

Editor's Note

Experiences play a fundamental role in my research, writing, and teaching. They influence how I perceive the profession in general and the *Afro-Hispanic Review* in particular. Though general linguistics, structuralism, semiotics, and semiology have attempted to offer a “scientific” approach to literary studies, experiences allow for another way of reading, one that provides a meaningful relationship between our lives and the literature we study.

The main focus of the *Afro-Hispanic Review* is the African presence in Hispanic literature, but this topic is inextricably linked to other cultures, languages, and disciplines. The broader mission undertaken by the *Afro-Hispanic Review* is evident, most recently, in the spring issue of 2007, as the journal explores the influence of African religions in the New World, represented by Cuba and the Dominican Republic, as well as non-Hispanic countries such as Haiti, Brazil, and the United States. With the current issue, the *Afro-Hispanic Review* continues to underscore the importance of Latino literature, as seen in the works of Latino writers like Tato Laviera, Pat Alderete, and Blas Falconer.

As I travel outside of the New World, I look for the interconnectedness between the central focuses of the *Afro-Hispanic Review* and similar yet broader concerns. In December of 2006, the director of the Asian Studies Program at Brown University, Evelyn Hu-DeHart, invited me to attend the regional conference of the International Society for the Study of Chinese Overseas, which met at the University of Pretoria, in Pretoria, South Africa. While the meeting was stimulating and in many ways illuminating, so were my travels to the central and southern parts of the country, and in particular to Cape Town, a city which contained, for me, the most vivid remnants of the apartheid government. I toured, for example, District Six, a heterogeneous community of some 60,000 residents that had been dismantled in 1966, for its proximity to government buildings and an imaginative feared rebellion, and the District Six Museum, which reproduces aspects of the culture that once thrived in that area. I also visited the Slave Lodge, built in 1679 by the Dutch East India Company, believed to have housed some 9,000 slaves, until it was transformed into government offices in 1810. In the present, the lodge is a museum that remembers the Cape's tragic and painful past. Equally significant was understanding the complex makeup of the country's diverse population of black Africans loyal to their tribal heritage, Coloureds of mixed backgrounds, and the Afrikaans of Northern European ancestry. I saw Cape Town as a city of extreme contrasts, between whites and non-whites, mountain (Table Top Mountain) and sea, rich and poor, the strong and cold sea winds that swept the city and how the hot sun

felt in wind-protected areas, the city's apparent calmness and the violence that lurked within, its resemblance to a European city and its location on the south African continent. While studying its people and traditions more closely, I was reminded of the history of the Dutch East India Company, and how its administrators, from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, enslaved non-whites and brought them to work in Cape Town. They were taken from regions as diverse as East, West, and Central Africa, Madagascar, India, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), and the Indonesian Archipelago. In the present, I could sense a tension between the people of African, Asian, and European lineages that is as visible and dense as the morning fog that hovers over the city.

Though my trip to South Africa will always be a memorable experience, I was able to appreciate another part of Africa when I traveled to Accra, Ghana, in August of 2007, to participate in the First International Conference on Afro-Hispanic Studies Across the Disciplines, held at the University of Ghana and organized by hispanists Komla Aggor and Yaw Agawu-Kakraba. There, I experienced a different region of the continent, where the descendents of black Africans were a visible majority, bringing me closer to my travels throughout the Americas and my studies of slavery and other topics pertaining to the *Afro-Hispanic Review*. The conference was indeed well run and represented an important venue for bringing together a multidisciplinary group studying Afro-Hispanic issues. After its conclusion, I walked with colleagues throughout the capital city, to the usual museums, such as the one that honors the memory of Kwame Nkrumah, but also to the Makola market, with its many and varied foods, products, and vendors, and the market at the Arts Center, with woodcarvings and colorful clothing; both sites permeated with expressive and enthusiastic merchants. Closer to my own research was an earlier excursion to Elmina Castle, located in the town of the same name, which the Portuguese erected in 1482, and turned into one of the most active processing centers for the distribution of slaves to the Americas. Later, the castle was under the control of the Dutch (1637) and the British (1873), from whom the Gold Coast obtained its independence in 1957. As I walked through the dungeons that once entrapped their victims, the men separated from the women, women raped almost at will by top government officials, I arrived at the infamous "door of no return," leading Africans to the awaiting slave ships. While walking through Elmina Castle, I was reminded of my visits to the Jewish concentration camps of Auschwitz and Birkenau, where one can feel the presence of those who perished, those whose souls have never found peace.

Another recent trip transported me to a different location, to Beijing, China, where I attended the Sixth Conference of The International Society for

the Study of Chinese Overseas, hosted by Peking University, in September of 2007. I had made professional visits to Hong Kong (under British rule) and Japan, but this was my first visit to the mainland. As scholars studied the Chinese presence throughout the world, in countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Canada, South Africa, and Australia, I was involved in panels organized by Evelyn Hu-DeHart and Kathy López on race, identity, migration, and diaspora in Latin America and the Caribbean.

In Beijing, I was struck by the density of the population (over 17 million) and the enormity of the city (6,487 square miles); everything seemed to be on a massive scale! I just could not fathom how a nation, any nation, could feed so many people, in the case of China, 1.3 billion inhabitants. China is a place of wonderment. It purports to have the most continuous culture, one that flourished many thousands of years before the European Dark Ages. I visited, for example, the Great Wall of China, the Mutianyu section, which I found extremely difficult to describe in words. Attempting to convey its magnificence reminded me of Carpentier's narration of Henri Christophe's Citadelle Laferrière, in *El reino de este mundo*, and Neruda's Inca City, in his much celebrated poem "Alturas de Machu Picchu," which in my estimation are among the most salient works of Spanish American literature. However, as great as these works are, words cannot truly capture what you feel when standing among the most spectacular architectural wonders of the world. While I had read about the Great Wall, it was a totally different experience climbing the highest mountain to find, at the very top, a wall that meanders through the mountainous countryside. But, like Machu Picchu and Laferrière, many died constructing the Great Wall, and the workers also became victims who formed a part of the structure they were building. Equally spectacular were the Forbidden City and the Summer Palace, among other sites. Another favorite city will always be Xi'an, China's earlier capital, the center of the 5,000 mile Silk Route. It was here that the first emperor of China, QinShihuang, more than 2,000 years ago, commissioned some 8,000 life-sized pottery warriors and horses to be buried that they might follow him into the next life. The soldiers had distinct facial features and were equipped with battle-ready bows and crossbows.

The reader may ask, how does China tie into Africa, slavery, and the slave trade? As I have mentioned, Asians in general were enslaved to labor in Cape Town, and in subsequent decades numerous Chinese worked, suffered, and perished in the mines of South Africa and other countries of the continent. In the first half of the nineteenth century, many of the Chinese who participated in what became the *trata amarilla* were kidnapped, deceived, and forced to sign the infamous indentured contracts. Afterwards, they embarked on three-month

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voyages as Europeans, some of whom were slave traders, transported them, under similar conditions to slaves, to work in Cuba and Peru. Once there, the Chinese labored side-by-side with African slaves and were treated as if they were enslaved. In subsequent years, countless Chinese married blacks and mulatas, mixed with the population, and contributed to their adopted country's national culture.

My travels to South Africa, Ghana, and China have allowed me to consider slavery, in both narrow and broad categories, as a manifestation of European expansionism to control and exploit the world's natural resources without regard to life, property, customs, languages, and religions. After the dust settled, it is not difficult to understand that the most vulnerable, those enslaved and exploited, have left a vibrant culture that continues to thrive well into the present.

The next issue of the *Afro-Hispanic Review* will explore the relationships that exist between Africa and Asia. If you are interested in collaborating in this issue, please contact Guest Editors professors Evelyn Hu-DeHart (Evelyn_Hu-DeHart@brown.edu) or Kathleen López (kmlopez57@yahoo.com).

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