

Pine Cone Profiles – September 2021

Karen Kossie-Chernyshev

Every historian has had that aha moment, that breakthrough that brings everything together, that single fact that makes everything click! Karen Kossie-Chernyshev experienced hers while investigating the Horace papers at the Tarrant County Black Genealogical and Historical Society, when she confirmed that Ms. Horace was the author she had long admired, Lillian Bertha Jones. Writer of the earliest novel by a Black woman in Texas, Jones spearheaded her own publishing company, taught secondary school in East Texas, and worked switchboards as a telephone operator. It was her book, *Five Generations Hence*, however, that most captured her spirit of hope – and enthralled Karen.

Karen has continued Jones' spirit in both her professional and personal life. Courses like "African American History to 1865" and "Topics in African American History" make heritage real to her students at Texas Southern University; and summer school sessions, like those she sponsored in her Workshops on African American Texas History, inspired teachers. In 2018, in a kind of reverse diaspora, she and her summer workshop attendees sailed east from Texas to Ghana's Gold Coast; then in 2019, Karen ran for the Houston City Council, representing District B. Like Lillian Bertha Jones, there are no limits to her activism and hope.

Here, in her own words, is Karen Kossie-Chernyshev.

Where do you live?

I live in Houston, TX. I am a third-generation Houstonian and a fourth generation Texan.

How long have you been in East Texas Historical Association?

I have been in ETHA since 2003. I was a renewing member for about ten years, and I became a life member about seven years ago.

What convinced you to join?

I joined ETHA when I was looking for a place to present and submit my first scholarly article for review and publication. A newly minted Ph.D. at the time, although I had spent four-plus years gathering information about my subject and written a few book reviews while in graduate school, I knew very little about getting published when I joined the faculty at Texas Southern University. I consulted with my mentor and colleague, Dr. Merline Pitre, then Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Behavioral Sciences. I still remember the day I went to her office with my near 400-page dissertation in hand to tell her I had no idea how to start publishing. She asked a simple question that totally demystified the process from that day forward: "Is anybody in your dissertation from East Texas?" Honestly, up to that point, Texas was simply "Texas" to me. I had not thought of regional distinctions until Dr. Pitre posed the question. I

recalled that one of my chapters had a list of a lot of Texas towns. When I pulled out the map to see where they were, I discovered that most were in East Texas. With a researched “yes” in tow, I returned to her office with a smile. She then advised, “Well, take that chapter and send it to East Texas Historical Journal.” A lightbulb turned on. Suddenly, I realized “place” mattered not only for my subjects but also for publishing about them. As East Texas turned out to be the regional focus of my research, the East Texas Historical Association became a perfect fit immediately.

What is there within ETHA that has kept you a member?

I have remained a member of East Texas Historical Association (ETHA) because I have met some great researchers and history enthusiasts through my affiliation, and East Texas Historical Journal (ETHJ) has played a key role in my development as a professional historian. My first article and two others were published in ETHJ. One of the articles, “Constructing Good Success: The Church of God in Christ and Social Uplift in East Texas: 1910-1936” (2007), won the C.K. Chamberlain Award for the best article to appear in Volume XLIV of the ETHJ. The essay was included in *Blacks in East Texas History* (2008), edited by the late Archie P. McDonald and Bruce Glasrud. I was also awarded the ETHA’s Otis Lock Research Grant (2003), which supported the eventual publication of “Texas On the Record: Church of God in Christ Determination to Possess the Land, 1910-1935” (Central Texas Studies, 2019). It was also at the ETHA that I first presented on Lillian Jones Horace (1880-1965), who is now confirmed as Texas’s earliest known African American female novelist and the first Black woman nationally to own a publishing company before 1920. My essay, “What Is Africa to Me: Visions of Africa in Lillian Bertha Jones’s *Five Generations Hence* (1916): A Gendered Means to a Political End,” was also published in ETHJ (2011) and became the springboard for *Recovering Five Generations Hence: The Life and Writing of Lillian Jones Horace* (2013), *Angie Brown: A Jim Crow Romance* (2017), and my recent study examining Horace’s and Zora Neale Hurston’s overlooked contributions to the study of African American religion. All the noted research projects and publications by various scholars of Texas history inspired me to found SWATH (Summer Workshop on African American Texas History) for K-16 teachers, which convened in various historic locations for five consecutive years and included a multiple-destination trip to Accra, Ghana, West Africa (2018). In short, my affiliation with the East Texas Historical Association has been more fruitful and long-lasting than my affiliation with any other professional historical organization.

What is there about Texas that attracts you?

My family ties keep me in Texas. My paternal relatives have been in the Lone Star State since the mid-nineteenth century. I also love Texas because it is uncommonly spacious and culturally diverse.

What is there about history that attracts you?

Since early childhood, my favorite question has been “why?” Answering “why” always requires historical understanding. The answers we find help us meet the present with clarity and make reasonable projections. I also appreciate the dynamism inherent in historical exploration. Historians are investigators dedicated to understanding the past. The evidence we examine is not as static as it is often presumed to be. Data moves, appears, disappears, or reappears. For this reason, I have grown to value patience and timing in historical production, as ideas must mature, and dust must settle.

How do you usually pursue history: reading books/articles?

I pursue history in a variety of ways, including conversing with others, traveling to historic places, visiting museums, watching documentaries, conducting research, organizing programs, pursuing genealogy, writing articles and books, and teaching classes. I love the study of history because it welcomes my curious, creative nature. Thanks to history, I am free to be me.