

2008-2009 Colloquia

April 24, 2009—Minshall’s Masks, Dancing Mobiles, and Walking Sculptures: A Legacy for Mas’ Mask Makers in Trinidad

The Lunchtime Colloquia for the 2008-2009 school year ended in a celebratory way, as **Professor Deborah Bell** from the UNCG Theatre Department offered a presentation that led into much discussion of mask making in the carnivals of Trinidad. In a presentation that featured a slideshow showcasing carnival masks and the men who make them, Dr. Bell discussed both the history of this unique art and the threat that modern commercialism brings.

As Dr. Bell explained, the history of Trinidad— influenced by Spanish and French Canadian colonists, as well as the indentured servants and African slaves who stayed after their former owners left—makes the country particularly well-suited for the diversity and spectacle of carnival. These qualities are personified in the key figure of the presentation, the “mas’ man” Peter Minshall. Dr. Bell’s presentation focused on the Trinidad-born mas’ man (“mask maker”), whose training at the St. Martin’s School of Design in London helped him develop a unique blend of European and Trinidadian aesthetics. Minshall changed the way we think about masks, and his work poses the following question: does a mask consist only of what covers the face, or does it include everything that frames the covering as well? Where do you draw the line between mask and costume? It’s all part of the masquerade.

Dr. Bell also discussed the mas’ men who followed in the spirit of Minshall, such as Brian McFarlane, Jason Griffith, Geraldo Vieira, and Sheldon Clemdore. As this continuing of the tradition suggests, community is the heart of carnival and drives the celebration. However, carnival is growing more commercial, as it costs too much for most mas’ men to participate without funding from companies and donors. Furthermore, where carnival was the celebration of everyday people, the audience now consists largely of wealthy tourists who can afford a plane ticket to Trinidad. The question remains: is this bad? Although there is a danger of diluting the tradition of carnival, Trinidad is historically built on diversity brought from across the seas.

March 3, 2009--Economies of Cultural Exchange: Trade, Gift, or Trojan Horse?

AWRN welcomed Colloquium leaders **Dr. Gail McDonald and Dr. Bruce Caldwell** back to the UNCG campus. Dr. Caldwell, until recently a member of our Economics Department, is now Research Professor in the Department of Economics and Director of the Center for the History of Political Economy, Duke University; while Dr. McDonald, a former member of our English Department, is Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Southampton in England. Dr. Caldwell is an historian of economic ideas, and Dr. McDonald is a scholar of American literature who specializes in modernism. Together they led a discussion on the topic “Economies of Cultural Exchange: Trade, Gift, or Trojan Horse?”

Dr. McDonald opened the Colloquium by noting the influence on her thinking of *The Gift*, a short book by the French sociologist Marcel Mauss that is best known for being one of the earliest and most important studies of reciprocity and gift exchange. Mauss argues that giving an object creates an inherent obligation on the receiver to reciprocate the gift, and creates an

alternative system to that of market value for understanding human social, ethical, and aesthetic exchange. “What conditions are good for the Arts?” and “How has trade benefited and/or affected the Arts?” Dr. McDonald asked. She acknowledged the crucial role of voluntary gifts by the wealthy in supporting the arts, and noted the sometimes messianic “one world” rhetoric employed by arts organizations to inspire such giving. But she also recognized the very common distaste for markets among artists and arts groups.

Dr. Caldwell began his portion of the presentation with questions from 18th-Century Scottish economist Adam Smith and his seminal book *The Wealth of Nations*, and from 20th-Century Austrian free-market economist F. A. Hayek, author of *The Road to Serfdom*. “Why are some countries so very poor and others wealthy?” Smith asked. Dr. Caldwell also asked, “What is it about markets that people hate so much, excepting economists, of course?” Using Smith and Hayek, Dr. Caldwell explained the spontaneity of markets, the evolution of cultures from hunter-gatherers to contemporary society in which strangers deal with each other and necessarily have had to develop a system of trusting strangers. As an instance of spontaneous economic order, Dr. Caldwell used the example of Paris being fed. Nobody plans on feeding Paris each day, but it happens, because of the “invisible hand of markets.” He asked whether markets in art might have a similar effect.

“Should the Arts be subsidized?” was a hot question debated by the professors attending.

The Director of the Weatherspoon Art Museum, Nancy Doll, related that the NEA was awarded 50 million dollars in the new national Stimulus Package. The senators were persuaded to award this money not because of aesthetic value, but because it was shown good for the economy, for instance, by employing large numbers of people. Some attending argued that if the government can subsidize beef and dairy farmers, it can subsidize painters and musicians. Others noted that, with the exception of figures like Shakespeare, much great and lasting art is not initially lucrative, and is created by struggling and marginal figures like Vincent Van Gogh, pursuing their personal visions though working in relative poverty; while state-supported art in the USSR was some of the worst in human history.

February 2, 2009--Transcultural and Transatlantic German Studies

At the February 2 AWRN Colloquium, German professors **Susanne Rinner and Arndt Niebisch** drew a record gathering of professors from disciplines as varied as Art, Music, English, Classical Studies, History, and African American Studies for a discussion of the topic of “Transcultural and Transatlantic German Studies.”

Professor Niebisch’s presentation, “*Transmissions: The Atlantic as a Space of Techno-Aesthetic Imagination*,” outlined the history of Marconi’s transatlantic radio transmissions and subsequent monopoly of Atlantic radio waves (making him, Arndt suggested, an early Bill Gates). The dangerous nature of this monopoly came to light with the sinking of the *Titanic*, when. Dr. Niebisch’s research probes the significance of this dynamic, as well as the Lindbergh flight and response to that flight by author Bertolt Brecht and composers Kurt Weill and Paul Hindemith,

whose Opera on Lindbergh's transatlantic flight was written exclusively for performance via the radio—a.k.a. "the apparatus."

The focus for Dr. Rinner's talk, "Triangular Tryst: Americans, Germans, and Jews in Contemporary German Literature, Film and Art," was *The Reader*, the 1995 novel by German law professor and judge Bernhard Schlink, and the current film version. Susanne discussed this and other German novels published since the 1989 reunification as these works engage across the Atlantic with questions of the Holocaust, Germany's Nazi past, and portrayals of collective guilt extending beyond Germany to America.

After these lunchtime presentations, a lively conversation around the table followed as we considered the radio and the airplane as Modernist icons of communication, connection and progress, and discussed whether the film version of *The Reader* was seeking subtly to connect Germany's Nazi racist past with American racial injustice by portraying an American Jewish family that employs a black household servant.

November 24, 2008--Studying the Atlantic World Commons

Dr. Susan Buck, UNCG's Director of Environmental Studies and President-Elect of the International Association for the Study of the Commons, gave an enlightening and broad-ranging presentation about Studying the Atlantic World Commons and what constitutes the commons. Her talk described the expansion from the historical village commons of English shared grazing areas to the supposed commons of the world's oceans and a shared Antarctica.

As Dr. Buck's specialty is Law and Policy in Environmental Studies, her presentation brought to the fore some interesting questions about what types of international policy are made and enforced regarding a global commons. She dealt with the problems of depleted Atlantic fisheries and the lack of any enforceable controlling legal authority. She talked about the actual facts of overfishing and declining fishing grounds, then discussed the varied legal approaches to the Atlantic as a kind of commons and why that language, while intuitive, doesn't fit the actual legal status of the oceans, which are governed by often unenforced treaties. She noted that improvements in fishing technology have endangered the survival of many important fisheries, and changes in ocean ecology may have a more devastating impact on the planet than even atmospheric changes

Professors from a wide range of disciplines attended the November AWRN colloquium: Musicology, History, English, and Environmental Studies among those represented by faculty and graduate students. The following conversation took right off as historians in the group provided more context on maritime civilizations, a musicologist discussed the parallel decline of sea shanties in moribund fishing communities, and a literature professor discussed how slavery was severely curtailed by 19th-Century naval cooperation.

Other comments from different disciplinary angles and research foci ensued: questions like, "why does New England have historical commons and the southeastern United States does not?" and "Is outer space a commons in the historical sense?" Dr. Buck pointed out the literary

connections to this environmental terminology as Thomas More's Utopia refers to this issue of enclosing the Commons.

Oct. 24, 2008 The Essentiality of Leadership—Ghanaian and Nigerian models

Every country needs good leaders. Every culture has implicit ideas of leadership. Individuals have different ways of conceptualizing what a good leader is, depending on their socialization and past experience with leaders. Little attention has been paid to how people perceive leaders and leadership in Africa. **Dr. Acquaah and Dr. Lowe** are conducting extensive research in order to explore this important question: how Africans (specifically for this study, Ghanaians and Nigerians) measure, identify, and value leaders and leadership. For the first time, a person's value and perception of these identifying factors will not be based on a National Identity or "country score." The data was interesting and at times, surprising, as Nigerians answered the questions about leadership differently from those asked about perceptions of leadership in Ghana. This is an ongoing and important initiative in understanding African ideas of leadership.

Professor Acquaah's presentation generated a thought-provoking discussion and several questions regarding the diversity of answers to the sample questions and what that diversity might mean. Professor Lowe shared an ongoing interest in discovering International Students' "hard-wiring" of leadership expectations and concepts by asking them to describe nursery rhymes and fairy tales told them as children. The Asian stories are distinctly divergent from Western tales of a knight on shining armor rescuing the damsel in distress, instead featuring the group solving the problem—a collaboration inherent in Chinese folklore.

A striking difference in how the "referents" information "loaded"—in other words how the Nigerian and Ghanaian answers to the questions on leadership were revealed on a graph displaying attitudes towards leadership—were those differences regarding "masculinity" and "education": Nigerian respondents put education as a high value for leadership while Ghanaians put it at the bottom. Whether these divergent attitudes reflected the respondents' difference in the age or gender, their experience in recent political leadership, or their learned cultural values were possibilities that Dr. Acquaah and Dr. Lowe highlighted and discussed. They remarked that they found it useful to them to field such queries as they continue and expand this research on the subject of leadership in Africa. The "so what" factor in Dr. Lowe's concluding remarks—his question about real applications and consequences—was that it is "essential to understand the implicit ideas of leadership in each country" and that a leader coming from America to be a leader in Ghana, for example, needs to understand what leadership style works in that culture and not automatically use his own culture's leadership style. Styles that succeed in America may prove to be completely ineffective, since a different cultural leadership style is expected in a different cultural context. Dr. Lowe's goal is to improve cross-cultural leadership, particularly as it relates to Africa.

Sept. 9, 2008—Teaching the Atlantic World

The Atlantic World Lunchtime Colloquia Series for 2008-09 is off to a fine start, thanks to **Professor Colleen Kriger and Professor Linda Rupert**. The first Colloquium, titled “Teaching the Atlantic World,” met on Tuesday, September 9th. Dr. Kriger, Professor of African History and Co-Director of AWRN, led a lively discussion on meeting the challenges of teaching Atlantic World material to undergraduates in current UNCG classrooms. She brought thought-provoking hand-outs and real-life examples of the ongoing debate among Africanists over who counts in the accounting of the Atlantic slave trade, suggesting techniques for dealing with questions that arise in current classrooms. Dr. Rupert, Assistant Professor of Atlantic World History, brought visuals—including a wonderfully disorienting early map of the Americas with West at the top—and state-of-the-art textbooks to illustrate what works in teaching the Atlantic World to graduate students. Professors from diverse disciplines attended: Business, Environmental Studies, English, Romance Languages, and Anthropology, contributing responses on a wide range of questions such as, “What primary sources are useful?”, “How do we help students analyze across boundaries?”, and “How do we help students think more spatially?” Colleagues noted that though Atlantic World studies encompass far more than the history of slavery, the reality is that this topic arouses strong personal feeling, even for the scholars of the Slave Trade Debate. This recognition prompted insights into how to approach that reality productively in the classroom, perhaps by converting the question of inherited guilt into one of continuing responsibility for all who live with slavery’s legacies.

April 4, 2008—Defining the Atlantic World

The first Atlantic World Lunchtime Colloquium met Friday, April 4 and was led by **Kate Flint**, Professor of Victorian Literature at Rutgers University and 2007-2008 Fellow of the National Humanities Center. Professor Flint is author of *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), *The Woman Reader, 1837-1914* (Oxford University Press, 1993), and *Dickens* (Harvester, 1985). Her newest book, *The Transatlantic Indian 1776-1930*, is appearing from Princeton University Press in 2008.

Professor Flint led out with a thoughtful consideration of how to define “Atlantic World”: Cis-Atlantic? Trans-Atlantic? Circum-Atlantic? Do Atlantic World Studies carry their own ethical, multicultural charge as a rebuff to the notion of transatlantic being really just North Atlantic? The assembled lunchtime group went at it for a good hour, with some healthy diversity of opinion. By the end of the discussion, it was clear that while the issues of ethical and cultural redress are of interest in the network’s ongoing discussions, its purposes are broader than any particular theoretical commitment or political program. Instead, our mission is to foster and encourage research from a variety of disciplinary perspectives into the geographical and cultural zone that is the Atlantic Rim. Our first colloquium drew 18 people by invitation, deliberately varied in their disciplinary affiliations, including history, political science, music history, Environmental studies, theatre, English, and Romance Languages.