

Doria Johnson lecture

Doria Johnson:

Good afternoon. How's everybody doing? Good, thank you so much for having me. I appreciate this. This is an honor to appear in front of you today. I consider this sacred ground. I've said that before every time I speak in this building because this was the traditional black neighborhood and I respect that as traditional and sacred space. So I'll begin today by telling you how I got here. I'm the great great great great granddaughter of a proud African man who lost his name to me and the Middle Passage. But I came to know him as Charles [Crawford?] and his wife [Lydia]. I'm the great great great granddaughter of their son Thomas Crawford and his wife Louise. I'm the great great granddaughter of their son, Anthony Crawford, and his wife, Amanda [Merten?]. I'm the great granddaughter of their son, George Crawford, and his wife, [Annabelle?] Washington. I'm the granddaughter of their daughter, [Fanny?] Crawford [Brooks?] and her husband Joseph Brooks. And I'm the daughter of their daughter, Helen Johnson, and her husband Charles Johnson. And that's how I got here today. I wouldn't be here without the ancestors, so I ask for their blessing, that they stand behind me as I talk to you about their history today.

I am what's called a fellow at the University of Wisconsin Madison. And that just means I'm getting a free PhD.

(laughter) All right? But I wouldn't do that without all of you, OK? So when I come back home and people say when are we getting that degree, this is truly a community degree. So I respect it in that way, OK. All right, so the first thing I want to talk to you about is my dissertation, which will be titled *Sweet Tables, Supper Parties, and Servitude: A Brief History of Evanston's Underestimated black Women*. And the reason I say that is because my research into black women in Evanston, first let me tell you why I study specifically black women is because U.S. history, and specifically black history, has been written through the bodies of the black male experience, which really silences the experiences of black women. I study also very specifically the Great Migration, because how else did we all get here, right? It's a very important time. In fact, some historians say that the Great Migration is the largest voluntary movement of man known to the history of this world. So black people took their freedom during the first Great Migration, which some people say is 1916 to 1918. How many of your families came here during that period? So did mine. The second Great Migration, some historians argue, is about 1940 to 1970. And how many of you came up during that time? OK. So that's most of the people,

about half of the people in this room. How many of you came up between 1918 and 1940, in between the war? OK. All right. So, so that we can move past defining ourselves through the black male experience, right, I've thought about, what did my great grandmother go through, who I'll call Big Mama, because that's what I always heard them refer to her as. What did she go through when she got to Evanston? As many of you know, my family was run out of Abbeville because of the lynching of my great great grandfather Anthony Crawford, right? OK. So how many of you are from South Carolina? OK. Not too many, right? OK, so how many of your families are from South Carolina? That's a more accurate question. And would that be the Abbeville area? All right. OK. Anderson, yeah. That's not fair. That's where I stay when I go there. They ran me out of Abbeville. (laughter) So I stay in Anderson. All right, so, and another reason I want to specifically talk to you about the way I study my history, I'm known as a cultural historian, and what does that mean? Typically, historians will look at, or have previously looked at, important dates as markers, right. And how do we develop these dates of how we talk about the experiences of the United States? They're typically, before, were studied through the events of white men. Elite white men, OK. Cultural history allows me to do something a little different. So who was the first black police chief in Evanston?

F1:

What's his name? White, he was [White?]...

DJ:

Who was the first black principal [00:05:00] in Evanston?

F2:

Hill.

DJ:

So see what I mean? And then White people know this. I study what black people cared about. And that's called cultural history. So let me give you an example of that. What was Maids Day?

F3:

Thursdays.

F4:

Thursdays.

F5:

Thursdays. (laughs)

DJ:

In the sixties, when buses would be lined up all down Foster Street, if you leave early in the morning, where were we going?

F6:

North Shore.

F7:

Highland Park.

DJ:

The bachelors of Benedict [Picnic?], remember that?

F8:

Oh yeah. Oh yeah. (laughs)

DJ:

Where were we going?

F9:

Harms Woods. Harms Woods.

DJ:

Right. Muskego Beach, remember that? OK, these are the kind of things that black people know about. And these are the kind of

things we care about. This is the kind of history that I'm writing, OK? White newspapers, White history books, will record who the first black police chief was, the first black principal was. And that was not because we were [talented?] that day. That was because the day White folks decided to open up the door and let us in. I don't want to tell that history. I want to tell what we cared about, so that's what I do. It's not a White approved history. OK, I want to be clear about that. The next thing I want to talk about is why I picked the Great Migration. Again, I've told you a little bit about that. But for me, that's a very important time in the history of the world and the United States, because most historians have said that black people moved North only because the jobs were plentiful. And I disagree with that. I've heard stories over and over again how people had to leave in the middle of the night with no goodbyes, right, because they were threatened. And it also makes it so, if we talk about the economy being the reason that people move, that leaves very little agency, we call it, right? So that means you were following an irresistible economic force, or you're not making a decision on your own. My history turns that around a little bit. I say black people very purposefully said no more. In fact, we know of cases of a lot of people who were sharecroppers, tenant farmers, leaving when the crops were due. 'Cause what did that do?

F10:

Put them in a bind.

DJ:

Put them in a bind. They'd wake up in the morning. Nobody's there. Everybody on the train to Chicago, right? OK, who's in charge now? That's the history I write. In Evanston, there were black residents, and this is one thing that I'm concerned about in terms of the history in Evanston and who built Evanston. Let's dig that up. And let's tease that out a little bit, right? The first African American resident we have enumerated in Evanston is Maria Murray, a live-in servant, in 1855, so that's before the Civil War. She got married in Evanston to another black resident, George Robinson, who was also a servant. The black community grew very slowly over the next 30 years. So then by 1882, you have Ebenezer and Second Baptist Churches, right? You know, I just read this morning, and I remember my Aunt [Anna B?] telling me, that she used to witness houses being cut in and half and moved the other side of Evanston, right? You remember that?

F11:

Yeah, I witnessed that.

DJ:

Do you know what I've thought about? This explains why the only thing east of Green Bay that's black is the three churches. Now why would you build a church outside your neighborhood? You don't. Right? So that's where black people used to live. I remember Anna B told me that our first address was 302 [Dempster?] or something like that. That's three blocks from the lake. I've served on the board of the Evanston Historical Society and I asked all of the white members how long have your families been here? My family had been here the longest. Who built Evanston? In 1880, we had 58 black people. In 1900, 744. In 1910, 758. In 1920, 2,592. In 1930, 4,922. I look at that compared to where I'm from, Abbeville, South Carolina. Abbeville, South Carolina is important for historians too because it's home to 25,000 slaves. And [00:10:00] compared to the number of white residents, that wasn't a lot. So there were mostly black people in the states of South Carolina and Mississippi as far as white historians are willing to admit at the turn of the Civil War. Abbeville was a very important place. But because of that mention, in 1960, the 25,000 black people that were in Abbeville, became 15,000 by 1920. In four short years. Another thing about the Great Migration, we know that some counties in the South experienced no migration out.

Black people stayed. In some counties, everybody left. And the big difference is, a big racially violent event, like a lynching. So that also tells me that we love the South. We loved our land, we loved growing our own food, we loved our communities, we loved the weather, the vastness of the land. OK. So we were forced out of the South. We came to Evanston because it was what is called a domestic service suburb, and what does that mean? The black community in Evanston was really here to help serve White folks their lifestyles that they wanted to have, usually built when they left the city. So for Chicago, that was the Chicago fire, right? And the influx of immigrants from Europe. The neighborhoods started to deteriorate, and they wanted more land and wanted to build bigger houses, so they moved and built trolleys and railroads outside of urban areas and moved to Evanston. The university was already here, built by Methodists. So this was a morally correct place to be. And they came, and what happened was too, the services that they needed, because of the railroad and their distance from Chicago, where they had been before, they needed servants, so they let the servants build homes in Evanston. Or places to live, let me say that. You know, my earliest memory from living here was being at Foster School in kindergarten. I think it was 1967 or '68, the big snowstorm. What year was that, does anyone know?

F:

'67.

DJ:

'67. OK, so that's when I was kindergarten. I was pushed back a year in say, '68, but that's probably my issue. It snowed so bad my mother came to school to pick me up. And we were walking home, and that snow was coming so fast that it was covering me. She picked me up and carried me home. Black mothers in Evanston can't do that now. You know why? 'Cause their kids were on the bus.

F:

That's right. The bus.

DJ:

And I want to talk about that, about what it means to have a neighborhood school. So Foster School, I remember Lois Johnson told me that she went to Foster School in the mid 1920s. And the teachers came up with this brilliant plan on how to teach and train little black girls. So they decided to bring their dirty laundry and have washing machines installed in the school. In the mid 1920s. Lois' mother Iva, and other black women, who were domestic workers, formed what we know now as a PTA. And

demonstrated against the school and said you will not teach my daughter to be a laundry woman. So while the school board had a lot of money and decided that it was OK to put the washing machines in the schools, black women organized, became activists, and said no, and those washing machines were not put in the schools. That's why I tell black women's history.

In Evanston, what also makes it unique is because here for every one white collar white male worker, there were two black women domestic workers. I'm going to say that again. For every one white collar white male worker, there were two black women domestic workers. Couple that statistic with this fact. Black people in Evanston owned their homes at the same rate as white folks did. So if 50 percent of white people in Evanston owned their homes, so did 50 percent of black people. That's a historic number. I can tell you why. For black people on the South Side and the West Side of Chicago, [00:15:00] they owned their homes at half the rate that Evanston blacks did. So now we're talking about an economic tax base. Black people helped to build Evanston. You understand why? So now we don't have, we can think about, why do we have to beg for resources of a place we helped build too? Right? This is historic numbers. Historians, scholars, know this stuff. We just didn't know it. Evanston is studied a lot by people. There are only three

suburbs in the United States we know of with the same configuration. Berkeley, California, and Westchester County, New York, and Evanston, Illinois, where black people were able to negotiate and buy their homes, which means real estate agents, bankers, all decided to allow black people to have these loans so that they can build their houses. My great grandfather, Joseph S Brooks, in 1934, built the house I was born in, my mother was born in, and my grandfather was raised in. 1928 Foster. 1934, [employed as?] a porter, that's what he did. That's right after the Depression, right? That's hard. But black people negotiated their space. Very important.

Most black women in the United States between 1900 and 1950, the most dependable occupation for them was what?

F11:

Domestic work.

F12:

Domestic work.

DJ:

Domestic work, right? Black women developed outside of the banks, a system to get themselves to be more independent and not live in the house. They lived out. You've heard of day work?

F12:

Yes.

DJ:

And live-out work? Let me tell you what the genius of black women is. They formed [penny?] clubs. Do you know what those were? OK. When black women decided that they no longer could stand living in the house, which was a very dangerous situation for them, right? For two reasons, physical violence, and sexual violence. There's a whole history of this. If you're going to tell the history of black women domestic workers, if you don't tell the story of sexual violence and physical violence, you are telling a cleaned up history that's wrong. This is why I have a big problem with that movie *The Help*. And that's another talk I can come here and do. So anyway, black women decided to get out of the purview of a house of white folks where they worked. I had black women tell me that they would be conscious of where white men were at all times. So if they were in the bedroom upstairs, they'd be at the furthest corner of the house cleaning the kitchen. If he came downstairs, they'd go upstairs and

clean the bedroom. So their bodies had to be as far away from the dangerous white employer as possible. That's how bad it was. All right, so the penny clubs were where they save money and they knew that it would take them about 30 days to find a job they wanted to have, right? [With] a live-out situation. So they could live off that money, the penny club money, for 30 days, while they found a job. So they would take this whole industry, right, and change it from the slave, servant, or slave relationship, to a servant, I mean to an employee employer relationship, right. Because now they're more in charge, and then of course, we started doing laundry in our homes, which even became more independent. You could take better care of your own kids, right? The genius of black women. How many have heard of Melvin Smith, CCC [letter?] Remember that?

F?:

Yes.

DJ:

Did you know about his mother, Carrie Carrie Smith?

F?:

Yes.

DJ:

She had that employment agency, didn't she? Do you know about the list of rules she sent to white folks before she sent our mothers over there? Carrie Crawford Smith had them sign sheets of paper and she would pull her employees because she said "My women do not scrub on floors. I have men I can send over there to do that. They don't clean windows. You will not physically attack them. You will not sexually attack them," and she pulled people out of there too. White women would call her up crying, begging for their help back. And sometimes she said no. Carrie Crawford Smith Employment Agency.

A lot of us too started to form our own businesses, but still providing the same traditional services that we did domestic work in. So catering businesses started to grow, right? But that's still cooking. Moving businesses, landscaping businesses. [00:20:00] OK, so we're providing the same service, but now we're owning the businesses. A little different. Relationship starts to evolve. And I'm really interested in Maids Day and women domestic workers because they set the social calendar of Evanston, right? Uncle Sam told me one day that Maids Day, that's when the ghetto would come alive. (laughter) The bars would open early, right, the hairdressers would open early. And opposed to cooking for someone else, you'd cook for

you and your friends that day, right? Again, this is not the history that a White historian can tell. They don't have access to the information, no will they respect it the way we do, right? Maids Day.

You know, I think in graduate school, when I started reading about enslaved people, I was happy to learn that they would go to the woods in the middle of the night and have birthday parties. They would go to the woods in the middle of the night and have funerals, proper burials. Parties. And dress up and do it too. So that let me know that's a form of resistance and that nobody has total control over your body. We'll never really be able to count how much work that the slaves put out versus what they could have put out. So when I hear kids say "I couldn't have been a slave," I think that they're doing us a little bit of a disservice, because they don't understand these subtle forms of resistance that our people have traditionally always done. There was a lot of fires set. Breaking tools. Hunger strikes. Not going to work. Hiding out in the woods and negotiating a way back so that your kids weren't sold from you. So all this stuff is not really talked about a lot. And the resistance of our people. I think for black women in Evanston too, there was a form of resistance within being a domestic worker by becoming a club woman too, right? Remember all the

clubs? And all their elaborate affairs? So even if you had the ability to cook really good, and you were known as the best cook on the West Side of Evanston, and you go down to Wilmette and cook for them, and they treat you like a dog, right? You come home and that same skill means something else. That's black women's history. Again, it takes us to tell it. So I'm asking too, for your help today. I really need to conduct oral interviews that can help me document what happened here, so that they're not just talking about us without being inside of our group. I'd like a black woman to write black women's history so that tells the story of black women throughout the United States. But in order for me to get Big Mama's story down, I need your help. So if any of you are willing to help me by letting me talk to you and just listen to you and record what you're saying, that's going to help me accurately tell our story. Because again, the forms of resistance will be missed. The things that made us happy will be missed if we don't get that down properly. So, if you could talk to me afterwards, I'd appreciate that. I think I'm running out of time now. But thank you so much for your time today. And for the future, thank you for your help.

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