Unmasking Blackness: Through Rhythm, Culture & Celebration

Carnival as a tradition is seen throughout the African Diaspora. The tradition of Carnival has existed from as early as the 16th and 17th Centuries in the Bahamas and the late 1700’s in Trinidad (New Orleans-1781). Through Carnival people of African descent offered resistance to their oppressors, preserved their African culture—specifically—language, music and religious/ritual practice. Many scholars argue that Trinidad’s Carnival is the inspiration for Carnival celebrations throughout the world. Trinidadians describe the events and its costumes, bands and music the “greatest show on earth”!

There is significant European influence on Trinidad and Tobago. This is because the area has been under the colonial rule of Spain, France and Britain at various times in its history. After slavery was abolished peasants from India and China worked as indentured servants. The practice of indentured servitude officially ended in 1917. As a result of this heritage the people and customs of Trinidad evolve form a rich tapestry of race, religion, class and culture from various blends of the indigenous Indian, African, East Indian, Spanish, French and British. The timing of the pre-Lenten festivities are historically traced to 18th century French settlers to the area. According to scholars the French settlers dressed up and danced like the Africans they enslaved. However, enslaved Africans viewed the event as an opportunity for resistance and uprisings to express their dissatisfaction. Even after slavery was abolished in 1834, the tradition of Carnival remained despite attempts to outlaw essential elements by legally suppressing drums, masks and public dancing.

This fall the BCC will focus on Carnival as both a cultural product and cultural practice. As part of the study of Carnival the Purdue Black Cultural Center will sponsor a 6 day fall research tour to The Republic of Trinidad and Tobago Friday October 10-15, 2014. The tour and other semester calendar events will be an immersion experience that encompasses scholarly, artistic and cultural exploration of African diasporic history and life. Through a combination of course readings, master classes, site tours, and presentations by experts on Carnival culture in our fall Cultural Arts Series or the December Cultural Arts Festival it is our belief that you will be presented with the opportunity to gain a comprehensive understanding of the history of the Carnival tradition as well as hands-on experience in the art forms that comprise the experience.

Juanita Crider, Editor
Director’s Desk

This academic year I will celebrate my 25th anniversary as a Boilermaker! When I first stepped onto this beautiful campus it immediately became apparent, there is something special about being a Boilermaker. You too will discover that you are part of a dynamic university that is full of energy and excitement. The Black Cultural Center has built a reputation on campus as a place that promotes academic excellence and cultural pride. I am immensely proud the BCC receives ongoing national acclaim for our stellar programs and services. BCC programs are always high quality, professional, impactful and consistently surpass standards accepted by our national accreditation association.

Working at the BCC provides me the unique opportunity to interact with a world-class faculty and professional staff. More importantly I work with the best and brightest student in the world, including you. The BCC enriches the student experience through a diverse range of culturally relevant programs that build community. We believe engaging arts, culture and history are critical to a strong community. In effort to better serve the public, the BCC has expanded our weekend hours. The BCC is now open on Sundays from 2pm -9pm.

This past summer there were a couple of staff transitions at the BCC. After 10 years of service as artist in residence for the Black Voices of Inspiration, Dr. Twana Harris accepted a position as pastor of Carter Metro church in Detroit, MI. We are currently conducting a national search to identify her successor. In the meantime, Lance Mosley and Johnathan Turner are serving as co-directors for the ensemble.

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This Summer incoming STEM Academic Boot Camp students participated in a series of artistic workshops designed to put the “A” in STEM to make STEAM. Participants were able to experience how dance, painting, theatre and music could enhance their creativity in the STEM disciplines. Jamillah Gabriel, BCC librarian, also conducted a library resources & skills session with students.

During Boilerfest, the Passistas Samba dance group, out of Chicago, Illinois helped to introduce our fall semester theme with a lively performance in the tradition of Carnival!
The BCC and African American Studies Travel to Brazil

In late May, a group of Purdue Students, faculty and staff embarked on a trip to Brazil. Students were also enrolled in a class offered through the African American Studies department. I spoke with two students, Schane Coker and Casarae Gibson, who participated in the Study Abroad experience. See their comments below:

Crider: Why did you decide to participate in this study abroad experience?
Coker: I had previously had the opportunity to live and study abroad in Sydney, Australia and New Zealand in my undergraduate experience and made a slew of friends, both internationally and domestically; in addition to this, I had a passport that was collecting dust so I really wanted to use it to travel more before it expired.
Gibson: I participated in the study abroad trip to Brazil because I always had a desire to learn about and experience Afro-Brazilian culture.

Crider: Tell me about some of the sites you saw, people you met and other observations.
Gibson: During the trip, Purdue students met with political activists from movement Negro, an Afro-Brazilian civil rights organization started in the early 1970s to combat racism and other social injustices in Brazil. We met with other organizations such as Brazil cultural, an organization that gives tours to students abroad who have an interest in studying Afro-Brazilian history. We visited three locations: Paraty in Rio de Janerio, the city of Rio de Janerio, and Salvador de Bahia. We went to a performance of African deities performed by dancers within the Salvador community. We visited a capoeria school dedicated to increasing capoeria in women and children communities. Lastly, we visited many museums and islands that I cannot name.

Crider: I have heard a lot about Bahia. Please tell me how Bahia was different from being in Rio de Janeiro (or other parts of the country you traveled to).
Coker: Everything about Bahia and Paraty that I experienced almost makes me not want to tell you because it's the best kept secret in Brazil! I felt that Rio de Janeiro is seen internationally as this paradise and ideal vacation spot to the extent that my experience there didn't really match up to the hype. Paraty is a small town located about 4 hours west of Rio but when we arrived here I think that's when we started to discover how beautiful the landscape and culture within Brazil is. I can remember waking up early in the morning walking outside my room to a vision of the sun rising over the Green Mountains and slight cloud cover and seeing how scenic and beautiful the town was (and the temperature was perfect).

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Dr. Twana Harris Bids Farewell

Ebony Barrett-Kennedy, staff writer

Students and staff gathered at the Black Cultural Center on Friday August 29, 2014 to say farewell to Dr. Twana Harris, the inaugural full-time Artist-in-Residence at the BCC. Harris, an ordained minister, has accepted the pastorate of Carter Metropolitan CME church in Detroit, Michigan. Talking with BCC staff, current ensemble members, and past students quickly reveals the large impact of her 10 years of service to the BCC. According to BCC Director Renee Thomas, the Artist-in-Residence positions were initiated at the BCC to provide ensemble members with mentors from professionals in the performing arts industry. When Harris joined the staff in 2004, Black Voices of Inspiration (fondly known as BVOI) was the premiere performing arts ensemble and their repertoire consisted solely of gospel music. After a few years of part-time work with the ensemble, Harris was asked to join the BCC staff as a full-time staff member to create more consistency and encourage creative growth, however what she accomplished was much more.

Renee Thomas credits Harris with expanding the focus of BVOI. Under the direction of Harris BVOI integrated various genres of music including jazz, blues, R&B. Jasmine Reid, a graduating senior and current co-coordinator for BVOI expressed gratitude for the lessons learned from Harris both musically and personally. “Vocally she trained my ear to hear notes and chords. I learned how to read music and to sing different types of music. I learned how to listen to the choir as a whole instead of focusing on myself,” said Reid. Reid speaks of Harris’ leadership style as one of high expectations and love. Reid reflected on a time when Harris stopped her to share an important message. “She said, ‘I love you,’” Reid recalled. “I looked at her like she was crazy but she repeated it ‘I love you,’ and then she said ‘I really mean it’. Reid said that Harris exuded a love that all of her students felt. Reid credits Harris’ open heart as the driving force behind her growth. She says that Harris’ ability to motivate and push students towards their full-potential was well received because it was always done in love. These sentiments were echoed when talking with Purdue University and BVOI alumnus, Alias Jones.

Jones interacted with Harris not only as a member BVOI but also with the Lafayette Civic Theatre in a production of Rent. “My Life has been forever changed from having Twana it,” said Jones. “She has always been a consistent source of wisdom, light and love, approachable and open to all who called on her.”

Thomas summed up Harris’ legacy at the BCC. “She was more than an instructor. She mentored students socially, culturally, and academically using a holistic approach.” Thomas also applauded Harris’ ability to “take a small idea and create a grand production” and her willingness to share her talents with the greater Lafayette community. Purdue alum and former Varsity Glee Club member, Dustin Hopkins, who performed with Dr. Harris at the 4th annual 4th of July Stars and Stripes concert in Lafayette concurs. When asked to reflect on Dr. Harris he states “Twana is such a presence. She’s the kind of performer that other performers go to see. We have been taking part in the Stars and Stripes concert on the 4th for years. I am always impressed and moved by her, even if it’s a song I have heard many times. She was such a great ambassador for Lafayette with her positive attitude, smile, and always something nice to say.” When asked what did she enjoy most about her time at the Black Cultural Center Harris responded “Too many things to count: the opportunity to help shape musicians and performers, the chance to cultivate space for growth creatively, spiritually, and otherwise, the chance to share our gifts with the community both in and outside of Purdue.

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The BCC has a new ensemble, The Gordon Parks Fine Arts Ensemble. The conversation about establishing this ensemble has been brewing for a while. According to Bill Caise, BCC Assistant Director and ensemble instructor, “Over the course of several semesters students who have been interested in some form of visual arts have approached me inquiring how their interests might connect to the ensemble model of the BCC. The timing was just right with the group of students who have currently expressed interest.” Additionally the BCC has recently featured several artists’ exhibitions as part of their cultural arts series, most notably the Afros photography exhibition by Michael July and the paintings of Purdue alum, Joe Barry Carroll. Caise also stated “when thinking about everything that the BCC currently does in using the arts as a vehicle to teach about black history, culture and thought, it became a no brainer to implement a fine arts ensemble.” Why the name Gordon Parks Fines Arts Ensemble? Gordon Parks is described by many Black Studies scholars as a true African American renaissance man. Parks is perhaps best known by some as the director of the 1971 film Shaft. However, he was primarily a photographer and also a composer, author, and poet. Although he began his photographic career as a freelancer for fashion magazines, his true photographic passion was documenting black life from a humanitarian point of view. It is with this in mind that the first fine arts genre the new ensemble will be focusing on this semester will be photography; with the goal of documenting black life at Purdue. If you are interested in participating in this ensemble, please contact Bill Caise at: wpcaise@purdue.edu. To learn more about Gordon Parks see the recommended reading below and also visit the BCC library.

Recommended Reading

*Voices in the Mirror: An Autobiography* by Gordon Parks

*Half Past Autumn: A Retrospective* by Gordon Parks

*Gordon Parks, A dance group, Frederick Douglass housing project, Anacostia, Washington, DC, 1942. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress...*
Dr. Thomas Gass: BCC Program Manager

Loretta Davidson, staff writer

The BCC welcomes Dr. Thomas Gass, the new BCC program manager, who joined the staff in early August. Originally from Maryland, Dr. Gass comes to us from Ohio State University, where he worked for four years as a Graduate Administrative Associate in the Hale Black Cultural Center. Gass holds a Bachelor of Science Degree in History from Bowie State University, a Master of Arts Degree in history from Morgan State University and a Doctor of Philosophy degree in history from Ohio State University. Dr. Gass took time to speak with me about joining the BCC staff at Purdue.

Davidson: Why did you choose to apply for this position at Purdue?
Gass: There are several reasons. First, I respect the BCC and was excited about the opportunity to go from one respected cultural center to another. Second, I wanted to remain at a research institution if possible and Purdue fits that bill. Third, Purdue is not that far from Columbus, Ohio where I have several friends and associates that I can visit as frequently as I like. Finally, it is close to several big cities such as Chicago and St. Louis and I love to travel.

Davidson: What are your responsibilities as Program and Facilities Manager?
Gass: I am responsible for a number of programs and activities, including Friends & Family Day and the Pre-Kwanzaa Celebration. I directly supervise the student receptionists, handle room reservations and coordinate tours of the BCC, oversee the maintenance of the building and supervise payroll for student employees. I also develop programs, events & activities on African and African American history and culture to educate Purdue, Lafayette, West Lafayette, and other communities. Several of these programs may be a collaborative effort between the BCC and other campus departments and/or community organizations.

Davidson: What are you looking forward to and what changes, if any, would you like to implement or programs to build on?
Gass: I am definitely looking forward to bringing some exciting, thought provoking programs to the BCC. I am going to initiate my “What is Blackness?” lecture series, try to bridge the gap between African American grads and undergrads, and work on bringing more attention to important issues in the African American community such as depression and suicide, police brutality, and poverty. Also, I would like to increase local community involvement. Additionally I hope to see the BCC more involved on the academic side in terms of having classes held in the center. Mr. Caise, BCC assistant director, has his class on Carnival every Tuesday and Thursday and I would like to see that continue and expand to other topics/subjects. I am currently working to implement a better tracking system to record the number of patrons that use the center.

Davidson: What do you enjoy doing in your “spare” time?
Gass: I am an avid music and book lover. I enjoy travelling, stimulating intellectual conversations, and serving as a mentor; particularly to young African American men.
Dr. Tony Gass joined the BCC staff in mid-August as our program and facility manager. He recently completed his Ph.D. at Ohio State University and is excited to work with Purdue students. I encourage you to stop by his office and introduce yourself. You will find Dr. Gass to be a strong advocate and mentor for students.

Finally, as you know, this fall the BCC fall semester theme is “Unmasking Blackness Through Rhythm, Culture and Celebration”. Please mark your calendars and plan to attend some of our dynamic program offerings.

Renee Thomas, Director
Salvador, the city which we visited in Bahia in itself is another topic just because it was such a wonderful and amazing experience to go there and interact with people that looked just like me and the weather was everything I came to Brazil for!

Gibson: in Bahia, because it is the largest concentration of Afro-Brazilians in the western world, we couldn't escape the presence of blackness and black culture in Bahia. Bahia felt like a mix between New York City in its city parts and New Orleans in its rural parts. The presence of Afro-Brazilian religions such as Candomble, the artistic representations of contemporary culture such as Olodum which is a Samba school and business for Carnival were visible, the food culture was very distinct in representing the experience of Afro-descendants. Lastly, there were different shades of black people with beautiful smiles, colorful clothing, and hairstyles.

Crider: What did you learn about Brazilian culture; i.e. their music, literature, food and art?

Gibson: The food was amazing! Once again having this first-hand experience in tasting some of the foods that are exported to the US or grown in the US to lackluster results just brought everything into perspective! I especially enjoyed was learning about Brazilian folklore and mythology which was brought over by African slaves and adapted, more or less. It's similarity to Greek/Roman mythology was so tangible that it was the focus of a research paper I wrote for our Racial Democracy course that we were enrolled in as part of the study abroad experience.

Crider: Lastly, would you recommend the trip to others?

Gibson: I would recommend that all students attend the trip. For graduate students, I would suggest they explore outside funding options to support their trip because Purdue Study Abroad scholarships are only awarded to undergraduates.

Coker: I would recommend this trip to others but I would also tell them to focus on other cities/destinations in Brazil just because Rio is really over-hyped and that the other cities in Brazil have the same, if not more, to offer tourists and visitors.