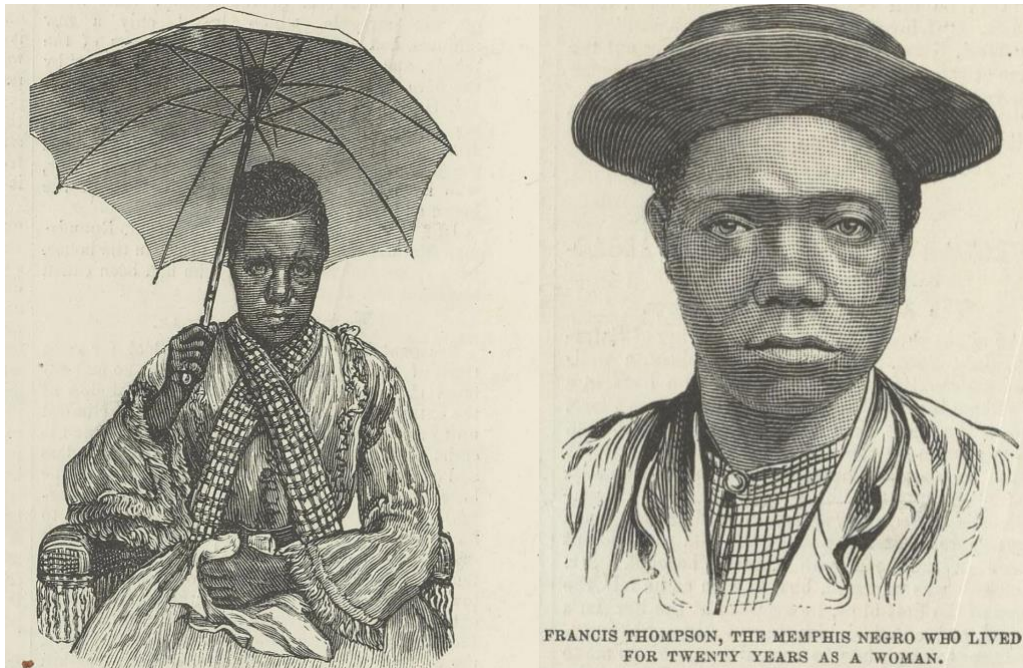


“We are not that sort of women”:

***The Life and Times of Frances Thompson during the 1866
Memphis Massacre***



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Introduction

Frances Thompson was a formerly enslaved trans Black woman who lived in Memphis, Tennessee during the May 1866 Memphis Massacre. The significance of the Memphis Massacre is that it played a vital role in challenging Congress to uphold the Constitution by passing legislation among the debates surrounding the meaning of freedom and rights of citizens. During the three-day massacre, May 1-3, 1866, Thompson and several other Black women experienced sexual violence at the hands of angry white mobs. In the aftermath of the massacre, Thompson was invited to testify in front of Congress to recount her experiences of being sexually abused by white mobs. While her testimony makes her arguably the first trans person to testify in front of Congress, it also served as a linchpin that set off a series of legislation enacted to protect the rights of newly freed people. It also set off a series of responses from the conservative press, which sought to undermine white southern brutality against African Americans, especially against Thompson whose body was deemed undesirable as it did not conform to their idea of womanhood. After her testimony to Congress, Thompson was arrested and imprisoned for defying anti-cross-dressing laws. This further provided the conservative press with ammunition to double down on its attacks of Thompson, labeling her a liar and criminal.

As historians have worked to highlight the historical, political, and cultural significance of the Memphis Massacre as well as the larger importance of Reconstruction, the story is still very much untold. For example, the lives of Black women in the south, more specifically, Black trans women's experiences during this time. While the conversations around the Memphis Massacre and Reconstruction focus on issues of race and politics, the historiography that has emerged since the early 2000s, centered on the racial violence and meanings of citizenship, specifically that of Black men as they were granted the right to vote with the ratification of the 15th

Amendment, thus giving them full permission to participate in the political arena. Any discussions of the gender moved Black women from the margins of the discourse to the center; however, the limitations of these narratives largely excluded the lived experiences of gender nonconforming women. Historians have begun to challenge the ways in which gender and sexual violence have been discussed. Hannah Rosen's *Terror in the Heart of Freedom* highlights the gendered violence during Reconstruction and the media's responses to it. Tera Hunter's *To Joy My Freedom* explores the lives of Black women in the south following the Civil War and how they shaped freedom for themselves in response to white America's desire to keep them in domestic servitude and Black America's determination to live their lives in ways that would be acceptable to white America. One of the pioneering works to explore race and sexual violence in the press is Sharon Block's "Rape and Race in Colonial Newspapers, 1728-1776." She explores how the intersection of gender and race determined how one was profiled in the press. For example, Black men were labelled rapists whether they committed crimes or not and white men were not labelled as such, even when they perpetuated such crimes. White women were always believed when they spoke of being subjected to sexual violence while Black women were not. This laid the foundation for Black and white sexuality for the next century.

With this book chapter, I intend to fully explore the political implications of Thompson's gendered nonconformity. The life and experiences of Frances Thompson is an important example of individuals living at the intersection of race, class, and gender play an integral role in helping to shape how we understand and tell our history. Thompson's experiences challenges scholars to break away from the rigid boundaries of heteronormative southern Black women's histories and tell new stories and contribute to the historiography in new and innovative ways.

Significance

The work of diversity and inclusion does not reside in a single office but is a collective responsibility for the whole of the campus community. My teaching pedagogy and scholarship focus on underrepresented communities. This is purposefully done to bring students in who represent many backgrounds, ethnicities, races, genders, religions, etc. When students see themselves represented in the materials, they are more inclined to engage with the materials. They want to know more. They want to learn more. They want to undertake projects they can relate to more. While I am in the process of working on this book chapter, I have included the life of my subject, Frances Thompson into classroom discussions and students have responded favorably to learning more about trans people who lived centuries ago. Rather than shy away from the brutal, painful, dehumanizing parts of our histories, stories like Thompson's encourage us to learn more and to understand the lives people lived during the time in which they lived.

When talking to students in class, I always tell them that we are a community. We come from different backgrounds. Our pathways to this very classroom are all different and together we are building a space that is inclusive and respectful of one another. A project like this forces us to celebrate cultural richness and create transformative spaces of belonging. We share these spaces with one another, recognizing that there is space for all of us. As we learn about the past and converse about our own experiences, we understand that we are here to uplift one another, be compassionate about our subjects and one another, and as we go to our communities beyond Sac State, we take with us the dedication to engage with diverse perspectives with mutual respect, and open dialogue.

Dissemination

This book chapter will be a part of a larger volume that will be published through Bloomsbury Press during the 2027-2028 academic year.

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