

SANCOCHO

Newsletter of the
Center for African and African American Research
at Duke University

LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

SPRING 2014

PEOPLE

CENTER FOR AFRICAN AND AFRICAN AMERICAN RESEARCH

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Online Museum Exhibition

Brian Smithson
Christina Lan



J. Lorand Matory

This spring, *Sancocho* celebrates the first five years of the Center for African and African American Research—five years of interdisciplinary research, dialogue and public education about Black ingenuity and creativity across cultures and linguistic groups. We are historians, art historians and artists, anthropologists, literary critics and political scientists. We are specialists in music, dance and education. We are faculty, students, administrators and visiting scholars united in a project to transform each other and the world with the best of ideas and the best of social interventions.

Among our tools have been monthly lecture series on topics such as

- Breaking Boundaries : Re-Narrating the Black Atlantic
- Race (Theory) and the Disciplines
- Black Gods and Kings: Priests and Practices of the Afro-Atlantic Religions
- Africa: Crisis, Caring and Resurgence
- Race, Culture and Education *See p.2*

We have showcased an international array of scholars and artists, such as

- Edwidge Danticat, National Book Critics Circle Award-winning author of *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994)
- Lee Daniels, Academy Award-winning director of “Precious” (2009)
- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, MacArthur Award- and National Book Critics Circle Award-winning author of *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006)

Our annual scholarly conferences have included

- “Can We Talk?”: Bridges between the Humanities and the Social Sciences
- Youthful Futures (about the causes and social consequences of the “youth bulge” in African demographics)
- Human Traffic: Past and Present (regarding the comparative lessons of the Atlantic slave trade and contemporary human trafficking)
- Global Affirmative Action in a Neoliberal Age (a comparative examination of affirmative action and its counterparts around the world)
- Lucumí Music: Singing, Dancing and Drumming Black Divinity (about Afro-Cuban sacred music) *See p.8*

We have made three films highlighting the key conclusions and visually illustrating the themes of these conferences:

- “Can We Talk? Bridges between the Social Sciences and the Humanities”
- “Human Traffic: Past and Present”
- “Global Affirmative Action in a Neoliberal Age”

And a fourth film, “Lucumí Music,” is in production.

If these had been CAAAR’s lone accomplishments, we would have much to be proud of. But there is even more to celebrate.

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RACE, CULTURE AND EDUCATION: Fall 2013 Lecture Series

The Center for African and African American Research presented a fascinating lecture series last fall by four scholars: Amanda Walker Johnson, Carl James, Sera Shani and Kamela Heyward-Rotimi. Each addressed multiple tensions in the current anthropology of education.



Amanda Johnson

Amanda Johnson's lecture, "Measuring Silences: Race, Testing and the Corporatization of Public Education," examined her year-long field study of what she describes as the "politics of schooling" and high-stakes testing" in Texas public schools. She focuses on the language of the debates in and beyond the Texas state legislature over the Multiple Compensatory Criteria Bill.

She argues that the heart of standardized testing is a marketization model that uses the discourse of statistics to naturalize racism and other forms of inequality. This discourse attributes the success of the privileged to their individual qualities and blames poor children, children of color and their schools for the circumstances of their deprivation. Indeed, she argues, statistical discourse silences its victims, while justifying the profits of capitalist enterprises like the \$87 million dollar Pearson education national assessment service. Though measurement suggests objectivity, the factors chosen for measurement distract us from the actual sources of the problem and, therefore, from the most direct solutions.

Johnson's research engages a tension in the field over whether education is essentially a form of liberation or of domination. She is inspired by Harvard Law professor Lani Guiner's comparison of modern-day standardized testing to the taxes of the Jim Crow era: their apparent neutrality conceals their intent to exclude particular segments of the citizenry from opportunity. Southern states in particular tend to use testing and its statistical discourse to maintain a de facto system of segregation. On the other hand, Johnson used critical race and feminist theories to

illustrate the skillful ways in which Black and Latino children and mothers create a counter-narrative, presenting their experiences of discrimination and unequal access as fundamental problems unaddressed and unresolved by high-stakes testing.

Three of our guest lecturers studied contexts of autobiographical significance. Johnson, an African-American scholar, revisited the public school system that she had attended as a child, while Carl James, a celebrated Canadian scholar who studies youth in the Caribbean, Sweden and Canada, focused on Jane and Finch community in Toronto, Canada, where he had once lived.



Carl James

Thirty years ago, James worked as a youth worker there and in a number of Toronto's marginalized communities.

In Toronto, the intersection of Jane Street and Finch Street is the center of an ethnically and racially diverse public housing community. It hosts 20,790 families, approximately one-quarter of which are female-headed. It is a stigmatized community, stereotyped by the Canadian mass media as a hotbed of violence. News reports only obliquely refer to race, but the black boys in the neighborhood are typically branded with terms like "immigrant," "fatherless," "troublemaker," "athlete" and "underachiever." Seen through the lens of a white-dominated news industry and school administrations, these black boys are a population in need of taming, typically through the intervention of sports coaches.

The neighborhood's reputation becomes a structure of opportunity and constraint for its residents. In "The Way Out: U.S. Athletic Scholarships as a Route to Educational and Social Success for African Canadian Youth," James shows how many of these young black men themselves thus come to view sports as a way of *making it*. Many imagine that winning a basketball scholarship at a US university, such as Duke, will one day enable them to play in the National Basketball Association (NBA) and come home wealthy.

Yet the truth is that only one player in 6,864,000 is drafted to play in the NBA.

Sports can be a route to healthy self-esteem and an incentive for alienated students' re-engagement with school, but, in this setting, basketball can distract students from more realistic goals.

James' study illustrates the role not only of the media and the schools but of families in shaping student aspirations, highlighting how some parents, especially first-generation immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean, reject the sports option and employ reassignment to other school districts in order to facilitate other options for their children. In this and many other ways, young people in Jane and Finch draw on what Tara Yosso calls their "community cultural wealth" as they pursue educational and social success.



Serah Shani

Kenyan-American scholar Sera Shani studies the impact of globalization, migration, transnationalism and economic development on immigrant populations. Immigrants from Asia, Latin America, West Indies and Africa are fast-growing segments of the US population.

Yet research on immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa is scarce, and school ethnographies tend to lump all black students together.

Shani's presentation, titled "African Immigrant Parents, Transnational Lives and Schooling in the United States: The Case of Ghanaians in New York City," described the social backdrop of high academic achievement among of Ghanaian immigrant children in the New York City public schools. Ghanaians in New York City participate in what Shani describes as a "network village," where Ghanaian immigrants of multiple class backgrounds organize themselves and take advantage of the option of sending miscreant children back for disciplining and re-immersion in what they call "Ghanaian values."

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“Peter Lange Wins CAAAR Distinguished Service Award”



Seated: Lori Leachman and Provost Peter Lange

In honor of his 16 years of distinction as the Provost of Duke University and for his unflagging support of excellence in research and teaching about Africa and the African diaspora, Peter Lange received the 2013 CAAAR Distinguished Service Award. On 7 December 2014, the Center for African and African American Research hosted him and his wife Lori Leachman at an honorary banquet, prepared at the Director’s house by legendary local chef Giorgios Bakatsias.

During his exceptionally long tenure (compared to provosts of other universities), Lange promoted the idea that Duke should reach beyond its walls, through such programs as the Duke Office of Durham and Regional Affairs, the Duke-Durham Neighborhood Initiative, DukeEngage, the Global Health Initiative, the Duke Medical School campus in Singapore, the Duke Kunshan Campus, the Africa Initiative and the Center for African and African American Research, of which his office has been a major sponsor. Lange has been particularly supportive of the Center’s John Hope Franklin Young Scholars Program, which each year exposes 30 high-potential Durham Public middle-school students to hands-on archival and practical research about African and African-diaspora history, nourishing their sense of belonging in school and their commitment to scholarship.

The outgoing Provost has also presided over the enormous growth of the University’s infrastructure and its faculty. His robust support of the arts as essential to education is evident in the high profiles of the Nasher Museum of Art and the Center for Documentary Studies. Lange is nationally famous for his support of interdisciplinarity, the latest result of which is the Bass Connections Program. The success of interdisciplinarity at Duke owes a great deal to Lange’s administrative style, deep knowledge of the faculty, and receptivity to new initiatives.

Perhaps the most moving testimony of the evening was written by Marcus Benning, President of the Black Student Alliance:

“Over the past 15 years, Provost Lange has led the effort to diversify Duke’s faculty by soliciting the advice of *students*, university offices and centers, and other faculty members, and, most important, by consulting Duke’s previous attempts as learning experiences for future approaches. The Black Student Alliance applauds Provost Lange’s efforts and accomplishments... and his myriad successes during his terms as Provost. His straightforward, strategic, visionary leadership is forever valued, reflected in our successes and inscribed in the annals of Duke history.”



David Stein (center) with other guests



Chef Bakatsias gives the personal history behind the menu



J. Lorand Matory and Provost Peter Lange



Michaeline Crichlow, Executive Editor

NEWSLETTER AND WEBSITE

Please visit our website at <http://caaar.duke.edu/about>



Bernice Patterson, Managing Editor

Sharing John Hope with Young Teens

by David Stein



To commemorate the upcoming 100th anniversary of the birth of Dr. John Hope Franklin, the Young Scholars decided to write a book about him targeted at young adults. They began their work in a summer 2013 immersion week focused on getting to know the late historian better.

John Gartrell, the John Hope Franklin Research Center Director, and his staff assembled cartons of source material from the Rubinstein document collection. The Young Scholars were amazed to see how sought-after John Hope was for speaking engagements and learned that he had received three times more honorary degrees than anyone on the planet, even more than the Dalai Lama. They saw correspondence with publishers including a royalty statement that reinforced their desire to write a very well reviewed book of their own! But mostly they discovered how much people liked John Hope and how kind and thoughtful he was with everyone! People would stop the Young Scholars wherever they were to tell them stories of having met him once, or how much they admired him, or the impact one of his books had on them.

The Young Scholars were also given behind-the-scenes tours of the NC State Archives in Raleigh and a personal tour of St. Augustine's University, where Franklin once taught, by the head of the university library.

The Young Scholars also spent the week examining Franklin's quiet side. They toured the orchid greenhouses in Morrisville where he would sometimes shop, and the staff there introduced them to the diverse varieties of orchids and their intricacies. Each of the Scholars received an orchid of his or her own. On the return trip, we stopped at John Hope's home and saw his greenhouse.

Since fly-fishing was of his passions, several knowledgeable volunteers from the community came out to teach the Young Scholars. Part of Duke University's West Campus Quad became their "stream."

The required reading that summer was "Claudette Colvin: Twice Towards Justice," which was to become the model for the Young Scholars book about John Hope. Phillip Hoose, the National Book Award-winning author, flew down from Portland, Maine to talk about the development of the book and to critique their book outline.

Working with 30 very bright middle school students means that very little is predictable. Partway through the process, the Scholars argued that if we really wanted to reach a larger number of young people and to keep the legacy of John Hope alive, we should create a hybrid book. They wanted to interweave a fictional account of a 14-year-old African American boy who gets in trouble (before getting guidance from John Hope) together with portions of his autobiography. The Scholars shared successful examples of this and further suggested the autobiography portion should be in graphic form, similar to the one published by Congressman John Lewis.

The Young Scholars reviewed similarly hybrid books, including one by Congressman John Lewis, and decided to present the story in the form of a graphic novel.

The Scholars began outlining the book at their first writing retreat. Local authors joined them during the weekend at Stone House in Mebane, NC. Even in the fictional account, the Scholars were able to incorporate much local history. For instance, the main character, Kendrick, attends Pauli Murray School, and his father is a vice president at the historic North Carolina Mutual Insurance Company. At the story's turning point, Kendrick engages in civil disobedience in Wilmington, NC, to convince the State Department of Public Instruction to include the 1898 coup (the central theme of the 2012-2013 session of the John Hope Franklin Young Scholars Program) in the study of NC history.

The Scholars finished the first draft in May and received a detailed critique by editor and award-winning author Sharon Ewell Foster ("The Resurrection of Nat Turner" and other works).

A subgroup of the Young Scholars is revising the book this summer and fall. It will be published in January as part of the John Hope Franklin Centennial celebrations.

During the 2014-2015 session, the Scholars are turning their attention back 150 years to study life on the home front of North Carolina during the Civil War, particularly in the African-American and Native American populations. If you are interested in finding out more about the Young Scholars' research on this theme, or would be willing to talk with them about your related research, please contact David Stein at dstein@duke.edu.

Visiting Scholar Felix Asiedu on Mudimbe and the “African Enlightenment”

By Kamela Heyward-Rotimi



Felix Asiedu

On 26 March 2014, CAAAR Visiting Scholar Felix Asiedu delivered the last lecture of our 2014 series. “Tales of Faith and the Paroxysms of Conversion: V.Y. Mudimbe and the Idea of an African Enlightenment” outlined Asiedu’s new book project on the troubling role of conversion in modern African development and identity-formation, elaborating on a central theme of Mudimbe’s philosophical oeuvre.

The Newman Ivey White Professor of Literature at Duke University, Mudimbe is a world-famous critic of the discourses through which Europe has described Africans and justified the exploitation of Africa. He is less often cited for his analysis of how African self-identities have been shaped by these discourses and by the act of conversion to missionary religions, which has typically been the price of admission to Western-style education in Africa. Mudimbe regards conversion as an act of violence that seeks, forcibly, to divert people from an allegedly primitive past toward an enlightened future. Mudimbe intimates, however, that Africa’s future development will depend on an African Enlightenment, comparable to the 17th- and 18th-century Enlightenment that made Europe what it is today. An African Enlightenment would recover a knowledge base of African discourses highlighting a black humanity free of the Eurocentric, or what Mudimbe calls the “Europocentric,” othering of Africa. Asiedu proceeds by asking whether conversion has not directly inhibited the pursuit of an African Enlightenment.

According to Asiedu, Europeans regarded the Christianity that they took to Africa as “enlightened goods” for the improvement of African identities and social relations. Colonial religion and education were purported to provide a moral foundation for the African colonial subject. A philosopher trained originally to be a Benedictine monk in the Belgian Congo, Mudimbe judges the real character of conversion from personal experience. Asiedu asks the question that follows from Mudimbe’s conclusion: does an African Enlightenment depend on the rejection of the missionaries’ religion?

Asiedu aims to highlight Mudimbe’s thoughts on the impact of colonial cultural, political and economic practices on African identities, going beyond the tendency of most other scholars to focus on Mudimbe’s critique of Western discourses about Africa. According to Asiedu, the dialectical element of Mudimbe’s philosophy must no longer be overlooked: European discourses shape African identities, as well, and an African Enlightenment must recognize and take its distance from these discourses before Africans can recognize themselves humanistically.

Race, Culture and Education (continued from p.2)

They expect their children to respect and listen to their elders and these values are underscored in the religious training found in both mosques and churches. Thus, the “network village” helps to generate respect for teachers and avert the behavioral problems caused by drugs and gangs, the pressure to buy designer clothes, and the practice of calling 911 to report parents who apply corporal punishment. Such networks thus enable these parents and children to take fuller advantage of the school’s elaborate facilities, free education, and gender-equalized opportunities that are less available in Ghana.

Shani’s research references the cultural ecological theory of John Ogbu and others who highlight the attitude differences between voluntary and involuntary minority students. He argues that, whereas descendants of locally enslaved or colonized minorities often see schools and other majority-dominated institutions as instruments of oppression, voluntary immigrants and their children tend to view education in the host country as a step up from what they had in the sending countries. The Canadian example does not support Ogbu’s theory. The stigmatized Caribbean second- and third-generation came from voluntary immigrant families, which Ogbu expected to generate more positive attitudes toward schooling. Yet Shani called attention to the transnational networks that not only tend to shield Ghanaian immigrant students from the oppositional attitudes of their involuntary-immigrant and locally colonized peers but also might be said to generate values and social strategies irreducible to Ghanaian culture per se.

Kamela Heyward-Rotimi delivered the final lecture: “*The Colonial Heritage of Nigerian Higher Education.*” Her auto-ethnographic approach highlighted the unexpected roles in which her Nigerian interlocutors cast her. As an African-American anthropologist researching the digital divide and attempting to forge egalitarian collaborations with colleagues at Obafeми Awolowo University (OAU) in Nigeria, she was not automatically understood as a fellow “black sister” but, more often, as a foreign wife to a Nigerian, as a privileged “white” woman, as “every other American researcher” and so forth.



Kamela Heyward-Rotimi

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Letter from the Director (continued from p.1)

Perhaps our proudest accomplishment is the resurrection and the resounding success of the John Hope Franklin Young Scholars Program. This academic enrichment program teaches middle-schoolers to research, write and disseminate the knowledge of history like university scholars (*see p.4*). The JHFYSP has won major support from the National Endowment for the Humanities. The annual themes of the Program have included

- The Stagville Plantation of North Carolina: the Plantation in International Perspective
- The Great Migration (on the urbanization of Black America in the early 20th century)
- The Wilmington Riots of 1898
- Freedom Crafters (concerning 19th-century African Americans who secured their freedom through the practice of their skilled crafts)
- The Life and Work of John Hope Franklin
- The Home Front: African-American and Native American Domestic Life during the Civil War *See p.4*

Two of our CAAAR Distinguished Visiting Scholars completed major books during their stints at the Center:

- Karen E. Fields, with Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: the Soul of Inequality in American Life* (New York and London: Verso, 2012)
- Adedoyin Soyibò, *Images: Prologue to Africa's Development and Economic Renaissance* (Ibadan, Nigeria: University Press Plc., forthcoming in 2014).

This legacy continues in the work of CAAAR's current Visiting Scholars, Felix Asiedu and CAAAR Post-Doctoral Fellow Kamela Heyward-Rotimi. (*see p.7 and p.9*)

In all that we do, we resist the urge to reduce Black life to an artifact of oppression and discrimination. Instead, we highlight, document and analyze the trans-historical and multi-cultural creativity of Africa and her descendants. Among the capstones of this project have been our museum exhibitions:

- "Interwoven Histories: Luxury Cloths of Atlantic Africa" (in collaboration with the Lilly Library)
- "Icons and Industry: New Yoruba-Atlantic Art" (an online exhibition under construction about innovation in the sacred arts of West African Yoruba religion, Kongo religion, Brazilian Candomblé, Cuban Santería and Haitian Vodou)

CAAAR's success over these five years is indebted to the genius and the effort of our Associate Directors Michaeline Crichlow and Charlie Piot, as well as our Administrator Bernice Patterson. It would have been impossible without the generosity of the Office of the Provost and the Office of the Dean, but we have also benefited immeasurably from the efforts of the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Humboldt Foundation of the Federal Republic of Germany, and the University of Malaya, which have all lent major financial and intellectual support for our undertakings.

Our other Duke University collaborators and co-sponsors have included the Departments of African and African American Studies, Cultural Anthropology, History, Sociology, Romance Studies, Theater Studies and English, as well as the Programs in Dance, Literature, Latino/a Studies in the Global South, the Art of the Moving Image, Women's Studies and Liberal Studies, the Africa Initiative, the Centers for European Studies and Latin American and Caribbean Studies, the Duke University Libraries, DukeEngage, the Center for Reconciliation at the Divinity School, the Concilium on Southern Africa, the Office of the Vice Provost for International Affairs, the Global Health Institute, the Africa Initiative, the Office of Institutional Equity, the Mary Lou Williams Center, the Sanford School of Public Policy, the Kenan Institute for Ethics, the Human Rights Center, the John Hope Franklin Research Center for African and African American History, Duke Islamic Studies, and the Research Network in Racial and Ethnic Inequality.

One of our most stalwart supporters, Peter Lange, retired as Provost this year. CAAAR was proud to celebrate his many successes with a dinner party last fall (*see p.3*).

CAAAR's first five years has been, in the spirit of *Sancocho*, a tasty and ever-surprising stew of scholarship, art, religion, politics and creative intervention in society. We build on this legacy in our future plans, which include

- A conference of scholars, filmmakers and priests on zombies in popular culture, as well as a film based upon this conference.
- We have also invited National Security Advisor Dr. Susan Rice to lecture at Duke.
- Lecture series or one-time public conversation among three outstanding female university presidents

Stay tuned! On behalf of the Center for African and African American Research, I thank you all for your support!

-J. Lorand Matory
Director



Handwoven kente cloth on display at the "Interwoven Histories" exhibition

Race, Culture and Education (continued from p.5)

Nigeria is a complex society with a growing middle class and the highest number of mobile telephone subscribers—approximately 120 million—in all of Africa. Internet usage in Nigeria is also the highest on the African continent, and, there, some schools provide digital tablets for students.

In her conversations with them, OAU students raised questions about the Internet, Facebook and race, but Heyward-Rotimi discovered a paradox. She found her discipline represented in the University by an out-of-date and, indeed, colonial canon, and her own study of media technology and internet fraud was more welcome in the Theatre Department than in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology. And, while she aimed to bring a newer anthropology and a respect for indigenous African knowledge to the collaborative design of an anthropology curriculum, older colleagues had a stake in defending the canon that they had mastered, and younger colleagues feared that she would not remain long enough to support the changes that they, too, advocated.

Trusting relationships between the American and Nigerian anthropologists were not as easy to forge as she had expected.

Each of the four critical ethnographers in the lecture series addressed the core tension in anthropology between science and advocacy. The anthropology of education must be grounded in empirical documentation. However, as advocacy, the best of such research also names and unpacks institutional arrangements, power relations and educational processes that promote and produce disparities among students. The anthropological foundation of such advocacy is the recognition of the culture-specific assumptions and the structured forms of agency that shape parents' and students' sense of their own options.

- Zoila Airall

Icons and Industry: The Online Museum Exhibition

By J. Lorand Matory

Thanks to the generosity of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and Duke University, I am spending 2014 in Berlin, where I am engaged full-time in the development of the online museum exhibition of the Afro-Atlantic Sacred Arts Collection of the Center for African and African American Research. The Humboldt Prize, which has supported my leave of absence throughout 2014, is a lifetime-achievement award granted by the government of the Federal Republic of Germany and is intended to facilitate cooperation between leading international scholars and leading German scholars and institutions.

With the assistance of Trinity Technical Services, I have been collaborating with the Latin American Institute of the Free University of Berlin and with the Ethnological Museum in Berlin to develop a flexible online platform that will catalogue the Afro-Atlantic Sacred Arts Collection, which currently includes approximately 1000 liturgical objects from the African-inspired religions of Nigeria, Benin Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Brazil, Cuba, Haiti and the United States.

The catalogue pages will include the names, measurements, photographs, acquisition history and explanation of each object, as well as video footage of interviews about the objects with priests, scholars and art dealers and footage of rituals involving similar sacred objects in situ. Additionally, we are designing a mechanism called the "virtual online tour," in which a priest, scholar or art dealer can present a series of ten to twenty objects, explaining their significance with respect to a specific theme, such as "Fire in the Sky: the Meaning and the Majesty of Shango's Sacred Art in Brazil, Cuba and Nigeria," "The Male Bride: Gender in the Afro-Atlantic Religions," and "European Social Theory and the Real-Life 'Fetish.'" Each object in a virtual online tour will be available for detailed inspection and multimedia detours before the visitor proceeds to the next object on the tour.

As I interview the leading European art dealers in classical African art and lecture in various German, Swedish and Dutch universities, I have learned much about the role of African religion and art in Europe's reconceptualization of itself since the 19th century. Like Afro-Atlantic sacred altars themselves, the European collection of African art nostalgically commemorates the stunningly profitable trade ties between particular classes of Africans and Europeans.

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The Center for African and African American Research at Duke University
presents the

Fall Lecture Series
"Race, Culture and Education"

All presentations will be on Wednesdays and begin at 4:15 pm, Friedl 225 on East Campus, followed by light refreshments

Co-sponsors:
The Program in Education
The Department of Cultural Anthropology

Series Chair:
Zoila Airall, Ph.D.
Assistant Vice President in Student Affairs
Adjunct Associate Professor of the Practice

Amanda Walker-Johnson
Department of Anthropology
University of Massachusetts, Amherst
October 2, 2013
"Measuring Silences: Race, Testing, and the Corporatization of Public Education"

Carl James
Director, Centre for Education and Community
York University, Toronto, Canada
November 13, 2013
"The Way Out: U.S. Athletic Scholarships as a Route to Educational and Social Success for African Canadians"

Sarah Shani
International and Transcultural Studies
Columbia University Teachers College
October 30, 2013
"African Immigrant Parents, Transnational Lives and Schooling in the United States: The case of Ghanaians in New York City"

Kamela Heyward-Rotimi
CAAAR Visiting Fellow, Duke University
December 4, 2013
"The Colonial Heritage of Nigerian Higher Education"

Afro-Cuban Sacred Music Conference Unites History, Theory and Performance

by David Font-Navarrete



Roundtable discussion

On 7-8 November 2013, CAAAR hosted a conference titled “Lucumí Music: Singing, Dancing, and Drumming Black Divinity.” Lucumí music encompasses an extraordinarily rich and diverse set of traditions from the Afro-Cuban religion known variously as “Lucumí,” “Regla de Ocha,” “Orisha,” or (sometimes pejoratively) “Santería.” The two-day conference included panels and performance workshops by some of the world’s leading authorities on Afro-Cuban sacred music and dance.

The Lucumí descendants of the West African Ọ̀yọ́ empire arrived in 19th-century Cuba as slaves, fodder for the colonial economy based on the export of sugar, coffee and tobacco. In Cuba, “Lucumí”—a common greeting meaning “my friend” or “comrade”—was first used as a generic ethnonym for speakers of languages that later became standardized and known as “Yorùbá.” By the early 20th century, the worship of West African deities known as *orichas* (or *òriṣà*) took hold in Cuba, and Lucumí religious traditions committed to their worship were formalized and consolidated. Indeed, the meaning of the term “Lucumí” shifted from an ethnic designation (based on biological ancestry) to a broader marker of religious and cultural affiliation based on ritual initiation. During the last century, Lucumí religion and culture have acquired a unique prestige among the diverse black musical and cultural traditions of Cuba (e.g., Arará, Iyesá, Palo/Bantú, Gagá, et al.), effectively becoming the most visible and emblematic expression of Afro-Cuban identity.

In the Lucumí tradition, music, dance, visual arts, ritual, community, culture and theology form an integrated whole. Even beyond the relatively conspicuous ensemble music for festive occasions, nearly every communal ritual in the Lucumí tradition includes a musical component. Indeed, even intimate ritual actions are generally accompanied by song, and music serves as a prime vehicle for possession trance. By the middle of the 20th century, Cubans from a variety of backgrounds—both African and European—had become involved in Lucumí traditions, and artists and scholars developed an intense interest in the cultural richness of Cuba’s African heritage. By the end of the last century, Lucumí religion not only was becoming increasingly conspicuous in Cuba, but also planted firm roots in the United States, Venezuela, Mexico and Europe. In the early 21st century, Lucumí religious traditions thrive in disparate communities around the world, leading some scholars to characterize *òriṣà*-worship—including its West African, Cuban, Brazilian and Trinidadian varieties—as a world religion.

In collaboration with CAAAR Director J. Lorand Matory and Administrator Bernice Patterson, I enjoyed the privilege of organizing the conference. I have worked as a ritual musician in the Lucumí tradition since the 1990s, and I am currently a Lecturing Fellow at Duke’s Thompson Writing Program. The conference offered me (as an artist, musician and ethnomusicologist) a rare opportunity to bring together several of my vocations—not to

mention some of my dearest mentors, friends and colleagues. The themes of the conference grew out of a collaborative research project that Kenneth Schweitzer and I have been developing for several years. In 2015, Temple University Press will publish a monograph on our research, tentatively titled *Lucumí Music: Art, Ritual, and Culture*.

On the the first morning of the conference, academic papers by Matory (anthropology), David F. García (ethnomusicology), and Miguel “Willie” Ramos (history) transcended their respective disciplinary orientations to become a “trio” that revolved around closely-related notions of text, narrative, interpretation, translation and authority. Schweitzer provided a survey of Lucumí musical genres and fundamental concepts, followed by a presentation by Neeraj Mehta on the related (and stunningly complex) tradition of Arará music in the Cuban province of Matanzas.



Left to right: Ezequiel Torres, David Font, Aruán Torres

In the afternoon, a workshop on Lucumí drumming and song by NEH National Heritage Fellow Ezequiel Torres was both poetic and hands-on. Torres was keen to offer his audience a number of nuanced symbolic insights on Lucumí music and (assisted by his son Aruán and myself) a virtuosic display of his artistry on batá drums. As the workshop gained momentum, Ramos helped lead several chants, and many of the attendees joined in the singing. As the drumming and singing intensified, the workshop was punctuated by vigorous music and dance for the *oricha* Changó (deity of thunder, dancing and drumming).

Later that evening, more than 150 people participated in a master class by dancer Marisol Blanco, an alum of the seminal National Folkloric Ensemble of Cuba. The Dance Department’s Ark Studio was filled with the movements of a remarkably diverse cohort of dancers, including professionals, professors, students and curious enthusiasts. Accompanied by drumming and singing, Blanco led the class through movements for various *orichas*, including Ochosi (deity of hunting) and Oyá (deity of the wind).



Dancer Marisol Blanco (front-center) leading the class through various dance movements.

Photos by Kenneth Schweitzer © 2013

Schweitzer and I began the second day of the conference with an informal session about the multimedia materials

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Afro-Cuban Music (continued from p.8)

gathered during our research—audio recordings, photos and videos. Aside from the intrinsic beauty and archival value of the materials, we explored problematic dimensions of producing and disseminating documents of expressive culture. We also shared concerns and strategies regarding the messy, blurry lines between informal, ethnographic and commercial interests.

In the afternoon, a quartet of dancer-scholar-choreographers presented a panel moderated by Andrea E. Woods Valdés. Melissa Noventa offered an incisive ethnographic meditation on the “body politics of Afro-Cuban folklore”—that is, “ways that Afro-Cuban identities are constructed, commoditized and consumed.” Ava LaVonne Vinesett narrated her spiritual and artistic trajectory, culminating in an approach to choreography that she describes as “choreographing liminality” and “danced *ébo* (offering)” —a practice that is intimately (albeit indirectly) related to Lucumí tradition. Marisol Blanco also offered her perspective as a Cuban-trained professional folkloric dancer, reflecting on the nature of her training in Cuba and recent relocation to the U.S. The conference concluded with a roundtable discussion including all of the conference participants and—perhaps most satisfyingly—a number of insightful contributions from musicians, dancers and devotees from the Durham community.

The conference was intended to shed light on the roles played by “indigenous” and “insurgent” forms of historiography, critical thinking and musicology within Lucumí tradition. Musically and ritually, the aesthetics and cosmology of Lucumí tradition are based on a multiplicity of voices and authorities. Indeed, many of our conversations offered sophisticated models of reflexivity and intertextuality that deserve wider application in the academy. In a similar vein, the conference repeatedly suggested a provocative, mysterious question: How do we understand the Lucumí and Afro-Atlantic notion that adherents are not just singing, drumming and dancing *for* a deity, but also singing, drumming and dancing *the deity itself*? Put another way: Lucumí devotional and cultural traditions embody and personify divinity, thereby offering some profound (and profoundly worthwhile) challenges to “classic,” Western epistemologies and ontologies.

One recurring theme was the “folklorization” of traditions. For example, national dance ensembles and tourist-oriented entertainment based on Lucumí religion often recontextualize or change a sacred tradition into a secular one—often in the service of nationalistic or commercial agendas.

The conference certainly enriched all of the participants’ thinking and research. But as Matory put it, “Above all the analysis, there was joy and conviviality, food and fun. We all laughed, joked and danced across languages.”

Schweitzer and I are currently producing a brief documentary for CAAAR incorporating multimedia materials from our fieldwork and footage of the conference. The film will introduce the historical, structural and aesthetic dimensions of Lucumí music. The cardinal goal of the conference, the film, and our larger research project is plain: to share and illuminate a measure of the individual and collective genius of African and African American cultures that is so vividly exemplified by Lucumí traditions.

We celebrate these cultures both deeply and joyfully.

CAAAR Visiting Scholar Dr. Kamela Heyward-Rotimi



Kamela
Heyward-Rotimi

Dr. Kamela Heyward-Rotimi spent her first year as a Visiting Scholar working on her manuscript, participating in Duke events and meeting members of the Duke community. She made significant findings in her field data analysis of her study conducted in southwestern Nigeria. This analysis supported the chapter drafts of her manuscript on 419 advance fee fraud and its impact on Nigerian communities.

Heyward-Rotimi was a featured speaker in the Center for African and African American Research (CAAAR) Fall 2013 “Race, Culture and Education,” lecture series organized by anthropologist of education and Vice President for Campus Life at Duke, Professor Zoila Airall. Her talk entitled, “The Colonial Heritage of Nigerian Higher Education” was an opportunity to discuss her ongoing collaborative project with Nigerian anthropologists at Obafemi Awolowo University to address anthropology curricular development.

In the later part of the Spring semester Heyward-Rotimi also participated in a round table that was a part of the “Rural Health and Rural Academic Excellence in South Africa” series organized by Professor Jenni Owen and sponsored by the Africa Initiative, Sanford School, and Center for Child and Family Policy. Heyward-Rotimi spoke about her work with Nigerian anthropologists to influence Nigerian Higher Education policy.

Heyward-Rotimi met and spoke with Duke Faculty and staff whose work tied to her research interests of marginalized communities’ relationship with digital technology and society, public scholarship, and collaborative projects. She especially enjoyed the Forum for Scholars and Publics talks, the African and African American Studies conference, *Race in Space*, and the CAAAR Fall and Spring lecture series and “Lucumi Music: Singing, Dancing and Drumming Black Divinity” conference.

A meeting with Professor Cathy Davidson allowed her to learn about the collaborative interdisciplinary digital projects at Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Alliance and Collaboratory.

At the Department of Cultural Anthropology she met with fellow anthropologists and appreciated the encouragement from current Department Chair Professor Orin Starn and Professor Charlie Piot. Director of CAAAR, Professor Randy Matory, offered tremendous guidance on various projects. In her second year Heyward-Rotimi anticipates another enriching year at Duke writing her manuscript and continuing to meet and talk with members of the Duke community.

Icons and Industry: The Online Museum Exhibition (continued from p.7)

For some Europeans, Africans and their sacred art are anti-types according to which the partisans in intra-European struggles, such as Marx, can classify their European opponents as stupid like African “fetishists.”

For other Europeans, such as Freud, Africans and their sacred art represent a primordial human element facilitating the rediscovery of an authentic self underneath layers of European “civilization” and discontent. A century of buying and selling of these objects among Europeans artists and connoisseurs, as well as their repeated display alongside the famous works of “modern” art that they inspired, have added a whole new dimension of sacrality to these objects in the domestic and museum shrines of Europe.

My lectures about the use of Africans and their art as anti-types in Europeans’ self-construction has opened up discussions with colleagues in Germany, Sweden, Holland and Belgium about northern Europeans’ omnipresent use of other northern European nations and dialect groups as anti-types of the legitimate personal or national self. For example, all of these nations include dialect groups—such as the Saxons in Germany—that are perceived as uniquely stupid. Much of this stereotyping of the white European Other occurs against the backdrop of the speaker’s knowledge that his or her own group has an international reputation for stupidity, cruelty, laziness, unsophistication or backwardness.

The pervasiveness of white northern European feelings of collective inferiority to other populations came as a great surprise to me, as the notion of northern European superiority to everyone—including white Americans—is a persistent trope in white American racism. This insight has leavened the argument of my forthcoming *Stigma and Culture: Ethnological Schadenfreude in Black America* (University of Chicago Press, forthcoming) and is the seed of a new book, under review at Duke University Press, called *Marx, Freud and the Gods Black People Make: European Social Theory and the Real-Life ‘Fetish’*. It analyzes the biographical backdrop of Hegel’s, Marx’s and Freud’s use of African religion as the paradigm of irrationality, the political economy of Afro-Atlantic altar-making, and the centuries of Afro-European cultural dialogue that have informed both.

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