UL hosts lecture on enslavement of African-American women in Louisiana

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The University of Louisiana at Lafayette hosted a one-time lecture on the enslavement of African-American women in Louisiana last Thursday, March 14, in H.L. Griffin Hall.

Assistant professor of history and women's studies at the University of Michigan, LaKisha Simmons, Ph.D., used images from various works of art such as film, photography and poetry to illustrate what it was like to be an enslaved woman in Louisiana.

Tranquilla Roberson, a senior history major at UL Lafayette, said she was glad that to hear that slavery in Louisiana was finally being talked about.

"In history textbooks, you don’t really learn about Louisiana history in regards to enslavement," Roberson said. "You learn about Virginia and you learn about the cotton and the indigo but no one really says anything about sugar more than that it grows in Louisiana. They don’t say why or how. It didn’t just sprout."

Simmons frequently referenced Beyoncé’s "Lemonade," a visual album that uses poetry and symbolic imagery to describe the horrors of slavery in the American South from a woman's perspective. It was filmed on real Louisiana plantations.

"I was surprised to learn that the plantations played such a significant role in 'Lemonade,'" Morgan Gardiner, a
senior sociology major at UL Lafayette, said. "I knew there were plantations in there but I never knew they were such a central focus."

Simmons also showcased various photographs and explained their connection to slavery. These included "A Single Waltz in Time" by Carrie Mae Weems, which depicts an African-American woman in a ghastly white dress standing alone in what appears to be a plantation. Simmons said she believes this represents the ghost of slavery that never leaves.

Simmons also spoke about Harold Baquet’s photo "Cabin in the Sky," which takes a hard, unflinching look at a slave cabin. She explained that this photo calls into question what is needed to call a living space a home.

Simmons said she hoped her lecture would help people recognize how history is connected to the land that it took place on as well as give the audience and other historians a better understanding of what life was like for a typical woman during slavery. She said she believed many people have a warped perception of how enslaved people in Louisiana actually lived.

"I do think there is something really powerful about understanding the humanity of the enslaved," Simmons said. "When we go back to the slave past we want to find heroes and people who fought back ... but we need to know that humanity was there in the people who fought back, the people who just barely survived, the people who didn’t and those who chose not to."

Simmons wrote a book called "Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans." She said she would often walk down the streets of New Orleans and try to imagine what it was like to be an African-American woman during segregation based on old maps and other historical facts. She calls this disciplined imagination in her book.

"I think history actually requires a lot of imagination," she said. "I really try to work with primary sources but I also try to imagine the possible because the sources are never going to tell the full story."