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# TRUTH: SPECIAL ISSUE

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## Dr. Jacqueline A. Rouse (1950-2020)



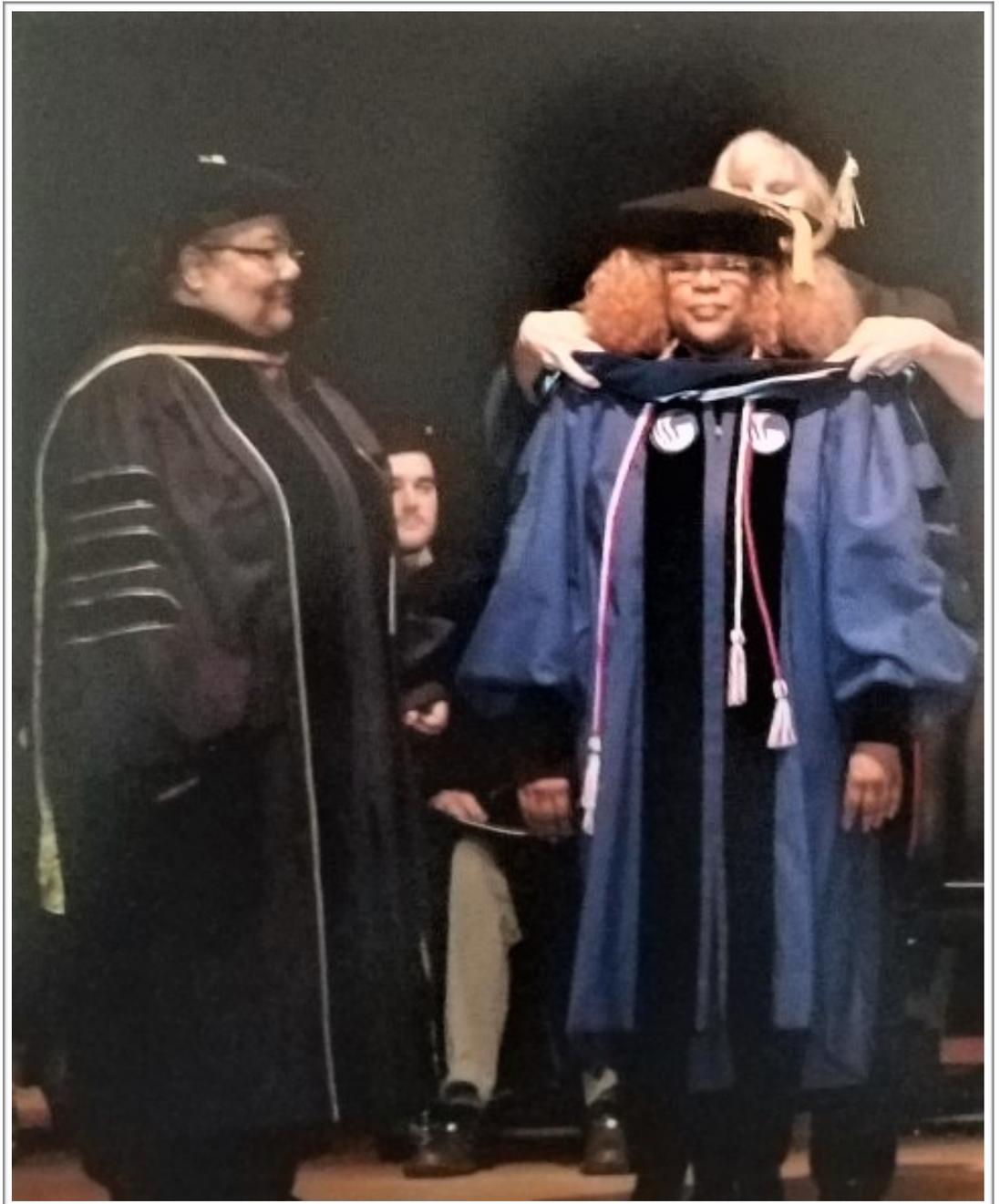
Dr. Jacqueline A. Rouse (center) with Karcheik Sims-Alvarado, Charmayne Patterson, Christy Garrison-Harrison, and Kenja McCray at the 2015 ASALH conference in Atlanta

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### By Dr. Kenja McCray

The day after Mother’s Day, we lost Professor Jacqueline Anne Rouse, a significant pioneer in the field of Black women’s history and an early leader within the Association of Black Women Historians (ABWH). Scholars such as ABWH National Director Erica Dunbar and [Lisa Shannon](#) have offered biographical sketches of Dr. Rouse’s professional accomplishments—publications, leadership positions, and awards—but this essay will feature the perspectives of her students and advisees,

revealing her unique and enduring contributions as a teacher and mentor. Rouse was an author as well as an instructor and adviser to many people over the years. Her journey as an educator began at Palm Beach Junior College. She later worked at Morehouse College and American University. For the last 29 years of her life, she taught at Georgia State University (GSU).



Rouse's professional guidance served her students well. Many are employed in tenure-track positions, while others are now filmmakers and theologians.

Dr. Rouse and Dr. Garrison-Harrison (2017)

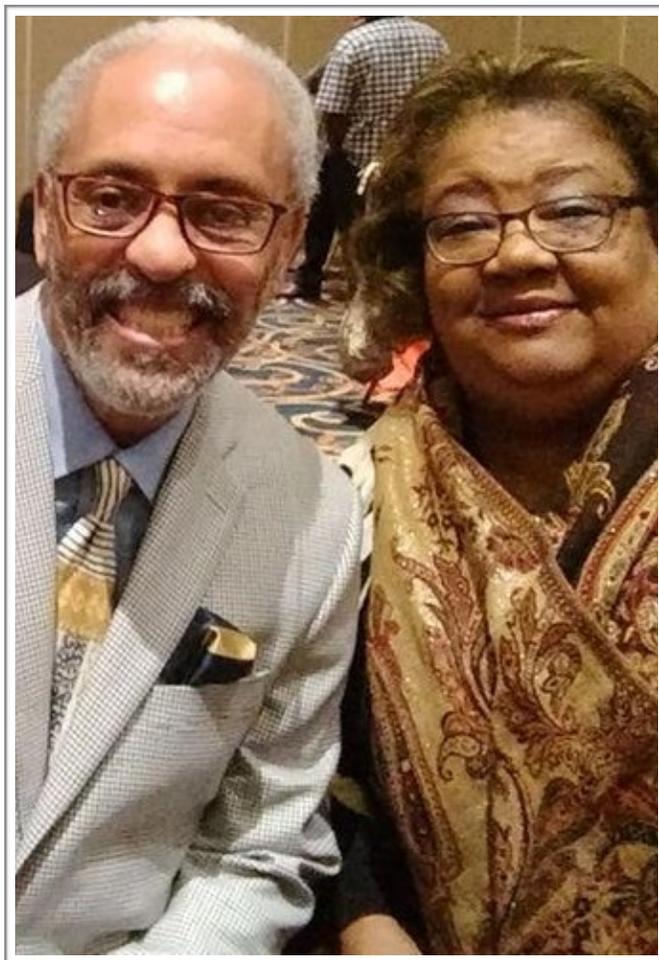
This piece is comprised of tributes collected from several of Rouse's protégés. Former student Mary Rolinson collected and shared some of these recollections at a symposium honoring twelve founding mothers of African American women's history during the 2015 BWHxG: Cross-Generational Dialogues in Black Women's History, held in East Lansing, Michigan. Rolinson aptly pointed out in her own reflections that it was not always easy to earn Dr. Rouse's esteem; however, "Once Dr. Rouse became your mentor, she was with you for life. She read your work with all her attention and seriousness, and she took personal responsibility for you getting it right because you were hers." One of Rouse's greatest strengths was that she remained concerned and accessible long after we graduated and as we moved forward in our careers. The following words highlight many other aspects of the dynamism and excellence Rouse brought to her scholarship, teaching, and advisement.

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**“She poured into us because she believed our scholarship mattered.”**

Some of Rouse's advisees spotlighted how even a casual visit to her office was often like taking an advanced class in scholarly methodology. Christine Lutz fondly remembered that her best conversations with Dr. Rouse were "about this theory or that book." Christy Garrison-Harrison met Dr. Rouse while completing a master's degree at Clark Atlanta University (CAU). Vicki Crawford, Dr. Rouse's co-editor for the groundbreaking book *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers (1941-1965)*, taught at CAU and assigned Dr. Rouse's work in a course on the Civil Rights Movement. As Garrison-Harrison began to immerse herself in mapping her thesis proposal, Crawford became her advisor. Crawford suggested she interview with Dr. Rouse so Garrison-Harrison could gain a richer sense of the women she was researching. "Ten minutes into the conversation, Dr. Rouse decided that I was no longer interviewing her, she

was going to ‘school’ me,” Garrison-Harrison wrote. “It sounds almost too cliché to even share, but every meeting with Dr. Jacqueline Anne Rouse—from the initial introduction to the last conversation—left a lasting impression.”



Dr. Barry Lee and Dr. Rouse (2017)

Garrison-Harrison’s retrospective particularly revealed how Rouse demanded excellence from her students while reminding us that the people we wrote about were important and that our scholarship mattered. Garrison-Harrison recalled:

What happened next can only be described as an abbreviated masterclass in conducting oral history and structuring critical analyses. [Rouse] dismantled my interview questions and walked me through

reassembling them into a framework that would honor the women and my work. Dr. Rouse explained that, as a Black woman writing about Black women, my scholarship would have to be above reproach because there were many established mainstream historians who simply did not consider [studies of] Black women as either critical

scholarship or worthy of inclusion in the historical canon. My oral histories, my primary sources, my citations—all would need to be airtight. Most importantly, she told me that as a Black woman historian, the academy needed my research on Black women. This exchange mattered in ways that I cannot articulate in this medium.

Grateful for how Dr. Rouse generously shared time and expertise with budding scholars such as herself, Garrison-Harrison resolved to finish her master's degree in African American history at CAU and become one of the professor's GSU doctoral students after the session. The “conversation with Dr. Rouse was but the first of many such meetings that began with me presenting a draft of my work and [ended] with an epistemological discussion,” Garrison-Harrison stated. She looked back over the years spent with Rouse and reminisced on how each discussion, from the first to the last, challenged her to deconstruct her research inquiries and strengthen subsequent revisions of her work. Recording the memory of this arduous process is especially important because it serves as a reminder of Rouse's belief in the fact that the women's stories and Garrison-Harrison's voice deserved to be shared with the world.

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**“She was a taskmaster because she had high expectations for her students.”**

Charmayne Patterson's feelings of intimidation surged when she glimpsed Rouse at Georgia State's commencement in May 2001, a few months before entering the university's history doctoral program. Dr. Rouse's distinction as a pioneering scholar of African American women's history preceded her. So did her reputation for rigor. Patterson's sentiments remained fully intact once she entered the program and had her first meeting with Rouse. Patterson's viewpoint eventually shifted as she realized that Rouse “was a taskmaster because she

had high expectations for her students.” Patterson’s reflections affirmed that Dr. Rouse’s hard-driving approach to advisement helped us rise to our full potential.

Over time, Patterson’s intimidation gave way to admiration and appreciation. “She was tough but fair. I came to value her opinion and respect her professional advice.” Pointing out Rouse’s enduring commitment to her former students, Patterson said, “Years after graduating from the program, I still considered Jacqueline Rouse to be a mentor. I also considered her to be family. My children knew her. We even joked that she forced my son into the world. He was born exactly one week after she oversaw my comprehensive exam, and boy, did she take me through it!” Dr. Patterson believed Rouse was more than worthy of the accolades she received for “her scholarship, her leadership, and her commitment to training scholars to follow in her footsteps.”

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**“Jackie showed me enormous patience [and] instilled confidence.”**

Christine Lutz, Nafeesa Muhammad, and Barry Lee also reflected on Rouse’s outstanding advisement and mentorship as defining aspects of her impact on them. “Throughout those years at Georgia State, Jackie showed me enormous patience, instilled confidence, metaphorically slapped around others on my committees, and wrote more than a few letters on my behalf. . . . She was and is somebody a person could trust. I loved her then, and I miss and love her now,” Lutz reminisced.

Similarly, Nafeesa Muhammad centered the feeling of trust in her memories of Dr. Rouse. Muhammad met Rouse in 2011 through a friend and fellow history doctoral student with roots in the African American Studies Department that Rouse helped found. The friend encouraged Muhammad to apply to GSU's

history doctoral program. Following an introductory email message, Muhammad says Dr. Rouse became, not only her professor, advisor, and dissertation chair, but also a staunch advocate and a confidant. “I remember being in awe of her ability to teach without notes and slides while engaging students for over an hour with great historical narratives,” Muhammad mused. “With Dr. Rouse's help, I obtained a research assistantship and served as her teaching aid.” Muhammad said Rouse was so steadfast in her support of striving students that she was the only professor the young doctoral candidate felt comfortable enough to cry in the presence of. “Dr. Rouse was a maternal figure who saw my tears of joy and struggle while navigating the doctoral program. She taught me how to be resilient. I can only hope to impact students and future generations as she did.”

Barry Lee commented on how Rouse demonstrated the importance of principled mentoring and teaching. Lee opined that Rouse had “no peer in the state of Georgia in raising up the next generation of scholars, particularly those invested in scholarship of movement and Black women’s history.” He penned in his reflections that, “She taught me the meaning of the responsibility to raise up the next generation, a commitment I bring to my own classroom. . . . Dr. Rouse reinforced in me the notion of absolute integrity in all that one does in life.” Lee said he works to ensure his students know he cares about the kinds of people they are more than anything, defining this approach as a form of “holistic pedagogy” that Rouse instilled in him.

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**“She allowed me to see that women can and should be at the center of telling our own narratives.”**

Some of Rouse’s former students discussed the impact of her teaching as much as they did her mentorship. Karcheik Sims-Alvarado recounted how one

question blossomed into so much more. Rouse taught the very first graduate course she took as a history doctoral student at Georgia State University and eventually began to mentor Sims-Alvarado in a way that molded the contours of her research and writing interests.



Dr. Derrick Lanois and Dr. Rouse (2014)

Rouse “opened her lecture with the research question, ‘What is a Movement?’ Little did I know how this question and the person posing it would indelibly shape me,” Sims-Alvarado recalled. “Dr. Rouse had a beautiful way of telling history. She presented it with such fluidity and ease that it left me captivated. While she was taking me on a journey, she was dropping jewels of wisdom, analysis, and thought-provoking questions that I pondered the remainder of the day.

. . . She allowed me to see that women can and should be at the center of telling our own narratives.”

Like Sims-Alvarado, Derrick Lanois emphasized Rouse’s strong mentorship and her passion for women’s history. “Dr. Rouse was a godsend . . . and the word mentor cannot capture all that she meant for my career and life. Like the women she studies, she has been a steward in training the next generations of scholars on African Americans and women. I am a recipient of that training and [the] vast wealth of knowledge she possesses,” he expressed. “She has taught me many things in and outside the classroom. She has invested in me and my scholarship, and I wish I could . . . show her the appreciation I have for her and what she has added to our understanding of African American women through her scholarship.”

The latter part of Lanois’s story illustrated Rouse’s sense of concern. She could be warm, humorous, stern, and scourging, but we always knew she cared. After studying gender through the Women's Studies program, he said, “I told Dr. Rouse I was now prepared to teach African American Women's history. She looked at me with her smile and told me she would not recommend teaching on African American women unless I had taken a class from her. I audited a graduate seminar on African American women--mind you-- after I was ABD because I wanted her approval.” Lanois experienced a debilitating bout of asthma during one of his classes with her. “Typical Dr. Rouse scolded me for coming out as she took care of me and my health,” he observed. “She not only taught about African American women’s history and their struggles and triumphs, but she showed me love, care, and most importantly, never to get on her bad side. Thank you, Dr. Rouse.”

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## **“She taught me that, if I gave it some thought, I too was a feminist.”**

Exposure to Dr. Rouse’s woman-centered advocacy in research, teaching, and mentorship was liberating for some of her former students. Dexter Blackman explained how Rouse inspired his feminism:

She taught me that if I gave it some thought, I too was a feminist; that as a person working for the liberation of all, my analysis was incomplete if I did not consider the presence and position of women who brought their many insights and experiences to the table; that my teaching was incomplete if I did not provoke others to examine women as well. Stated plainly, she helped me liberate myself from my socialization as a traditional man.

Blackman said Rouse’s scholarship and teaching instructed him that “liberation can come from the least traditional places and people.”

Blackman was not Rouse’s only former student who noted how she sparked their feminism. As a Morehouse student, Barry Lee changed his major from biology to history around 1987. He did not have a clear idea about the field of history that most interested him until he took Dr. Rouse’s United States history class. He graduated in 1990 with a bachelor’s degree and pursued graduate studies at Georgia State University. He was tempted to leave because the history department had no African American professors. “Then lo and behold,” he said, “Dr. Rouse arrived at GSU the next year, 1991, and became the first Black professor in the department. Because of her, I decided to stay at GSU and entered the Ph.D. program as well as earning a certificate in the inaugural class

of GSU's Women's Studies Program." Lee stood out like a sore thumb, but his experiences with Rouse forever transformed his thinking. "At that time, apparently, I was an oddity as the only man in the program, but Dr. Rouse forced me to begin a process of examining my assumptions about gender. I even began thinking of myself, and I still do, as a Black male feminist."

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**"She had a special sixth sense [and] a cultivated relationship with her God."**

Dr. Rouse's guiding principles as an educator were rooted in her holistic concern for students and her faith in God. Blackman commented on Rouse's role as an instructor, academician, and mentor. He explained that her example forced him to consider balance in his life as a scholar. He wrote, "She . . . preached temperance when this world has heaped praise on me." He also said Rouse gave him "not so subtle reminders" to hold his head high in times of difficulty.

Barry Lee suspected that Rouse's deep commitment to grooming a new generation of intellectuals, unfortunately, came at the expense of her scholarship:

While at GSU, Dr. Rouse became perhaps the most favorite professor in the History Department and the one committed to her students more than to her own advancement. Her scholarship on Septima Clark was neglected, and her promotion to full professor no doubt was delayed because she sacrificed personal goals so that protégés like Mary Rolinson and I could earn doctorates and permanent jobs in the academy. Amazingly, Dr. Rouse consistently turned out more Ph.D. students from GSU than perhaps any other member of her department. In some years, such as in 200[7], she

graduated two students: Tommy Bynum, [who became] a tenured Associate Professor at Middle Tennessee State and Charmayne Patterson, [who became] an Assistant Professor at Clark Atlanta University. Nearly every one of her students has gone on to a faculty post somewhere. She became the reason why many African Americans enrolled at Georgia State to earn master's and [doctoral] degrees in history.

Blackman additionally pointed out that Rouse's grounding in Christian principles informed her mentorship. He said, "She had a special sixth sense, a cultivated relationship with her God that made her secure and that protected and benefitted her and the others whom she took into her confidence. Like many of those students and friends, I have benefitted from her words and works." In keeping with many who shared their memories, Blackman ended with the statement, "I am thankful and also wiser because of my relationship with Dr. Rouse."

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**“Dr. Rouse embodied a womanist leadership model.”**

Like some of my colleagues, I initially encountered Rouse through her publications and later met her face-to-face. I was also excited about how her work centered African American women as integral theorists and strategists who molded and marked the Black freedom struggle's contours. The ways she interrogated the gendered nature of leadership and organizing specifically interested me. After deciding to pursue a Ph.D. in history at GSU, I had to earn an introduction to Rouse through classmates and other mentors. This was probably because Rouse had so many advisees she seriously had to vet new students seeking her guidance. Maybe it was also because my focus on Black

cultural nationalist women of the late 1960s through the 1980s would concentrate on the historical literature about a turbulent time, which she lived



Dr. Rouse and Dr. Christine Lutz (2001)

through and did not care to revisit. I believe it was Rouse's commitment to what I view as a womanist leadership model that ultimately inspired her agreement to serve on my dissertation committee.

Like the women she wrote about, Rouse acted as a skilled and ethical leader who often worked in the shadows. She led us with rigor and compassion. She opened, not just her office, but also her home as a refuge while we struggled through our research and writing. Likewise, she offered her shoulder to cry on, a frosty drink, or a warm meal when we needed it. She did not perform these incredibly kind and meaningful acts for fortune or even for formal recognition. She mentored us from a spiritual place. She did it for the culture. Despite her early reservations about my topic, Rouse went above and beyond the call of duty to help me complete a solid work that would contribute to the field and aptly tell the stories of the women I chronicled. All I can say is I owe Dr. Rouse a debt for which I can never repay her. My only hope is that I can one day pay it forward.

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## Conclusion

Barry Lee left the following closing remarks from that momentous 2015 symposium. I believe his words speak for many of the former students and mentees Rouse left as her legacy: “Dr. Jacqueline A. Rouse personifies all that is good about humanity. She is my shining exemplar and one to whom I [could] always turn to for wise counsel and firm grounding in the values that have gotten our people through many midnights. I would not have a terminal degree, nor truly understand my role as an African American historian, were it not for her example. Dr. Rouse, your legacy lives in me. Thank you so much!”

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## Contributors

**Dr. Dexter Blackman** is an Assistant Professor of African American History and Studies at Morgan State University in Baltimore, Maryland.

**Dr. Thomas L. Bynum** is Associate Professor of History and Director of the Black Studies Program at Cleveland State University, Ohio.

**Dr. Christy Garrison-Harrison** is an Assistant Professor of History at Southern University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

**Dr. Derrick A. Lanois** is an Assistant Professor of History at Norfolk State University in Virginia.

**Dr. Barry E. Lee** is an Assistant Professor in the Morehouse College History Department in Atlanta, Georgia.

**Dr. Christine Lutz** retired from Fort Valley State University, Georgia as a tenured Assistant Professor.

**Dr. Kenja McCray** is an Associate Professor of History at Atlanta Metropolitan State College in Georgia.

**Dr. Nafeesa Muhammad** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of History, Political Science & Philosophy at Lincoln University, Pennsylvania.

**Dr. Charmayne Patterson** is an Associate Professor at Clark Atlanta University in Georgia.

**Dr. Mary G. Rolinson** retired from Georgia State University's main campus in Atlanta as a Senior Lecturer.

**Dr. Karcheik Sims-Alvarado** is an Assistant Professor of Africana Studies at Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia.