

Memorial Minute for Louis Edward Wilson, October 24, 2022, Faculty Meeting
Written by Daniel Horowitz, Mary Huggins Gamble Professor Emeritus in American Studies and
Daphne Lamothe; and read by Daphne Lamothe, Department of Africana Studies, Smith College

Thank you to the colleagues, family members and former students who contributed their perspectives and recollections to this recognition of a distinguished and esteemed colleague.

Louis Edward Wilson died on July 10 2022, at age 83. He moved with his family from Texas to California as part of the Great Migration; he grew up in Los Angeles during the years of Civil Rights activism; was in Ghana during the Independence era; and in South Africa when Nelson Mandela was released from the Robben Island Prison. Louis lived a remarkable life that, combined with his many years as a teacher and scholar, captures the expansive sweep of African and African American history, to which he was deeply devoted. With his passing, we have lost an extraordinarily graceful, talented, and generous colleague, teacher and mentor.

Louis was born in Longview, Texas in 1939, and grew up in South Central Los Angeles. After graduating from California State University-Los Angeles, he went on to graduate school at UCLA where he earned an M.A. in 1973 and Ph.D. in 1980. He began his teaching career elsewhere, and in 1989 left the University of Colorado-Boulder to come to Smith to join what was then called the Dept. of Afro-American Studies. He rose through the ranks to full professor, all while raising two sons as a single father. He taught courses in African American and southern African history for 31 years, until his retirement in 2020.

The range of Louis's scholarly expertise was prodigious, including the histories of Los Angeles, Colonial America, and the African continent. In 1992, he published his book, *The Krobo People in Ghana to 1892: A Political, Social and Economic History*, which examined family networks, oral traditions, and conflicts between Christian and traditional values. One reviewer hailed it as “a definitive social and political history of the Krobo, . . .”

After arriving at Smith, Louis's teaching and research turned increasingly to U.S. history, even as he remained dedicated to African history and the African Studies Program. He was the co-author of a series of K-8 textbooks, mostly in U.S. History, which were published by Houghton Mifflin in 1994. With titles such as *Some People I Know*, *From Sea to Shining Sea*, and *This Is My Country*, they have been widely adopted, especially in California. His publications with Houghton Mifflin continued with *The Americans*, a textbook for grades 9-12 which remains in print and is used in classrooms across the nation.

In recent years, Louis developed a sustained and passionate interest in the history of African Americans in the Revolutionary War and built an extraordinary database that charted their military service in Southern New England. This database earned the appreciation of the Daughters of the American Revolution, with whom he worked on the project, *Forgotten Patriots—African American and Indian Patriots in the Revolutionary War: A Guide to Service, Sources, and Studies*. Louis often delivered compelling lectures on this Patriots Project, exemplifying his dedication to establishing a historical record of the significant roles African Americans and Native Americans played in American History.

With more time, I could regale you with the many opportunities, fellowships and honors that Louis garnered over the course of his forty-year career, like the 1991 Blackwell Fellowship and Prize to an Outstanding Black New England Scholar. For now, I will highlight the support and regard that his later work garnered from the DuBois and Hutchins Centers at Harvard. In 2015 at the Hutchins Center, he served as Co-Director of the Black Patriots Project. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. describes Louis as “a steady presence” and captures what he meant to the people there. “He was our most trusted source of information on Black Union soldiers in New England during the Revolutionary War. But his spirit extended beyond his scholarly gifts, whether he was

hosting dinner for our staff in Oak Bluffs or bringing Smith students to our events in Cambridge. He was a brilliant, kind, and warm person, and he will be missed by the Hutchins Center community and by me.”

In the weeks since his passing, it has become clear that Louis was at the heart of many communities, especially here at Smith. He touched us in a multitude of ways that were visible and invisible. He is remembered fondly for his steadfastness, integrity, generosity of spirit and kindness. During his several terms as chair of the Africana Studies Department, and while directing the African Studies Program from 2012-14, he was a fierce advocate of ideas and projects that enhanced student experiences. He was a longtime, vital member of the Cromwell Day Planning Committee, another example of his commitment to movements toward greater equity and inclusion.

He was “a trusted and influential mentor to many students and junior faculty, especially those of color” helping them “to navigate a predominantly white institution with grace and integrity.” Above all it was with students in and out of the classroom that Louis had a phenomenal impact. Teaching was to him second nature; he combined high professional standards with an erudition and delivery that only seemed casual and effortless.

When they heard of his passing, former students wrote of the impact Louis had on them. Again and again, they described his “truth telling” and “humor;” how he became part of their lives; how he taught with an unusual combination of love, provocation, toughness, and passion. He was, one noted, “there as a guide, protector, and place of refuge even after graduation.”

To the end, Louis shared with friends and families his enthusiasms for among other things, travel, the wonders of rare book auctions, and the unique social history of Blacks on Martha’s Vineyard’s. These exchanges took place in classrooms, our offices and in hallways; as

well as over elegant meals at his and his wife Alona's home in Williamsburg. One couldn't help but admire the walls and shelves filled with astonishing works of Black and West African art: another one of his passions. I've been told, "Louis wanted *Smith* to make a difference, so *he* wanted to make a difference." And indeed, he did in countless ways, leaving an indelible mark on those of us fortunate enough to know him.

We will have an opportunity to honor Louis at a memorial service that will be held on Saturday, Nov. 12 at 2pm in the Helen Hills Chapel. We hope you can join us.

Thank you.