

Material Memory Season 3, Episode 7
“Cradle of Student Protest”

Transcript

Narration: Hello, and welcome to Material Memory. I am your host, Sharon M. Burney. This last stop on our HBCU Library Alliance tour takes us to Nashville, Tennessee, where we will be in conversation with DeLisa Minor Harris from Fisk University. Known as the Cradle of Student Protest, this epicenter of social justice has a longstanding commitment to creating scholars who are dedicated to changing history. Today we will listen to the voices of the past and learn the incredible story of the Jubilee Singers.

A quick warning that this episode contains references to racial violence and trauma.

DeLisa Minor Harris: My name is DeLisa Minor Harris, and I am the assistant director for library services at Fisk University, and I oversee the technical services department, access services, and special collections and archives. **SB:** That sounds like a lot of work. Yes, well, we're a small institution, and our student size population is a little under a thousand, so our staff is very small. Right now, there is seven of us. So, we're a very small library, but mighty. [laugh]

Narration: Fisk University is renowned in the HBCU community. What may be surprising to many is the relatively small size of this university, which has produced some of the world's greatest scholars. To say it punches above its weight is an understatement. To understand Fisk's influence, you need to look back to its earliest days.

DeLisa Minor Harris: We were founded in 1866 by members of the American Missionary Association, as well as members from the Freedmen's Bureau. It was founded as the Fisk School for free people of color who had just been freed from slavery. So, the age ranges for the Fisk during that time range between, you know, someone is a student as old as 45 to a student as young as five. And so, the institution served as an elementary, a middle school, a high school, and eventually a college.

Narration: Like many schools for formerly enslaved Black people, Fisk did not have the necessary resources and had to find solutions to survive as an institution.

DeLisa Minor Harris: What makes Fisk unique is that we were able to, from that start, a few years later purchase land and build a building known as Jubilee Hall. And that was made possible by the dedication of students who went out on a singing tour and raised funds that saved the institution, and that group was known as the Fisk Jubilee Singers.

Narration: Fisk was saved by its students, who lent the university one of the most valuable things a person has: their voice.

DeLisa Minor Harris: The original group was founded by George L. White. He was the treasurer of the university, and he knew that Fisk University needed money. And so he came up with the idea to form a singing troupe. So he made arrangements for them to leave Nashville and travel north to conduct a tour in 1871. And from that tour, there was a lot of, you know, hardship, illness, and I mean, even the singers didn't have proper clothing. They were in the north, it was really cold. So, um, some got sick, but they continued on. And from one of their first shows, they actually raised \$500 that they ended up giving to the Chicago Fire Relief Fund. Um, so they didn't even keep that money, they gave it.

Narration: Imagine working hard for funds desperately needed, and in turn donating them to other people in need. In time, however, the Jubilee Singers' efforts did pay off for Fisk.

DeLisa Minor Harris: And so they continued on, they were successful. They raised \$20,000 on the first tour. And their recognition was heard of in the UK. And they were invited over for a tour in Europe, and they sung for Queen Victoria. And from there, their name grew even more. They were able to go back for a second European tour and, overall, they raised a little over \$150,000 that purchased the land that Fisk University currently sits on, as well as construction for Jubilee Hall and furnishings, and the partial construction for Livingstone Hall and furniture for that building.

Narration: To put that into context, the \$20K they raised with that first tour is the [equivalent](#) of roughly half a million in today's dollars; the \$150,00 they raised with their European tour would equal approximately \$3.5 million. Yet the money was only a small part of the Fisk Jubilee Singers' incredible legacy.

DeLisa Minor Harris: The impact, I mean, people came out of their pockets for the singers. How else could you explain a group of African American individuals in 1871 or 1877—whatever year—raising that much money? I mean, they literally put themselves on the line and put forth an image of something that spoke out against what they were pegged to be. And that's how the Black music tradition really becomes that: the Black music tradition, because now it is in a way respected. Now you have people who are imitating it.

Narration: The impact of the Jubilee Singers' tours is indisputable. However, the journey to success was built on the road of intentionality and exceptional care, as they introduced the world to the Negro spiritual. The Jubilee Singers understood the mission and the importance of what was at stake.

DeLisa Minor Harris: You know, the spiritual came about in a way that was not necessarily celebrated at first. It was something that was seen as not a musical tradition or something that was considered music. When I think about George L. White, who formed the singing troupe, the Jubilee Singers, his original strategy for the group was to sing these classical numbers. Only after they did the traditional program, would he even permit a spiritual to be sung. And so, you know, just thinking about that, the spiritual means so much more than just a song. It really is that thing that catches you in your heart, and it just grabs your heart and you just, you, you, sometimes you can't even breathe. I mean, it just makes you feel, brings out something in you. And it's a recognition of, of trauma, it's a recognition of glory of, of, making it through, pushing through, you know, victory, and just all these different things. And then you see the Fisk Jubilee Singers making it an international thing. So it went from the fields, when they were enslaved, to when they were free, and now they're taking it overseas and introduced it to people who had never ... "What is this? What, what do you call this? What are these songs and, and the meaning behind it?" They didn't really even have to explain. The songs explained themselves.

Sharon Burney: I would love for you to expand upon the role of Negro spirituals as a form of protest, as a form of strategizing.

DeLisa Minor Harris: When I think about the Jubilee Singers, and all that they came from and endured, they use their music and their voices as a way to speak out against it, but also to, in a way, try and put an end to it. So it, I mean, it's just like the protests that happened later on, where you're using your body, you're sitting in to stop something that's happening—to put an end to it. And the Jubilee Singers, singing spirituals, traditional songs of their ancestry and heritage, singing these songs to people who have done these things to them who still contribute to doing things to them, like keeping them from being able to live places and do things and go places, is a way that they protest against it and speak out against it, for change. And when they sing these songs, people weep, and people lose or separate themselves from what they originally thought. When we see Black people, it's often in minstrelsy or barbaric ways, during that time. And so, they pulled them away from that treatment. And their goal is to put an end to it, and they do it in such an eloquent and beautiful and melodic way that all one can do is think, "wow."

Narration: DeLisa and her colleagues are working to ensure this legacy is never forgotten. Her love for and commitment to the Jubilee Singers collection shines through when she talks about it.

DeLisa Minor Harris: Well, [laugh] I, uh, my favorite pieces are probably the original purses that the singers from the 1800s owned, and they're pink and blue, and they were hand-stitched and they, I mean, they're just beautiful silk. Also, probably Ella Sheppard's diaries. Ella Sheppard Moore was one of the original Jubilee Singers. She was pianist, and she often stepped in to direct, when George White or was not able to, and she continued on until she passed, and her children went to Fisk. And Beth Howse, who used to be our special collections librarian, was a direct descendant of Ella Sheppard Moore and her family. So, the legacy and the tradition of that family still lives on today.

Narration: It's not just the artifacts that are being preserved, it's the tradition.

DeLisa Minor Harris: So even today you have students who come to Fisk to be a part of the group. The group still goes on tour. They were just recently nominated for their second Grammy award. The Fisk Jubilee Singers is something you can't separate from Fisk. It's part of who we are, and their legacy is long, and it's been withstanding for now 150 years.

Narration: That second Grammy they were nominated for? They won it. Today's Jubilee Singers are truly their ancestors' wildest dreams.

DeLisa Minor Harris: We had an exhibit and we named it, "Lord, I'm Out Here on Your Word." And that's one of the songs that the Fisk Jubilee singers often sing. Dr. Kwame, who's the current director, he suggested this as the title. And I mean, the lyrics, "Lord, I'm out here on your word." I mean, that is really essentially what the Fisk Jubilee Singers were, and were doing. They were out there on a prayer, on faith. Because this was something that had never been done.

Narration: Using the vastness of a choir, made up of vocal ranges from baritones to sopranos, the Jubilee Singers represented the voices of protest, joy, sorrow, resiliency, and determination. They introduced the Negro spiritual and—more importantly—its revolutionary history to the world. With their international respect and fame, the singers secured critical funds for what would become one of the great HBCUs, whose very existence and success was an act of defiance.

[Music: Wade in the Water, Fisk Jubilee Singers]

Narration: the music you are hearing is the Fisk Jubilee Singers singing "Wade in the Water." This Negro spiritual, sung as a declaration of perseverance through the inhumanities of chattel slavery and the hope for freedom, also held a significant purpose. Harriet Tubman used the song on the Underground Railroad to alert escaping enslaved peoples to get off the trail and into the water, to ensure that dogs used by slave catchers would lose the ability to track their scent.

I want to move forward in time to the 1960s, where Fisk and its neighboring universities in Nashville continued the tradition of protest and defying expectations.

DeLisa Minor Harris: Fisk, Meharry, and Tennessee State, all reside along the same street within blocks of each other on Jefferson Street. So, you know, even though we're all separate institutions, we're connected by the people. And from that, you have these connections that create a group of students who recognize when social issues are affecting all of them, their neighborhood, and they come together and organize together. And it doesn't matter that we don't go to the same institution, even though, you

know, there's friendly rivalry there maybe with sports or, or other things, but when it came to impacting social change, that affects all of us. And so, it's really all about community and how, I don't want to say nothing divides us, but I mean, in that situation, nothing really did.

Narration: There's a nickname for Nashville, and specifically the Jefferson Street community, that I love: The cradle of student protest. I asked Delisa to expand on this title.

DeLisa Minor Harris: When I think about the cradle of student protest, really at Fisk University, we can trace student protests back to the late twenties where the students at Fisk revolted against the president of the institution, Fayette McKenzie, who they felt was racist and, uh, over controlling. Essentially, he thought that Black people were [laugh]—men and women should not be close or near each other or involved in certain activities because they were naturally sexual beings. I mean, this is kind of overly racist kind of thinking. And so, the students revolted, they refused to go to class, they protested and they even had the backing of W. E. B. DuBois, who came to campus and he spoke, and he basically spoke out against McKenzie as president of Fisk. And it stirred up a lot as alumni wrote in about it, mostly in support, but then there were some who supported McKenzie. Students were kicked out and this went on for almost a year until McKenzie resigned. And so, we look at student protest tradition at Fisk from that point.

Narration: After a hard-fought battle with Fisk's administration, students gained greater liberation within the university, but the world around them remained a racist and violent place.

DeLisa Minor Harris: After World War I and lynchings, there was also two students who were affected by that, where we had the Cordie Cheek case in the thirties, where Cordie Cheek was lynched. And he was actually at his aunt's house right across the street from Fisk. And he was taken from her house and taken to a small town in Tennessee and was lynched. And so students, and even some of administration efforts got involved in that case because they actually knew who Cordie Cheek was, knew he had been essentially hiding out at a family member's house in the community.

Narration: Emmitt Till is often represented as a lynching victim from America's distant past, but was it really that long ago? My father was born the same year as Emmitt. This country's legacy of lynching continues today, as Black people, including children, continue to be victims of murders committed in plain sight, and we watch as their murderers are acquitted in a court of law. Cordie Cheek was sought out by his murderers in the safe space of a relative's home, in his HBCU community. I wish that these public lynchings were a relic of America's past that would be inconceivable today. I wish that [59 incidents of bomb threats](#) were not levied upon HBCUs across the country this year. I wish that the [recent anti-lynching law](#) signed by President Biden had not taken over 100 years and 200 failed attempts to be passed. The issue of lynching lit a fire under students in the decades following the 1930s as it continues to mobilize us now.

DeLisa Minor Harris: And so, there's students who speak out about that—lynchings and other issues. And I think that's a buildup into the forties and fifties. There are obvious issues, of course, with Jim Crow in the South, and students are speaking about them, either writing about them in the student newspaper, expressing themselves in the literary magazine through poetry or short story, and then also organizing an NAACP chapter at Fisk. And we see the discussion ramp up more and more about what's happening. Why can't I go to this restaurant, shop at this store? In 57, Dr. King comes to campus to speak. And he actually comes to Fisk a few times, where he's talking about the Montgomery bus boycotts, and so then students are getting more involved in the issues. And so, from that, there's a SNCC chapter that's formed. And there's actually a “sit-inners club” is what they called it. You have people like Reverend Lawson who are teaching about non-violent strategy, and protests, and those moments of meeting and getting together and strategizing, transform into action, where now you're going downtown in Nashville to the lunch counter, to Woolworth's and you're actually doing this you're, you're sitting in, and even some students were going to, like, the movie theater and sitting in there and saying, “We won't leave until this is integrated.”

Narration: In this era, Fisk produced several civil rights legends. Diane Nash, co-founder of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (or SNCC) was a leader of the Nashville sit-in movement. She organized the Freedom Riders, helped lead a movement against bail, and was a leading strategist in the voting rights movement. Nash's close friend and fellow Fiskite was none other than John Lewis, a central figure in the civil rights movement who went on to serve in Congress for over 30 years. These were just two of the many Black youth activists who became part of the Nashville Student Movement.

DeLisa Minor Harris: And also, too, during this time, you have White exchange students who, who have come to Fisk, and they too are involved. They too feel the need to stand up and support, um, the students who are getting involved.

Narration: Following the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965, we start to see a shift in the politics of the civil rights movement.

DeLisa Minor Harris: Yeah, it really just sparks this change, and it even continues on past the sit ins to where we get into the Black Power movement and this idea of creating a more-Black university, where we have African studies and Black studies. And so, you get into that in the seventies, and we have a Black president, we have, um, leadership that is really about Black pride.

Narration: It is during this time that we witness the transformation of the civil rights movement to the Black Power Movement and its presence in SNCC, as Stokely Carmichael (who in 1978 changed his name to Kwame Ture) is elected chairman of SNCC in 1966. Carmichael radically shifted the direction of SNCC, embracing the ideology of the Black Power Movement. The Black Power Movement, motivated from the

necessity and desire of safety, promoted the doctrine of self-reliance through racial pride, economic empowerment, and the creation of political and cultural institutions. The movement also started to take a more transnational context.

DeLisa Minor Harris: And also looking at anti-apartheid as well, because you have [a tennis tournament, I believe at Vanderbilt](#) that had, um, an apartheid supporting backer, or something was happening, but the students from Fisk and Meharry and TSU protested that tennis engagement, because it went against the anti-apartheid movement. And so, the tradition from that late 1920s moment to, now it continues because now we see, here in Nashville, just like across the country, the Black Lives Matter movement. And we see here on the front lines, one of our alums, Justin Jones, who sat in at the Capitol, and was arrested, you know, detained numerous times for just peacefully protesting. He and other young organizers renamed the Plaza, the Ida B. Wells Plaza, and he's been doing activist work, um, you know, trying to get the bust of Nathan Bedford Forrest removed from the state Capitol and other things. And so we can see the tradition continued through him and other Fisk students, alumni who are involved—organizers, activists—in their various cities.

Sharon Burney: When you think about documenting the now, the importance of us collecting our own histories, why is that important and vital, and how does that play into recent current events as you see it?

DeLisa Minor Harris: There's always a question of how we got here. Well, how we got here is played out in archives. But I'll say in real time, now we have social media. We have things that weren't there before. So you can go back and see what people have said, or people have done. And so, I guess when I'm thinking about it, it's the archives of those moments that speak to how this happened. And so, during the riots—

Narration: DeLisa is speaking about the January 6th, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol.

DeLisa Minor Harris: During the riots, people were thinking and comparing to the social justice protest of the summer and how, military or the government reacted to those protests versus then, and if it weren't for people capturing these moments, we wouldn't be able to speak truth to what we're seeing. We wouldn't be able to call it out without that record. And so that's how I connect it to the archives, because even if we go back to the 1960s, if we didn't have those records, we could not speak truth to what is happening now. And that's why, you know, sometimes archivists or special collections librarians, people consider hoarders, or we want to keep everything. Well, I mean, we look at things in the sense of if we have it, we can tell it, you know, we can say it, we can show it, we can prove it.

Narration: Protest records are of vital importance. In some ways, the act of collecting these stories is an act of resistance.

DeLisa Minor Harris: Having that oral tradition, having that oral history demonstrates how important, how valuable people of color are to society. When I look at the oral histories in our collection, they're not just political figures that we know, like John Lewis, but they're also people who were officers in the military and their experience matters to how we tell the story for people of color. And then, others who worked in the cafeteria at Fisk for 50 years, those stories matter.

Sharon Burney: Yeah, when you think about the value of hearing the actual voice, what do you think about those impacts in the oral traditions?

DeLisa Minor Harris: It really impacts your emotion, and it grabs you to be more empathetic. Maybe it pulls you to think about collectiveness. Like, you know, maybe it's not just me, but it's about, it's about all of us doing our part.

[Music: Jubilee singers (Glory)]

Narration: That was the Fisk Jubilee Singers, singing "Glory." One of the ways Fisk continues its legacy of protest is by thriving as a liberal arts college. Fisk produces artists and humanists who observe the world around them, tell our stories, and reimagine what the future could be. DeLisa showed us how she herself came to value our history and culture.

DeLisa Minor Harris: I do this work because, well, it's been embedded into me, from my mother to love and appreciate Black history, cultural heritage, all of that. We would go to the MLK celebration every year our church would have during Black History Month. And we would wear traditional clothing from the African American experience, whether you grew up in the South and you would wear your traditional clothes, or you would wear your African wear, you know, it was just different things. And it was always impressed upon me to appreciate and value African American cultural heritage. And, and I took that into my, into my adult life and then found that I didn't want to separate it from my professional life. Like every day that I do what I do, I'm just excited about it. And I, and I want other people to be excited and when they read something, like I read something, I want them to understand this is important.

Narration: For descendants of enslaved people, the formal study of the arts and humanistic inquiry itself can be an act of radical defiance. Even today there are people who see this knowledge as dangerous. In the face of multiple threats to Fisk's artistic legacy, cultural heritage workers are more crucial than ever. I asked DeLisa about digitization as a possible tool for preserving some of Fisk's collections.

DeLisa Minor Harris: For a small HBCU, like Fisk, we are often underfunded. And our goal is to be able to get to a point where we can do the things that are necessary to preserve our physical collections with digitization. It's different for a small HBCU to make the same type of decisions that you would at other places. The decision is how do we keep this room and this temperature right? How do we make sure that the roof doesn't fall in, or we're leaking or whatever. But digitization, for a lot of HBCUs—I can only speak for mine—is a lofty goal.

Narration: Preservation work requires institutional capacity. Grant funding helps. I'm happy to report that since this interview was recorded, Fisk has received a digitization grant from CLIR. Yet grants do not address the deeper infrastructure problems and the psychological impacts of systemic inequity. DeLisa's goal is to preserve these stories and to get people to respect the community behind it, but this work is made harder by external factors that can feel beyond her control.

DeLisa Minor Harris: Fisk University sits in the heart of north Nashville, which is a predominantly African American community. Our zip code, I believe, has the highest rate of incarceration of African American people. And so, we're also seeing a shift in the city where you have more people coming into the community and buying properties and rebuilding homes—what we call the “tall and skinnies”—and, you know, selling them for half a million dollars. And it's really caused communities like Fisk, like TSU, like Meharry, and other businesses, Black-owned, to rapidly pick up the pace of where we have to go in order to stay alive, or stay present, or, or be considered up here with this new development, this new Nashville. And so it's really, you know, changing the priorities. Yeah. And I think, you know, if we were able to control our own destiny, then maybe it wouldn't affect us, or we wouldn't have a reason to be nervous.

Narration: In a country dominated by predominantly White media, when many people think of Nashville, they think of “The Birthplace of Country Music.” However, another name predates that. “Music City” was a nickname for Nashville bestowed by Queen Victoria. After she was immensely impressed by the performance of the Jubilee Singers, she proclaimed that “they must be from a city of music.” Country music was derived from Black music: Creole, gospel, blues, spirituals, and folk. The stories of Black Nashville are often buried, while historically Black spaces are being bought up and Black families are priced out of their communities. These threats to the Black community in Nashville make the archival collections at Fisk that much more important.

DeLisa Minor Harris: My thoughts are [sigh] we can't have a community without these archives, you know, this is how we tell our community story. And I think about it from the perspective of north Nashville, where you have this history of Jefferson Street, but there's only a few collections, maybe one and that's at Fisk is it's the [Jefferson Street Photograph Project Collection](#) that speaks to that history, where it's hard to find the images of those Black-owned businesses that line the street before the construction of Interstate 40, and really tell the story of that entire north Nashville community.

Narrative: Central to this community is the university itself.

DeLisa Minor Harris: When you go different places in north Nashville, people know about Fisk, and they know the legacy and traditions of Fisk and even themselves that who may not have attended still feel like they're connected and still feel like they're a part of the Fisk family. And I think that's true for a lot of HBCUs and their surrounding communities. And it's a confidence that you know that this institution has produced scholars and, and people who contribute to this world, this country, generation after generation, and the legacy is so important and so valued that it really keeps Fisk and other HBCUs going in my opinion.

Narration: Delisa is determined to do whatever she can to safeguard this community, its stories, and the universities at its core.

DeLisa Minor Harris: And so how are we going to tell the story of north Nashville whenever the community is, is essentially being pushed out or being lost or silenced. I'm a librarian, but I'm a part of Fisk. I'm an alum of Fisk, and whatever I need to do at this point to ensure that my Alma mater—this university—stays open, I need to do it, whether it's representing the library on a panel, or if I need to go down to the local high school and, you know, talk to the parents or the students at that high school about Fisk, I'll do that. If I need to go across town to an elementary school and talk about Fisk, I will do that because if we lose Fisk, we lose community.

Narration: The history of radical dissent in the face of threats to the Fisk community continues, as it faces a national trend for many HBCUs—the threat of gentrification. At the core of these protests are strength, resiliency, and, most importantly, love: the radical love that inspired the Jubilee Singers to take the Negro Spiritual and introduce it to the world, and which inspired Harriet Tubman to use the spirituals to free enslaved peoples on the Underground Railroad. This love created SNCC as a social justice hub. Fisk University is a radical love incubator, creating scholars that show the world the infinite possibilities of Black Love.

Closing: Thanks for joining us. To learn more about the collections at Fisk University, check out our show notes at material-memory.clir.org. This concludes our HBCU Library Alliance tour. We've loved having you with us this season and invite you to join us for a special bonus episode later this summer, in which we'll examine holistically some of the key themes from the season. We promise it will be a fantastic discussion.

Material Memory is available wherever you get your podcasts. Follow us to be sure you never miss an episode, rate us on iTunes, and leave us a review. *Material Memory* is produced by CLIR with the assistance of Nicole Kang Ferraiolo, Kathlin Smith, and Lizzi Albert, and our staff editorial team, Jennifer Ferretti, Alyson Pope, and Gayle Schechter. Drum music is by Kofi Horne. We thank the Fisk Jubilee Singers, who appear courtesy of Curb Records. Wade in the Water features soloist Chelseai Cunningham with arrangement by Paul T. Kwami. "Glory/Stranger features Derek Minor and Shannon Sanders. Special thanks to Sandra Phoenix and the HBCU Library Alliance for partnering with us on this podcast. I'm your host, Sharon M. Burney, and this is *Material Memory*.