
Regional

Harris studies African-American moments

The history of the African-American experience has become the subject of study on many American college campuses. The more we study it, the more we come to understand its significance in the development of the United States as a country. One of those researchers opening our eyes to the importance of studying this community is Jessica Harris.

Born in Shreveport, La., Harris obtained her bachelor's degree from Dillard University in New Orleans, and her master's and doctorate in history from Cornell University. Today she is an assistant professor in the department of historical studies at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

Although she initially wanted to become a lawyer, a course she took on African-American studies as an undergraduate changed the direction of her career. For the class, she wrote a paper on the Black Panther Party that she ended up presenting at an essay competition sponsored by the Association for the Study of African American Life and History.

While at the competition, Harris had a chance to meet well-known historians like John Hope Franklin and Darling Park Hein. Many of them attended her presentation and came up to her and asked her if she was

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interested in pursuing a Ph.D. "I thought, yeah, sure, maybe this is what I am supposed to be doing," Harris recalled. Her research on "Black Nationalism" continued, according to Harris, but public awareness of this movement has waned in recent years.

"Post 1965, the movement became more radical and you had the advent of what people typically define as the Black Power Movement," explained Harris. "And during this period you see a contemporary form of Black Nationalism." Harris said that she thinks that the change in the movement can be attributed in part to people becoming more comfortable in their own lives. "Because inequality sometimes is not as obvious, as in your face as perhaps as it once was," she added.

Harris has recently been working on the topic of African-American fraternities and sororities. "My interest is personal because I am a member of one of the African American sororities, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority," said Harris. "These organizations were formed during the early 1900s, during a period of

great racial oppression. And this is important because this is a movement of college students, students who were attending primarily Howard University, but also Indiana University and Butler University.

"Many of the members of these organizations were part of the civil rights movement," Harris said. "Dr. Martin Luther King himself was a member of Alpha Phi Alpha, and, as a matter of fact, when he helped to lead the Montgomery Bus Boycott a lot of his fraternity brothers were right there with him walking the streets and in the courthouse and very supportive of his endeavor."

These groups also had an impact on the curricula of many universities. The earliest fraternity of black students was formed at Cornell University and later that institution developed one of the strongest African-American studies programs in the nation. For Dr. Harris, the connection between historically black fraternities and sororities and the civil rights movement is clear.

"Although the Africana Studies program at Cornell was founded in 1969, Alpha Phi Alpha was founded originally as a literary group, a study group of African American males who were attending Cornell during the early 1900s," explained Harris. "And they gathered together primarily because of



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Dr. Jessica Harris

the isolation they were feeling, sort of being only a handful of African-Americans on the campus at that time. Soon after forming they did adopt a broader agenda, a national

agenda and began to look beyond their local context."

Harris said that she hopes that the students taking her classes will graduate knowing that a prominent theme in the history of African-Americans is resistance. "No matter what obstacles African-Americans have faced, they never sat down and took it, they resisted, they fought back," she said. "I would also want people to know that African-Americans are not a monolith. African-Americans are not all the same, they don't think the same, don't believe the same things and just as there is diversity in all communities there is diversity in the African-American community."

Harris is working now on a monograph on the women involved in the Black Freedom movement in Oakland, Calif. "I want to place the (Black) Panthers within a trajectory of a larger frame of activism within the black community," she said. "So I definitely want to tell that story."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.