup>57</sup> She would then be assigned to work for the Fisk University library under Arna Bontemps due to his secretary being on maternity leave, a position that would change her career trajectory.<sup>58</sup>

### **Charles S. Johnson, The Movement and Fisk University**

Jessie Smith came to Nashville under the administrative transition from Charles S. Johnson to Stephen Wright. Charles S. Johnson was elected the first black president of Fisk

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<sup>55</sup> Jessie Carney Smith, “The Four Cultures,” 192.

<sup>56</sup> Brandon Owens, “A History of Fisk University Library: 150 Years of African American Public History and Culture, 1866 – 2016,” PhD Diss., (Middle Tennessee State University, 2020), 152-53; Smith, “The Four Cultures,” 193.

<sup>57</sup> Owens, 152.

<sup>58</sup> Owens, 153; Jessie Carney Smith, interview by author, Nashville, TN, April 4, 2023

University in 1946. And 1946 proved to be a pivotal year in the Tennessee Civil Rights movement. Prior to being elected president at Fisk, Johnson was appointed as head of the Sociology Department in 1928.

In 1929, he was personally asked to serve as co-chair on the library committee by then President Thomas Jones.<sup>59</sup> On this committee, Johnson helped establish funds to build the book collection as well as strategize plans for a new library building.<sup>60</sup> Johnson and librarian Louis Shores worked to purchase collections that were valuable to the early black collections at Fisk. Charles S. Johnson had his roots in Harlem, as a writer, scholar and sociologist. One of Johnson's most crucial Renaissance connections was his relationship with Arturo Schomburg. According to biographers Marybeth Gasman and Patrick Gilpin, "of the many black scholars whom Schomburg assisted, Johnson was the only one with whom he developed an enduring and close relationship and friendship."<sup>61</sup> In 1926, Johnson's first year serving as a member of the Fisk faculty, he envisioned the library as a resource tool for the entire university. With the persistent recruitment efforts of Johnson and librarian Louis Shores, they convinced Schomburg to curate the collection. Although Schomburg experienced a short tenure at Fisk, his efforts curating the collection became the foundation of the library's collection.

Until 1930, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) had not recognized HBCUs. Of the seventeen HBCUs approved by SACS from 1930-39, Fisk was the first to receive an "A" grade. All seventeen of the approved HBCUs maintained white presidents and administrations. Public, state HBCUs that appointed black presidents would not receive

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<sup>59</sup> Thomas E. Jones to Charles S. Johnson, February 9, 1929, box 35, folder 1, Thomas E. Jones Collection. Special Collections and Archives, Fisk University.

<sup>60</sup> Owens, 59-60.

Sinnette, *Arthur Alfonso Schomburg: Black Bibliophile & Collector*, 149.

accreditation from SACS until the 1940s. Before becoming Fisk's president, Johnson was responsible for bringing several prominent faculty members to Fisk. As a member of the civil rights movement, Johnson navigated as a scholar-activist to promote social justice. Tennessee historian Bobby Lovett said that Johnson played a vital role in building bridges between the races.<sup>62</sup>

Johnson managed to receive white funding to support his research on race relations. He also had enough political sway to influence local policy, and also encouraged peaceful protests among the black citizens in Nashville. In 1942, he received support from the American Missionary Association (AMA) to sponsor the Race Relations Institute.<sup>63</sup> Nashville's white citizens were fearful that such a radical institute would bring in outside agitators. The presence of "outside agitators" would later become inevitable in Nashville during the 1950s. By the time Johnson assumed the position of president, he had assembled a faculty of black scholars, intellectuals, and activists. As both a faculty member and as president, Johnson had a close relationship with the Fisk library. He had helped curate and develop the collections since his arrival. After his death in 1956, Fisk established the Charles S. Johnson Research Library.

### **Working For Bontemps**

Arnaud Wendell Bontemps was a major literary figure of the Harlem Renaissance, and a prominent member of the Fisk faculty from 1943-1970. Appointed chief librarian in 1943, Bontemps was known as one of the most prolific writers of the Harlem Renaissance. During the Harlem Renaissance, Bontemps established relationships that shaped his role as Fisk's university

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<sup>62</sup> Bobby Lovett, *The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee: A Narrative History* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 14.

<sup>63</sup> Patrick J. Gilpin and Marybeth Gasman. *Charles S. Johnson: Leadership Beyond the Veil in the Age of Jim Crow*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 172-73.

librarian. During his early Renaissance career, he frequently collaborated with black intellectuals, poets and writers. His collaborations with Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, James Weldon Johnson, Countee Cullen, and Charles S. Johnson contributed to the growth of African American literature and culture. Born in Louisiana, Bontemps became famous for writing about his experiences through historical fiction, novels, and plays.<sup>64</sup>

Inspired by the work of Du Bois, Bontemps had an affinity for children's education and the Diaspora. Bontemps believed that the most far-reaching and pervasive contributions of African Americans to western culture came from folk sources.<sup>65</sup> Bontemps was also beholden to his boyhood memories and experiences, constantly grappling with the stories his grandmother shared with him back in Louisiana. After attaining his graduate degree from the University of Chicago Graduate Library School in 1943, he took over as head of the Fisk University library.<sup>66</sup> Immediately joining the library, Bontemps looked to secure rare and significant items to enhance its collections. Bontemps had been eager to start working at Fisk soon after he returned to the South. In Bontemps's first year, Fisk received a rare copy of William Wells Brown's *Clotel* which was the first book published by an African American.<sup>67</sup> During the first decade of his tenure as librarian, Fisk became the repository of the American Missionary Association's valuable files.

Bontemps did not intend on becoming a librarian, instead he initially pursued the position of Chair of Creative Writing. However, it was the position held by beloved Fisk faculty member James Weldon Johnson who had been tragically killed during a train incident in the summer of

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<sup>64</sup>“Arna Bontemps, Writer, 70, dies,” *New York Times*, June 6, 1973; Carroll Van West, “Arnaud W. Bontemps,” *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture* (Nashville: Tennessee Historical Society, 2018).

<sup>65</sup> Kirkland C. Jones, *Renaissance Man from Louisiana: A Biography of Arna Wendell Bontemps* (Greenwood Press, 1992), 171.

<sup>66</sup> West, “Arnaud W. Bontemps.”

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 130.

1938.<sup>68</sup> Because of the tragedy of his death and his great legacy at Fisk, President Thomas E. Jones felt that it would not be appropriate to fill his position immediately. Therefore, Bontemps did not arrive on campus until 1943. Bontemps completed all but his dissertation for a doctorate in English at the University of Chicago, but ultimately, he never completed the dissertation.

In 1948, the Fisk library received its largest gift, the library and pamphlet collection of the Julius Rosenwald Fund (JRF). The pamphlet collection contained primary sources and photos about the Rosenwald School Building Program.<sup>69</sup> In the early 1950s, Bontemps and president Charles S. Johnson worked to secure the collection of W.E.B Du Bois. Based on Johnson's conversation with a close friend and classmate of Du Bois, he believed that Du Bois would be willing to donate to Fisk if contacted by a person he considered a personal friend.<sup>70</sup> However, Bontemps would not become successful in attaining his collection until 1961.<sup>71</sup> Due to Bontemps's personal relationship with Langston Hughes, Fisk did not have difficulties acquiring Hughes's collection. Bontemps viewed his accomplishments in building the collections at Fisk as both a personal achievement and an achievement in the study of African American history.<sup>72</sup> In 1956, when Jessie Carney Smith worked in the Fisk University Library, she benefited from Bontemps's mentorship. In her words, working with Bontemps was "like heaven," a place encouraging the study of black history and culture.<sup>73</sup> Smith summarized her experience with Bontemps by stating that,

"When I was first employed in the Fisk Library a number of years ago, the head librarian (Bontemps), whose successor I later became, greatly impressed me as an

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<sup>68</sup> Owens, 126.

<sup>69</sup> Annual Report, Arna Bontemps to Charles S. Johnson, July 1948, box 53, folder 1, Arna Bontemps Collection. Special Collections and Archives, Fisk University.

<sup>70</sup> Letter, Arna Bontemps to W.E.B Du Bois, October 27, 1952, box 23, folder 10, Charles S. Johnson Presidential Papers. Special Collections and Archives, Fisk University.

<sup>71</sup> Owens, 148.

<sup>72</sup> Kirkland C. Jones, 171-72.

<sup>73</sup> Hardy, "Piecing a Quilt: Jessie Carney Smith and the Making of African American Women's History," 69.

administrator and librarian. He is probably totally unaware of his influence over me, for I have never mentioned it to him. Unlike many librarians I have met in my professional career, he encouraged and permitted a to be a librarian rather than a clerk. He was involved in a variety of activities which seemed to make librarianship interesting rather than routine. And he encouraged librarians to become involved in a variety of experiences beyond the normal routines of a small college library.”<sup>74</sup>

### **Jessie Smith And Her First Years in Nashville**

During Smith’s years as secretary (1956-57), she was fascinated by all the prominent people she was able to encounter. In addition to Bontemps’s connections, Fisk English professor Leslie M. Collins also had great relationships in Harlem. For most of her time with Bontemps, Smith watched him embark on new writing projects. Indicative of the lack of respect publications had for black writers at the time, several publications would reject Bontemps’s work. Although he had incredible success as a poet and writer, Bontemps’s work on black history turned white publications away. During her nine months in the library, Bontemps encouraged her to pursue a career as a librarian. Also, during Smith’s nine months, the library received a \$1,500 grant to process the Charles S. Johnson papers.<sup>75</sup>

In 1957, Smith received a graduate degree in library science at Peabody College.<sup>76</sup> Before her attendance, Peabody College had made an agreement to accept black students into their library school in 1954.<sup>77</sup> At Peabody, she experienced racism from faculty and students. She said of the program, “There had only been one black student to graduate from there. And there was

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<sup>74</sup> Jessie Carney Smith, “The Four Cultures,” 193.

<sup>75</sup> Owens, 148.

<sup>76</sup> Jessie Carney Smith Dossier, Jessie Carney Smith unpublished collection, Fisk Special Collections & Archives

<sup>77</sup> Paul Conkin, *Peabody College: From a Frontier Academy to the Frontiers of Teaching and Learning* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2002), 282.



only one black student other than me, a Fisk alum, a part of the program.”<sup>78</sup> Due to Jim Crow segregation, she and her classmate were forced to eat in separate dining areas.

From 1957-60, she worked as head cataloguer and instructor at Tennessee State University. In 1960, with a grant-in-aid from the State of Tennessee, she left Nashville to pursue a doctorate degree in library science at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign. With an interest in understanding the resource discrepancies between HBCU and PWI libraries, she wrote her dissertation “Patterns of Growth in Library Resources in Certain Land-Grant Universities”.

In working for Fisk and Tennessee State, Smith concluded that black libraries did not receive adequate financial support. Due to her experience at TSU and Fisk, her dissertation evaluated how university libraries were able to grow their collections on limited resources.

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<sup>78</sup> Jessie Carney Smith, interview by author, Nashville, TN, April 4, 2023

### III. THE PROFESSIONAL WOMAN

Being a child of the Jim Crow south reinforced values of the black working-class. Smith understood that black students would have better professional and academic success if they were educated about their history. By researching and surveying the state of Black America, Smith resembled the efforts of previous black librarians. Moreover, Smith meticulously studied the state of the Black community. Always interested in solving race relations, she pursued and supported bettering Black education in her work. Smith's dissertation at Urbana-Champaign was her first effort to solve the race disparities present in education.

On her dissertation committee, there were no black faculty members. In addition to that, there was only one woman on the committee. One might conclude that Smith's dissertation was not black-themed in subject matter. In fact, the dissertation only refers to the "negro" twice.<sup>79</sup> Interestingly and shrewdly, her entire dissertation focused primarily on land-grant institutions. Several public HBCUs were land-grant funded, and while there were land-grant white institutions in her survey, her dissertation uniquely exposed the lack of attention given to HBCU libraries. As a graduate of A&T, and at the time, professor at TSU, Smith's HBCU background was undoubtedly linked to her dissertation topic. In 1964, she stated that not much research had been done on libraries at land-grant institutions.<sup>80</sup> And in conclusion, she stated that,

Serious attention needs to be given to patterns of library resources development in smaller land-grant institutions. Surveys and other studies have been made already of libraries in many of the larger land-grant universities, while studies of many smaller land-grant college libraries are lacking. It may be significant to determine the extent to which libraries of this group are involved in the teaching and

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<sup>79</sup> See Jessie Carney Smith, "Patterns of Growth in Library Resources in Certain Land-Grant Universities," PhD Diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1964.

<sup>80</sup> Smith, "Patterns of Growth in Library Resources in Certain Land-Grant Universities," 175.

research programs of their institutions and the adequacy of library resources and services to support such programs.<sup>81</sup>

Smith's suggestion was a savvy and deliberate way of including HBCU libraries as part of the overall discussion surrounding funding for libraries. The smaller HBCUs, Smith was likely referring to the black libraries in the southern states.<sup>82</sup> Ironically, Smith's tenure at Urbana-Champaign was funded by land-grant institution TSU. In much the same way her innate brilliance was shaped the racist policies of Jim Crow, Smith's tenure in Illinois also experienced racism similar to the south. Tennessee, and several other southern states, offered black educators and administrators at state supported HBCUs grant-in-aid funding to pursue doctoral study.<sup>83</sup> In response to the growing push for integration, southern states used this to deter educated and qualified black graduate students from attending their state doctorate degree programs. In accepting this offer, Smith agreed to return to TSU after graduation. Not deterred by segregation and its effects, Smith became Urbana-Champaign's first Black PhD in library science.

Before Jessie Smith became university librarian at Fisk, President John F. Kennedy had been assassinated in 1963, The Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965 had been passed, and Malcolm X had been assassinated. Nashville, being a vital part of the Civil Rights Movement, college students became the face of the movement. As it pertained to Nashville, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Nashville Student Movement changed black college campuses.

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<sup>81</sup> Smith, 1-5.

<sup>82</sup> "those in the Jim Crow South" refers to Alcorn State University, Tennessee State University, Florida A&M University, Tuskegee University, North Carolina A&T University, Prairie View University, Southern University, Fort Valley State, University of Arkansas Pine Bluff.

<sup>83</sup> Hardy, "Piecing a quilt: Jessie Carney Smith and the Making of African American Women's History," 74; Owens, 152.

Being a professional black woman came with its own problems. Like most professional women at the time, Smith was plagued by the dilemma of furthering her career and being a full-time mother to her son. While at the University of Illinois (1960-64), the movement in Nashville had spread nationwide. SNCC had gone from a growing committee of part-time student activists to an established radical and political force. In 1960, King spoke at Fisk seeking inspiration from the campus movement, a sign of positive relations between college and the older generation of civil rights leadership. However, by 1964, SNCC had adopted the more secular and radical philosophies of figures such as Karl Marx, Albert Camus and Malcolm X. This was a discernible shift from the Christian mission at the organization's foundation. A year after the famous March on Washington, in 1963, black college students spoke boldly on policy reform. The face of Nashville's students had been those affiliated with SNCC and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Prior to the more radical and aggressive movement, leaders such as Diane Nash and John Lewis were considered agitators in Nashville who disrupted the so-called "interracial harmony". Despite the obvious racist attitudes, Nashville had been advertised as the "Best City in the South for Negroes" in *Jet Magazine*.<sup>84</sup> Likely this was due to comparing Nashville to the considerably more racist and violent places in the south. To further indicate the considerably positive public perception of Nashville, it had been phrased as the Athens of the South.<sup>85</sup> However, it was the unique local and racial Nashville politics that influenced Jessie Carney Smith's black professional career.

### **Nashville Student Movement**

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<sup>84</sup> Michael D'Orso and John Lewis, *Walking with the wind: a memoir of the movement* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 192.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 81.

Initially SNCC supported the nonviolent tenets of the MLK and SCLC led civil rights movement. In addition, the Nashville student movement shared a commitment to Christian beliefs and attitudes. So, it was their mission to be both activists but global leaders for nonviolence. Fisk arguably produced the most significant faces of the Nashville student movement. Most notably leaders such as Diane Nash, Marion Berry, and later John Lewis were all students and graduates of Fisk. Diane Nash, originally a student at Howard University, transferred to Fisk in 1959. As one of SNCC's famous leaders, Nash was known to have a calm but firm voice and be a very deliberate and sincere organizer.<sup>86</sup> Berry was a graduate student in Fisk's chemistry department and risked losing his scholarship in order to participate in the Nashville sit-ins.<sup>87</sup> While the sit-in movement took place, Jessie Smith was a professor and librarian at TSU, a considerably less politically active black campus. Although a faculty member at TSU, witnessing the Fisk students gave her great excitement. Smith, however, was unable to be an active participant in the sit-in movement. As a mother and black professional, Smith grappled with the reality of risking her life in the movement. In her words, "to be in the movement, one had to truly be in the movement."<sup>88</sup> Balancing her radical spirit with both her professional and personal duties would be a lasting battle that existed her entire career.

Nashville activists did not experience the same level of violence as their contemporaries in Alabama or Mississippi faced. The later divide in SNCC would be caused by the philosophical division on nonviolence. Budding black leaders saw the nonviolence movement as heavily reliant on whites. In the second phase of SNCC, leaders questioned whether the reliance on white support hindered the movement's impact and enabled political stagnancy. Though home to

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<sup>86</sup> D'Orso and Lewis, *Walking with the wind*, 95.

<sup>87</sup> Carson, 22

<sup>88</sup> Jessie Carney Smith, interview by author, Nashville, TN, April 4, 2023

several activists, Fisk as an institution, was still considered an elitist college. Therefore, Fisk students became increasingly frustrated that their all-black campus did not reflect the black movement.

For most of the twentieth century, Fisk prioritized its financial future over its fight for civil rights. In 1957, President Stephen Wright inherited an institution that had lost the support of Johnson's donors. Due to what some considered a lack of clear university vision, Fisk entered a period of financial hardship. Because President Johnson had always kept a close inner circle and had not been transparent about his administrative plans, Wright relied on his own experience to remodel the institution's <sup>89</sup>. Moreover, compared to Johnson, Wright had a different concept of a black university. During the early 1960s, Jessie Smith believed that, "Fisk did not want to be called an HBCU or a black college back then." In Wright, Fisk had a black president who was willing to be outspoken about civil rights and did not shy away from being a HBCU. Wright also was vocal in local newspapers, supporting on-going protests . In 1960, During the sit-in movement , he publicly endorsed the student activists on campus. Wright even told the media, "I approve of the ends our students are seeking through these demonstrations"<sup>90</sup>. He even managed to get the support from the board of trustees, who had traditionally been hesitant to support such demonstrations. Under the Wright administration, Smith admired the more militant energy of Fisk's faculty members. At Fisk, faculty were increasingly vocal and had influence over campus policy. Wright supported the movement and encouraged faculty to be vocal as well. However, the movement would later become increasingly radical. While the Fisk administration defended the non-violent and peaceful protests, they would take a different stance in the coming years.

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<sup>89</sup> Gilpin and Gasman, *Charles S. Johnson: Leadership Beyond the Veil in the Age of Jim Crow*, 235.

<sup>90</sup> "Fisk Trustees Back Prexy's Sit-in View," *The Chicago Defender*, May 14, 1960.

Wright's vocalness was likely due to his own faculty members being central figures in the movement. Z. Alexander Looby, a prominent black Nashville attorney, was also a professor of government at Fisk. Therefore, after the Looby house bombing, Fisk was motivated to take a more active stance in the movement. In 1960, the attempted assassination of Looby, the damaging of his home affected the nearby Meharry Medical College. Looby, serving as professor at Fisk from 1932 until the late sixties, had been a faculty member with Smith. She was familiar with Looby, and she had developed a professional relationship with his wife. Right before she departed for Illinois in 1960, during the sit-ins, Smith cited this as the scariest and most dangerous time of her entire career. As a member of the local Clark Memorial Methodist Church, she witnessed members afraid for their lives. As a training ground for nonviolence workshops for SNCC and SCLC, Smith's church was a target for racist white violent groups. With growing instances of church bombings across the country, Smith said, "If you went to church, whites could kill you. You didn't even feel safe at church."<sup>91</sup>

Then, student at American Baptist College, John Lewis, was one of the leaders of SNCC and SCLC in the early 1960s. Organizer of the famous Freedom Rides, Lewis was a pivotal figure in the Nashville civil rights movement. While a student at American Baptist College, he remembered Fisk being a campus that annually hosted scholarly gatherings, where both blacks and whites attended.<sup>92</sup> Although Nashville was still a member of the Jim Crow south, Lewis believed Nashville had a developed and strong black middle-class. In addition, Nashville had one of the country's strongest NCAAP chapters. In a considerably more calm and progressive city, Nashville had the potential for an emerging strong black leadership class. For Lewis, this made

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<sup>91</sup> Jessie Carney Smith, interview by author, Nashville, TN, April 4, 2023

<sup>92</sup> D'Orso and Lewis, 81.

Nashville a place of unique opportunity. By 1959, Lewis had noticed a shift in Nashville students. In response, President Wright had noticeably shifted his tone by the mid-to late 60s.

From 1960-63, Wright's stance on the movement would be called to question. In fact, John Lewis's first impression of Wright was that he was cautious about talking about the movement, particularly to the press.<sup>93</sup> Once Smith completed her doctoral coursework in Illinois, she returned to Nashville in 1963. Smith would be reintroduced to a new North Nashville environment. Ironically, in 1959, first-year college students were chanting "Free by 63", indicating that the students's senior year would spark social change. The Free by 63 chants signaled that Smith returned to a student body growing frustrated with the stagnant presidential administration. Although the Kennedy administration had submitted new civil rights legislation, civil rights leaders felt that Kennedy lacked a sense of urgency. Black Americans had become accustomed to the Kennedy administration treading the waters. Although a young, popular and progressive Democrat, Kennedy's civil rights proposals lacked protection for civil rights leaders and protesters. Lewis and SNCC felt that Kennedy did not use his political power to prevent police brutality and voter intimidation.<sup>94</sup> Racial violence throughout the country stifled black voting, and civil rights demonstrations. Jessie Smith says of the period, "I was afraid then. I recall having to go to a meeting for SACS in Mississippi. I had to go through Memphis. I tried everything in my power to not go."<sup>95</sup> Smith's fear demonstrated the dangers of living and working in the Jim Crow south. In the early 1960s, her affiliation with Fisk undoubtedly made her a target for southern racist groups, especially as a black administrator. Like for John Lewis, Nashville served as a safer option for activism. And in her case, as a scholar activist, seeing the

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 109.

<sup>94</sup> Carson, 87

<sup>95</sup> Jessie Carney Smith, interview by author, Nashville, TN, April 4, 2023



movement take shape defined her scholarly activism going forward. The movement inspired her mission to chronicle this period during her career at Fisk. It was these years that inspired her passion for what would later be known as black studies.

Wright's presidency was defined by the principles of King and the considerably less radical tone of the older generation. Upon his hire in 1957, Wright experienced a movement that promoted peaceful protests, nonviolence, and patient strategy. By the time of Wright's resignation, in 1966, the movement had become more energized, mobilizing Fisk's campus to reflect the radical new age. Although the movement included youth involvement, the growing Black Power Movement involved even more aggressive student participation. In 1965, Jessie Smith's first year as university librarian, Fisk was a radical and conscious campus. The campus had benefited from Wright's achievements in enrollment, fundraising, and his development of science and physics departments.<sup>96</sup> Wright found new ways for Fisk to continue to get external financial support. As Charles S. Johnson's successor, Wright worked with Arna Bontemps to continue building on the black collection in the library. Smith summarized Wright as being "outspoken and unafraid to speak publicly on issues of race". And although she was never asked for input on administrative matters, she admired that Wright refused to take a backseat locally. Jessie Carney Smith, in 1956, entered into a budding Nashville civil rights movement. By 1965, the movement had mobilized, and then, transformed into black power.

### **Jessie Carney Smith, Black Power, and the Riot of 1967**

In 1965, Smith's first year as Fisk librarian, the famous Bloody Sunday took place in Selma, Alabama. A symbolic image of Bloody Sunday was the image of the stricken and

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<sup>96</sup>"Dr. Wright Quits as Fisk Prexy", *The Chicago Defender*, April 23, 1966.

assaulted John Lewis. The assault by state troopers on the Edmund Pettis bridge serves as one of the most significant images in the civil rights movement. However, the story behind the march from Selma to Montgomery is a key indicator of where the movement was heading. By 1965, SNCC became a more militant movement. Diane Nash was no longer a member of SNCC, and there were growing tensions between SNCC and the SCLC. Just a few years prior, leaders of both organizations worked with one another. For example, Ella Baker, SCLC director, had formed the SNCC group that started the Greensboro sit-ins in 1960. However, the Edmund Pettis bridge exposed the lack of communication between both parties. King's participation in the march was controversial among members of SNCC.

Jessie Smith was a long admirer of the student sit-in activists. She was a staunch advocate of a Christian led movement. Though socially and politically conscious, Smith did not consider herself militant. Black militancy was a shift from the sit-in movement she had experienced in Nashville from 1957-1960. While in Illinois, Smith encountered the growing militancy in the more northern and urban cities. Just outside of Urbana-Champaign, Illinois was the metropolitan city Chicago. Chicago was the founding place of the black nationalist and Muslim organization, the Nation of Islam (NOI). While on the Urbana-Champaign campus, Smith encountered the NOI leader and activist Malcolm X. Though he had been invited to speak at the university, Smith chose not to attend the event. In contrast to King, Malcolm X was seen as a nightmare for both whites and working-class blacks. At the time, Smith had a similar opinion of Malcolm. She believed Malcolm was too radical, with his racial rhetoric appearing divisive. During the Black Power Era, Smith's feelings toward Malcolm X would change.

While the Civil Rights Movement occurred in the South, Malcolm X established an equally devoted audience in the North. For most of the movement, the northern and southern

movements were in opposition. Malcolm X's growing presence on white college campuses and appearances on daytime television resonated with the dissenting SNCC activists. As one of the most polarizing, and thought-provoking civil rights leaders of his era, Malcolm X's messaging attracted young college students. HBCUs, specifically Christian-centered HBCUs, feared that Malcolm X agitated their Christian campuses. Fisk notably never invited him to campus. However, his assassination in 1965 forced HBCUs to deal with his resounding impact. After 1965, even King, became increasingly radicalized. Malcolm's death left a profound impact on young people. HBCU college students replicated Malcolm X's refusal to compromise their political stances. Malcolm X's death created room for a new, charismatic, and radical black leader, Stokely Carmichael. As it pertains to Jessie Smith's career, Stokely Carmichael's appearance in Nashville changed the city forever.

Stokely Carmichael had been a member of SNCC in the 1960s. Carmichael graduated from Howard University in 1964.<sup>97</sup> Howard was an elite HBCU with a strong academic and national reputation. Like Fisk, Howard relied on white philanthropic support and were wary of deterring donors who supported their African American students. At Howard, Carmichael joined Howard's SNCC affiliate the Nonviolent Action Group (NAG).<sup>98</sup> In 1961, Carmichael was a member of the Mississippi Freedom Riders. During those rides, he would be arrested and jailed for forty-nine days. Carmichael spent several summers in the South, hoping to inspire those at Howard to engage in the movement. Once he graduated, Carmichael became a full-fledged organizer. As a member of SNCC, Carmichael was a captivating and energetic member. He formed the Black Panther Party in Lowndes County, Alabama. Although he admired King, he

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<sup>97</sup> Peniel Joseph, *Waiting 'til the midnight hour: a narrative history of Black Power in America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2007), 124.

<sup>98</sup> Joseph, *Waiting 'til the midnight hour*, 126.

did not agree with what King represented. King symbolized the old regime of civil rights leaders who, in his opinion, prioritized press coverage and political favor. Carmichael and fellow SNCC members believed that while they got the media attention, they were the shock troops of the movement.<sup>99</sup>

By 1965, it was clear that SNCC was an independent organization. It was also when Jessie Carney Smith took charge of the Fisk Library. In 1966, Carmichael took over as chair of SNCC from John Lewis. Lewis later cited that internal differences amongst SNCC leadership led to his departure.<sup>100</sup> Lewis enrolled at Fisk and completed a bachelor's degree in 1967.<sup>101</sup> With Carmichael in charge, Black Power became the slogan of SNCC. Compared to Lewis, he was a more radical and confrontational leader of SNCC. Carmichael relished confrontations with media and political officials. The catchy "Black Power" slogan became popular amongst young people. Jessie Smith noticed a discernible shift in leadership at Fisk as well. President Wright would resign on June 30, 1966.<sup>102</sup> 1966 also marked the 100<sup>th</sup> year celebration of Fisk. During Wright's administration, Fisk had doubled the salaries of its faculty and increased its annual budget by over a million dollars.<sup>103</sup>

After Wright's resignation from Fisk, he became president of the United Negro College Fund (UNCF).<sup>104</sup> In 1966, Wright left Fisk in good hands. James Lawson became Fisk University's eighth president in 1967, and the first Fisk graduate to hold the position. Prior to his presidency, he was a professor of Physics at Fisk. Graduating in 1935, Lawson was the first Fisk

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 127-28.

<sup>100</sup> D'Orso and Lewis, 388-89.

<sup>101</sup> "Two SNCC Leaders Axed in Shakeup: John Lewis, James Forman are Replaced," *Chicago Daily Defender*, May 18, 1966.

<sup>102</sup> "Dr. Wright Quits as Fisk Prexy", *The Chicago Defender*, April 23, 1966.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> "Stephen Wright, 85; Led Education for Blacks", *New York Times*, April 19, 1996.

student to graduate with a degree in Physics. Before joining the Fisk faculty, Lawson was chair of the Tennessee State physics department from 1955-57.<sup>105</sup> Similar to Jessie Smith, he had worked at both Fisk and TSU. TSU differed from Fisk because faculty were discouraged from speaking out due to fear of government retaliation. Lawson inherited a Fisk campus unlike the one he had known in the 1950s. Fisk students who were known for being militant politically would turn Fisk into a militant institution.

On April 6, 1967, Stokely Carmichael arrived in Nashville, encouraging further student dissent on campus. Locally, Carmichael was a known radical, and considered a threat to the supposed racial harmony in the city.<sup>106</sup> Nashville whites were not the only ones opposed to his arrival. Nashville's black middle class had not fully embraced the militancy of the current movement. Some believed that black power was detrimental and disruptive to their livelihoods. Ben West, former Nashville mayor (1951-63), supported the desegregation of lunch counters, during the sit-ins. West's successor, mayor Beverly Briley, was a conservative. Moreover, Briley did not support the idea of outside agitators. Going all the way back to Charles S. Johnson's days at Fisk, Nashville whites always believed that race relations were under control. The presence of Carmichael, a more provocative and less accommodating leader, was frightening for Nashville's white politicians and citizens. Due to Fisk's reliance on white support, faculty members were hesitant to welcome Carmichael to campus. Though faculty members were not consulted about the eventual decision, Jessie Smith supported Carmichael's arrival. In March, he had met with Nashville community leaders to plan the visit. During his visit, Carmichael stayed with fellow

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<sup>105</sup> Crystal DeGregory, "James Rayford Lawson" in *Profiles of African Americans in Tennessee* (Nashville: Annual Local Conference on Afro-American Culture and History, 2021), 159-60.

<sup>106</sup> Scott Frizzell, "Not Just a Matter of Black and White: The Nashville Riot of 1967," *The Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, 70, no.1 (Spring 2011): 38.

activists and community leaders. Smith, a well-known member in the Nashville community, met Carmichael at a mutual friend's home. To avoid press coverage, Carmichael and his associates made sure to meet outside of Jefferson Street to keep a low profile. During the meeting, Smith observed Carmichael as being tired and exhausted, clearly due to all the demonstrations held that year. After the March meeting, Smith was anticipating his arrival. In April, Carmichael intended to visit TSU, Fisk, and Vanderbilt.

On April 6, 1967, Carmichael met with Fisk students in the school's gym. Carmichael discussed topics, ranging from the ongoing Vietnam war to the black political struggle in Nashville. At Fisk, Carmichael strategically wore a short sleeve T-shirt and blue jeans, notably stating that students "must use our color as a weapon of liberation."<sup>107</sup> Carmichael was well-aware of the class dynamics of Black Nashville. On April 8<sup>th</sup>, Carmichael spoke at Vanderbilt, where he had a considerably milder tone, evidenced by his appearance in professional attire.<sup>108</sup> His engagement at Fisk and his later presence at TSU symbolized a Jefferson Street unification, inspiring the famous incident on April 8<sup>th</sup>.

His strategic appearances may have had something to do with the local newspapers. The Nashville *Banner*, a conservative local newspaper, attempted to incite fear amongst the local community.<sup>109</sup> Conservative editor of the *Banner*, James Stahlman, wanted to deter Carmichael from speaking at Vanderbilt. As a member of Vanderbilt's board of trustees, he felt that Carmichael would inspire black student agitators. So, the afternoon newspaper that Jessie Smith and other middle-class blacks read proved to be an unreliable source. Stahlman's worst

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<sup>107</sup> Jennifer Hendricks, "Stokely Carmichael and the 1967 IMPACT Symposium: Black Power, White Fear, Conservative South," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, 63, no.4 (Winter 2004): 295.

<sup>108</sup> Hendricks, 295.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid*, 291-98.

nightmare occurred the evening of April 8<sup>th</sup>. Carmichael's appearances at both Fisk and TSU may not have directly caused the riot on Jefferson Street but his motivational address successively unified the two divided institutions. Though white Nashvillians pushed the narrative that Carmichael was responsible for the riots, the riots were more indicative of black Nashvillians working together.

Smith lived on Clarksville Highway, roughly five miles from Fisk and Meharry. Her home was closer to TSU; however, she was concerned that the riots could lead near her home. As a single mother, Smith was afraid; she had no idea what the results of the riots would be.<sup>110</sup> The so-called "riot" started as a dispute between a black restaurant manager and a drunken soldier, nearby the Jefferson Street campuses.<sup>111</sup> The manager called on the police to dismiss the intoxicated soldier. Once the police arrived, college students gathered to stage an impromptu protest. Students allegedly threw rocks at the police officers, leading to a swarming of officers at the scene. The demonstration resulted in police injuring fourteen people and one student was shot in the leg. However, Fisk students claimed they were simply protesting, calling to question why over 150 police arrived to stop them.<sup>112</sup> Nashville police assumed that Carmichael had staged a violent uprising, and wrongfully detained and harassed students. Fisk student president Lucious Outlaw maintained that the riots were at the fault of the Metro police.<sup>113</sup> Furthermore, Fisk students actively denounced the reporting in the local newspapers, which insisted that Carmichael looked to incite violence.

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<sup>110</sup> Jessie Carney Smith, interview by the author, April 4, 2023.

<sup>111</sup> Hendricks, 298-299; Frizzell, "Not Just a Matter of Black and White: The Nashville Riot of 1967," 36-37.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, 299.

<sup>113</sup> Hendricks, 298; *Fisk Herald*, April 14, 1967

Even though Carmichael had spoken about a wide range of political and social issues, Nashville whites painted him as a violent and anti-American radical. However, the media created what they were seemingly trying to prevent. By creating a disastrous spectacle on Jefferson Street, they converted an otherwise centered student bodies into campuses of black power. Historian Scott Frizzell concluded that “the Nashville riot highlighted the emerging division in the black and white communities and the rise of a new political movement: the New Right.”<sup>114</sup>

As it pertained to Fisk, Carmichael’s appearance transformed the attitudes of Fisk students. Arguably Carmichael’s greatest implication was that whites ran the administration.<sup>115</sup> Fisk students viewed themselves as activists and as agents for institutional change. Students questioned the board of trustees being overwhelmingly white and challenged the university’s reliance on white support. Graduate W.E.B Du Bois had similarly compared Fisk’s campus to Oberlin College in terms of its curriculum and culture.<sup>116</sup> That culture was undoubtedly felt by the energized civil rights generation. Rather than accept this elitist and Victorian culture, Fisk students wanted its campus to be black—in every sense of the word. Therefore, President Lawson and the Board of trustees were under scrutiny.

Although Lawson was an advocate for the civil rights movement, he did not approve of the growing attitudes of students. In addition, some students felt that the black power demonstrations were detrimental to the institution. Lawson felt that the difference between the new student activists and their predecessors was that new student activists were disruptors.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Frizzell, 47.

<sup>115</sup> Ben Houston, *The Nashville Way: Racial Etiquette and the Struggle for Social Justice in a Southern City* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 168-69; Hitchens, 295.

<sup>116</sup> W.E.B Du Bois, “Of the Training of Black Men,” in *Atlantic Monthly*, XC (1902), 292-93.

<sup>117</sup> James R. Lawson, “Student Participation in Educational Change,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 40, no. 3 (1971): 282.



Agreeing with the sentiment of students, Smith wanted Fisk to take pride in being a black University. At this time, a black University meant being a militant university. This contributed to why Fisk distanced themselves from the designation for years. Students were not only inspired by Black Power, but they became active members of the Black Power movement. From 1967 until the late seventies, Smith witnessed a change in student's appearances. Mainly, the appearance of the signature black power afro. Smith saw that all the girls were wearing them, and it even inspired her to do the same.<sup>118</sup> A key sign of Smith's support of the ongoing movement was her developing relationship with Nikki Giovanni. Giovanni would later become a renowned writer and poet, but Smith knew her young. Giovanni had been expelled from campus by the Dean of Women in 1964. She was later encouraged to reenroll at Fisk the next fall and reinstated Fisk's SNCC chapter. Giovanni graduated with a B.A in History in 1967, the year of the Nashville riot. Giovanni was one of the notable black student activists during the Black Power era. Smith's relationship with Giovanni illustrates her affinity for Black Power and the students were involved in the movement.

Lawson would lose some white donors during the emergence of black power on campus.<sup>119</sup> As it concerned the Fisk Library, Smith relied heavily on outside support. Racial retaliation required an equal activist effort to preserve what clearly was under attack. Fisk, residing on the famous Jefferson Street, remains one of the lasting monuments of that era. Smith was determined to keep Fisk's library afloat through the volatile financial and institutional climate. Smith had always established partnerships with the university's president, making sure the library did not model the institution's overall financial crisis.

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<sup>118</sup> Jessie Carney Smith, interview by the author, April 4, 2023.

<sup>119</sup> DeGregory, "James Rayford Lawson", 159-60; Lawson, "Student Participation in Educational Change," 282-289

Students referred to Smith's home as the "Dark Tower", a reference to the Harlem Renaissance.<sup>120</sup> The Dark Tower in the Harlem Renaissance was the nickname for A'Lelia Walker's home and salon. It was famous for being a place that hosted writers and creatives. Jessie Smith may not have envisioned herself as active, but she had her fingerprints all over Fisk. Like Walker, Smith provided a home for young scholars at Fisk. Smith was not a foot soldier, but she was an incubator for black scholarship, achievement and activism. In the years that followed the Nashville riot, she would spend five decades preserving this period in her career. From Smith's perspective, the Nashville riot was an impetus to Black Power. The early years of Black Power inspired black studies, a field that Smith would later help establish across the country.

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<sup>120</sup> Jessie Carney Smith, interview by author, Nashville, TN, April 18, 2023

#### IV. THE BLACK AMERICAN, 1970-1977

In honor of E.J. Josey's *Black Librarian in America*, black librarians have recently co-authored an edited volume under the *same title*. E.J. Josey, a library giant, prolific author and activist of the late sixties and early seventies, was the first black president of the American Library Association (ALA).<sup>121</sup> Josey was one of the leaders of the growing community of black librarians preserving black history through librarianship. During that same time, Jessie Carney Smith turned Fisk into one of the South's first public history sites. Like Josey, Smith advocated for the implementation of black studies programs into college curriculums. When Josey co-authored *The Handbook of Black Librarianship*, in 1977, Smith represented a small number of doctorate-degree holding black librarians.<sup>122</sup> And while *The Handbook of Black Librarianship* recognizes achievements of all black librarians, Smith's name appeared all over the 392-page book. The accomplishments made at the Fisk library were amongst the most recognized, including the groundbreaking Black Oral History Program.

From 1965-1975, Smith set Fisk, and herself, apart as leaders in historical production. The establishment of the 1969 Fisk library building was Jessie Carney Smith's her first major public history project, but it certainly was not her last. Smith's navigation of Fisk's financial difficulty inspired the making of Nashville's first public history site.

#### **Fisk Gets a New Library Building**

In 1967, Dr. Smith began the two-year project of the new Fisk University library building, signaling the dawn of a new era. Smith made history by becoming the university's first Black woman librarian and one of the university's first black woman administrators. The new

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<sup>121</sup> "A Tribute to E.J. Josey," *American Libraries*, August 1, 2009; Leonard Kniffel, "To Be Black and a Librarian: Talking with E.J. Josey," *American Libraries* 31, no. 1 (January 2000): 80.

<sup>122</sup> E.J. Josey and Ann Allen Shockley, *The Handbook of Black Librarianship* (Littleton, Colorado: Libraries Unlimited Inc., 1977), 89.

building marked Smith's first major project as head librarian. The library was not only built under her administration, but she should be credited as the building's architect. The over 74,000 square foot building would need to house a collection of an estimated 600,000 volumes and serve nearly 2,000 students.<sup>123</sup> With President Wright's departure, 1967 marked President James R. Lawson's first year on the job. However, it was Wright's efforts that secured Rockefeller funding to support the library building.<sup>124</sup> Smith established a nice rapport and working relationship with Wright, and the library had benefitted from it. Enrollment at Fisk had reached new heights by the end of the 1960s. And with a sizable enrollment, students aimed for institutional involvement.

In some ways, the Fisk students epitomized the "civil rights generation". Smith embodied the rare blend of the New Deal working-class combined with the radical energy of the civil rights generation. In some ways, she shared a similar perspective with King—a little young for the old guard, but a bit more reserved than the younger generation. At Fisk, Smith found herself in the middle of a radical, student-led movement. These students had seen the legal success of *Brown v. Board* failing to meet the expectations and demands of the black community.

Under the tutelage of Bontemps, Smith had understood the plight of the Black intellectual. She recalled Bontemps, with all his literary excellence, being denied opportunities to publish.<sup>125</sup> She witnessed Fisk turn from a HBCU in name only into a HBCU in culture and value. One could argue that this was the perfect era for Smith to be in leadership. By 1969, Smith laid the groundwork for an administration that promoted black culture and knowledge. In the December issue of the *Library Journal*, the issue described the layout of the new, impressive

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<sup>123</sup> Owens, "A History of Fisk University Library," 154.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid; "Preparation of an Application for a Grant under the Higher Education Facilities Act of 1963," March 12, 1965, box 2, folder 9, Stephen J. Wright Collection. Special Collections and Archives, Fisk University.

<sup>125</sup> Jessie Carney Smith, Interview by the author, Nashville, TN, April 4, 2023.

library building. Key to Smith's design was the housing of the illustrious Fisk African American collection. Describing the second floor, the article stated that,

“On approaching the second floor, the attention of library patrons is immediately drawn to the elaborate Special Collections Room. An African influence is suggested by the selection of colors, use of patterned fabrics and floor coverings, and the items displayed. The Special Collections are separated from the general reading and stack areas by a wall of glass. The reading area of the room is surrounded on three sides by custom cabinets with grilled fronts extending from floor to ceiling. Beneath the outside windows are window seats which are upholstered in velvet fabric of colorful African prints. The two supporting columns which are in the room are completely hidden by custom units which contain display cases and slanting shelves for periodicals. Furnishings and custom work are constructed of oak. Provision has been made for micro reading and for listening. The parquet floor is covered with a dark stain giving the appearance of ebony. An area rug of African design maintains the African décor.”<sup>126</sup>

The Afro-centric structural design of the second floor was clearly intentional, and it reflected Smith's appreciation of Fisk's historic black collection. Also, in 1969, Smith hired Ann Allen Shockley as associate librarian and as head of Special collections. Shockley's hire demonstrated Smith's immediate impact in black librarianship. Smith marked Fisk's first library administrative hire, and before 1970, she had hired another black woman to be in leadership. Though black librarianship made significant progress by 1969, the library profession was still plagued with misogyny. When looking at the first African Americans to receive a M.L.S degree, to hold leadership positions, or even speak at ALA conferences, they were predominantly black men. However, black women made the most significant contributions to the field. For instance, looking at Howard University, Dorothy B. Porter had built the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center almost 30 years prior.<sup>127</sup> Porter set a standard for black librarianship, centering historic preservation, black studies, and activist scholarship. Following the legacy of Porter, Smith was

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<sup>126</sup>“Library and Media Center for Fisk's Future,” *Library Journal* 94 (December 1969): 4405.

<sup>127</sup> Sims-Wood, *Dorothy Porter Wesley at Howard University*, Preface.

also Porter's successor in the field of women's history. At Fisk, Smith and Shockley's leadership challenged what had been a long fight for leadership equality.

In Smith's early mission, Porter's fingerprints are present in almost every aspect of action. Even when thinking of the Pan-African design of the Special Collections room, one can see Porter's advocacy for making LOC cataloging more representative of the black experience. While Smith was still an infant, Porter had advocated for a decolonization of the library cataloging system.<sup>128</sup> Porter had also worked to incorporate African artwork, literature, and scholarship into her collections.<sup>129</sup> Likewise, reflecting on designing the new library building, Smith said that,

“Planning the new library building at Fisk is another activity which has been extremely rewarding. My activities have included visiting new library buildings, working and fighting architects, meeting with the administration and faculty (with more fighting), working with the interior planners on furnishings, and finally moving into the building---where the real fight began.”<sup>130</sup>

The “real fight” in building the Fisk Library was Jessie Carney Smith attempting to establish a public history site. Moreover, by designing the Fisk Library, she arguably established something more innovative, a site for black public history.

As an administrator at Fisk, Smith's role wore several professional hats. In addition to overseeing the facility, hiring staff, and managing the budget, Smith was also a prolific scholar.

### **Birth Of the Fisk Special Collections, Implementing Black Studies**

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<sup>128</sup> Zita Cristina Nunes, "Remembering the Howard University Librarian Who Decolonized the Way Books Were Catalogued," *Smithsonian*, (November 26, 2018), <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/remembering-howard-university-librarian-who-decolonized-way-books-were-catalogued-180970890/>.

<sup>129</sup> For more information about Dorothy Porter, see Esme E. Bhan, "Dorothy Porter" in *Notable Black American Women*, edited by Jessie Carney Smith. (Detroit: Gale Research, 1992), 864; Dorothy B. Porter, "A Library on the Negro," *The American Scholar* 7, no. 1 (Winter 1938): 115-117; Dorothy B. Porter, "Library Sources for the Study of Negro Life and History," *The Journal of Negro Education* 5, no. 2 (1936): 232-44.

<sup>130</sup> Jessie Carney Smith, "The Four Cultures," 196.

In the 1969 hire of Ann Allen Shockley, Smith demonstrated her appreciation and knowledge of contemporary scholarship. In addition to being a proud graduate of Fisk, Shockley was an inspired short story writer and columnist. Before Shockley's hire in 1969, she had worked as a librarian at Delaware State College and the University of Maryland at Shore. When the new library building opened to students in 1970, Shockley initiated arguably one of Fisk's earliest public history projects.<sup>131</sup>

By the 1970s, Smith witnessed students become increasingly interested in the black collections.<sup>132</sup> Smith's passion for meeting the student's needs was reflected in her attitudes toward preservation. When possible insisted that all books on black history and culture have at least two copies in special collections demonstrates. Immediately after becoming head librarian, Smith engaged college students with library resources, and integrated librarianship into the classroom. In a 1966 article, Smith detailed how she integrated librarianship into the university's Pre College-Center.<sup>133</sup> In that article, she stated that,

“At the end of the 1965 summer term these students were permitted and encouraged to participate in a four-week training program which provided them with actual work experiences for which they received remuneration. Eighty-four students were employed in offices on campus, with the library requesting that forty-one be assigned as library aides. It was felt that through these services the library could focus on solving some of its problems that required immediate attention, while at the same time providing desirable library orientation for those students who probably were not familiar with library practices.”<sup>134</sup>

Her efforts were immediate and effective in getting students acclimated with the library's resources. Feeling as though Fisk had not been a “black institution”, Smith played a vital role in reshaping the institution's culture. Inspired by the campus uprisings at other HBCU campuses,

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<sup>131</sup> Owens, 153-54.

<sup>132</sup> Jessie Carney Smith, interview by the author, April 4, 2023.

<sup>133</sup> Jessie Carney Smith, “Library Enriches Pre College Experiences for Students,” *College & Research Libraries*, no. 27 (Fall 1966): 393-94.

<sup>134</sup> Smith, “Library Enriches Pre College Experiences for Students,” 393.

students wanted their education to reflect Pan-Africanist ideas. Smith, seemingly, found herself in the growing tensions between HBCU administration and the HBCU student body.

During the awakening of Black Power, Smith's perspective evolved with the movement. Students had become focused on the lack of effective local white support for the institution. Although the perception of Fisk had been one of a Victorian influenced campus, the school often struggled for Nashville's financial support. John Hope Franklin, Fisk graduate, historian, and residing board member, addressed the lack of local support in his autobiography.<sup>135</sup> The entire Black Power mantra, if nothing else, emphasized the importance of black self-reliance and nationalism. The designation of being an Oberlin-like campus would no longer suffice. Although some may not view an institution's library as being a center for activism, the early Smith years disproved that notion. Though not a foot-soldier, Smith made the Fisk library a center for black history and culture. Smith's design concept of the second floor Special Collections marked one her earliest acts of scholarly activism.

Believing that Fisk was to home to more than just students, Smith considered the Fisk library as part of the much larger Nashville black community. A child of Jim Crow, Smith was well-aware of the relationship African Americans had with public libraries. Therefore, she insisted on building a facility that was home to North Nashville. She was a strong member of the North Nashville community. She attended one of the movement's most famous churches, Clark Memorial United Methodist Church, and was a visiting professor at several Nashville colleges. She also established relationships with local and prominent officials, which proved valuable for the university. Her first significant public history project resulted from her sense of community pride.

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<sup>135</sup> John Hope Franklin, *Mirror to America: The Autobiography of John Hope Franklin* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 254-55.



The Fisk Oral History Project was not only the first oral history program at Fisk, but it was a landmark accomplishment in black librarianship.<sup>136</sup> Under Smith's leadership, the library applied for grant-funding from the National Endowment for Humanities (NEH). The NEH grant supported Shockley's plan for the program. From 1970-1973, the Fisk Oral History Project interviewed over 300 civil rights activists, scholars, and researchers. Shockley interviewed some of the most significant African Americans in history including: Shirley Graham Du Bois, Aaron Douglas, Hank Aaron, John Hope Franklin, Bontemps, and several other local community members.<sup>137</sup> Building upon the legacy left by her librarian predecessors, she used past acquisitions and formed black public history.

The 1970s saw a transition in the field of black history. In the fourth generation of Black historians, there was an increase in black women. As it pertained to the field of history, black women were one of the last to experience any level of status. In addition, librarians were not accepted as equals in the humanities. Librarians were often underappreciated as scholars compared to their contemporary faculty members. The Black Power era left an indelible mark on academia, diversifying the once predominantly white field. black librarians aggressively promoted black scholarship, often without the necessary support from administrators. On black campuses, librarians had always served as public historians. Despite that, Smith felt that the requisite faculty members failed to understand the usefulness of their librarians and libraries.<sup>138</sup> She also described the administrative attitude towards libraries as an "attitude of apathy."<sup>139</sup> The students of the civil rights movement forced institutional change at colleges, resulting in a new approach to libraries on their campuses.

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<sup>136</sup> Josey and Shockley, *The Handbook of Black Librarianship*, 254.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid*, 254; Owens, 158.

<sup>138</sup> Jessie Carney Smith, "The Four Cultures," 195.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid*.

## Black Librarian in America

In 1970, Smith published a reflective essay in the edited volume *The Black Librarian in America*. Smith's chapter, titled "The Four Cultures," was a commentary on her journey to librarianship. Inspired by the work of C.P. Snow's *The Two Cultures: And a Second Look*, Smith stated that her four cultures included being a librarian, a southerner, a Black American, and a woman.<sup>140</sup> Smith believed that her four cultures defined her experiences as a librarian. In one of the most eloquent and thought-provoking reflections by a scholar, Smith defined black librarianship for the field of library science. Furthermore, she never viewed her career in isolation. Instead, she felt her journey would inspire others that followed. As a woman, she was aware of institutional misogyny that plagued women scholars. Smith stated that,

"Women who endeavor to move into supervisory positions, especially at the top level, quickly to discover that far too many college administrators prefer to place men in supervisory positions and hold women in subordinate positions. The double standard is obvious when a man of limited qualifications moves to the top while a woman of equal or better qualifications is passed over. This is a particularly prevalent practice at this time when it is fashionable and profitable to be a dynamic black man."<sup>141</sup>

In addition to describing her four cultures, she listed several problems existing in black libraries. Smith understood that her position as an administrator was an exception and not the norm in academia. She knew there were several other qualified women candidates that were denied opportunities. Most college administrators were men, and even when HBCUs saw predominantly black leadership, women rarely held administrative positions. Smith's successful leadership at Fisk's library not only debunked sexist notions of women in the profession, but it also represented a changing field. The 1960s social movements revolutionized American society.

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid, 191.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid, 197.

More importantly, the social movements reshaped the humanities departments in the following years.

In 1969, two years after Carmichael's visit to Nashville, Vanderbilt University established its black studies department.<sup>142</sup> Black studies formed in the late 1960s in California, home to the Black Panther Party.<sup>143</sup> In addition to being a pioneer in black librarianship, Smith was an early advocate of black studies programs. Starting with the 1969 library opening, Fisk hosted a "Workshop on the Incorporation of Materials about the Negro in the Curriculum of the Liberal Arts College."<sup>144</sup> Smith was the opening speaker at the conference. She was followed by her mentor Arna Bontemps, giving his presentation titled "Contributions of the Negro to American Culture."<sup>145</sup> After the opening of new library building, Smith established new programs for black studies.

In 1970, Smith introduced the "Institute on the Selection, Organization, and Use of Materials by and About the Negro".<sup>146</sup> Smith, along with special collections librarian Ann Shockley, worked with both public and academic libraries. While academic and public libraries are looked as two distinct intinctions, they felt knowledge about black collections was essential to both institutions. During the 1970s, elite white research institutions began to value special black collections. According to Shockley, "predominately white colleges and universities, which previously had only a minimum amount of information on the Negro, are now hastily attempting to organize Afro-American libraries."<sup>147</sup> Shockley continued to suggest that this had more to do

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<sup>142</sup> "AADSRC History," African American & Diaspora Studies, accessed December 4, 2023, <https://as.vanderbilt.edu/aads/about/>.

<sup>143</sup> Abdul Alkalimat, *The History of Black Studies* (Pluto Press, 2019), 199-201.

<sup>144</sup> Owens, 159-60.

<sup>145</sup> Owens, 160.

<sup>146</sup> Owens, 161.

<sup>147</sup> Ann Allen Shockley, *A Handbook for the Administration of Special Negro Collections* (Nashville, TN: Fisk University, 1970), i.

with the “black role in society being a lucrative research field.”<sup>148</sup> Moreover, Smith had always intended for Fisk’s special collections to be more than just a private collection. She believed that strong private collections led to the founding of public ones. The strong development of what she called Black Public Special Collections was an early example of her creation of black public history in Nashville.

In 1971, Smith launched the “Institute in Black Studies Librarianship.” From 1957-1970, the sentiment toward black subjects changed. Suddenly, a once rejected era of black production became romanticized. Du Bois had once warned that the Harlem Renaissance would be exploited and manipulated by whites. Bontemps, now retired, became a coveted speaker across the country, a rather different reception than he experienced in the 1950s. Although the Harlem Renaissance became a romanticized era in black history, several renaissance writers and artists grew low on funds. After WWII, Langston Hughes became one of the few Renaissance writers who could make a steady income.<sup>149</sup> By the 1970s, the Harlem Renaissance, in the words of David Levering Lewis, became en vogue once again.<sup>150</sup> One might argue that Smith’s insistence on black studies programs was rooted in her experiences at professional conferences. Smith was often asked to serve on various committees solely because she was designated the only qualified black person. However, she dealt with it solely because she viewed her access as an opportunity to keep others from having to experience the same. Establishing black studies was her way of getting involved in the movement. Despite not being a foot soldier, she believed that education was key to institutional change.

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<sup>148</sup> Shockley, *A Handbook for the Administration of Special Negro Collections*, i.

<sup>149</sup> See Arna Bontemps, “Negro Poets, Then and Now.” *Phylon* 11, no. 4 (1950): 360; Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 302-309.

<sup>150</sup> Reference to David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was en Vogue* (Oxford University Press, 1981).

After Charles S. Johnson's election in 1947, Fisk experienced nothing but black presidents. Much to the chagrin of alum James R. Lawson, he was tasked with solving this dilemma. Lawson had been a student and faculty member at Fisk during its glory years. A student under Elmer Imes, Lawson graduated Phi Beta Kappa, with a degree in Physics.<sup>151</sup> Lawson was a product of the somewhat "elitist" Fisk culture. Prior to becoming president, Lawson had done wonders for the university's science departments, increasing the amount black graduates by the year.<sup>152</sup> Entering the presidential office in 1967, success was no longer measured by enrollment numbers. For students, Fisk had to leave its conformist past behind them. Despite his best efforts, Fisk lost a quarter of its enrollment, endowment and faculty.<sup>153</sup> At Fisk, as well as other HBCU campuses, black power permeated throughout the entire campus. Smith's support and pioneering advocacy for black studies should be viewed as an academic side of the much larger Black Power movement.

During Lawson's administration, Smith demonstrated her invaluable ability to acquire outside funding. While the university support waned, Smith fostered growth for the library. Proving invaluable to the institution, Smith not only led innovative projects, but she also secured necessary grants that supported the library. Smith's pioneering Institute in Black Studies Librarianship secured funding from the Higher Education Act.<sup>154</sup> From 1971 to 1974, Smith hosted the summer institute with much success. Her initial success inspired her to expand on an already groundbreaking idea. For the 1972-73 summer institute, Smith decided to host eight

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<sup>151</sup> Crystal DeGregory, "James Raymond Lawson," in *Profiles of African Americans in Tennessee*, eds. Linda T. Wynn and Bobby Lovett (Nashville: Tennessee State University, 2021), 159.

<sup>152</sup> For information about James R. Lawson's administration see, Jon Yates, "James Lawson, ex-president at Fisk, dies," *Nashville Tennessean*, December 23, 1996; L.M Collins, *One Hundred Years of Fisk University Presidents, 1875-1975* (Nashville: Hemphill's Creative Printing, Inc., 1989).

<sup>153</sup> DeGregory, "James Raymond Lawson," 161.

<sup>154</sup> Owens, 161.

interns, testing the efficacy of in-service training programs.<sup>155</sup> Although black studies had its birth in California, Smith spearheaded black studies in the conservative south. The Fisk Library, being an innovative research center, started generations prior. However, Smith certainly added to its legacy. Smith was surrounded by the legacies of African American literature and intellectual thought. In just over a decade, Smith had encountered and interacted with anyone spanning from Charles S. Johnson to Nikki Giovanni. And proven by her spectrum of work, she lied neatly in between those two legacies.

Images of the Black Panthers, Stokely Carmichael, the symbolic afro, and the iconic Olympic fist come to mind when thinking of Black Power. Even when looking at the Black Power movement on college campuses, most of the emphasis goes to the aesthetics of the movement. But the true impact of Black Power was arguably most felt on college campuses and in college curriculums. However, HBCUs did more than simply add black studies departments. Rather, HBCUs experienced black studies in all of its academic departments.

### **Establishing Black Studies Abroad**

In October 1970, Smith attended the Society of American Archivists conference, serving on a panel with the likes of Dorothy Porter, Vincent Harding, Willie L. Harriford Jr., and Stanton F. Biddle.<sup>156</sup> The conference was held to discuss the “Archival Resources for Black Studies.” In 1971, Smith collaborated with the Edwin Gleaves, dean at Peabody College, to teach a course titled “The Bibliography of the Negro.”<sup>157</sup> Some would argue that teaching at a white institution at that time, went against the black power ethos. However, Smith wished to balance between 1970s militancy and New Deal era patience. Smith understood her role as not only being a black

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<sup>155</sup> Brochure, “An Internship in Black Studies Librarianship,” September 5 – December 15, 1972, Fiskiana Collection. Special Collections and Archives, Fisk University.

<sup>156</sup> Josey and Shockley, *The Handbook of Black Librarianship*, 231.

<sup>157</sup> Hardy, 4-5.

educator, but an American educator, one that viewed education as a solution to racism. In 1973, Smith continued her global vision, serving as conference director at a workshop in Tokyo, Japan.<sup>158</sup> That same year, being one of the first to broach a minority-center resource project, she became a resource guide for minorities in the United States.<sup>159</sup> She later used this resource guide as impetus to start *The Directory of Significant Twentieth Century American Minority Women*.<sup>160</sup> However, due to a December fire in 1976, the project was stalled.<sup>161</sup> The fire did not hinder Smith's ambition. Between 1974 and 1976, she served as director of an ethnic studies program as well as serving on the staff of the Multicultural Institute for Librarianship at the University of Michigan.<sup>162</sup>

While some might have considered it misguided to work with whites, Smith used these predominantly white settings to build relationships. Though scholars have failed to view librarians as scholar activists, Smith's execution of black studies remains one of the most definitive cases of scholarly activism in American history. According to Smith, "It (black studies) strives to instill in black people a sense of identity, unit, and group dignity, and boldly rejects the host of standards traditionally dictated by white Americans governing fashion, hairstyles, skin coloring, and speech patterns."<sup>163</sup>

While black studies continued to grow across the country, Smith worked to expand curriculum. An expanded curriculum meant that black studies would now be integrated into public history. For Smith, she felt that white Americans were deprived of understanding black

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<sup>158</sup> Hardy, 215.

<sup>159</sup> Jessie Carney Smith, *Minorities in the United States: Guide to Resources* (Nashville: Peabody Library School, George Peabody School for Teachers, 1973)

<sup>160</sup> "Fisk Librarian Compiling a Book," *The Tennessean*, April 11, 1977.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid*; Hardy, 134.

<sup>162</sup> Hardy, 215.

<sup>163</sup> Jessie Carney Smith, "The Impact of Black Studies Programs on the Academic Library," *College and Research Libraries* (March 1972): 87-96.

culture as well. In her opinion, black studies were a correction of a false narrative history. Moreover, she stated that, “White Americans have also been provided little basis for understanding black culture; biased textbooks and cultural indoctrination have perpetuated a distorted perception of American cultural heritage among blacks and whites.”<sup>164</sup> This observation fueled what would later be the impetus of her encyclopedias. She felt that the need for black studies was a public need, an educational dialogue between two distinct races of people.

While some may not recognize librarians’ contributions to history and culture, Dr. Smith’s career at Fisk forces those to view librarians as builders and conservators of a race. As it pertains to Jessie Carney Smith, the 1970s increased her desire to preserve, document, and curate living history. Dr. Smith’s life marks that of a library builder, one whose mission aimed to chronicle the unique time in which she existed. While white institutions had still not caught up to the movement, Smith had already embarked on black public history, a field still not recognized as a discipline today.

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<sup>164</sup> Smith, “The Impact of Black Studies Programs on the Academic Library,” 88.



#### IV. THE LIBRARIAN

When Dr. Smith first assumed the position of librarian, the idea of radical librarianship was almost unheard of. With insistence on being scholar activists, black librarians did what the academy was afraid to do. One by one, black librarians insisted that library collections represented student interests. With the success of the Fisk Oral History project, Fisk's library became one of the most heralded collections in the South.<sup>165</sup> In the field of Black history, there were few that could rival Fisk's special collections. Smith mandated that the special collections maintain at least two copies of every book significant to black history and culture. She also acquired the most recent literature of black topics. Therefore, the Fisk special collections became a go-to place for anyone studying black life.

Smith was a long admirer of the Harlem Renaissance. Insisting that the library be a place for the local black community, she established the Learning Library Program (LLP).<sup>166</sup> Smith spearheaded the LLP to make the newly acquired Renaissance collections accessible, introducing the Harlem Renaissance to Nashville public history. During the two-year program, Smith hosted numerous events and produced several exhibits honoring the Renaissance. From 1981-82, the program's themes were "The Harlem Renaissance Remembered" and "Perspectives in Black Music".<sup>167</sup> Promoting the work of various artists, writers and musicians demonstrated her curiosity for the arts, believing that the arts was essential to black history.

With a NEH grant totaling \$293,666, Smith partnered with TSU, and the Nashville Public Library.<sup>168</sup> The LLP connected faculty, librarians, and scholars from all across the country. The

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<sup>165</sup> Josey and Shockley, *Handbook in Black Librarianship*, 22; Annette Phinazee, *The Black Librarian in the Southeast: Reminiscences, Activities, Challenges* (Durham: NCCU School of Library Science, 1980).

<sup>166</sup> *The Tennessean*, September 17, 1981.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

program also made sure that all lectures would be recorded. Smith had understood that black collections were not just for Fisk's students and faculty. Although Fisk was a small, private HBCU, Smith viewed it serving a public audience. When she arrived in Nashville, under Jim Crow segregation, one might not have conceived of a library promoting Black history and culture to the public.

HBCUs were home to college educated black students who were looking to enter a lucrative workforce. During Jim Crow, public libraries were strict enforcers of segregation. In Nashville, blacks had been relegated to a couple small public branches. Famously, the Hadley Park branch had been the prominent black library for Nashville's black population.<sup>169</sup> The issues of class have long been tied to the level of accessibility to archival collections.

Smith's asset to Nashville's black population was that she always kept the door open to more than just the student body. She also valued the average citizen, evidenced by the countless interviews of black working-class citizens in the oral history project. Somehow, she was able to balance scholarship and public service. Smith credited her work-life balance to her organized and detailed routine. She regularly went on morning walks, while having a structured breakfast before arriving to work each morning. If nothing else, Dr. Smith epitomized the black professional. The black professional class are often associated with being elitist. However, it was Smith's blue-collar, southern values that influenced her incredible work ethic.

Following the legacy of black woman librarianship, Smith worked as scholar, educator, and administrator. During the 1980s, Smith lectured at multiple colleges and universities.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Bobby L. Lovett, *The African-American history of Nashville, Tennessee, 1780-1930 : elites and dilemmas*. (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1999), 126.

<sup>170</sup> Jessie Carney Smith lectured at Howard University, University of Tennessee, Iowa State University, Cornell University, Atlanta University, Mississippi Valley University, University of North Carolina at Chapel-Hill, and University of Illinois. For more information, see Jessie Carney Smith Unpublished Collection at Fisk University; Phinazee, *The Black Librarian in the Southeast*, 121.

Despite living and experiencing Jim Crow, Smith was optimistic in her approach. She regularly educated Nashville's white audience on African American studies.

In March 1980, Smith worked on "Women a Research Imperative." Ten years prior, Smith wrote that it was "fashionable and profitable to be a dynamic young black man."<sup>171</sup> She continued by stating that women, particularly black women, were labeled as high-strung, temperamental and gossipy.<sup>172</sup> Although Black Americans gained increased social mobility, black women were still suffering from sexism within their own community. As it pertained to research interests, academia focused on the successes of black men, from the perspective of black men. Battling American sexism, Smith was not shy in pointing out the unfairness amongst her colleagues. In *Black Librarian America*, edited by E.J Josey, she challenged the discrepancies in HBCUs. Financially, HBCUs were repeatedly underfunded. The tasks of a head librarian at a HBCU were drastically different from one at white institutions. In addition to that, Smith stated that people considered the library "over-feminized."

Ironically, a profession predominantly held by women, emphasized the collections and perspectives of men. In her position, she could have easily sat idly by and been silent. Rather, she chose to challenge her peers, the community, and education. In her words, the black library administrator must accept the challenge, reject defeat, refuse to submit to the concept of a man's world, and make her role an enviable one.<sup>173</sup> Smith's role in librarianship paved the way for feminism in the field of history and librarianship. That same sentiment has been shared for several other black women librarians.<sup>174</sup> Smith made Fisk's library, the Harlem, 35th street

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<sup>171</sup> Smith, *The Black Librarian in America*, 197.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid, 197.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid, 204.

<sup>174</sup> See Julie Des Jardins, *Women and the Historical Enterprise in America: Gender, Race, and the Politics of Memory* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Suzanne Hildenbrand, eds., *Reclaiming the American Past: Writing the Women In* (New York: Ablex Publishing Company, 1996).

branch of Nashville. In her first twenty years at Fisk, she unarguably set a new standard for womanhood. Historian Julie Des-Jardins credited black women with making a way for women's history.<sup>175</sup>

In 1985, Jessie Carney Smith was awarded Academic Librarian of the year.<sup>176</sup> From the moment the new Fisk building was erected in 1969, Smith became the most accomplished academic librarian in the Southeast. By 1985, she had worked under several Fisk administrations. She had become one of the longest tenured librarians in the school's history, while also becoming a fixture in the Nashville scene. Prior to the 1980s, Smith was rarely mentioned in the local newspapers. With few exceptions, she had mainly been visible in academic circles. All this changed when she spearheaded her project on minority women, publicly calling for participants across the country.<sup>177</sup> At this point of her career, she became more than just a "Black" librarian or academic. She became Nashville's preeminent public historian. During the years that preceded her prestigious award, she described herself as being a fundraiser.<sup>178</sup> Moreover, she stated that,

"While many librarians are emphatic in their belief that fundraising is the responsibility of the development office on campus, my view is that institutions have many priorities and too frequently the library is one of the lower priorities. If the library is to grow, flourish, and extend itself in ways that support the institution's mission, it is not unreasonable to expect the library director and staff to seek funds from external sources to provide the support they need."<sup>179</sup>

Smith's insistence to go above and beyond the proverbial job description is what earned her such an achievement. She never settled for less, regardless of the financial strife in front of her. To simply call her an excellent steward would be an understatement. It was her faith in an

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<sup>175</sup> See Julie Des-Jardins, *Women and the Historical Enterprise in America: Gender, Race, and The Politics of Memory, 1880-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

<sup>176</sup> *The Tennessean*, August 18, 1985.

<sup>177</sup> Hardy, 106-110; "Fisk Librarian Compiling Book," *The Tennessean*, April 11, 1978.

<sup>178</sup> Jessie Carney Smith, "The Four Cultures Twenty Years Later" in *The Black Librarian in America Revisited* (Scarecrow Press, 1994), 145.

<sup>179</sup> Smith, "The Four Cultures Twenty Years Later," 145.

institution that inspired her to maintain hope. To celebrate the award, she was interviewed by the *Tennessean*. What made her such a unique public historian is that she never lost faith in the public, despite the local politics. She insisted to the reporter, "I'm not only hopeful, but I'm optimistic."<sup>180</sup> Smith's optimism was not just about Fisk or the Fisk Library. Rather, she had optimism that societal change would occur and that she could contribute to it. Due to her achievements at Fisk and in Nashville, she was often encouraged to take other opportunities. Smith always refused. She stated that at Fisk, "there was a history you feel and there's a future you feel. And everything you do here is noticed, both locally and nationally."<sup>181</sup> Being a public historian in Nashville had its perks. Smith was able to be in the state's capital, a place that had not appropriately commemorated the black experience.

Inundated with the importance of black culture, Smith shared black culture with Nashville, making the Fisk library home to various cultural events. Smith always saw popular culture as an asset to education rather than a deterrent. She viewed the musical and artistic achievements of Black Americans just as important as the scholarship. Dr. Smith was a proponent of a true liberal arts education, making special collections exhibits reflect every aspect of black life. From a staffing perspective, she made it possible to promote, hire, and employ predominantly black staff.

Due to the nonexistent library science programs for Black Americans, it was the mission of black librarians to build them at HBCUs. Although the priority shifted, particularly after the Black Power era. Black library science programs continued to dwindle, now there are only a few in existence. The decline in black library science programs could be credited to several factors

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<sup>180</sup> *The Tennessean*, April 18, 1985.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*

including lack of institutional support, changing landscape for the black working-class, sexist attitudes towards librarianship, and racial bias to whites and white institutions.<sup>182</sup> Regardless, the need for black librarians was felt, particularly at HBCUs. Smith wrote that,

“I am disturbed that few young black people see librarianship as an attractive profession. Their options are so great that other fields are more attractive to them. On the other hand, the closing of the multipurpose library school at Vanderbilt University, for example means that the few young people who were encouraged to enter the field and who were restricted to Nashville have had to choose other professions, particularly areas of business. Doubtless the pattern is the same in other areas where library schools have closed. Strong, positive role models, once unavailable to our young, are now present with few people to be inspired by their work.”<sup>183</sup>

Instead of just writing about the issue, Dr. Smith was increasingly vocal over the decade.

She traveled all across the country to advocate for support in the field. She used her successes as evidence of what black librarianship meant to communities and students. Speaking in front of professional organizations, holding professorships at several institutions, consulting the U.S Office for Education, U.S Office for Civil Rights, and the Southern Association for Colleges and Schools, she was one of the most influential librarians in the Americas.<sup>184</sup>

### **Returning Home, NCLA Biennial Conference**

In 1989, Smith returned home to North Carolina and gave a lecture titled “Twentieth-Century Perspectives for Librarians and Librarianship” at the North Carolina Library Association (NCLA). In her words, she aimed to satisfy that curiosity about the 90s and to present some of the directions that we must take to promote the smooth, effective transition from this decade to the next, from this century to the next.” But more importantly she stated that librarians must determine what the public needs will be.<sup>185</sup> More than a librarian, Smith was a public historian.

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<sup>182</sup> Smith, “The Four Cultures Twenty Years Later,” 149-51.

<sup>183</sup> Smith, 149.

<sup>184</sup> For information about Jessie Carney Smith’s role as consultant, see Hardy, “Piecing of a Quilt.”

<sup>185</sup> Jessie Carney Smith, “Twentieth-Century Perspectives for Librarians and Librarianship,” *North Carolina Libraries* 47, no. 4 (Winter 1989): 227-33.

Smith insisted that the only way librarianship would survive the decade was if it had best served the public. Speaking in front of North Carolina's public and academic librarians, she challenged them to change their perspectives. Smith was not only well-respected as a librarian, but her philosophy of practice was considered innovative. She spent over twenty years transforming Fisk into a public history center. No librarian in America could testify to library innovation more than Jessie Carney Smith. On October 12<sup>th</sup>, she challenged her attentive audience to develop and execute a plan of action. Her lecture was not typical lip-service to appease the audience. Rather, she warned that all attendees would be called to question during her lecture. Specifically, the attendees were those she described as allergic to change.

Jessie Smith was not just immune to change, but she was a change agent. She questioned why certain libraries failed to embrace the new technological advancements of the 1980s. She insisted that libraries should be modernized and adapted to the changing environment. In this lecture, Smith concerned herself with the country at large. One might even describe it as a state of the union address. She spent several instances highlighting the changing demographic landscape of the growing nation. Concerning the growing immigrant population, Smith stated that,

“If the number of immigrants increases, they will need places to live and work. If the Baby Boomers take early retirement, they will need to find ways to fill the time once spent burning themselves out in the workplace. If others reach retirement age and opt to remain in the work force, they will need to learn to live in a vastly automated society.”

Smith was truly before her time. Historians, let alone librarians, had not yet grappled that society was changing. Even if they did, they met change with skepticism and resistance. In 1989, Smith was fifty-nine years old, an age that for most signaled close to retirement. Smith's innovative and foreshadowing speech signaled that the best was still yet to come. Smith saw the

American library as a hub, a space for critical thinking and information. She also challenged the narrative that libraries could not be creative spaces. She believed that librarians, community planners and others needed to be in think-tank seminars, research laboratories and elsewhere.<sup>186</sup> Libraries needed to expand, not necessarily in size, but in ideas and strategies.

Smith's concept for library science programs were considerably radical for her time. She was more than just an advocate for diverse and black library programs. In fact, she advocated for a radical library program design, one that sets trends for the information sciences. She had grown tired of libraries being reactive, rather than proactive. From her perspective, Fisk had always been a proactive library space, constantly innovating and strategizing for better. Smith encouraged librarians to expand their imaginaries and to begin to see their institutions differently. To relay her sentiment, Smith used a personal anecdote to demonstrate how librarians and libraries should adapt to an unfamiliar environment. Smith went on to say,

“My friends and colleagues, there are many questions regarding libraries in the 90s, but there are no easy solutions. I am reminded here of my favorite cartoon character Ziggy, who often finds himself in a rather precarious situation. He too has been affected by new technology, and he has been known to associate with computers in public. In one instance, as Ziggy sat at the computer, a message on the screen read: That's the third time you've punched the wrong button... Why don't you just go watch some cartoons and let me handle this.” As librarians, sometimes we will need to go away and let technology take over.”<sup>187</sup>

For a librarian trained in the 1960s, Smith uniquely supported technological advancements despite it transforming how she approached her profession. Smith had a way of relating to people. She understood that it would be a difficult transition for libraries, however, that did not mean that the transition could not be done. Smith's final message was an edict to the library profession. As an architect of black studies, she learned the importance of strategy and

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<sup>186</sup> Smith, “Twentieth Century Perspectives for Librarians and Librarianship,” 230.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid, 232.



understanding the target audience. What did patrons want? What did patrons lack? All her objectives answered the absences that were felt by academic and public patrons. Subsequently, Smith listed six objectives that she challenged North Carolina libraries and librarians to accomplish. These objectives were all phrased “Libraries will,” “Librarians will”, which signaled that this was not only her objectives for the future, but they were her expectations. She expected libraries to be better because they had no excuse not to be. Fisk, a small private HBCU, had become the main site for black public history with limited funds and resources. Therefore, libraries benefited from the perspectives of a HBCU librarian. Her visit to North Carolina symbolized the public historian she had become. She illustrated that librarianship alone would not have led to the Fisk Library’s success. Instead, it was her public history practice that set her apart and propelled Fisk into the generation.

### **The Encyclopedia: *Notable Black American Women***

Smith never lacked a sense of public responsibility, constantly promoting women and minority voices. One might say Smith delved into several academic disciplines: sociology, genealogy, library science, black studies. However, Smith’s greatest accomplishment was in the field of history. Particularly in the field of women’s history, Dr. Smith answered the prayers of several women before. By the 1980s, the field of history saw an emergence in women historians. Black women were not only integral to this emergence, but they served as inspirations for a new generation of scholarship. One of the greatest voids in history was black women’s biography. The subject had been often ignored by white and black men alike. With few exceptions, most prominent black women had been overlooked and under discussion.

Dr. Smith, a pioneer, knew there were other pioneers that had been ignored and undiscovered. Although she had a great knowledge of women’s history, she would need help

with a large-scale project on women. Though her initial quest for a minority women's encyclopedia was postponed, she had a new opportunity. In 1992, Dr. Smith completed what had been a career-long effort to document the achievements of black women. When *Notable Black American Women* was published, it was met with instant acclaim. The acclaim was not just from fellow scholars but from the American people. Parents, children, and schoolteachers saw the achievement as changing the course of classrooms forever. No longer could someone lie to their daughter about what she could accomplish. No longer could black history be seen solely from a male perspective. *Notable Black American Women* was the culmination of the women's history movement.

Now, scholars had a reference point about black women that had been ignored by scholars. The image of the Black American woman was now broad, expansive, and obvious to all that observed the encyclopedia. Women ranged from scholars, artists, musicians, businesswomen, doctors, lawyers, athletes, etc. Dr. Smith, who spent a career challenging the image, now changed the image of women forever. The groundbreaking encyclopedia led to her receiving the Candace Award, given by the National Coalition of Black Women (NCBW). The Candace Award had previously been given to some of the most important figures in American history including Ella Baker, Johnnetta Cole, Maya Angelou, Althea Gibson, Dorothy Height, and Rosa Parks. The award recognizes the "Black role models of uncommon distinction who have set a standard of excellence for young people of all races."<sup>188</sup>

Once a renowned librarian, Smith became a history maker herself. Her awards properly align her with the black women heroine of the past. When the NACW was founded in 1896, Mary Church Terrell envisioned black women being trailblazers and changing the lives of Black

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<sup>188</sup> "Camille Cosby, Kathleen Battle Win Candace Awards," *Jet Magazine*, July 20, 1992.

Americans. The NACW was also evidence of an existing black women's leadership class, often under discussion and overlooked in history. Black women had long been the educators and stewards of black scholarship. Operating from behind the scenes, sophisticated and strong black women built every sustainable movement Black America has ever had. Smith's career achievements were an acknowledgement of this fact, long overdue.

From the perspective of Fisk, it had now had the most influential librarian in the United States. Particularly as it pertained to women's and black history, she was the go-to conservator of an entire race. The era before her was almost all but gone. Dorothy Porter had retired from Howard in 1973, leaving an enduring legacy for black history. Smith filled that void admirably, and Porter served as a consultant and editor for *Notable Black American Women*. She would later properly honor Porter in the 1996 volume of the book.

Most people do not associate creativity and innovation with scholarship. Scholars are often viewed as those who operate outside the realm of creativity. Smith, from the very beginning, was innovative. She never shied away from perceived challenges and/or obstacles in her way. When funds were low, she made a way, whether that be through fundraising or developing Fisk's resources. Smith's approach is tied to how she always viewed the library profession. Librarians were not academic bystanders. Rather, librarians had a place in building history. Being a black librarian meant immersing oneself in the community. For the longest time, black librarians had no choice. HBCUs, for black librarians, were the only places of academic freedom. Describing her work culture, Smith said that,

“Fisk is a place where I have been able to research, write, and publish without the threat of perishing looming overhead. Publishing, then, has been the result of an interest in maintaining professionalism, or pursuing areas of interest, and the desire to share the information with others.”<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> Smith, “The Four Cultures Twenty Years Later,” 144.

Essentially, at HBCUs, if you could acquire the funds, you could do the project. Most of Smith's publishing grew out of external funding sources. Throughout her time at Fisk, she often shared both privately and publicly the financial obstacles Fisk and black libraries faced. However, she also surveyed the American landscape to start new projects for the library. After the publishing of *Notable Black American Women*, the objective that Smith would embark on would be in digital history. As she stated in her NCLA conference address, the world was changing. Information spaces transformed to digital spaces quickly. By the end of the 1990s, libraries were forced to adapt or die based on how they integrated modern technology into their institutions. In 1989, Smith proved to be far ahead of the curve because she had already been planning how to best make the 1969 building a digital hub.

Smith seemingly always reached back into Fisk's resources to find the strategic answers. The JRF fund that Fisk had acquired under the tenure of Bontemps would serve as the basis of Smith's next project. Again, Smith was demonstrating that private collections beget accessible public collections. In an era of urban renewal, the monuments of the movement seemed to be fading. However, Smith, the public historian, valued more than just the concrete structures of history. Smith was also a preservationist who looked to preserve what was left behind. Rosenwald schools served an entire generation of black children during Jim Crow. Smith was a product of the Rosenwald schools, and saw those schools get destroyed or readapted once she became an adult. Smith's next project would transform public history in the 21st century and become the lasting achievement of the innovative librarian.

### **Rosenwald Database, Digital History**

In 1994, Smith revisited her reflective essay "The Four Cultures." In *the Black Librarian in America Revisited*, she described how she and the field of librarianship had grown. Though

she acknowledged that some of the previous problems still existed, she mostly maintained her signature optimism for the future. Smith still concluded that,

“as librarianship becomes a much more attractive and challenging field, it must also provide opportunities for blacks and other minority groups to be beneficiaries of that new excitement and to become full partners in the educational and cultural development of all people.”<sup>190</sup>

Smith was clearly advocating for librarianship to take a more aggressive stance in its outreach to the black communities. However, Smith would not wait on the field or for the ALA to answer her call to action. Instead, Smith got busy building. At the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Rosenwald student alumni became increasingly interested in the JRF collection. Always swayed by the patron’s request, Smith looked to secure funding to make the collection more publicly accessible. Because she had always been a proponent of digital innovation in libraries, she wanted to establish a Rosenwald database.

When looking at African American schools, in the rural South, there are two names that are often in association, Booker T. Washington and Julius Rosenwald.<sup>191</sup> Prior to the New Deal, there was a lack of financial support for southern schools. As it pertained to black Americans, there was little to no effort to provide education to black children.<sup>192</sup> Rosenwald’s significance to the black community also includes his funding of black scholars. From 1928-48, the Rosenwald fund fellowship supported almost every black intellectual in the United States. However, it took almost an entire century before the National Trust Historic Preservation (NTHP) to designate Rosenwald schools as a national treasure. In 2002, Rosenwald schools were determined by the

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid, 151.

<sup>191</sup> See Stephanie Deutsch, *You Need a Schoolhouse: Booker T. Washington, Julius Rosenwald, and the Building of Schools for the Segregated South* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015).

<sup>192</sup> For information about education for African Americans in the South, see James Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

NTHP as one of the country's most endangered places.<sup>193</sup> By 2002, there had been schools listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Therefore, the historic preservation community was tasked with saving and rehabilitating the schools that had once held an entire generation African Americans.

With the passing of *Brown v. Board*, the Rosenwald schools were neglected. Southern states made a concerted effort to dismantle what had been one of the few places left of predominantly black neighborhoods and communities. Dr. Smith, a product of the Rosenwald schools, joined the growing preservationist efforts to preserve the Rosenwald legacy. It is fair to say, the remaining Rosenwald schools survived due to the black community and grassroots preservation efforts. The MTSU Center for Historic Preservation (CHP) had been one of the earliest southern preservationist organizations to work closely with rural black communities. Carroll Van West, the organization's director, has held the position since 1984. West had experience working closely with Fisk, Dr. Smith, and the Metropolitan Historical Commission in Nashville while she was establishing Fisk as the city's preeminent black public history center.

Smith's partnership with the CHP and NTHP signified that the Rosenwald schools were getting the full support of the preservation community. In addition, historian Mary S. Hoffschwelle wrote two books, using the JRF resources housed at Fisk.<sup>194</sup> The momentum for the Rosenwald database culminated at the 2004 conference.

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<sup>193</sup> "Rosenwald Schools: National Trust for Historic Preservation," Rosenwald Schools | National Trust for Historic Preservation, accessed March 21, 2024, <https://savingplaces.org/places/rosenwald-schools>.

<sup>194</sup> Mary S. Hoffschwelle wrote two books on the Rosenwald schools. See Mary S. Hoffschwelle, *Preserving Rosenwald Schools* (National Trust for Historic Preservation, 2003); Mary S. Hoffschwelle, *The Rosenwald Schools of the American South* (University Press of Florida, 2006).

Hosted by the NTHP, the “Reclaiming Rosenwald Schools: Preserving a Legacy” conference was held from Friday, May 21 to Saturday, May 22., 2004 in the Fisk Library.<sup>195</sup> Those who attended the conference included, the NTHP, The Alabama Historical Commission and Catawba Trace Commission, The Brevard Rosenwald School, and the MTSU CHP.<sup>196</sup> Smith again found herself at the center of public history. Welcoming several public history organizations to the “Fisk culture” proved to successful. In October of that year, Smith received grant funding from the Save America’s Treasures program.<sup>197</sup>

In the application for the grant, Smith cited the public interest of the preservation of the schools.<sup>198</sup> Smith’s appeal for funds was another example of her community-centered scholarship. Her scholarship always reflected the interest of the community, proving that she was a practitioner of shared authority practice. It would take four years for the Rosenwald database to become public.<sup>199</sup> In 2008, the Rosenwald database at the John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library was home to the largest single collection of papers concerning the Rosenwald School building program.

Considered a career capstone project, Smith aimed to retire from Fisk in 2010. However, she was convinced to stay by the Provost and Vice-President of Academic Affairs until Fisk found a successor.<sup>200</sup> For one last time, Smith prioritized Fisk’s future, faculty and students over her personal interest. In her successor, she looked for someone who shared her

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<sup>195</sup> Program, “Reclaiming Rosenwald Schools: Preserving a Legacy,” May 21-22, 2004, Fiskiana Collection, Special Collections and Archives, Fisk University.

<sup>196</sup> Owens, 178.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid, 179.

<sup>198</sup> Application, Save America’s Treasures: FY 2004 Historic Preservation Fund Grants to Preserve Nationally Significant Intellectual and Cultural Artifacts and Historic Structures and Sites, May 17, 2004, Fiskiana Collection, Special Collections and Archives, Fisk University.

<sup>199</sup> Final Project Report, Federal Save America’s Treasures Grant, Final Grant Report for the Period January 1, 2005-December 31, 2007, March 26, 2008, Fiskiana Collection.

<sup>200</sup> Program, “Jessie Carney Smith: Celebrating 50 Years of Service to the Library at Fisk University,” December 4, 2015, Fiskiana Collection, Special Collections and Archives, Fisk University.

same passion for history. In 2017, she hired Brandon Owens as library assistant for technical services. Smith quickly determined that Owens would be her successor. Much like her mentor had done for her, she encouraged him to pursue librarianship as a profession. Owens graduated from Middle Tennessee State University with a PhD in Public history. He would become Fisk's second dean of the library and the school's second public historian to hold that office. In 2020, Dr. Jessie Carney Smith retired from Fisk University.<sup>201</sup> Smith was unanimously chosen by the Fisk Board of Trustees as librarian emerita, capping off one of the most significant careers in American history.

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<sup>201</sup> "Longtime Fisk University Librarian and Dean Jessie Carney Smith Retires," Fisk University, July 21, 2020, <https://www.fisk.edu/featured/longtime-fisk-university-librarian-and-dean-jessie-carney-smith-retires/>.



## V. CONCLUSION: JESSIE CARNEY SMITH, NASHVILLE'S FIRST PUBLIC HISTORIAN

Dr. Jessie Carney Smith is one of the most significant figures in the Nashville Civil Rights Movement. Although some, including herself, may not see it that way, she was a true soldier. She may not have “put boots on the ground” like some more notable civil rights leaders, but she was unquestionably a scholar-activist. For 55 years, Smith worked in libraries, and served as the Fisk University librarian, later becoming its first dean. Her career witnessed several significant periods of African American life. You can even trace her career all the way back to the Harlem Renaissance. One can view the life of Jessie Carney Smith in the same lens the prolific activist and writer, James Baldwin, reflected on his life in *Remember This House*. To put her life into its proper context, Smith was one year younger than MLK; she was a growing academic and scholar when Malcolm became the face of the Nation of Islam, and she became Fisk's librarian while John Lewis and Nikki Giovanni graduated from Fisk. People often claim that it is impossible to chronicle the civil rights movement without mentioning the Nashville sit-ins. There are those who also believe that there is no movement in Nashville without the student movement at Fisk University. So, one might ask why the life of Jessie Carney Smith has slipped through cracks of history. The Fisk library has been and maintains to be one of the sole conservators of the movement. Therefore, how is the Fisk University librarian not recognized for her part in the movement?

Smith's entire career and contributions as a librarian at Fisk warrant an entire book. However, I intend to demonstrate that she made an even larger contribution to history. Public history, as defined by the National Council of Public History (NCPH), is history that is applied to

real-world issues.<sup>202</sup> Based on that definition, Jessie Carney Smith was Nashville's first public historian. Smith viewed history as reflective of the social issues that took place. History was a working discipline, one that engaged with local and global communities. Long before the first iteration of public historians secured grants and partnerships with the National Endowment for Humanities (NEH), Smith had already used NEH funding to establish black studies. In 1978, G. Wesley Johnson recalled hosting conferences discussing topics such as: historic preservation, business history, writing community history, and history in media.<sup>203</sup> That same year, Smith had restarted her minority women's project. From 1971-78, she had already published several surveys and resource guides on African American topics. She had also hosted several conferences and workshops that educated the public on how to handle black collections. It is clear history was ignorant of the work of black librarians.

As it pertains to integrating media in the field of history, Smith helped institute the Fisk Oral History Project. Due to black studies being interdisciplinary in nature, it is often ignored as integral to the history discipline. Smith's insistence on black studies was another example of public history at work. The Black Studies Librarianship Institute was an early iteration of Black Public History. Black Studies programs did more to introduce black history to non-academics than any history department in America. In Nashville, she was integral in implementing black studies at Vanderbilt. The NCPH considers the field of library and archives a field of public history. Jessie Carney Smith's service in the American Library Association (ALA), Southeastern Library Committee, and the Tennessee State Library Association are evidence of her role public history. Nashville needed Jessie Carney Smith. Working in a profession where blacks were

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<sup>202</sup> "About the Field," National Council on Public History, June 28, 2022. <https://ncph.org/what-is-public-history/about-the-field/>.

<sup>203</sup> G. Wesley Johnson, "The Origins of 'The Public Historian' and the National Council on Public History," *The Public Historian* 21, no. 3 (1999): 169.

rarely given the opportunity to meet the qualifications, Smith would often be called to serve on advisory boards and committees. During the period of implementing black studies, Smith was often called to be the discipline's representative. Few African Americans worked in academic libraries, let alone had a PhD in library science. Smith's credentials made her an anomaly, particularly at southern conferences. She leveraged her credentials to pave the way for library and resource literacy for her community. Smith turned Fisk into a black public history center. In her words,

“My professional years have been devoted to administering in a college that is historically black and underfunded yet known and respected nationally and internationally for its library, art and academic programs.”<sup>204</sup>

The unique “Fisk culture” essentially forced its library into public history. Due to limited funds, it had no choice but to look outside academia. With a population of minority and underrepresented students, Fisk had to curate a collection that represented its population. While the movement of the 1960s was happening, the Fisk Library did not act as an observer. Instead, the library viewed the movement as an opportunity for future research. Smith believed that the black arts movement of the 1960s made a clarion cry for materials and for library staffs who could serve the African American collections and programs that emerged.<sup>205</sup> NCPH sarcastically simplifies public history's definition to the simple phrase, “I know it when I see it.”<sup>206</sup> Similarly, Jessie Carney Smith looked, acted, and worked as a public historian for years.

Jessie Carney Smith's first ten years in Nashville interacted with everything spanning from activists to activism. Smith arrived in Nashville under Jim Crow segregation. By 1967, she

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<sup>204</sup> Smith, “The Four Cultures Twenty Years Later,” 144.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid, 145.

<sup>206</sup> “About the Field,” National Council on Public History, June 28, 2022. <https://ncph.org/what-is-public-history/about-the-field/>.

was at the center of the Black Power Revolution on college campuses. These formative years undoubtedly shaped her perspectives on scholarship.

Some individuals have the rare opportunity to blend their purpose and passion with their career. Smith developed into a scholar activist who used her platform to enforce institutional change. Historian Andrew Lewis defined Jessie Smith's generation as the New Deal generation. The New Deal generation, described by Lewis, worked hard to provide their children with things and opportunities that they had missed out on. Smith may have been a member of the New Deal generation, but she shared a sense of urgency with the Civil Rights generation that followed.

In the "Four Cultures" essay, Smith detailed the opportunity of being a black librarian at Fisk. She had benefited from the black librarians and collectors before her. At Fisk, Schomburg had help curate a lucrative collection at Fisk. However, due to limited space, those later valuable sources were simply resting on shelves. It was Smith, and her generation of librarians, that would ensure that these collections would be made public. In each decade of Smith's career, she engaged in curation, historic preservation, archives, oral history, and digital history projects. Unlike academic historians, public historians meet "beyond the walls of the traditional classroom."<sup>207</sup> Public historians work with community members, professional colleagues and engage collaborative projects. Advocating for shared authority, public historians understand the balance between scholarship and community-centered work. Smith engaged in collaborative projects her entire career, including; calling for writers for an encyclopedia, partnering with outside institutions to host a public program, or sharing Fisk's resources with local community

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

centers and public libraries. Smith's four cultures clearly defined her professional efforts as a librarian and public historian.

In "The Four Cultures: Twenty Years Later", she gave an autobiographical account of her career. Twenty years prior, she shared that she had not envisioned librarianship as profession before she arrived at Fisk. What changed? In 1994, she shared that it was the "Fisk experience". Fisk, Nashville's oldest standing institution, embodies history. There was no other place that would have allowed her to have a public history platform. There was also no other place where she would have benefited from independence to demonstrate her individual brilliance and passion. Smith viewed libraries as thinktanks, and resource centers in both academic and public libraries. Fisk not only supported this belief, but it had a long and storied history of proving that belief true.

When one looks at the career timeline of Smith, one could argue that no librarian nor historian has done more to promote black history, particularly in the south. First, Smith opened the Fisk library building in 1969, establishing a black public history in Nashville. In 1970, Smith and Shockley started the Fisk Oral History project, conducting more than three hundred interviews. From 1970-79, she helped implement black studies across the country and integrated black studies into librarianship. From 1980-89, she became a distinguished publisher, culminating in becoming Academic Librarian of the Year. From 1990-99, she edited the groundbreaking *Notable Black American Women*. From 2000 until her retirement in 2020, she launched the Rosenwald database, a site used by researchers worldwide. Smith once said,

“I look upon being a black librarian as something to be proud of, regardless of the many injustices that black librarians still face, and of the long road ahead before we gain full access to the rewards that librarianship offers others.”<sup>208</sup>

Indeed, Jessie Carney Smith should be a proud black librarian. More importantly, she should be proud that she lived up to and set a new standard for the field. Bontemps, her mentor once answered the question “What can librarians do?” as it pertained to the “Negro Awakening”. To this question, Bontemps answered,

“the Negro awakening, or revolt, if you prefer, may be said to have had its genesis in the library. Nothing has done so much to irritate and arouse Negro youth of this generation as the attitude to imply that Negroes did not exist, or at least didn’t matter. He continued to say, Negroes obviously need to read about themselves and their situation. But is equally important for white readers to be exposed to some of the same books if both are to live and work and worship in the kind of society toward which we seem to be moving.”<sup>209</sup>

Arna Bontemps provided one of the most eloquent observations of the ongoing 1960s civil rights movement. One could argue that Bontemps brilliant answer was only topped by the execution and practice of none other than his successor, Jessie Carney Smith. Nashville benefited greatly from public history. As a city lacking a sufficient black museum for most of Smith’s career, she provided Nashville’s black community a safe space, an early black public history establishment.

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<sup>208</sup> Smith. “The Four Cultures,” 202.

<sup>209</sup> Arna Bontemps, “The Negro Awakening: What Librarians Can Do,” *Library Journal* (1963): 2999.

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**APPENDIX: ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

## INTERVIEW ON APRIL 4, 2023

1. What do you remember about the Nashville Riot of 1967?
2. Did you attend the Carmichael meeting held in the Fisk gym?
3. When Carmichael arrived on campus, did faculty receive any direction from administration?
4. What were your attitudes toward Stokely Carmichael?
5. Did you notice a shift in the student body after the gym meeting?
6. Was Black Power a presence at Fisk prior to Carmichael's arrival?
7. What was your relationship with President James Lawson?
8. How did the Nashville Riot affect the library and/or its collections?
9. Do you feel that the riot sparked the Black studies program at Vanderbilt?

## INTERVIEW ON APRIL 18, 2023

1. How do you feel about the comparisons between Martin Luther King and Malcolm X?
2. Were there drastic differences between (Michigan State University, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and Cornell University) and Nashville?
3. While getting your PhD, did your family follow?
4. Did you encounter John Lewis or Nikki Giovanni while they were students at Fisk? If so, could you describe your interactions with them?
5. Do you think Arna Bontemps would have supported the Black Power Movement?