

**The Project in Interpreting the Texas Past
Dr. Martha Norkunas, Project Director**

**African American Texans
Oral History Project**

Interviewee: Audra Sneed

Interviewer: Johanna Hartelius

Date of Interview: February 22, March 3, April 3, 2006

Place: University of Texas, College of Engineering, Austin, Texas

Recording Format: Digital video and micro cassette audio

Questions developed by Erin Murphy, Summer, 2006

Teacher Questions

1) Race and Professional / Working Life: Racism in Her Life

What were some of Ms. Sneed's experiences with racism? How does Ms. Sneed describe White privilege? How does she describe feeling too visible, and in another situation, invisible?

Running Time: 8 min

JH: This is sort of a shift in gear, but do you think that race or racism is an issue on the UT campus?

AS: Definitely. Definitely.

JH: So is that like a yes or no answer?

AS: Yes it is.

JH: How so?

AS: It's evident. I mean, it's hard to talk about the racism because its like, you talk about it so much and nothing changes. So it's kind of like okay it's there but. (pause) I don't know. I just know it's a problem.

JH: The reason I'm continuing to look blank is that not, I think, I suspect that in some groups and circles it's talked about all the time. Like you said, you talk about it all the time and nothing seems to change. I don't hear about it very often at all. And so I was wondering if it's a conversation that some people are having over and over even though nothing is changing and some people are never –

AS: I think –

JH: never have to face it.

AS: I think when you have what, and I'll just be frank with you.

JH: You should.

AS: A lot of people, Caucasian-looking people have what we call White privilege.

JH: Yeah.

AS: And White privilege means that you only talk about things that directly affect you and beyond that it doesn't mean anything. I think for me racism exists because there is a perception attached. When people see my name Audra, they don't know that I'm African American but I guarantee you when I walk through that door, the eyes are like: "Oh! So we're going to have to treat her a little bit differently." Not knowing they don't have to. I know here in this office I'm the only person of color. And I think it was hard for me at first, but I think all my co-workers understand me now and they know that, you know, I'm a good person and I'm open. But there are just some things I'm not going to tolerate.

JH: Yeah.

AS: I don't know, it's there. I always try to tell people you can't, you can't explain it. Its kind of like, I'll never know what it's like to, to have, to be a Caucasian and no one will really understand what it's like to be a person of color. But it's there.

JH: Is it there in the same way for someone who works on UT campus, like a staff member as it is for a student of color? Or is that different?

AS: Yes, but I think it's two different locks. I mean, when I went to A & M I knew it was there. It's uncomfortable when someone hangs out a monkey outside your door with a, with a, you know with a rope around it, you're like: "Excuse me?!" You know what I'm saying? When people are just really insensitive. I think that's what students deal with. Because, a lot of people are not at that age, they, they're not, they don't have any tact. But then as you get older, it becomes more of a sly way of doing things and you just know. Prime example: Dave Chappell. I mean, you know, he does a lot of skits and he was on the Oprah show and he said, "You know, I can tell when someone is laughing with me or laughing at me." And I think that's, that's kind of the way that I would describe racism, so. You can just, you just know. It's kind of like it's been marked since you've been born so it's like a second nature.

JH: Do you grow to recognize it?

AS: Oh yeah. Like I know if I go in Dillards, I know nine times out of ten someone's, a cop is going to be following me.

JH: Really?

AS: Um, hum. I know nine times out of ten I have to carry my receipt in Wal-Mart to let them know I paid for it. It's just different things that you know.

[Fades out and a second segment begins.]

JH: So I really want to understand what your college experience was like. Tell me about the first day.

AS: Oh God! (laughs) The first day I'll never forget. I had on some blue-jean shorts, a Manor Mustangs jersey from one of my boyfriends from high school. My hair was braided. I had on a visor, and I kept the visor low because I didn't, I felt like: "Oh, I'm a goin' this by myself. I'm a have to just, you know, make it by myself." And--

JH: Why do you think you had that attitude Or that feeling?

AS: Because that's how it's always been. When you go into a classroom and you can't, you don't see anyone who looks like you, you know right then you got to do it by yourself.

JH: Do what by yourself?

AS: Succeed. Do your work by yourself. You know, it's just not comfortable. I think being Black you have to do things twice as good and twice as hard all the time.

JH: What does that mean?

AS: That means if, you know, me and you were standing and we're up for a job, if I don't have stuff that exceeds what you have, you'll get the job.

JH: Have you experienced that?

AS: Yeah, I have.

JH: Can you give an example?

AS: Wow. (laughs softly) When have I not? (pause) When, I won't say where I was but, it was me and this other White lady and we were both doing the same thing. We were both overseeing a group of students, equal jobs. We did everything together. We all did everything. And this isn't really an example, but it will let you understand what I'm saying. But, at the end when it was time for the kids to thank me and her, they didn't even thank me. They went to her and

gave her a gift: "Oh you're the greatest and dah dah dah dah." And we were equal. Like I had never done anything. And I don't, it really, it hurt really, you know what I'm saying, because I'm like: "Hold up, we're doing the same thing." And it was like I didn't exist.

JH: How old were those kids?

AS: They were in college.

JH: And what was the, I guess what was the interaction between you and ...?

AS: We trained those students to be orientation advisors for the college.

JH: And it was hurtful?

AS: Yeah it was because you get tired of being invisible.

2) Race and Gender: Single Motherhood

What does Ms. Sneed say her worst experience was in college? How did it impact the rest of her life? What does she say she learned because of it? Looking back on the events of this time, how did her opinion and the way she sees things change?

Running Time: 8 min 28 sec

JH: What was, now that I asked about the best thing, do you remember the worst thing that happened in college, that you would share with me?

AS: The worst thing that happened in college was when I got pregnant. That was probably one of the darkest days of my life. I was devastated.

JH: Do you remember finding out?

AS: Um-hmm. I went to the doctor thinking that I had an iron deficiency and she told me that I was pregnant. And I was like, "That can't be right, not me." And I called the father on the phone and I just, I lost it. And I had lot of thoughts going through my mind. Should I give the child up? Should I terminate my pregnancy? And I called my pastor and he said: "Audra, you need to give life a chance." And when he told me that, I said, "Okay."

JH: How did you feel when he said that?

AS: I was confused. I was hurt. I just didn't want to have to deal. I was like, "I have my whole life planned ahead of me and now I'm going to be a mother." And he said give life a chance and that's what I did. I don't regret it.

JH: Did you go by yourself to the doctor?

AS: Um-hmm. I did everything by myself.

JH: At that time where were you living?

AS: In Austin.

JH: But it was during college?

AS: Yes during college. I mean I went to the doctor and all that in College Station and then I switched over to my doctor. Cause I got pregnant in February, graduated in May, and then came home.

JH: Did you tell your friends, your A&M college friends, when you found out?

AS: I told Tanya, my friend at the time and maybe a couple of other people. But I didn't have to tell. Because when she was born she didn't look like me, she looks like him. And when people would see me, they'd just be like, "That's not who I think it is." I said, "It is."

JH: Did, how did he react when you told him about the pregnancy or that you were keeping it?

AS: He was supportive. He was supportive. I mean, he didn't, he told me, "I don't agree with termination but if you want to do it, I'm not going to, you know." But he didn't condone it per say.

JH: So then she came out and she was the spiting image of him?

AS: Mmm, hmmm. Yeah and, it was, it was devastating. It was hard. I think one thing that I've learned is that people need to understand that their actions can really, really impact another human being. And you know, I don't think he understood and I don't think he will ever, *ever* know what I've had to go through.

JH: Specifically in terms of the pregnancy?

AS: The mental, the physical, the emotional things that you go through. I think it's quite sad that another person can leave their flesh and blood just out there. And be able to walk away. See, a woman can't walk away because the baby's inside you. But a man, he can walk. It's hard and I think people, all Americans, should think about where they plant their seed.

JH: Is that how you feel, is that what you feel like he did, walked away?

AS: Yeah, I do. But I'm glad he walked away. At the time I wasn't glad, because I couldn't understand. I didn't, all I felt was anger and bitterness. But now that my daughter is six and you know, he's doing his thing and I'm doing my thing, I'm grateful for it. The best revenge is to live well.

JH: Did you feel like you needed to get back at him?

AS: Mmm, mmm [no]. There were times when I wanted to kill him. I mean like, literally be like: "Well, Adonna, looks like I'm going to be in jail and your father will be six feet under, cause I'm going to kill him." But I think that was more of anger. When you carry a seed inside you and that seed grows and that seed becomes a human being, and the person who helped you make it doesn't want anything to do with you or that seed, that is a very hurtful feeling. And this, basically it boils down to, how can you love a creation but not the creator? How can you do that?

JH: That's a good question. Does it still feel as hurtful or does it seem like it got, it's gotten easier?

AS: It's definitely gotten easier. I think I will always be hurt. Because not only, me, I'm an adult, I can handle it, but I have a child who doesn't have a full-time father in her life and it's not her fault.

JH: Do you and she talk about that?

AS: No. With my daughter I feel like whatever decision that she makes about her father it will be her decision. It won't be mine. So, my job is to encourage her. Whenever he wants to see her he can see her. When he calls, he gets to talk to her. And she'll have to make that determination, not me. So, it's, you know it's funny. I mean, it's not funny, but it's, life is a beautiful thing. I wouldn't be the person that I am today had I not gone through it. And it hurt like hell to have to go through though. And I wouldn't want anyone to go through the pain and anguish and the after-effect. Because it was like, when he decided that we weren't, when we decided we weren't going to work it out, it was like I went through this spiral of out of controlness and I couldn't get my life back together. And that was that was a very hard thing.

JH: What happened during that spiral?

AS: Man, let's see. What did I want to do? I wanted to kill myself. I wanted to put my daughter on a doorstep and (to the camera)--Adonna, I love you,

feelings--I've wanted to drop her off and not deal. I used to drink a lot to kind of numb that pain. Thank God I didn't become an alcoholic, I just you know. There were some other traumatic things that happened to me.

JH: What's your daughter's name?

AS: Adonna

JH: Adonna?

AS: It means first daughter.

3) Race, Racism, and Race Relations: How People See Her

How does Ms. Sneed explain how Black people see her versus how White people see her? Ms. Sneed sometimes feels like she has to speak two kinds of languages. What impact does this have on her in college?

Running Time: 4 min 21 sec

JH: Can you say a little bit more about that? I don't, I'm from Sweden, I was born and raised in Sweden and came to the States for college. So, Austin is kind of a new town for me too and I don't know necessarily the different reputations of different schools.

AS: Ok, well, we have a lot of schools that are in east, east of everything. Like the majority of African American and Hispanic schools are like Johnston, LBJ High School, Reagan. More of the, I guess White schools are Anderson, McNeil, Westlake, and Austin High. I remember growing up Westlake hated, Westlake hated Reagan and Reagan hated Westlake. It was like Black versus White, and it was just a big 'ol, you know, it was ugly. But, I say that because my mom felt like she had to move me to a predominantly White school for me to get better schooling and just to make my life better. And so I guess in a sense that was smart because from there I went to Texas A & M, which is another predominantly White school and I've done well. I went ahead and got my master's. So you know, I kind of understand but you kind of feel like you're stuck in the middle. Because, if you look at me, I'm Black but when Black people look at me sometimes they think that I'm White. And then I know that I'm not White, but White people know that I'm Black, and so.

JH: When Black people look at you and say you're White what is that, what do they base that on?

AS: They base that on my education and how I talk, where I live, how I dress, the places that I've been. Only White people go out of the state of Texas. Only White people go to Europe and stuff like that. Only White people have a degree and stuff like that. It was hard because I've always been smart but sometimes you're

afraid to actually be smart. Like when I went away to college, when I would come home a lot of my friends would be like, "Oh, you think you're White now, 'cause you go to Texas A & M!" And I'm like, "But I'm not." And I always felt like I had to talk two languages. I had to learn to talk street when I was around them and then of course when I went to school I was okay, because to them I was just a student trying to get my degree. So, I've always kind of felt like, okay, I have my hands, both of my hands stuck in two worlds, a world of privilege and then a world of maybe, I wouldn't say poverty/inner-city, but more cultural as far as like my community. Being African American you toy with those things, because in my heart, I'm Black. But it's hard when you try to succeed, other Blacks perceive you to be a traitor or, "You think you're better than me," and that's not what it's about. It's about trying to have a better life for yourself.

JH: Does that feel hurtful?

AS: Oh yeah, it's hurtful. I mean, because that's not my intent. My intent has always been, you know, my household my mom was like, "You're going to college. You're going to do two things: you're going to go to college or you're going to work and we're not going to be sitting around doing nothing." My mom was the type she would drive us around Austin and say, "When you do drugs, you're going to look like that." So a lot of things are put into that. So, yeah of course it's hurtful because when I get up in the morning, I'm Black and I'm proud of that

but it's hurtful when your own community kind of makes you feel bad for the success that you've had.

4) Education – Race and Inequality: School Experiences

What were two experiences that stood out to Ms. Sneed while she attended Texas A&M University in the 1990s? How were these experiences different from what other students might have gone through while attending college? How does Ms. Sneed understand these experiences as an African American and as a woman?

Running Time: 6 min 19 sec

JH: You were at A&M for four years.

AS: Five.

JH: Five. What was the best thing that you can remember happening to you while you were there?

AS: Whoa. Golly. One of the best things that happened to me was when I got a 3.2 [GPA]. I worked really hard for that.

JH: Do you remember that semester?

AS: Yeah, it was when I had this awesome English teacher. God, she was so awesome.

JH: Tell me about her.

AS: Actually, she works, I think she still works here. I forgot her name, it started with an 'M'. And, I learned so much intellectually from her. We read the story *Beloved* by Toni Morrison and that book really messed me up.

JH: How so?

AS: It messed me up because when you read certain things you know in your mind what's going on but you try to block it out like it's really not going on.

JH: Tell me more about that. Because I think I can relate, I mean, about that kind of experience with a book.

AS: It was a point where it was talking about how this slave master had a man on his knees and making him do certain things. In my mind I knew what was happening to him and I didn't want to accept it. And it was hurtful to know what some of my ancestors went through in slavery. So, it was hurtful.

JH: How did the teacher, the professor deal with bringing up or talking about things like that?

AS: I think she kind of forced you to face your fear. I mean it's no secret that slavery was really a bad thing. And when you dig deeper and know what some of the slaves actually went through you really don't want to hear because it's too painful but you know you have to hear it in order to make peace with it. And so she kind of forced me to do that.

JH: How did the other students in the class feel about it?

AS: I think they were sympathetic but not empathetic.

JH: What do you mean? What's that difference, what's the difference?

AS: Sympathy is, "Oh yeah, I'm sorry." Empathetic is really understanding, to be in that person's position.

JH: Did you take any more classes with that professor?

AS: No, but I remained close to her. She was a good teacher.

JH: So what else happened that semester? That was the famous 3.2 semester?

AS: Yeah, I took a lot of trips during that semester also. I took a trip to a prison and that changed my life. Did you know that 41 percent of the 11.5 percent African Americans in this state are incarcerated?

JH: I didn't.

AS: It's devastating. And it was weird because we went to the prison in Navasota. It was a minimum security, of course, and I was the only one who needed an escort. I had to have two security guards with me at all times.

JH: Who went to the prison?

AS: A class, my sociology class. I was the only Black in the class and I had to have two security guards with me at all times.

JH: Why?

AS: Because 41 percent of the 11.5 percent of African Americans in this state are in prison.

JH: So walking around with the class it was you and the class and two security guards that were watching you?

AS: Mmm, hmmm. Because the majority, probably 85 percent of that jail was African American men who probably hadn't seen a woman in a long time.

JH: And they, and the idea was they would have responded to you differently because you were a Black woman?

AS: Mmm, hmmm.

JH: But they didn't think this would happen with the White women in the class?

AS: No. It was, and one of my friends still talks about it. We walked on the basketball court and it stopped. It was complete silence as I walked by. I was like, "Oh my God!"

JH: How did you feel?

AS: I felt embarrassed. Well, I felt scared. I don't want to say embarrassed. I felt hurt. And I went home and I called my mom and I said, "Now I understand where all the Black men are. They're in prison."

JH: Why did you feel hurt?

AS: Because that's part of me, that's part of the Black family. I mean there are so many Black women who don't have a man there, you know. So, that's hurtful to our community and our family and our reproduction of a species.

JH: How did the, how did the rest of the class and the professor react to all that?

AS: You know, they were kind of like, "Are you ok? I know you kind of felt singled out." And I'm like: "Well, this is just the life that I've been blessed with." But I was okay. I mean some of them were yelling out different stuff, but I understood.

5) Race and Gender: Travel, Daughter

How did Ms. Sneed's experiences in school and becoming a single mother affect the way she raises her child? Ms. Sneed has traveled and is also a study abroad advisor in the College of Engineering. Because of this experience what advice does she want to pass on to her daughter?

Running Time: 6 min

JH: I imagine that the shift from A & M to Saint Ed's must have been pretty noticeable?

AS: Yes. A & M [was] a lot of people, Saint Edward's was very private, very close-knit and I liked it.

JH: Yeah? I went to a liberal arts college in Minnesota for college called Macalester College and it was 1700 students.

AS: Mmm-hmmm.

JH: And I had the same shock in coming to UT.

AS: (laughs) Yeah, it's a big shock.

JH: It's just such a big difference.

AS: Right, it is very different. A & M was really big and I think I kind of got lost at times. I don't think I applied myself like I could have. I think I've always kind of been bound by this fear that I wasn't good enough or I couldn't do it and at age thirty I'm starting to realize that that's false and that I can do it. I got pregnant the last semester of my senior year at A & M and I thought my world was going to come to an end. And for the first time in my life I had to, I guess, go back into poverty, let's say. And it was hard because I was like, "Okay I have a degree in business, but I'm on welfare." And that was a really hard transition.

And I'm just glad that I was able to, I kind of got in my mind, I was like, "Okay well I'm going to do what I can" and I always told myself that I was going to get a master's and maybe a Ph.D. because I always wanted to be able to take care of my daughter. Just in case I didn't get married.

JH: So what happened after you got pregnant?

AS: Oh man! After I got pregnant, that was, I say it's the gift and the curse. I don't regret having my daughter. She's a ball of fire. She's great, smart, [and] beautiful. But I had to really dig deep. And I don't think I've ever had to dig that deep. I had to kind of rebuild my life. I remember standing in line for WIC, for food stamps feeling embarrassed but also glad that it was in place at the time to be able to survive. I had gotten a job out of college. But I was working for Wal-Mart and I was a manager, but I knew that being a single mom I wasn't able to work fourteen, fifteen hours with daycare and all those things. So when my daughter was born I was off work for eight weeks and I searched for a job and I got a job on campus at UT.

JH: How did you, have you been working on campus at UT since then?

AS: Since 2000. My daughter was born in October of '99, I got a job at UT January 2000.

JH: Okay. And is she in school now?

AS: Yes, she's in kindergarten. And she's a ball of fire. She's smart. I'm very hands-on. I feel like no one's going to take care of my daughter like I am. And so, I'm really concerned about her social upbringing, her mental, just everything. When she was going to make the transition to kindergarten there's a school by UT called Lee Elementary and I heard great thing about it because most of the professors use it. So I went to orientation and I didn't see one person of color on staff. And I said: "I won't be sending my daughter here." I need my daughter to be able to deal with any type of person and that means anybody, Asian, Hispanic, I don't care. Someone from another country. She needs that global, that global foundation. So she's in Pflugerville [laughs].

JH: It sounds like traveling has been a really important thing to you in your life. Can you say a little bit about that, travels you've done?

AS: Oh man, traveling is so wonderful because one, it let's you know how blessed you are. I think a lot of people perceive Americans as arrogant but I just think we're just a blessed country. To be able to do the things that we want to do. To be able to say the things that we want to do. I think someone said it best it's like, to be an ancestor of a slave and to have a master's degree, I mean, that's

amazing. And so when I go, like when I went to Europe, I loved Europe! I though it was so beautiful. I thought the people were wonderful. But I was so proud to have my heritage of our culture. I think traveling just kind of lets you know that it's a big world out there. It just kind of embraces you and makes you more marketable, makes you more adaptable. Every time my daughter sees a plane, she's like, "Mommy, are we going to Europe?" (both laugh) I'm like, "No, we're not going to Europe. We're going other places." And I know that it's made a difference in her life. She is so well-rounded and me being a single mom it's just so imperative that she have a certain type of foundation.

JH: Yeah.

AS: I love traveling.