

JESSIE CARNEY SMITH: CURATOR AND PRESERVER OF A RACE, 1969-75

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I. INTRODUCTION

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Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated on April 4, 1968, in Memphis, Tennessee. On that date, almost sixty years later, I conducted my second interview with Dr. Jessie Carney Smith. In 2023, Smith is now three years retired from her post at Fisk, 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 still is an active writer and public historian. As of this year, she currently works on editing new volumes of her acclaimed encyclopedias. In the 21st century, Dr. Smith has been the subject of two dissertations.

Christa Hardy, PhD graduate from Smith's alma mater 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. One might think that all has been told of the storied legacy and career of Jessie Carney Smith. However, Smith's career incorporates several elements of black history and culture. Smith was a witness and activist in the black freedom struggle. Smith became one of the most prolific librarians in the United States, culminating in her being elected "Librarian of the Year" in 1985.¹ Smith's work is not in isolation. Instead, her work is a part of the development of black history, black librarianship, black studies, and public history. The study of black librarianship has grown in the last ten years, with several librarians reflecting on how far the black librarian has come. In honor of E.J Josey's *Black Librarian in America*, current black librarians co-authored an edited volume under the same title. E.J Josey was a library giant, a prolific author and activist of the late sixties and early seventies. Josey was the first black president of the American Library Association (ALA), and

¹ Christa V. 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), 2.

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often referred to as an activist librarian.² He was one of the leaders of a growing community of black librarians, trying to preserve black history. There are several awards named after the late, great E.J. Josey. Jessie Carney Smith, during that same time, turned Fisk into one of the South's first public history sites. Like Josey, Smith advocated for and implemented black studies programs into curriculums across the United States. When Josey co-authored *The Handbook of Black Librarianship*, in 1977, Smith represented a small number of doctorate-degree holding black librarians. 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 school's Black Oral History Program.

Smith began her career, as director at Fisk, in 1965. Her presence was not only necessary for the field of library science, but she made endless contributions to black history. Before black women's history was an established field, Smith was an early advocate. Her constant pursuit of knowledge led her down the path of historical scholarship. By the time of her retirement, several contemporaries concluded that her encyclopedias have helped educate the public and generations of students.³ Smith aptly followed the legacies of giants and continued their efforts. Though there has been increasing interest in black librarianship, Smith somehow slips through the cracks. While Schomburg, Josey and Porter were exceptional, Smith should share their place in black history. Not guilty of self-adulation, Smith rarely mentions her accomplishments. Instead, she proudly speaks of her colleagues, students, and collaborators. Undoubtedly worthy of a statue or

² "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.

³Sara Marcus, "Encyclopedia of African American Popular Culture." *Library Journal* 136, no. 8 (May 2011): 100; Mark McCallon, "Encyclopedia of African American Business." *Library Journal* 131, no. 19 (November 15, 2006): 94; Kam W. Teo, "Smith, Jessie Carney & Linda T. Wynn. Freedom Facts and Firsts: 400 Years of the African American Civil Rights Experience." *Library Journal*, January 1, 2009

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monument of her own, she insists that Fisk must commemorate her great mentor and predecessor.⁴ After all, it was those early years with Arna Bontemps that introduced her to librarianship. It was those years that formed the ethos of her first decade as head librarian. From 1965-1975, Smith set Fisk, and herself, apart as leaders in historical production. The establishment of the 1969 Fisk library building may have been her first major project, but it certainly was not her last. Smith's navigation of Fisk's period of cultural and financial difficulty should be an admired period of academic leadership.

II. 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 had already made history by becoming the university's first Black woman librarian. The new building would mark Smith's first major project as head librarian. The library was not only built under her administration, but the design would reflect her unique style and essence. 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.⁵ 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.⁶ Smith had established a nice rapport with Wright, and the library had grown because of it. The 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 student body reflected what historian Andrew Lewis called the "civil rights generation". Smith reflected the

⁴ Jessie Carney Smith, interview by the author, April 4, 2023.

⁵ Brandon Owens, Sr, "A History of Fisk University Library: 150 Years of African American Public History and Culture, 1866 – 2016," PhD Diss, (Middle Tennessee State University, 2020), 154.

⁶ Owens, "A History of Fisk University Library: 150 Years of African American Public History and Culture, 1866 – 2016", 154; "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.

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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.

Like those students, Smith carried a radical energy and flair about herself, unique to the budding black middle-class. From Smith's perspective, black leadership was not a mere possibility, instead it was the reality of her training. Smith was not ignorant of the black past or history, even though the history textbooks did not share it. In her Greensboro upbringing, she had seen the intellectual capabilities of both the Black elite and 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.

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.⁷ She had seen Fisk turn from a HBCU in name to 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*, they described the layout of the new, impressive library building.

⁷ Jessie Carney Smith, Interview by the author, Nashville, TN, April 4, 2023.

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One of Smith's key structural concepts was the housing of the illustrious Fisk African American collection. Describing the second floor, it 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.”⁸

The second floor was clearly an intentional Afro-centric structural design, and it reflected Smith's desire for an essential preservation of Fisk's collections. That same year, Smith hired Ann Allen Shockley to be associate librarian and to head the Special collections. Shockley's hire demonstrates the immediate impact Smith had on the library profession. Smith marked Fisk's first library administrative hire, and before 1970, she had already hired another black woman to be in leadership. Black librarianship had made significant progress by 1969, however, the library profession had a long, troubled history of 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, one could argue that Black women had made the most significant contributions to the field. Looking at Fisk's long, private-school counterpart, Howard University, Dorothy B. Porter had built the Moorland-Spingarn Research

⁸“Library and Media Center for Fisk's Future,” *Library Journal* 94 (December 1969): 4405.

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Center almost 30 years prior.⁹ Porter had already set a standard for black librarianship that centered preservation, black history and culture, and scholarly activism at its core. Smith was definitely in succession to several black women pioneers in the field of librarianship. The tandem of Smith and Shockley culminated 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 the efforts made by Porter to make LOC cataloging more representative of Black culture. While Smith was still an infant, Smith had advocated for a decolonization of the library cataloging system.¹⁰ She had also worked to incorporate African artwork, literature, and scholarship into her collections.¹¹ However, one noticeable difference that Smith points out, is that while Porter was head of the Moorland-Spingarn Center, Smith was administering the entire Fisk library facility. Therefore, the responsibilities of the positions differed. Smith's role as administrator at Fisk wore several professional hats. In addition to overseeing the facility, hiring staff, managing the budget, she was also a prolific scholar.

III. BIRTH OF THE FISK SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, IMPLEMENTING BLACK STUDIES

Smith's appreciation for scholarship was demonstrated by her hire of Shockley. 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

⁹Janet L. Sims-Wood, *Dorothy Porter Wesley at Howard University: Building a Legacy of Black History* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2014), Preface.

¹⁰ 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/>.

¹¹ 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.

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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.¹² In 1966, before Shockley came to work at Fisk, Smith had published the *Introduction to Special Collections in the Erastus Milo Cravath Library, Fisk University Library*.

Smith chronicles this period as being one that saw students become increasingly interested in the black collections.¹³ Smith's passion for meeting the student's scholarly needs was reflected in her attitudes toward preservation projects. Even her insistence that all books on Black history and culture have at least two copies, if possible, in special collections demonstrates her dedication to preserving history. Immediately after becoming head librarian, Smith worked to engage college students with library resources. In a 1966 article, Smith details how she leveraged the library to collaborate with the university's Pre College-Center.¹⁴ In that article, she documented 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 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.”¹⁵

Her efforts were not only immediate but effective in getting students acclimated with the library's resources. Suggesting that Fisk had not been a “black institution”, Smith played a vital role in reshaping the institution's image. Dr. W.E.B Du Bois similarly compared Fisk's campus

¹² Owens, 153-54.

¹³ Jessie Carney Smith, interview by the author, April 4, 2023.

¹⁴ Jessie Carney Smith, “Library Enriches Pre College Experiences for Students.” *College & Research Libraries*, no. 27 (Fall 1966): 393-94.

¹⁵ Smith, “Library Enriches Pre College Experiences for Students,” 393.

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to Oberlin College in terms of its curriculum and culture.¹⁶ 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. Inspired by the campus uprisings at other HBCU campuses, 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 Black Power awakening, Smith's intellectual thought 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. In fact, Fisk graduate, historian, and residing board member, addressed the lack of local support in his autobiography.¹⁷ 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. With the sentiment that Fisk was more than just a university, 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 had become a fixture in North Nashville as well. She attended one of the movement's most invaluable churches, Clark Memorial United Methodist Church, and was a

¹⁶ W.E.B Du Bois, "Of the Training of Black Men," in *Atlantic Monthly*, XC (1902), 292-93.

¹⁷ John H. Franklin, *Mirror to America: The Autobiography of John Hope Franklin* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 254-55.

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visiting professor at several Nashville colleges and universities. She also established relationships with local and prominent officials that later proved valuable. And although her mentor Bontemps had left his post in the library, he had a remaining presence at the university.

The Fisk Oral History Project was not only the first of its kind at Fisk, but it was a landmark achievement in black librarianship.¹⁸ Under Smith's leadership, the library had applied for grant-funding from the National Endowment for Humanities (NEH). The NEH grant would support Shockley's innovative oral history projects. From 1970 to 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 others.¹⁹ Building upon the legacy left by her librarian predecessors, she used past acquisitions and shared them with the public and students. The 1970s saw a transition in the field of black historical scholarship. In what was considered the fourth generation of Black historians, the presence of black women increased. As it pertained to the field of history, black women were one of the last to experience any level of status. Nearly thirty years separated Du Bois's PhD at Harvard and Anna Julia Cooper's PhD at the University of Paris. The Black Power era left an indelible mark on academia. Not only did the foot soldiers become icons, but they also became prestigious faculty at universities. The students of the civil rights movement were entering the academy en masse, forcing institutional change. And although in her early thirties, Smith's actions mirrored the cultural zeitgeist.

IV. BECOMING BLACK POWER, MAKING OF A BLACK INSTITUTION

¹⁸ E.J. Josey and Ann Allen Shockley, *The Handbook of Black Librarianship* (Littleton, Colorado :Libraries Unlimited Inc. , 1977), 254.

¹⁹ Josey and Shockley, *The Handbook of Black Librarianship*, 254; Owens, 158.

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Two years after Carmichael's visit to Nashville, Vanderbilt University established its Black Studies department.²⁰ Black studies as an academic discipline formed in the late 1960s in California, home of the Black Panther Party.²¹ In addition to being a pioneer in black librarianship, Smith also was an early advocate of black studies programs. Starting with the 1969 library opening, George N. Redd, hosted a "Workshop on the Incorporation of Materials about the Negro in the Curriculum of the Liberal Arts College."²² Smith was the opening speaker at the conference, followed by her mentor Bontemps, giving a presentation titled "Contributions of the Negro to American Culture."²³ In 1970, Smith introduced the Institute on the Selection, Organization, and Use of Materials by and About the Negro in the new library building.²⁴ Smith, along with special collections librarian Ann Shockley, had the foresight to associate with both public and academic libraries. While academic and public libraries are looked at as distinct from one another, they felt knowledge about "negro collections" was essential to both institutions. White institutions, especially the elite research institutions, began to see special black collections of sufficient value. 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."²⁵ Shockley continued to suggest that this had more to do with the "black role in society being a lucrative research field."²⁶

Despite Shockley's sentiment, Smith launched the Institute in Black Studies Librarianship in 1971. With more than a decade in Nashville, there was a seismic shift in

²⁰ "AADSRC History," African American & Diaspora Studies, accessed December 4, 2023, <https://as.vanderbilt.edu/aads/about/>.

²¹ Abdul Alkalimat, *The History of Black Studies* (Pluto Press, 2019), 199-201.

²² Owens, 159-60.

²³ Owens, 160.

²⁴ Owens, 161.

²⁵ Ann Allen Shockley, *A Handbook for the Administration of Special Negro Collections* (Nashville, TN: Fisk University, 1970), i.

²⁶ Shockley, *A Handbook for the Administration of Special Negro Collections*, i.

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scholarship. 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 in the 1950s. Bontemps had been a part of the migration of Renaissance alumni to academic positions. Although the Harlem Renaissance has become a romanticized era in black history, several renaissance writers and artists grew low on funds. After WWII, Langston Hughes had become one of the few Renaissance writers who could make a steady income.²⁷ By the 1970s, the Harlem Renaissance, in the words of David Levering Lewis, became en vogue once again. One might argue that Smith's insistence on Black studies programs was rooted in her segregated education.

While the end of segregation was a sign of societal progress, some have argued that it led to the decline of a black community. With the closing of all-black schools, business, and stores, few would experience the Black education that Smith greatly admired. Education, for the Smiths, was of utmost importance. Looking through Smith's childhood, she experienced nothing but black educators and classmates. And although resources were insufficient in comparison to white schools, Smith argued that her teachers were "highly educated". In fact, one memorable childhood teacher graduated with a master's from Columbia. 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 highschool's namesake, James B. Dudley.²⁸ Under Buford's leadership, A&I became one of the highest rated public HBCUs. By the time Smith graduated, A&I had grown exponentially. In Smith's early education, there was no lack of knowledge. One should see her early education as an impetus for the younger civil rights

²⁷ See Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 302-309.

²⁸ *Greensboro Daily News*, December 22, 1955

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generation. How could someone tell Smith that she could not have a seat at the lunch counter or hold political office, when she had seen nothing but black achievement growing up.

Being a child of the Jim Crow south did reinforce the values of the black working-class. She understood that a black student would fare better if they were educated about their history, by their own people. By researching and surveying the state of Black America, Smith resembled Du Bois's latter years in the 19th century. Smith meticulously studied the state of the Black community. Always interested in being a participant in solving race relations, she saw her mission to be one that contributed to bettering Black education. One can look at her dissertation at Urbana-Champaign as being her first contribution to bettering education. Why look at the library resources of land-grant institutions?

On her dissertation committee, there was not one Black faculty member. 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.²⁹ Always looking at her scholarship as complementary to the entire field of library science and American history, she had a passion for HBCU libraries. Several public HBCUs were land-grant funded, and while there are land-grant PWIs, her dissertation uniquely exposes the lack of attention given to HBCU libraries. As a graduate of A&T, and at the time, professor at Tennessee A&I, her 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.³⁰ 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

²⁹ See Jessie Carney Smith, "Patterns of Growth in Library Resources in Certain Land-Grant Universities," PhD Diss. (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1964).

³⁰ Smith, "Patterns of Growth in Library Resources in Certain Land-Grant Universities," 175.

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college libraries are lacking. It may be significant to determine the extent to which libraries of this group are involved in the teaching and research programs of their institutions and the adequacy of library resources and services to support such programs.³¹

Smith's suggestion should be viewed as a savvy and nuanced way of insisting that HBCU libraries needed more funding and attention. The smaller HBCUs, Smith was likely referencing, were those in the Jim Crow South.³² Ironically, Smith's tenure at Urbana-Champaign was funded by land-grant institution Tennessee A&I. In much the same way her innate brilliance was shaped by Jim Crow, Smith's tenure in Illinois reflected racist white institutions in 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.³³ In response to the growing push for integration, southern states used this to deter educated and qualified black graduate students from attending their state schools. 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. Based on multiple interviews with Smith, Christa Hardy concluded that Urbana reflected a similar racial climate to Nashville.³⁴

Nashville, the capital of Tennessee, has a unique relationship with its racial dynamics. Nashville had always envisioned itself different from its other southern counterparts. The city hailed by Jet Magazine as the "Athens of the South", Nashville had a more subtle racist relationship with its Black population.³⁵ Black Nashville had established a strong middle-class environment. It was not uncommon for a black native of Nashville to be college-educated or a

³¹ Smith, 1-5.

³² "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.

³³ Hardy, "Piecing a quilt: Jessie Carney Smith and the Making of African American Women's History," 74; Owens, 152.

³⁴ Hardy, 74.

³⁵ See Ben Houston, *The Nashville Way: Racial Etiquette and the Struggle for Social Justice in a Southern City* (University of Georgia Press, 2012).

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member of the professional class. And although the city had been somewhat transformed by the sit-in movement, Nashville racial tensions still managed to persist. In response to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Nashville wiped away the legacy of the city's black community with its destructive highway. 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.

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 the necessary funding. Smith's pioneering Institute in Black Studies Librarianship secured funding from the Higher Education Act.³⁶ 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 interns, testing the efficacy of in-service training programs.³⁷ Although black studies as a discipline started in California, Smith spearheaded black studies in the much more conservative south. Fisk, as a vehicle for transformative education, did not start with Smith but she certainly added to its legacy. The establishment of Vanderbilt's Black studies program was not a sign of societal change, rather it was an effort to cool young black militancy. Black studies programs were a begrudging

³⁶ Owens, 161.

³⁷ Brochure, "An Internship in Black Studies Librarianship," September 5 – December 15, 1972, Fiskiana Collection.

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compromise by white institutions. According to Abdul Alkalimat, the typical campus in the United States was a case of institutional racism for most of its history.³⁸

The death of King, coupled with increased civil unrest, changed the campus landscape.

Again, Smith found herself surrounded by the greatness of African American 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 lies neatly in between those two legacies.

When one describes the Black Power Movement, images of the Panthers, Carmichael, the symbolic afro and fist immediately come to mind. 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 curriculums. Like previously mentioned, Vanderbilt and universities alike, started to incorporate black studies into their curriculums. However, HBCU curriculums would begin to do more than just add a black studies department. HBCUs, particularly the traditional elite ones, saw black studies spread into all its academic disciplines. Fisk began to incorporate more black faculty in the 1920s, under the administration of president Thomas E. Jones. By 1945, two-thirds of the faculty at Fisk was black.³⁹ Two years later, Fisk would elect their first black president, much later than other HBCUs. The history of Fisk's administration and faculty suggests that even though it was historically black in nature, it had not been black in practice. Therefore, the late 60s forced Fisk to deal with its long and obvious contradiction. Was Fisk going to remain a black campus in name only? Or was it going to be institutionally black?

³⁸ Alkalimat, 192.

³⁹ Joe Richardson, *A History of Fisk University, 1865-1946* (University of Alabama Press, 1980), 114.

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Charles S. Johnson was elected in 1947, and every year since the campus has seen nothing but Black presidents in office. 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.⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹ 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.⁴² 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 part of the much larger Black power movement.

While she was not the age of Giovanni, she was a behind the scenes promoter of Giovanni’s generation. During the boom of black power, it was not uncommon for students to frequent Smith’s Clarksville Highway home. Unlike other products of the New Deal age, Smith found the new generation fascinating. As students learned from her, she also learned from them. Like King, Smith had an evolving attitude in the freedom struggle. She followed the footsteps of former Renaissance writers, civil rights veterans, and social activists by taking her activism into the classroom. In the 1970s, several of African America’s most prominent scholars held positions in black studies departments.

⁴⁰ Crystal DeGregory, “James Raymond Lawson,” in *Profiles of African Americans in Tennessee*, eds. Linda T. Wynn and Bobby Lovett (Tennessee State University, 2021), 159.

⁴¹ For information about James R. Lawson’s administration see, Jon Yates, James, ex-president at Fisk, dies,” *Nashville Tennessean* . December 23, 1996; L.M Collins, *One Hundred Years of Fisk University Presidents, 1875-1975* (Hemphill’s Creative Printing, Inc., 1989).

⁴² DeGregory, “James Raymond Lawson,” 161.

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V. ESTABLISHING BLACK STUDIES ABROAD

At the start of the decade, Smith attended a conference. Specifically, in October of 1970, Dr. 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.⁴³ The conference was held to discuss the “Archival Resources for Black Studies”, proving that Smith was crucial in the planning and implementation of black studies. In 1971, Smith collaborated with the Edwin Gleaves, dean at Peabody College, to teach a course titled “The Bibliography of the Negro.”⁴⁴ Some would argue that teaching at a white institution at that time, went against the black power ethos. However, this was where Smith’s unique balance between 70s militancy and new deal era patience shined. Smith understood her role as not only being a black educator, but an American educator—one that saw education as a key element of race progress. Smith continued with a global vision, serving as conference director at a workshop in Tokyo, Japan.⁴⁵ In 1973, she also a resource guide for minorities in the United States. She later used this resource guide as impetus to start *The Directory of Significant Twentieth Century American Minority Women*. However, due to a December fire in 1976, the project was stymied.⁴⁶ The fire did not hinder Smith’s ambition. Between 1974 and 1976, she would serve as director of an ethnic studies program as well as serve on the staff of Multicultural Institute for Librarianship at the University of Michigan.⁴⁷

While some might have considered it misguided to work with whites, Smith built relationships and partnerships. Much like King’s late 60s, radical Poor People’s campaign, Smith had a global vision for black studies. Though many studies on librarians fail to view them in

⁴³ Josey and Shockley, *The Handbook of Black Librarianship*, 231.

⁴⁴ Hardy, 4-5.

⁴⁵ Hardy, 215.

⁴⁶ “Fisk Librarian Compiling Book.” *The Tennessean*, April 11, 1977; Hardy, 134.

⁴⁷ Hardy, 215.

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conjunction with activism, Smith's execution of the budding field remains one of the most definitive cases of scholarly activism in history. Despite this fact, recent scholarship fails to even mention her by name. Smith's career, spanning over five decades, cannot be defined by a single label. Instead, one should view her work as a part of a long and storied tradition.

In Fisk, Smith found a culmination of her experience becoming a scholar. She referred to these experiences as foundational to her education. In much the same way students learned from her, she learned from them. A young Nikki Giovanni was a frequent visitor at her house, along with several other young Fiskites.⁴⁸ While some may not recognize librarians' contributions to history and culture, Dr. Smith's career at Fisk forces those to view them as builders. As it pertains to Jessie Carney Smith, the 1970s increased her desire to preserve, document, and curate living history. David Levering Lewis referred to W.E.B Du Bois's life as a biography of a race. In a similar way, Dr. Smith's life marks that of a library builder, one who's mission aimed to document the unique time period in which she led. Before becoming the icon known today, Smith was a student and educator of black power. She would later carry her first decade into the Reagan eighties.

⁴⁸ Jessie Carney Smith, Interview by author, April 18, 2023.