

2011-2012 Colloquia

February 15th - Revell Carr

Without question, the February 15th AWRN lunchtime colloquium is the most raucous session yet. Dr. Revell Carr, Assistant Professor of Ethnomusicology in the School of Music, Theatre, and Dance, led attendees in rounds of sea chanteys for his presentation, "19th-Century Sailor Songs of the Transatlantic Trade Routes." Not only was Professor Carr's discussion rousing, it was also informative, describing the shipboard culture of the 19th century Atlantic World and its influences on the land.

Attendees learned about the difference between packet ships and whaling ships. The former were fast and sleek boats designed to make regular cargo runs between the US and the UK. These ships developed into the very fast extreme clippers or more massive late 19th century "tall ships" with iron hulls and many sails, which could carry passengers as well as cargo. Whaling ships, conversely, were slow and tub-shaped, designed to accommodate a 38-man crew for three-to-four-year voyages. The crews on these whaling ships tended to be multicultural and, despite the sometimes notable differences between them, the crew members tended to show great respect and admiration for one another's cultures.

A primary form of communication upon these ships were the various chanteys (pronounced "shanties"), which provided sailors with everything from aid in performing onboard tasks to records of previous voyages to entertainment during "gams" - mid-sea meetings between whaling ships. Work songs tended to fall into three task-specific categories: hauling chanteys, heaving chanteys, and bunting chanteys - very short songs to be sung while furling the sails.

Two basic types of songs on ships

Work songs Hauling Chanteys

Heaving Chanteys

Furling Chanteys/Bunting Chanteys

Very short chanteys to be sung while furling the sails

Entertainment songs Sailors were fond of all kinds of music

Through extant journals, we can see the types of performances and songs performed at sea

Instruments for dancing

Ballads

Humorous/Ribald stories about women ashore or shipping agents

These songs have been collected and performed by performer/scholars, who learn them from living sailors who have passed the songs down.

These songs were usually performed on the high seas - a great liminal, in-between space.

Therefore, the sailors took advantage of adopting new personalities and welcoming those with whom they would not always sympathize with otherwise.

There was often "ethnosympathy" between races while out at sea.

Whaling was one of the few industries in which a black sailor could have a position of power over white sailors: they could, for instance, hold the position of first-mate and chief harpooner.

November 14th - Ana Hontanilla

Associate Professor of Spanish in the Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures Dr. Ana Hontanilla was the featured speaker for the November 14th Atlantic World Research Network lunchtime colloquium. Dr. Hontanilla's presentation "Sentimentality and the Law at the Real Audiencia (Royal Supreme Court) of Spanish Santo Domingo: 1786-1795" described the way 18th Century concepts of taste and ethics influenced legal decisions regarding slavery.

Dr. Hontanilla opened her presentation by engaging the audience and asking attendees to share their knowledge of slavery in the Atlantic World. After this initial discussion - which contrasted the efforts of William Wilberforce in the UK, Bartolome de las Casas in Spain, and the Quakers in the U.S. - Dr. Hontanilla presented her primary sources, a series of dialogues dictated by the Supreme Court of Spanish Santo Domingo from 1786-1797. As Dr. Hontanilla explained, the Catholic Church dictated that all of the King's subjects be as well-prepared as possible, which included civil and religious training. Because they were taken from their motherland and reduced to slavery, the Church decided that the state was responsible for providing the training and support they would otherwise receive from their families. Furthermore, slaveholders believed that such treatment would diminish the slave's impulse to rebel against his or her master.

Dr. Hontanilla provided excerpts from a number of legal decisions to serve as examples. These decisions described offenses that ranged from the sale of a slave's children to a distant city to the physical abuse of slaves to the theft of their property. In their responses, the justices repeatedly berated the slaveowners for their inhumane treatment and often punished them for such behavior. Yet, as Dr. Hontanilla's presentation illustrated, these decisions ironically employed a rhetoric of humanitarianism to downplay their responsibility for owning slaves whom they had not actually captured, and even led them to believe that freeing these slaves would be unfair and inhumane.

Discussion following the main talk addressed a number of issues, from the differences between the legal structures in the antebellum US and in the Iberian peninsula and its effects on the slave trade, the irony of using liberal humanitarianism to defend slavery, and the process of whitening and integration in Spanish Santo Domingo--in comparison to Britain and the US.

“Sentimentality and the Law: Legal Cases of Slave and Freed Africans at the Real Audencia of Santo Domingo, 1786-1789”

October 26th - Nadja Cech

Attendees to the October 26th Atlantic World Research Network lunchtime colloquium were treated to two firsts: not only was this the first colloquium of the 2011-2012 school year, but it was also the first presentation from the natural sciences! Dr. Nadja Cech, Associate Professor of Chemistry and Biochemistry and the winner of UNCG’s Junior Faculty Research Excellence Award for 2010-2011, presented a talk entitled “Traditional versus Contemporary Approaches to Healing: Research with Botanical Medicines from around the Atlantic Rim.”

Two questions opened Dr. Cech's presentation, and provided direction for the conversation that followed: “What is the difference between herbal medicines and pharmaceutical drugs?” and “Do herbal medicines actually work?” The dichotomy between the two forms of treatment is not quite as strict as the question might imply, as pharmaceutical drugs are often, in fact, plant-based themselves. The difference is in the complexity of the preparation. Herbal medicines are mixtures of many different compounds, and their composition may vary depending on methods and plant material used to prepare them. Pharmaceutical drugs contain a single active ingredient that may be derived from a plant but is present at a known quantity. Proponents of the use of herbal medicines argue that they may in some cases be more effective than their pharmaceutical counterparts because their multiple constituents may act together synergistically. Synergy is defined as a situation where the combined effect of two agents is greater than the sum of the individual effects.

A process called bioactivity-directed fractionation is frequently used to identify the active compounds in plants that might ultimately be purified into pharmaceutical drugs. Despite its applicability for drug discovery research, Dr. Cech explained, bioactivity-directed fractionation tends to be less useful for studying herbal medicines because it can overlook synergistic interactions that may be responsible for the overall effectiveness of such products.

To illustrate this claim, Dr. Cech offered a number of examples, such as the histories of cinchona and echinacea, and her own work with goldenseal. Dr. Cech and her students discovered that goldenseal, a plant native to North Carolina, can be more effective than identical concentrations of its reported active ingredient berberine. The Cech Lab has shown that goldenseal produces a number of constituents that work together to kill bacteria. While antibiotics tend to kill bacteria more effectively at lower concentrations than does a goldenseal extract, results from the Cech Lab do show that goldenseal possesses antibacterial activity, at least in vitro. It may be that the application of multi-constituent treatments prepared from goldenseal would be less likely to lead to the development of drug resistance that is often observed for antibiotics.

After the presentation, Dr. Cech answered questions about a range of subjects, from the differences in human drug tests performed in the U.S. and in Europe, the effectiveness of local folk cures versus FDA regulated medicines, and the academic debate about alternative medicines.

"Traditional versus Contemporary Approaches to Healing: Research with Botanical Medicines from around the Atlantic Rim."