

Essay

# Community and Naming: Lived Narratives of Early African American Women's Spirituality

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**Abstract:** Through the story of Francis Sistrunk, nineteenth century enslaved and later freedwoman in east central Mississippi, this essay illustrates that, despite few surviving written narratives of early black women's spirituality, their experiences can emerge from the silences. Much like paleontologists who recreate narratives of the past through fossils, in the present world of literary studies, we have the advantage of an expanse of resources that, when pieced together, can convey voices from the past to the present. This includes resources such as extant oral and written communal and family narratives, generational ideals and practices, digitized records from official and personal documents, and the recent emergence of DNA technology that provides its own narratives. From the earliest arrivals to the Americas, African diasporic populations maintained an understanding of community and spirit as an integrated oneness empowered through the word, particularly in the word-act of naming. Francis' story reveals that this spiritual ethos was a generative source, not only for survival, but for some black women it was a mechanism for inscribing their presence, their narratives, and their legacies for future generations. Francis Sistrunk's story re-emerges through the mining of sources such as these, and reveals that enslaved black women reached for and seized power where they found it to preserve the record of their existence and humanity and to record the story of their enslavers' injustices.

**Keywords:** African American women's spirituality; nommo; multimodal narrative; self-actualization; community; asylum hill project; naming; pre-emancipation; genealogy

## 1. Introduction: Community Is Spirit

Among the earliest frameworks of African American women's self-actualization was a sense of belonging and identity, informed by a commonly shared African ethos, maintaining the interconnectedness of secular and sacred<sup>1</sup>. As such, individual identity formation was shaped through group affinity, and that connecting structure was built upon the concept of the community or group as a collective spiritual corpus. Community is the core of individual actualization, but the individual self must be proclaimed before the community. One might liken this to the Puritan conversion process that calls for public pronouncement before a candidate is admitted into the so-called

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<sup>1</sup> This epistemology of the spiritual is discussed in a number of studies on African American literature and culture. In both her anthropological research and her fiction, Zora Neale Hurston was a pioneer of serious creative and scholarly work on African influences in the African diaspora of the Americas. Her anthropological works, *Mules and Men* (1935) and *Tell My Horse* (1938) underscored the African informed ethos of an interconnected world of the spiritual and the material worlds. Examples of studies beyond Hurston's early 20th Century research that also speak to this Africana ethos include Lawrence Levine's *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (1977 Oxford UP), particularly chapter 1, "The Sacred World of Black Slaves", Michael Gomez's *Exchanging Our Country Marks* (Gomez 1998); Albert Raboteau's *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans* (2001 Oxford UP), and Jason Young's "African Religions in the Early South", in *The Journal of Southern Religion* 14 (2012).

community of saints. For Puritans, however, the church world was presumed sacred and separate from the evil of the material world. Africans and their descendants in the Americas were not inheritors of this worldview. Instead, they saw the spiritual as both material and ethereal. Therefore, for early African Americans, one's place in the community constituted a spiritual belonging—one's soul, one's humanity was confirmed through community. Early African American communities consisted of enslaved people who formed bonds that guided them in living through the commonplace violence and terror of slavery, maintaining their collective understanding of the world and themselves as sacred. These communities celebrated and marked births, family unions, deaths, and other individual and collective hallmarks. Moreover, when slavery was abolished, freed black people continued and passed on this tradition of community and spirit. This tradition of community and spirit survives today throughout African American communities. In the US South, this legacy survives most notably in the longstanding tradition of family reunions. These celebrations bring generations together to reaffirm family and community bonds, that are for many still cemented through time honored religious and spiritual practices. Ceremonies of remembrances are practiced to date, and for many, calling or naming the ancestors remains part of the family ritual that centers all in an individual and collective oneness.

Early Africans in the Americas transported a sense of community that, while built on the belief of the collective as a cohesive body, called for individual pronouncements of self and identity. As part of the collective network, individuals define and declare their identities and place in the community, and throughout West African societies from which the New World enslaved originated, naming marked the beginning and gateway to self-actualization. This ethos of naming rests in an understanding that *nommo*, or the life force, emanates from the word: "the word is productive and imperative, calling forth and commanding" (Smith 2018, p. 12). Naming, then, is the conduit to existence or being, for "there is nothing that there is not; whatever we have a name for, that is" (Jahn 1961, p. 133). This Yoruba proverb underscores the epistemological and spiritual ethos that early Africans transported to their diasporic communities, and its importance has continued for generations, pre- and post-emancipation. In particular, because it is not a static or formulaic phenomenon, *nommo* "emphasizes the changing now, the improvisatory self", and that "each human has the capacity to bring forth divine power" to create and recreate (Osumare 2018, pp. 770–71). It is in this aspect of *nommo*, that is, in its pliability, that it has served diasporic African populations in the Americas, as they have had to continually transform themselves in response to changing, but persistent, racist white power structures. Many early enslaved Africans maintained continental African names, either in whole or in transformed versions, many maintained names in addition to the name their enslaver might have imposed. In the aftermath of the Civil War, the newly emancipated chose their names with deliberation to convey their new sense of selves, but to also note their family and community connections. Today, African Americans continue the practice of *nommo*: notably are those who choose African and Muslim names for themselves and their offspring, and those who continue the practice of inventing new names that defy Eurocentric identity. African Americans have had a long history of negotiating *nommo*: from the earliest African arrivals to their enslaved and later freed generations, naming has entailed a cycle of unnamings and namings. This is underscored in the history of countless African captives imported to enslavement in the Americas, who upon arrival were not recorded by name, as well as those renamed by their enslavers. In key historical moments we see the dynamic struggle for the power of self-agency that rests in renaming and naming<sup>2</sup>. Early examples of this African American proclamation of self-empowerment are popularly known in the narratives of former enslaved icons, such as Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth, but these stories are under researched on early everyday enslaved persons. In this essay focusing on nineteenth century matriarch, Francis Sistrunk, we see an example of how enslaved black women, whose stories were not conveyed in

<sup>2</sup> See Benston's "I Yam What I Am" Benston (1982) for a detailed focus on naming in African American culture and its manifestation in literature.

conventional literary forms, invoked the power of *nommo* to leave a narrative trail of their existence and their family's history.

## 2. It Is Not Just the Written: Reimagining What Constitutes Literature

Though this Special Issue underscores the conventional concept of literature as written, I divert in part to illustrate the necessity of reimagining creative and scholarly methods of excavating and hearing black women's narratives, particularly those from colonial to post-emancipation America. While there is significant and growing work that examines 20th and 21st century spiritual influences in black women's writings, little attention is awarded to the complex spiritual influences in the writings and lives of pre-C20 black women. For example, today we find a substantial body of scholarship focusing on spirituality in contemporary black women's fiction. This includes scholarship on the fictional works of celebrated black women writers, such as Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Paule Marshall, Toni Cade Bambara, and Gayle Jones. Many of these studies explore the diverse modes of African American narration employed in works of fiction by women. Toni Morrison's novels have probably been the most extensively studied body of African American women's fiction, and black women's spirituality in Morrison's fiction has been a prevalent topic in scholarship on her works. Much scholarship can be found, for example, on Morrison's earlier and most celebrated novels, (Morrison 1987) and Morrison (1988), and much focus has been directed to Morrison's black heroines, who are overwhelmingly the arbiters of familial and communal history and identity. In both works, the women (Pilate in *Song of Solomon* and the community of women who expel the ghost in *Beloved*) are the spiritual links to the past that must be revisited to set the community and the individual's course to healing and emerging into hope.

Similarly, in her often-anthologized short story, "Everyday Use" Walker (1973), Alice Walker focuses on the generational narrative of identity and purpose that is reaffirmed in black women, specifically through the "art" of quilting. The story contrasts the white informed tradition of excavating "cultural artifacts" such as quilts, and displaying them for public gazing. Relegating objects made to enhance life to a state of inertia signifies the spirit or soul in captivity. Instead of reducing quilts to lifeless artifacts, the black women in Walker's story create quilts as mediums of self-expression, that are embodied with the spirit of the quilt maker. The quilts are texts that articulate and confirm these women's sense of identity and community. Walker explores the interconnectedness of black women's spiritual and communal ethos in greater narrative depth in her full-length works, most notably in her award-winning novel, Walker (1982). While there has been criticism that Walker presents black men in a negative light in the novel, the story ends in communal reconciliation and healing facilitated by the women, but extending across gender lines.

The examples above illustrate that black women's spirituality is at the core of some of the most renowned contemporary writings by black women. While scholars of these works are increasingly exploring ways in which spirituality can inform critical readings of these works, these studies still do not significantly address the need to expand literary studies, beyond the presumption that literature equals the written. Studies of creative productions such as music, film, spoken word, and visual art remain in a kind of limbo arena in the academy—particularly in English departments. In recent decades, however, we see an increasing number of interdisciplinary studies that engage film, television, live streaming, and music, finding their way into classrooms and conferences, as well as academic publications. As scholarship on hip hop and rap trends upward, we are witnessing an example of how studies in black creative production are exposing the need to expand serious critical narrative studies beyond the convention of writing. The case of Kinitra Brooks and Kameelah Martin's recently published anthology, *The Lemonade Reader* (Brooks and Martin 2019), illustrates this point. This collection of critical essays takes a deep historical and artistic look at the varying modes of black narratives that informed or infused Beyoncé's multimodal album production, *Lemonade*. Whether one reads/hears in Beyoncé's *Lemonade* as a journey to a black female reconciliation of body and spirit or a dangerous

spectacle of black female rage (see Bell Hooks' criticism, for example), *The Lemonade Reader* portends a C21 expansion of critical engagement with multimodal concepts of literature and narration.

Arguably, the pathway to Beyoncé's *Lemonade* was paved by Julie Dash's C20 Dash (1991) and later text adaptation Dash (1999), *Daughters of the Dust*. It is a work that Beyoncé draws from in *Lemonade* as she traces a community or network of black women that are a source of support along the road to healing. Dash's story of black women's spiritual recovery of history and identity is told through a multidimensional narrative that integrates black folk parables, histories, music, and dance—representing these forms as literary narrations themselves. Dash's and Beyoncé's creative productions invite and have inspired studies that center black spirituality as a requisite lens for critical interpretations of black women's C20 and C21 literature—written and multimodal. This lens has been more slowly employed by scholars of early black women's narratives, where overwhelmingly, studies of black women's spirituality have rested in presumptions of a singular dominating Christian ethos and in the Anglo imposed intellectual paradigm that literature is written. This is evinced in scholarship on the more studied 19th C black women narratives—Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents*, Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*, Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy*, and Pauline Hopkins's *Contending Forces*, where little scholarly attention is awarded to African spiritual influences in the ethos and journey of the protagonists. There are exceptions to the Christian informed lens that has dominated studies in early black women's works, and perhaps emerging scholars will continue to dismantle this slanted read of early African American women's spirituality. I have challenged this read in my own scholarship for some time<sup>3</sup>. I now, however, feel more compelled to seek out narratives of the larger body of enslaved black women whose experiences went unvoiced within the realm of the written. These silences tell stories and experiences of generations of everyday black women who were central to building and sustaining the foundations of black communities.

While few enslaved women were able to leave written accounts of their lives, through a multitude of resources, we are able today to hear those voices of the past. Much like paleontologists who recreate narratives of the past through fossils, in the present world of literary studies, we have the advantage of numerous material and cultural fossils. This includes generational beliefs, practices, and ways of knowing that, if pieced together or sampled, can breathe life into black women's muted narratives from generations past. Through an expanse of resources, such as extant oral and written communal and family narratives, digitized records from official and private records, and the recent emergence of DNA technology and access to these records that provide their own narratives, we can convey voices of the past to the present. In this endeavor, that arguably reflects the multimodal latitude central in life writing, we can as well arrive at a greater understanding of black women's spiritual evolution—from antebellum to post emancipation, and into our contemporary moment. In the critical reflection that follows, I share a brief slice of the story that can emerge from this kind of deep dive engagement with nonwritten and unconventional narrative modes.

### 3. Calling Forth Francis

When I started a few years ago on what began simply as a genealogical charting project on my mother's lines of descent, Francis Sistrunk (b. ~1822) was not a name I had heard in my family's oral or written accounts of our history. I found Francis rather quickly, however, as I worked my way backward from her grandson, Noah Cistrunk (b. 1881), the family patriarch who is held as the unifying figure in the Cistrunk family line of my descent. As I reviewed census and military records on Noah, I found his father, Shadrick (b. ~1847/48), and those documents then led me to Shad's mother, Francis.

<sup>3</sup> Examples of this include "Reworking the Conversion Narrative: Race and Christianity in *Our Nig*," *MELUS (Journal of the Society for the Study of Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States)* 24 (1999), pp. 3–27; *African Spirituality in Black Women's Fiction* Lexington Press, 2011; and "Making the Awakening Hers: Phillis Wheatley and the Transposition of African Spirituality to Christian Religiosity," in *Cultural Sites of Critical Insight*. Eds. Angela Cotten and Christa Davis Acampora. SUNY Press, 2007. pp. 47–66.

Born between 1822 and 1825 in Georgia, Francis was an “ordinary” enslaved and later freedwoman in east central Mississippi. Through a life writing methodology and deep dive into a multiplicity of archives, the mining of Francis’ story highlights the practices, processes, and inventions of early African American mothers who maintained and carried over the ethos of community that was, and remains, central to black survival in a country that continues to hold little value for black humanity. It is this larger import of Francis’ life and legacy that informed the evolution of the initial personal project into the larger life writing monograph in progress that examines Francis’ narrative as a challenge to the disparaging paradigm of the single black mother.

In 1841, when Ralph W. Emerson ([Emerson 2004](#)) published “Self-Reliance”, a romanticized myth of rugged American individualism that anchors citizenship and democracy to assertions of individual rights and freedom, Francis appears to already be in the possession of her enslaver, Jacob Sistrunk Jr. A teenager at that time, between 14 and 19 years old, Francis is the lone enslaved person listed on the 1840 census ([U.S. Census Bureau 1840](#)) in Jacob Jr.’s Marion County, Georgia household. I think about her as a contemporary of some of the C19 African American authors and figures that I regularly teach: Frances Harper, Harriet Wilson, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Harriet Jacobs. Harriet Wilson ([Wilson 1983](#)) is worthy of further mention here, for her fictionalized autobiographical heroine, Frado, whose plight closely parallels the circumstances of young Francis. Just as Wilson’s heroine, Francis, is a young enslaved girl with no family or fellow enslaved persons, as company in the white household where she is forced to live. In the case of Wilson’s heroine, the result is tragic: Frado grows into a confused, self-denigrating, and isolated young woman who, though ultimately freed from indenture, succumbs to poverty and death at a young age. Wilson narrates a story of failed conversion that seats Frado’s fate in the failure of Christianity: Anglo Christianity and its conversion ritual that promises entry into the “community of saints” offers no place for the would-be black convert. Frado is therefore left on her own, and no hearty dose of Emersonian self-reliance is available for this young, black woman, isolated in a world of whiteness.

There are clear distinctions between Francis and Wilson’s autobiographical protagonist: Frado is an indentured servant in the free North, and the “mulatto”<sup>4</sup> offspring of a white woman and a black man. On the contrary, while she is identified as mulatto, Francis is the offspring of an enslaved woman and an unnamed white man who may have been her enslaver. This difference in the condition of the mother underscores the condition of Francis in the eyes of the law as slave. By the dawn of the eighteenth century, laws throughout the colonies sealed the generational fate of black people. With the legal decree that children followed the condition of the mother, children fathered by white men and enslaved women were not only not white, they were also not free. By extension, criminalizing sexual unions between white women and black men paved the way for generations of white “baby daddies” that this nation continues to ignore. Unlike Frado’s 1850s servitude that ends with the completion of indenture, Francis’ story of freedom is part of the collective experience of enslaved people freed after the Civil War. Though she lives in Jacob Jr.’s household as his lone slave, unlike Wilson’s fictionalized heroine, Frado, who is similarly isolated in the white New England household that holds her in involuntary servitude, Francis is not alone. The 1840 census ([U.S. Census Bureau 1840](#)) reveals that Jacob Jr.’s farm was adjacent to that of his father, who is recorded as having 10 enslaved people in his household.

With father and son owning adjacent plantations, Francis would have had regular contact with those enslaved on Jacob Sr.’s plantation. The structure of enslaved communities was such that “Women typically resided in matrifocal families with extended and fictive kinship networks” ([Millward 2015](#), p. 23). The two women ages 24–36 on his plantation in 1840 were older than Francis (who is listed in the age group 10–24) and probably functioned as models for the teenaged Francis. Though young

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<sup>4</sup> The term “mulatto” is used here and elsewhere in this essay out of its explicit use in the records and texts that are being referenced.

themselves, if either of the two enslaved women on Jacob Sr.'s plantation was nearer the upper limit of the census age category 24–36, if she were not Francis' biological mother, she was of an age and within proximity to serve as a surrogate. Though not regarded as holding familial bonds worthy of recognition, those enslaved on the Sistrunk plantations would have, as enslaved communities did throughout the plantation south, established and cultivated kinship bonds and circles that grounded them in a sense of identity and belonging. With the constant threat of being sold away and separated from family and community, however, these bonds could be, and often were, disrupted or broken.

The death of Jacob Sr. in 1841 likely ended the physical community that Francis shared with the enslaved on his plantation. The enslaved people on Jacob I's 1840 census do not appear to have been disbursed among his offspring. Because most Marion County records were destroyed in an 1845 courthouse fire, the record of Jacob Sr.'s may not be discoverable. This loss makes it more difficult to discern what happened to Francis' early community. They may have been sold to settle his estate, as this was common when deceased plantation owners died in a state of financial insolvency. After 1841, Francis is forced to move with Jacob Jr. and his family as they migrate from Marion County, where they are listed on the 1850 Census ([U.S. Census Bureau 1850](#)). By this time, Francis has three sons—John (b. 1844), Hillman (b. 1846), and my ancestor, Shadrick (b. 1848), perhaps the only one of Francis' children not fathered by her enslaver<sup>5</sup>. Francis and her family would be compelled to move when Jacob dictated. Between 1855 and 1856, Jacob moved from Harris County, Georgia to Neshoba County, Mississippi; sometime between 1860 and 1864, he moved to neighboring Winston County; and in the post-war, 1870 Census, he is shown living in the adjacent county of Noxubee ([Sistrunk et al. 1997](#), p. 191).

Jacob II's frequent migrations undoubtedly left Francis with a heightened sense of uncertainty and instability during her pre-emancipation life. Each move could have easily resulted in the disruption of her family; however, Francis' story is a reminder that, in some instances, slave families were able to stay together. Francis' migrations from 1840 to emancipation were not the result of slave sales, and illustrate those cases in which enslaved people moved as family or kinship groups as they were forced to move with their masters. With the move to Harris County, Francis may no longer have had the kinship circle of her Marion County community, but by that time, the young adult Francis had been shaped by those influences. Her resolve and strength, her wit and wisdom, her purposefulness, and her understanding of the necessity to see herself as integral to her community were ways of knowing that were not imparted by her enslavers. These aspects of Francis' character and world view would have originated from the women figures and community to which she had belonged. These relations and processes of generational carryover may not have survived in written texts or oral accounts, but they can be pieced together. Multimodal artifacts that, on their own, provide only faint sketches of Francis emerge into a fuller picture and narrative when superimposed. We see and hear Francis today because, despite the trauma of enslavement, she understood that there were ways, no matter how small, to preserve and narrate one's identity and existence. Her children and their descendants would themselves maintain key practices and ideals that were markers pointing back to the ancestral trail that Francis paved. Thus, they would become living archives of her life. Francis was re-discoverable in the 21st century because she left defining markers.

Francis and her three sons, John, Hillman, and Shadrick, and daughter Lucretia, who survive into the twentieth century, would establish themselves as part of the new Noxubee community of freed persons after the Civil War. I have found no written accounts from the enslaved persons or communities among which Francis and her children would have belonged, but census records show that Francis was able to navigate her life as a "single black mother"—enslaved and free—to keep her family together, establishing a sense of identity, and becoming immersed in their post-war black

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<sup>5</sup> While records suggest the need to consider key white enslavers that Jacob may have engaged in business or socially, he remains the most probable paternal progenitor of one, if not all of Francis' "mulatto" children. Francis gave birth to all her children while enslaved by Jacob. She was enslaved by Jacob as a young girl, and she and her children remained in this status until emancipation.

Noxubee County community. With Jacob II's move to Winston County around the eve or during the Civil War, Francis and her family were likely living in Winston during this period as well. At the close of the Civil War or shortly after, Jacob II moved his family to Noxubee County, and Francis, now free, moved her family to Noxubee as well. What prompted the newly emancipated Francis to seemingly follow the move of her former enslaver and his family is unclear, but it would mark the last move of this mother, her children and their descendants that would be directed by the whims of white Sistrunks and their search for prosperity.

#### 4. Listening for Francis: Speaking the Self into Existence through Naming

The post emancipation era spawned a surge in marriages of formerly enslaved couples, including those with children, as well as newly formed unions of freedpersons. For many women like Francis, there was little opportunity to build a family structure reflecting the white patriarchal nuclear family myth. As many African American leaders tied racial uplift to a politics of respectability that shamed unmarried mothers, these women had to envision themselves and their families as legitimate, worthy, and equitable members of their communities. In 1865, at the war's end, Francis, near or early 40 years old, was the mother of 6 children fathered by men who were absent and unavailable as possible marriage prospects. At least 4 of her children were likely fathered by one or more white enslavers, and Shadrack Dowdell, the black man who likely fathered her middle son, Shad, was married with children, and living in the neighboring state of Alabama. Francis may not have been without marriage prospects, but her set of circumstances probably left her hesitant to marry. She could not be certain that marriage would result in a spouse who would accept the role of surrogate father to her children, particularly given the tensions that could arise over colorism. This intraracial tension among African Americans over skin tone and white ancestry dates back to slavery and survives into the 21st century. Countless works by early to contemporary black authors speak to this ongoing and sometimes divisive element of black identity.

Pre and post-emancipation African American communities were shaped by social circumstances originating in slavery. While many formerly enslaved people married and thus confirmed their place within the rubric of Anglo patriarchal respectability, numerous households resembled that headed by Francis. The common practice of separating enslaved parents resulted in generations of family units headed by women, and as in the case of Francis, some households were led by enslaved women whose children were fathered by their enslavers. The prevalence of black female led households in the antebellum south was a striking contrast to Anglo American households that reflected the blueprint of white male patriarchal power. It is a structure that legitimates and places higher values on those households recognized through legally sanctioned marriage and offspring born from these unions.

Francis emerged into the post emancipation world in a circumstance reminiscent of her time in Marion County, GA, where she was the lone enslaved person in the household of Jacob Sistrunk. In Marion, it had been a physical distance marked by her separation from the 10 enslaved persons on the adjacent plantation of Jacob Sr. In 1865, the matter of distance that Francis faced was a sense of social isolation that could arise out of how she might have been perceived through the lens of skin color. This matter notwithstanding, Francis still shared the initial challenges of black southerners in general in the early post emancipation period. One of the first matters was the simple question of identity: who were they in this new world as free people? One of the first steps to answering this question was the choice of names—particularly surnames. black people exercised this practice to varying degrees during enslavement, but in the post-1865 world, they had the license to openly and legally name themselves.

The act of naming serves the purpose of everyday identification, but it also connects people to their past, to each other, and to their kin or community. From the earliest enslaved Africans in the Americas, an ongoing project has entailed "self-creation and reformation of a fragmented familial past", and in the immediate post-emancipation moment, this new state of the free self "was incomplete, if not authenticated, by self-designation" (Benston 667)—that is, naming. For generations, among black

southerners encountering strangers, “Who yo people?” was a commonplace question articulated in varying regional forms. The answer would determine connection and acceptance—not just passing curiosity or acknowledgement of one’s origins—but rather a validation (or not) of communal and thus spiritual ties. In the aftermath of slavery, newly freed people chose names that identified them as they desired. Just as their enslaved forefathers, newly freed black people often named their children or took on names themselves that would link to familial lines and kinship communities. In numerous instances, they chose the surname of their past enslavers, and while some may argue that this represented a continuation of black subordination, it served the practical purpose of connecting families and communities and a sense of history<sup>6</sup>. In large numbers, freed people also continued the practice of giving their children Christian names, and while many still argue that this was a white imposed practice during slavery, historian John Thornton reminds us that such assertions are not entirely accurate. In Central Africa, which was the place of origin for more than a quarter of African captives delivered to South Carolina in the early 1700s, “Christianity and Christian names were deep-rooted in Central Africa prior to the Atlantic slave trade”, and thus “Christian names have African and not just American (European) origins” (Thornton 1993, pp. 729–30). We must also consider that names associated with Christianity among African Americans may have been of Muslim origins, as Islam and Christianity share ancient texts and stories. Just as the case with Christianity in Africa, the presence of Islam in Africa predates the Middle Passage, and was practiced in enslaved populations “throughout the colonial and antebellum periods” (Gomez 1998, p. 249).

The sketchy story of Francis and community revealed in her unnamed presence as a young enslaved girl in Marion County, Georgia is brought into fuller scope through the overlapping narratives of her sons Hillman (b. 1846) and Shadrick (b. 1847/8), and Shadrick’s two children, Sophie (b. 1882) and Noah (b. 1881). Even before emancipation, Francis clearly understood the importance of naming. Naming her third son Shadrick, Francis inserted a marker into the family record that would remind Shad of his identity, as well as preserve her family’s history. With the exception of her third born, Francis’ children were given Anglo-Western names common among the Swiss-German Sistrunks and the white enslaving inhabitants of the antebellum Georgia and Mississippi regions where Francis resided. While the names of Francis’ four sons, John, Hillman, Willis, and Robert seem in line with these names, Shadrick seems to be an exception. Francis clearly does not name Shadrick from the lot of German Anglicized names of her Sistrunk enslavers. Naming her son Shadrick provided a way of remembering and recording the unique family lineage of this son, a lineage that today identifies the descendants of Shadrick as tied to a male line pointing to Africa, not Europe. A combination of archives that included tax records, wills, census records, military records, online genealogy records and resources, family histories, and DNA evidence, show that of Francis’ six children, her son, Shadrick, is the forefather of a descent line that he inherits from a black father, whose name was also Shadrick. Francis and the senior Shadrick (surname Dowdell after 1865) encountered one another sometime between 1847 and 1848 in Harris County, Georgia, before Shadrick I was removed to Alabama, where he and his family are listed among the enslaved in Dowdell’s 1856 will (Barfield 1961, p. 628). Shadrick I’s enslaver, James Dowdell, was among the wealthiest and most powerful plantation owners in Harris County, Georgia, and the bordering Lee and Chambers Counties in Alabama. Dowdell owned a number of plantations and mills, and, as with many wealthy enslavers, he moved his enslaved workers to his different properties as he needed or willed. By 1850, Dowdell’s permanent residence was in Chambers County, Alabama, and this relocation from Harris County probably ended Shadrick’s contact with Francis and their young child, Shadrick. In the aftermath of the Civil War, Francis chose the surname Sistrunk, and unified her household under this surname. Shadrick is aware that he and his siblings do not share the same fathers, and his consistent census designation of Alabama as his father’s

<sup>6</sup> See Laura Alvarez López’s “Who Named Slaves and Their Children?” López (2015) for a discussion of the debate on why emancipated African descended people often took on the surnames of their enslavers.

birthplace, suggests that he knows the identity of his biological father. Taking on his mother's surname, Shad affirms his mother's place as family head, and her representation of the family to the community as a unified and cohesive household under a single surname. Not insignificant here as well is that this marks their rebirth: they are born again into freedom, anchored in a matriarchal line.

It is important to consider that while Francis' other children bear names that likely connect to enslavers' names, as with Shad, she may have intentionally bestowed names that linked them to their paternal progenitors. This act would have allowed her an avenue to convey to each child their lineage, to speak to them a narrative of origins, place, and identity. That Francis and her six children were the only slaves that Jacob Jr. owned, and that she had been in his possession from her teenage years, speaks to the likelihood that, as with great numbers of enslaved women, Francis was subjected to sexual violence and exploitation<sup>7</sup>. This further calls for consideration that Sistrunk males cannot be ruled out as progenitors of her mixed race children, or for that matter that Francis, who was identified as mulatto, may herself have been the offspring of an enslaved woman and a Sistrunk male. Ongoing archival research will shed greater light on the lineages of Francis' five other children, and evidence unveiled to date suggest that this research is central to understanding more fully the extent of nommo in Francis' legacy. For example, it is not unlikely that Francis' assertion of this power began not with her third son, Shad, but rather with John, her first. John was a name passed down through numerous Sistrunk families from the line of American descent, that began with the Swiss German immigrant, Heinrich Sistrunk, who arrived in 1746. John was a popular Anglicized form of the German name, Johannes (or Hans), and is the name of Heinrich's grandson, who in the late 1700s, began the migration of Sistrunks from South Carolina into Lincoln County, Georgia.

John Sistrunk and his brother, Jacob Sr., moved into Lincoln County, where John, who met with greater financial success than Jacob, remained until his death in 1840. To date, I have uncovered no records that confirm the place of Francis' birth; however, in naming her first son John, she may have been leaving a trail marker. John Sistrunk owned several enslaved people, and may have sold or offered Francis as a wedding gift to his nephew, Jacob, Jr. John could have been the paternal progenitor of Francis, a not uncommon circumstance in the slaving world of the Americas. Similarly, records suggest that Francis' fourth child, Willis, may also have been given a name that points to a white paternal lineage. Though not listed as such on the 1860 slave record ([U.S. Census Bureau 1860](#)) or later census reports found to date, Willis's paternal line may point to a white enslaver. Willis is a shortened version of the name William, and while there are William Sistrunks in the family line, the name Willis does not appear in Jacob's immediate or extended family line. There is, however, a wealthy plantation owner by the name of Willis Whatley, whose property bordered Jacob's in Marion County, Georgia. Whatley appears on the record of Jacob Sr.'s 1841 estate settlement in Marion County, Georgia, purchasing a number of items<sup>8</sup>. Furthermore, after his father's death, Jacob Jr. moved to Harris County, where he lived in close proximity to wealthy plantation owning Whatley and Dowdell families, until his move to Mississippi in the mid 1850s. These were the kind of circumstances that rendered many enslaved women easy sexual prey to white men; however, if we research more closely through the critical lens of nommo, we may find that these women were exercising power. Through naming, they were pulling away the curtain that concealed their enslavers' crimes.

<sup>7</sup> In Micheletti et al.'s recent article "Genetic Consequences of the Transatlantic Slave Trade in the Americas" [Micheletti et al. \(2020\)](#), *The American Journal of Human Genetics*, their scientific findings confirm what more recent historical research on the trans-atlantic slave trade has revealed regarding the extreme sexual violence and exploitation black women suffered at the orchestration of white enslavers and traders: "Despite more than 60% of enslaved people brought to each region of the Americas being men, comparisons of ancestry estimates for the X chromosome and autosomes, as well as the comparison of mitochondrial (maternal) and Y (paternal) haplogroups, revealed a bias toward African female contributions to gene pools across all of the Americas. An Americas-wide African female sex bias can be attributed to known accounts of rape of enslaved African women by slave owners and other sexual exploitation" (9).

<sup>8</sup> See "Georgia Probate Records, 1742–1990", database with images, Family Search (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-CSK3-3S9Q-9999-178&cc=9999178&wc=9SBX-82W%3A267696001%2C267702601>; 20 May 2014), Marion > Inventories and appraisements 1839–1853 vol A–B > "images 31, 32, and 33 of 451"; citing Houston County Probate Court Judge, Georgia.

Shadrick becomes the rock upon which Francis establishes her family's place and identity in the community of freedpersons after the war. In the 1870 census (U.S. Census Bureau 1870), Francis is identified as head of household, but by the 1880 census (U.S. Census Bureau 1880), she is listed in the household of her son, Shadrick, and his wife, Susan. John and Hillman head their own households by this time, and although Shadrick is the younger of the three, his mother's residence in his household suggests that she looks to him as family head. While Shad's DNA line confirms that he is born from a paternal African line of descent, this is not confirmed for his siblings' lines. In fact, in the case of siblings John, Willis, Lucrecia, and Robert, records explicitly or implicitly point to the likelihood that their paternal progenitors were white. The family history passed down from Shadrick's descendants maintains that, at some point, the family splintered along lines of skin color. This splintering probably began earlier but seems to have been cemented around 1920, with the death of Francis' last surviving son, Hillman.

While Hillman and his wife, Harriette, had no children, they were central to the survival of the family, especially John's children and descendants. Census and tax records suggest that, by the end of the century, John had met with financial misfortunes. While records show that as early as 1872 the brothers were landowners; the 1900 census (U.S. Census Bureau 1900) shows that they are still farmers, but unlike Hillman and Shadrick, John now rents the property where he and his family reside. By this time, John and his wife Chancy have also assumed guardianship of grandsons, Elisha and Dorsey. Their three daughters appear to have died by the 1900 census. After John and Chancy's death, Hillman and his wife, Harriette, would become the surrogate guardians of John's son, Dorsey (who at age 23, still resided in their household in 1910) (U.S. Census Bureau 1910). Hillman's deep commitment to family and community is further evident in the 1908 Noxubee County records on the enumeration of educable children<sup>9</sup>. He, along with Shadrick, and Noah are listed under the category of parent or guardian. Noah registers his two children, Carl and Lula, but the three men also register additional children, who are either members of their extended family or members of their larger community. These men clearly believed that the advancement of black people was tied to education, and they understood that the progress of the community necessitated that this opportunity be extended to all. Within two years of the 1908 enumeration record, Shadrick has died, and by the time of the 1920 census, Noah and his family are shown living in Winston County, and his oldest son, Carl, has moved to Jasper County. In January of 1920, 76-year-old Hillman was admitted as an "inmate" (U.S. Census Bureau 1920), in what was then named the Mississippi State Insane Asylum: three months later he died, and was buried on those grounds<sup>10</sup>. His body lies among thousands, mostly black, who over a span of decades from the mid 1800s, died at the asylum. The gravesites were discovered in 2012, on grounds that today are part of the University of Mississippi Medical Center in Jackson, Mississippi. The archaeological site that has resulted is now part of The Asylum Hill Project, tasked with respectfully managing the fate of the thousands of remains buried at what is now a planned university construction site<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> See *Enumeration of Educable Children Noxubee County, Mississippi. 1908. "Race Black. Township 13 Range 15".* <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:939F-P2WX-6?i=2&wc=M6NC-CMS%3A167442001%2C167441002&cc=1856425>.

<sup>10</sup> See MDAH Mississippi Archives Online Catalog. Mississippi Asylum Cemetery Records. Retrieved from <http://opac2.mdah.state.ms.us/queries/burials3.php?referer=http%3A%2F%2Fzed.mdah.state.ms.us&searchby=name&term=Sistrunk&sortby=cerno>. See also 1920 United States Census. Mississippi. Hinds County. State Insane Asylum. Township 6 Beat 1.

<sup>11</sup> The discovery of the gravesites garnered considerable attention. The estimated 7000 graves hold the remains of those who died and were buried at what stood as Mississippi's first mental health institute, which opened in 1855 as The Mississippi Lunatic Asylum. Renamed The Mississippi State Insane Hospital in 1900, its doors closed in 1935, and the property is now part of the University of Mississippi Hospital complex. Its first patients were white, and among its earliest was in fact a white woman, Evalina Seastrunk (distant relative of Jacob Sistrunk originating from Georgia), from Copiah County. However, Black people were admitted in increasing numbers by the turn of the century and according to a March 19, 2018 article, "Asylum Hill Project: 'What a Great Story this Is'", in Univ of Mississippi Medical Center News Stories between 1912 and 1935, black people made up the majority of deaths recorded in the asylum records ([https://www.umc.edu/news/News\\_Articles/2018/03/asylum-hill-project--what-a-great-story-this-is.html](https://www.umc.edu/news/News_Articles/2018/03/asylum-hill-project--what-a-great-story-this-is.html)). The project's

Hillman's fate is significant because it ties ironically to the isolation that could have easily been the outcome for Francis, who without community would have lived in social isolation as the single enslaved person in Jacob's household. Hillman's fate illustrates, as in the twenty-first century COVID-19 crisis, how easily we can be separated from family, meeting our end alone. It is not necessarily a result of negligence or abandonment on the part of family or loved ones, but can very likely be the result of economic hardships and limited support for health care. When families do not have caretakers at home, or are unable to pay for assistance, and when work and distance prevents them from visiting loved ones when they are confined to living in healthcare facilities, the result can be catastrophic. Hillman's selflessness illustrates the sense of commitment to community and family that Francis instilled in her children. Hillman's story reminds us that, no matter how strong the bonds of family and community that we build and have built, black people in the United States live in a system that continues to leave them at higher risk for life threatening experiences. The Cistrunk migrations from Noxubee County from 1918 to 1920 were likely influenced by a combination of catastrophic events of this two year window: the Red Hot Summer of 1919 that issued in race riots and heightened levels of violence against black people throughout the country; and the flu pandemic of 1918 that left a trail of death throughout the United States, including the south. Perhaps it was the echo of the 1919 riots along with the ongoing push by whites to suppress black voting and economic gains that sparked the violence of 1919 in the city of Macon, in Noxubee County. Tax records show that Cistrunks, like many other black people, were being taxed out of land in Noxubee County, and as well were being charged with poll tax violations—clearly related to the concerted efforts of white southerners to deny black voting<sup>12</sup>. This was a horrible economic, social, and health moment in Noxubee County, perhaps one of the lowest moments in the post-emancipation period of the family. The result was unthinkable for a family and a community that was rooted in beliefs of caring and sacrifice: Hillman, under circumstances that I have not yet fully pieced together, was admitted to an institution where he appears to have died alone, and was buried without family, without memorial, without recognition of a life that mattered.

Like his siblings, Hillman was a manifestation of his mother's teachings, his mother's ethos. While Hillman died alone, the line of descent from his brother, John, lives today in Mississippi and other states in the nation. John's children's children and their descendants survived because Hillman assumed a responsibility for them and others in his community. In the absence of his brother, he became the father and assumed responsibility for his grandson's care. His life emphasizes the importance of black women's spiritual centeredness as key to maintaining a generational ideology of belonging among black people. Stories of the thousands buried on the grounds of today's University of Mississippi Medical Center are yet to be told. The Asylum Hill Project was established to oversee the respectful reinternment of remains, and to unearth the history of their lives and experiences in the asylum. Hillman's story is among those, but with no living direct descendants, his is a story that would have probably been lost but for the evidence of their existence mapped out by his mother, Francis, and her sons, and Francis' self-declared namesake.

The family's split seems to have occurred between the offspring of John and Shadrick. During the brothers' lives, however, they seemed to have worked together to seat themselves and family into their community and to find financial stability. The brothers would follow their mother's example in exercising the power of naming: they would declare their identity and independence

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website, [asylumhillproject.org](http://asylumhillproject.org), provides a history of the asylum and the present archaeological project undertaken to provide greater historical context and to honorably handle the thousands of human remains.

<sup>12</sup> The following articles exemplify the looming and implemented tax threats that pervaded the lives of Cistrunk landowners in Noxubee County in the first decades of the twentieth century: *Macon Beacon*. Macon, Mississippi. Fri, 06 May 1910 Page 4. Delinquent Poll Tax; *Macon Beacon*. Macon, Mississippi. Fri, 29 Apr 1910 Page 4. Delinquent Poll Tax List; *Macon Beacon*. Macon, Mississippi. Sat, 23 Mar 1901 Page 1. John on Delinquent Poll Tax list; *Macon Beacon*. Macon, Mississippi. Fri, 24 Feb 1911 Page 5. Shederick Sistrunk Trustee Sale; *Macon Beacon*. Macon, Mississippi. Fri, 10 Mar 1911 Page 8. Shed Cistrunk Sale of Land for Delinquent Taxes; *Macon Beacon*. Macon, Mississippi. Fri, 03 May 1912 Page 3. Doss Cistrunk Delinquent Poll Tax; *Macon Beacon*. Macon, Mississippi. Fri, 06 Oct 1911 Page 8. Susan Cistrunk Citation.

from their white enslavers, signaling their rebirth into the community of freed people. The present day Cistrunk descendants of Francis' son, Shadrick, pass on the family's historical account of this change in the spelling of their surname. According to this story, in the years after emancipation, the black Sistrunks would regularly receive their mail late, because the postman would deliver all mail addressed to Sistrunks to the households of white Sistrunks. The black Sistrunks—John, Hillman, and Shadrick—changed the spelling to distinguish themselves from the white Sistrunks, and thus to subvert this practice of censorship. The transition is evident in the 1876 deed record, that shows the change to Scistrunk as the new spelling. Subsequently, on the 1880 Census and other deed transactions we find Hillman and his brothers spelling their surname, Cistrunk, thereby dropping the S, and clearly instituting the new spelling that has passed on into this line of descent today.

By naming Shad after his biological father, Francis preserves for Shad and his descendants their connection to black ancestral origins. Although Shad's descendants to date convey a family history that points to his son, Noah, as patriarch and early ancestor, Francis, left markers that show her as the foreparent who planted the seeds of home and community for generations of Cistrunks in Mississippi. It is not clear why the story of Shadrick, his siblings, and their mother, Francis, did not survive at the forefront in the oral narrative of the Noah Cistrunk line of descent. The silencing of Francis, and to a lesser extent Shadrick, may have been the desire for those born post emancipation to sever ties to a history that connected their origins to slavery. Francis survived this erasure, however, because generations of her female descendants have quietly spoken her name. I learnt from women descendants of Noah Cistrunk that it was Francis' granddaughter, Sophie (Noah's sister), who passed down the story of her grandmother, Francis. Sophie lived 30 years after her brother's death in 1937, and while she outlived her own children, she shared the family's history with Noah's children. Because women usually care for the aged in the family, as Sophie became older, it was the women who primarily heard the accounts of the family that she shared. Remarkably, in death, Sophie leaves an indelible connection to the nineteenth-century Cistrunk matriarch, Francis. While her family had always referred to her as Sophie, between the 1930 and 1940 census, Sophie had remarried, moved to Jackson and assumed the name Francis ([U.S. Census Bureau 1940](#)), and this would be the name of record on her death certificate and obituary in 1967. While census records from her childhood into adult life identified her by the name Sophie, she may have, from birth, been given the second name of Francis at birth. African Americans have generationally maintained the common place Central African practice of naming children after grandparents ([Thornton 1993](#), p. 742). It seems that Sophie entered into a new life with the move to Jackson, and she signaled this by a name change. Her family continued to refer to her as Sophie, but in spaces beyond her family circle, she was Francis. Her navigation of a public and a private name is not out of line with a generations-old practice in African and African diasporic societies, where many individuals assume multiple names ([López 2015](#), pp. 161–63). This change to Francis is a declaration of identity and lineage, and stands today as perhaps Sophie may have intended: to pass on and secure the place of her grandmother, Francis, as foreparent—matriarch—to her family's line of descent. Recognizing Francis as such broadens the narrative of the Cistrunks and their place in the originating community of freed black people in Noxubee County.

Shadrick's son, Noah, would remain in Noxubee County until he moved his family to neighboring Winston County, sometime between the years 1910 and 1918. This move, however, did not uproot Noah from his Noxubee roots. Throughout his life, Noah maintained connections to the Noxubee community where his father Shadrick, and his grandmother, Francis, had planted roots after the Civil War. The poignant symbol of this connectedness was his continued membership at Brushfork Baptist Church, his home church in Noxubee, where his remains would be returned for burial in 1937. To this date, Noah's last surviving son, B\_\_\_ Cistrunk, and other descendants, tell the story of Noah's legacy in this community. Descendants from John's line still live in Noxubee County to date, but with Noah's relocation of his family, Shadrick's line was transplanted to Winston County. Today, his descendants identify Winston County as the point of their ancestral home. In both counties, however, we see through Francis' descendants the embodiment of her living legacy. Some are still landowners,

continuing the legacy of a rootedness in the land, and in both counties, the black Cistrunk presence and history live also in the naming of roads in both counties that bear the name Cistrunk<sup>13</sup>.

The narrative of Francis Sistrunk that has emerged from this study is a remarkable legacy for her descendants, as it shows that not only was Francis the architect of their family's place in the early freed community of Noxubee County Blacks, but that their Mississippi origins story predates the patriarchal first generation free born descendant, Noah (her grandson). The import of Francis' narrative, however, extends beyond her own descendants. Her story represents that of countless black women, many unnamed, who similarly planted the seeds of kinship and community for their families pre and post-Civil War. In the seeming simple but deeply spiritual act of naming, Francis imparted to her descendants the power of self and communal actualization, representing a proclamation of autonomy and identity that remains a practice among African Americans to date.

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<sup>13</sup> In Winston County, in the area where Noah and his family lived and farmed, there is a road named Bill Cistrunk, in honor of Noah's son, Bill. In Noxubee County, in the area where the three Cistrunk brothers, John, Hillman, and Shadrack, owned land and farmed, there is a u-shaped road named Cistrunk.

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