Gullah Folklore

[Re]Membering Our Pathways Through Low Country Legacies

Historically, as enslaved Africans survived the trek, or the middle passage to reach the sea island shores, “the soul of Africa” was witnessed. Moreover, “the majority of the slaves came from the western coast of Africa into the port of Charleston, South Carolina. The ancestors of these enslaved Africans called Gullahs, have been able to retain many components of their West African heritage in the language, art, food and religious practices to this day while living in coastal communities on the sea islands of South Carolina and Georgia.

What if there was a language by which the people that spoke it became more than a middling existence- their presence alone extending beyond the original borders. Such a language does exist. With such vibrant and colorful words such as: cootuh (“turtle”), oonuh (“you”), pojo (“heron”), and biddy (“baby chick”), the Gullah language is a cadence and accent of undulations and intonations in the tenor of a creative, melodic culture. The Gullah “shout” for example, is one of “rhythmic translation of forbidden drums and the oldest of plantation melodies […] song spoke of storms and other events in the lives of the slaves and were used as codes for meeting times and places and as messages for freedom” (Gullah Language & Culture).

Accordingly, the Gullah language “is a Creole language spoken by the Gullah people” (wikipedia.org) and though based on English it pays homage to African roots. Specifically, the Gullah language began as some form of the pidgin language, but as one critic has mentioned, “Gullah now differs from other African-American dialects of English” as well. The difference, however, still “resembles the Krio language of Sierra Leone, a major West African English-based Creole, Bahamian Creole, Jamaican Creole, and Belizean Creole” (wikipedia.org). Does this culture truly flourish today, and if so does the Gullah way of life compromise its existence?

Indeed, with such activities such as the “Gullah Festival,” held each May in Beaufort, South Carolina, which represent their language, their music, their art, and their food-such a people carried their legacy from generation to generation. Consequently, with such an ever-eroding language landscape and the increasing loss of the art of story-telling and story-saving, the Gullah culture, according Chicago Tribune writer Dahleen Glanton, is also “in danger of fading away.” Such an intact existence could not remain untouched however. Why? Change. The changing of the guard is not without its terror, namely-the inability “to live in isolation, groups with roots in old America are sucked into mainstream, where local traditions are forfeited in favor of popular culture” (Glanton Gullah Culture). The Gullah language and its people are not the exception. So what can one do to preserve such a rich and deeply spiritual culture? “Longtime St. Helena activist Marquetta Goodwine asserts, “Some people call us land rich and cash poor, but that doesn’t matter…most of us don’t believe the land of milk and honey is outside St. Helena.” The come yahs will always intersect the bin yahs and as oral tradition is silenced one can hope that, for now, the Gullah “shout” may be expressed, heard, and honored as a bequest of influence at the axis of reminiscence.

The BCC Performing Arts Ensembles will be traveling to St. Helena, S.C. and Savannah, GA participating in a research tour of the Gullah region and its folklore from October 4-8. You can read more about the experience in the next issue.

This is an excerpt of a previously written article by former BCC newsletter staff writer and Purdue Alumna Frank Tobienne, Ph.D.
Recently Purdue President Daniels announced a series of initiatives “Big Moves” designed to broaden Purdue’s global impact and enhance educational opportunities for students. The BCC has embraced several of these bold initiatives particularly in the areas of global education and student success. In May, the BCC partnered with the African American Studies and Research Center to co-sponsor our first study abroad program. Students and staff traveled to Ghana, West Africa and participated in a series of lectures at the University of Ghana and Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology. They had the opportunity to experience the history of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and contemporary African culture. Through lectures, historical tours, performances, group discussions and collaborative programs, the students had a unique global experience. See full story on page 3.

The BCC is positioning itself to be a leader in connecting STEM disciplines, Black culture and the arts. This summer the BCC hosted a pilot program with first year student participants in the Academic Boot Camp. Throughout the summer, ABC students worked in groups and conducted research on multicultural leaders and pioneers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics and applied what they learned into creative, highly informative and entertaining presentations. The students produced Boilermaker STEAM by infusing the “ARTS” with the STEM discipline.

This fall, the BCC is launching a new electronic publication “Cultural Briefs.” The Cultural Briefs are intended to educate the Purdue community on topics related to the African American experience. Throughout the fall semester, the Cultural Briefs will be directly tied to the BCC fall semester theme “Gullah Folklore: (Re)membering Our Pathways Through Low Country Legacies.” The Cultural Briefs feature researched content while providing a quick overview of a highlighted aspect of Gullah culture. It is our hope that the Cultural Briefs will serve to expand the knowledge of the reader and provide deeper insight into prevalent themes in African American culture.

With regards to student success, we are in the preliminary stages of exploring how the cultural programs and activities the BCC offers can be part of the university’s outcome based core curriculum. We believe many of the BCC experiences meet the co-curricular embedded outcomes in the area of intercultural knowledge, creative and critical thinking. As a first step in this process, the BCC is now an active participant with the Boiler Link management system. We are excited about this semester! It gives me tremendous joy to see so many students actively involved with the BCC through their participation in our performing arts program, conducting research in the library, utilizing the computer lab to complete class assignments as well as engaging the staff in meaningful cultural conversations.

Renee A. Thomas, Director

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The BCC and African American Studies Travel to Ghana

In late May, a group of 15 Purdue students and faculty members embarked on a trip to Ghana. For two weeks prior and two weeks afterward, students were enrolled in classes offered through the African American studies department which covering topics like Pan Africansim and African Diasporic literature which offered background for their upcoming travel. The trip centered on a true, scholarly thirst for knowledge. The members did not set off to push the ideals of American culture. They arrived in Ghana ready to learn from the rich culture of its land and people.

On the first day, they arrived in Accra, the capital of Ghana. The members of the group exchanged currency and purchased items necessary for the 10 day trip. The next day, they visited Independence Square, Accra’s open-air ceremonial grounds, Kwame Nkrumah Mausoleum and Museum, and the W.E.B. Du Bois Center. These places gave the group a great cultural base of knowledge for the trip. The group furthered their learning by listening to lectures by Dr. Antwi-Danso at the University of Ghana.

The group then left the greater Accra region to go to the Volta Region. Passing through many rural areas of Ghana, the 15 members visited the Wli Waterfalls, the highest waterfalls in West Africa at a height of about 400 meters. The group also interacted with monkeys at the Tafi Atome Monkey Sanctuary.

They then continued past the Volta region to journey to Kumasi. On their way, they stopped at the Aburi Botanical Garden and the Manhyia Palace, the former residence of the Ashanti kings until 1974. The next day, they toured the Ashanti craft villages of Ahwiaa, Bonwire, and Ntonso.

In Kumasi, the group attended more lectures at Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST). They also got to go to a live play at the cultural center within Kumasi. The group then left for the Cape Coast. On their way, the 15 members explored the village rich in gold mines, Obuasi.

The group also visited Assin Manso, the burial site of two former slaves from the U. S. and Jamaica. The same day, they saw the river (continued on page 4)
The BCC Art Collection: Serving Students and the Community

The Purdue Black Cultural Center partnered with the Art Museum of Greater Lafayette to co-host the Visions of Community reception at the BCC on June 22. The evening included Jazz by the Rob Dixon Trio from Indianapolis, student led tours of the BCC facility, a presentation by Ohio University professor of painting and drawing, Robert Peppers and an artist who painted a portrait of a live model as more than 100 guests enjoyed bountiful hors d’oeuvres.

The highlight of the evening was the announcement that Robert Peppers (former BCC assistant director) was making a donation of a piece of his original artwork – Peace Lily from his Hush Harbor Series. The hush harbors served as a location where enslaved Africans could combine their African religious traditions with Christianity. It was a safe space to truly blend the components of each religion in these meetings. These religious practices were often invisible to the eyes of the masters.

“Peace Lily” is a mixed media piece that stands over six feet tall and is valued at $7,500.00. The artwork was installed at the Purdue BCC in July and is on permanent display for the community to enjoy. The installation of the Peace Lily creates a “quiet meditative place” for students who visit the BCC.

BCC and African American Studies in Ghana continued from page 3

that was known as “Slave River.” These historical sites of slavery reminded members of their own ancestors who were forced to endure similar conditions.

A tour of the Cape Coast Castle and the Castle Museum included a visit to the infamous “Door of No Return” and participated in a Rights of Passage Tribute to the Ancestors ceremony. The group then got to experience the perspective of an American living in Ghana when they visited ONE AFRICA, owned by an African American.

The group then started to make its way back to Accra. On their way back, they stopped at the Kakum National Park and the Abanze village, the ancestral home of Louis Armstrong.

The group returned from Ghana equipped with more cultural knowledge and historical perspectives. The capstone project was the development of lesson plans for educational institutions to utilize to instruct students on Ghanian history and culture.
Julie Dash’s “Daughters of the Dust” takes place in 1902 and tells the story of an African-American family living in the Gullah Geechee region of Georgia who come together to celebrate their ancestors before moving North. The story is not told in a traditional way as the film is narrated by an unborn child. At times the film is difficult to follow due to the intricate weaving of the creole-like language in form that feels more like poetry than a traditional script. The film does not follow typical patterns that we expect from a plot line. There is not one main character or dynamic. There is no real climax or resolution in a conventional sense, yet Dash manages to tell a story that is more about emotion, evoking feelings that place you right there on the island experiencing the struggles these characters face.

Want to see the film?
When: Tuesday, November 5th at 5:00PM
Where: Hillenbrand Hall

Immediately following the film, Dr. Venetria Patton will facilitate a discussion with the audience to further explore themes in the film. Low Country cuisine will be catered by University Dining Services. Dinner will be available for guests for $12.00

About the filmmaker:
Julie Dash was born and raised in New York City. With the debut of Daughters of the Dust in January 1992, Julie Dash became the first African American woman to have a full-length general theatrical release in the United States. O Magazine included Daughters among its 50 Greatest Chick Flicks, and in 1999, the twenty-fifth Annual Newark Black Film Festival honored Julie and her film Daughters of the Dust as being one of the most important cinematic achievements in Black Cinema in the 20th century.
(Source: Women Make Movies www.wmm.com)

“...I wanted to tell a story that was authentic to African American culture – authentic to the point where it was not like something you could turn on the television and see. I wanted it to be more like a foreign film and so deeply into the culture that it appeared to be foreign.”
- Julie Dash, Director

Recommended Reading

Coming Through: Voices of a South Carolina Gullah Community from W.P.A. Oral Histories
By Genevieve W. Chandler

Gullah Images: The Art of Jonathan Green
By Jonathan Green
Jamillah Gabriel: BCC Librarian

By Ebony Barrett-Kennedy, staff writer

The BCC welcomes Jamillah Gabriel, the new BCC Librarian, who joined the BCC staff in June 2013. Originally from California, Ms. Gabriel brings over 13 years of experience in public and academic libraries, and has held leadership positions in professional organizations such as the American Library Association, Association of College & Research Libraries, and the California Conference of Library Instruction. Gabriel holds an Associate in Arts in English from Cerritos College, a Bachelor of Arts in Black Studies and Journalism from California State University Long Beach, and a Master of Library Science from San Jose State University. Currently, she is pursuing a certificate in Archives Management and a second master’s in Museum Studies, but took time from her busy schedule to speak with me about joining the BCC staff at Purdue.

Barrett-Kennedy: What are your responsibilities as the BCC librarian?
Gabriel: I oversee all of the functions of the BCC library, from collection development to displays to programming to instruction. I’m always looking for ways to improve the library to increase usage by the students. In addition, I work with the University Libraries as African American Studies liaison and Metadata Specialist.

Barrett-Kennedy: What sparked your interest in Library Science?
Gabriel: I’ve always loved reading, so I gravitated towards jobs in bookstores. I worked at Borders and Barnes & Noble in undergrad. But I reached a point where I grew tired of retail jobs and wanted something different, but I didn’t want to give up working with books. This led me to seek a job in the local public library as an aide, and within a few months, I had decided to go to grad school to become a librarian.

Barrett-Kennedy: What do you enjoy most about Purdue University and the BCC?
Gabriel: Purdue has a reputation for being a university that represents excellence in education and student success, so it makes me proud to work for an institution where I know the work I do contributes to these endeavors. I have many professional interests including education, information literacy, Africana, cultural heritage, etc. Working at the BCC allows me to combine and apply these interests to what I do on a daily basis and in a variety of ways which means the work is never boring and very rewarding. It’s also great to work for an institution that supports growth and learning about African American culture.

Barrett-Kennedy: What are some of your hobbies?
Gabriel: I don’t have many hobbies, but I love to read, collect 80s toys, go to movies, visit museums, and travel.

Barrett-Kennedy: What piece of advice would you give to students engaged in research?
Gabriel: Be more curious about things, dig past the surface when seeking information, and don’t let your research begin and end with Google and Wikipedia. There’s so much out there to discover and learn so try not to limit yourselves.

For research assistance or any questions about information literacy, especially as it relates to African American Studies or African Diasporic Studies, please schedule an appointment with Ms. Gabriel. She can be reached at: jgabrieb@purdue.edu.
Antonio Zamora Jazz Jubilee

By Loretta Davidson, Staff writer

The Black Cultural Center was festively decorated in splashes of blue and purple and filled with music and laughter on Saturday, September 7, 2013 as visitors entered the building for the Antonio Zamora Jazz Jubilee. The celebration honored beloved founder and director emeritus, Antonio Zamora. Mr. Zamora along with his wife Betty, were truly touched for him to come back 22 years later to see the growth of the BCC. Mr. Zamora was very humbled by the outpouring of love from campus and community members who came from near and far to honor him. He remarked, “It is important for students and the community to have a resource like the Black Cultural Center which offers many opportunities for learning and enrichment. Even employment opportunities that the center provides for students allows for leadership development.”

The Jazz Jubilee was an exciting event with interactive sessions of singing, dancing, acting, drumming and spoken word. Children and adults were enjoying the sounds of live jazz performed by a variety of bands. Meeting Mr. Zamora was truly a breathtaking experience. After speaking with him, I felt he imparted so much wisdom. Before exiting my encounter with Mr. Zamora, he encouraged me to reach to the highest peak for my endeavors and to take advantage. I am inspired to do so and encourage you to also follow his advice.

Don Seybold and Mr. Zamora. Seybold teaches jazz history at Purdue and has hosted numerous jazz radio programs in the community throughout the years.

Ron Dixon, of the Ron Dixon Trio, of Indianapolis, performing a stirring saxophone solo.
Wake Up to the Semester With Your Mind on Freedom ...

Juanita Crider, Editor

You may (or may not) be familiar with the refrain, “Woke up this morning with my mind stayed on freedom,” as a slave spiritual or as a Civil Rights Movement Freedom Song. Nevertheless, I believe the message of the song coupled with its historical context and meaning is informative and instructive for us in the present.

50 years ago … 1963 was a very pivotal year in the history of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. In April of that year, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote his famous Letter from A Birmingham Jail. On August 28th, there was the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Tragedy struck the movement when on September 15th Denise McNair, Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, and Carole Robinson (who are forever known as the famous “Four Little Girls”) lost their lives due to the explosion of a bomb at the 16th St. Baptist church in Birmingham, Alabama. If that isn’t enough for you, on June 11th Governor George Wallace, accompanied by Alabama state troopers, blocked the doorway to Foster Auditorium to prevent James Hood and Vivian Malone, two African American students from registering to attend the state university. Malone and Hood were accompanied by federal marshals and the deputy Attorney General! Yet, Governor Wallace still held his ground until President Kennedy intervened and federalized the Georgia National Guard. Later in the same day Hood and Malone, escorted by 100 National Guard, were permitted to register.

I encourage you to not only think about the freedoms you may presently enjoy but think about how you might impact freedom on campus, in Indiana, the U.S. and throughout the world. The Purdue experience offers you the opportunity to innovate, imagine, and implement world changing ideas and devices. You’re FREE to explore. Don’t leave here; i.e. GRADUATE without it!