

Hampshire in Havana

Cuba Project Abstracts

Theme: **Gender, Sexuality and Identity**

The abstracts listed here are for projects done on the Hampshire in Havana Cuba program, related to the theme **Gender, Sexuality and Identity**. Projects are listed by year beginning in 2008, with the most recent year first and then in alphabetical order by last name. For questions about specific projects, please contact the Global Education Office.

Name: Frankie Colon

Year: S2018

Tutor: Mayra Rodríguez

Title: "Fragments Undressed"

Topic: Identity, Diaspora Politics, Spirituality, Mask Sculptures

Medium: Mask Sculptures and Performance

As an homage to the late dyke-Chicana-feminist Gloria Anzaldua's unfinished thesis piece "Luz en lo oscuro," this installation is an exploration of divine feminine knowledge in the modern era of globalized information and the hybridization of "culture." From my own lens of diasporic belonging, I have created my own imagining of Anzaldua's terms "Nepantla," a borrowed Indigenous Aztec concept describing a spiritual realm in between realities. This series of mixed-media figures is the first stage of my thesis, a construction of 'un espacio entre mundos y entre filosofías' filled with my own personal pantheon of spirit guides. These *diosas* represent a process of cultural/self-fragmentation and recognition of all that is dissonant coming together to create a place of wholeness. Additionally, borrowing from Elaine Scarry's theories from her work "The Body in Pain", I attempt to make explicit and hyper-visible the trauma of rebirth, as roots are severed and new realities emerge. I engage with these questions: How might we begin to conceptualize a form of cultural production based on qualities such as radical envisioning and intuition, rather than solely giving weight to the scientifically empirical? How might an attunement to corporeal memory and spiritual methodologies aid in the creation of an empathic and interdependent post-colonial framework?

Name: Nadia Milad Issa

Year: S2018

Tutor: Eva Despaigne-Trujillo

Title: "Akpwanlá/Akpwón: Oral Traditions as Memory and Black Iyalochxs leading Yoruba Chants in Sacred Spaces"

Topic: Regla de Ocha-Ifá, Music, Black Womxn Akpwóns

Medium: Auto-Ethnography and Performance

While in Cuba, I studied music of the Regla de Ocha-Ifá religion, specifically Yoruba Chants (*Cantos Yoruba*), Patakis (Yoruba tales), and Womxn Akpwóns (ceremonial singers). Music, like dance in Ocha, is vital as they are both integral to rituals, ceremonies and initiations, celebrations, and homage. Concretely, I researched the history of how Yoruba Chants and Patakis have been passed down and preserved. Doing this involved scholarly research with an expert in these traditions. I explored their present-day form and usage through ethnographic research methods that involved participant observation in both secular and religious spaces. I particularly centered Black Womxn and their participation in these spaces where men tend to dominate, as well as in Oral Historical Traditions. Today I will be singing Yoruba Chants for Egún (ancestors), and Orishas Elegguá and Yemayá alongside company members of Obini Batá. Aché!

Name: Fynta Sidime

Year: S2018

Tutor: Isabel Bustos and Isnavi Cardoso Diaz

Title: "Contemporary Cuban Dance and Theater: Black Women in Performance Space"

Topic: Theater, Black artists, Black Women, Racism

Medium: Essay and Performance

My research in Cuba was to first understand how Afro Cuban women are making theater, as a young woman from guinea, I wanted to develop skills in theater making that I could bring into my community. I wanted to understand choices they make as a director or playwright how does that affect the concept of the piece. I was also interested in movement and so I was able to take dance classes at Danza Teatro Retazos, and one-on-one folklore with dance instructor Isnavi. My essay explore the absence of black women in dance and theater companies in Habana, and what it means to not see people that share my identity in theater. Based on interview and attending rehearsals by the two companies I was studying Danza Teatro Retazos and Teatro El Público I wrote about their performances. For my final presentation I will perform a monologue, the first part of an auto-biography I am writing for my senior thesis project. I integrated dance into this opening piece that talks about three generations of women and their experience of separation, migration and trauma.

Name: Sonya Goldman

Year: S2018

Tutor: Graciela Chailloux

Title: "Silencing of Women's Narrative and National identities within the vision of Cuba History"

Medium: Ethnographic Essay

This project explores the correspondence between Cuban national identity and the learning of one's history. I investigate how different Cuban women, were taught, digest, and engage with Cuban history. Through the collection of qualitative data from interviews conducted in Havana, I highlight the narratives less frequently told, and analyze my interviewees' experiences learning the history of Cuba, specific historical events, and their knowledge of Cuban historical figures. As history can be used as a mode to see into the future, it is important to explore what continuing to exclude the femme narrative from Cuban history means for the national identity of Cuba. I will argue that discourse of learning Cuban history in Cuba contributes to the exclusion of women in history, their oppression in Cuban society, and the quality of their education, inside the classroom and out.

Name: Zulay Holland

Year: S2017

Tutor: Zuleica Roman, and Gertrudis Y. Ortiz

Title: "A Romper el Silencio"

Topic: Activism, Queerness, Racism, Sexism, Homophobia

Medium: Series of Workshops and Handmade Multimedia Magazine

The Project "To Break Silences" ("A Romper el Silencio") is a workshop/reunion space for black womxn/ non-binary¹ black people to talk about their experiences with racism, sexism, homophobia and a plethora of other ways in which we are socially discriminated against. Using the methodology found in Popular Education, I was able to co-facilitate 4 different workshops in which the objectives were:

Visualize and identify the plurality of women chicenegrx and African descendants

- To find common ground in 'activism' of womxn chicenegrx and African descendants in the hip-hop movement, in the LGBTQ community, in heterosexuality and religiosity.
- To protect the integrity of the group of womxn/chicenegrx and African descendants.
- To create a platform to exchange information based on common interests.

Using this methodology, we were able to be able to create a space in which Black and Afro-Descendant womxn and non-binary people's experiences were centralized as knowledge, facilitating our ability to deconstruct taught histories and reconstruct our own, from our self images as well as our socio-political positions. Within these

¹ Non- binary refers to people who identify as gender non-conforming, two spirited, or as existing outside of the gender binary. Non-binary is used interchangeably with the word "chice", the gender non specific version of chica/o. The letter "x" replaces "a" or "o" in order to emphasize and include varying genders within the group.

workshops we were able to hear from the experiences of people from extremely diverse backgrounds, with varying ages, economic statuses, sexual orientations, and gender identifications. This work will be represented through a handmade multimedia magazine which contains theory, artistic contributions from participants, interviews, my own personal reflections and artwork.

Name: Asa Needle

Year: S2017

Tutor: Vivian Martínez Tabares

Title: “Blackness and Contemporary Cuban Theatre”

Topic: Blackness, Contemporary Cuban Theatre, Racism

Medium: Essay

To talk about Blackness in contemporary institutional Cuban theatre is to talk about interconnected and imbricated traditions, themes, sources, techniques, and goals. There is the legacy of slavery and resistance, in representations of the *cimarrón*, or escaped slave, and the *palenque*, or self-freed slave community. There is the influence, or direct reinterpretation, of Cuban religions with African roots, such as Santería, the *orishas*, and the *patakines*. There is the history of the racial impersonation through Blackface theatre starting in the middle 19th century and the nationalization of Blackness in the early 20th, which both make their legacy felt today. And there are the antiracist and antisexist projects that contemporary theatres engage in. I interviewed five prominent theatre-makers whose work engages with this matrix of Blackness, older established artists who have experienced and worked through the trajectory of Cuban history and its theatre. In these interviews we discussed themes such as the U.S. and tourism, marginality and gender, puppetry and children's theatre, and the role of public theatre in socialist society. I also analyze plays I saw throughout my time here, connecting these performances to the thematic above to illustrate the gamut of contemporary theatrical concerns.

Name: Nadia Milad Issa

Year: S2017

Tutor: Bárbara Balbuena

Title: “¡Oni Yemayá! Bailando Rezos Encima de el Piso”

Topic: Regla de Ocha-Ifá, Dance, Music, Blackness, Womxnhood

Medium: Ethnographic Essay and Dance Performance

My project in Cuba was to study Regla de Ocha-Ifá, a Cuban popular traditional religion of origin Yoruba, its manifestations in both music and dance, and the influences of the ritual dances of the Orishas in Danza Moderna. I also specifically looked at the relationship between Afro-Cuban womxn dancers with the divinities, fundamentally Yemayá. I analyzed the connections and differences between spaces of professional dance, and the context of sacred spaces within the ceremonial ritual festivities in this

religion. The journey of this investigation is deep and personal, since I begun practicing Ocha, I now have an element of performance that is more profound, ancestral, and incredible. I feel the guidance of the Orishas, particularly when I dance. I wanted to know what has Ocha, and the Orishas, gifted to the Afro-Cuban womxn dancers who are practitioners of the religion, and those who are not initiated. For me, it was a dream come true, to be able to take Danza Moderna and Folklórica dance classes as well as having first hand experiences with ritual dances. This has filled my soul with happiness and love for the *Tambores*, *Güiros* and *Cajónes*. For the final presentation I will perform a co-choreographed solo of Today Yemayá's *yakotá*, *omolode*, y *chachalokafu* toques. Aché to all!

Name: Cliff Robins

Year: S2016

Tutor: Rafael Rodríguez Beltrán

Title: Slowly Exploding: perspective in Cuban antislavery literature throughout time

Medium: Essay

Mi proyecto explora los múltiples puntos de vista de la literatura cubana sobre el tema de la esclavitud y la representación que han tenido tanto los esclavos como los negros libres en el decursar de la historia, y la forma como han sido reflejados en la literatura, concretamente en cinco textos: *Sab* de Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda; *Cecilia Valdés* de Cirilio Villaverde; *El siglo de las luces* de Alejo Carpentier; *Biografía de un cimarrón* de Miguel Barnet; y *Una Biblia perdida* de Ernesto Peña. Estas cinco obras narrativas subvierten los puntos de vista de la esclavitud, la raza y la discriminación, temas álgidos en el momento de su publicación. Dentro de su contexto histórico, también demuestran un cambio de diálogo respecto a la raza dentro de la sociedad. Al concebir este proyecto, me interesé por la forma en que esos textos han confrontado las ideas convencionales sobre la sociedad negra en Cuba, así como su contribución al cambio social y la manera en que la literatura cubana puede dar continuidad a estos temas en el futuro.

Name: Miari Stephens

Year: S2015

Tutor: Daisy Rubiera

Title: Nuestro Cabello

Topic: Black Women's Hair

Medium: Essay

Based on ethnographic fieldwork, this paper examines the personal and social significance of Black Women's hair in Havana. Hair carries a significant importance especially for Black women, as it is often classified as a marker of economic or social status, racial identity and personal aesthetic or expression. I conducted over twenty interviews throughout Havana with Black women from the ages of 21-78, residing in various municipalities, with different occupations and a variety of hair textures. Using two key concepts—material conditions and personal, intimate experiences--I investigate

Black women's hair as a manifestation of survival. On one hand, Black women's hairstyling can affect their role in the workplace or job market, as many jobs require a specific, limiting *presencia* that predominately targets black features. Thus, the manner in which a Black woman styles her hair may be crucial for her material or economic livelihood. On the other hand, hair can be a form of personal expression that allows Black women to appreciate and love their beauty. In this sense, hairstyling constitutes a form of personal self-survival for Black women— a technique to navigate of a world that devalues and criticizes their features.

Name: Dylan Fitzwater

Year: S2015

Tutor: Zuleica Romay

Title: "The Red Barrial Afrodescendiente: New Possibilities for Anti-Racist Organizing in Cuba"

Medium: Essay

This essay analyzes a community organization called the Red Barrial Afrodescendiente [Afrodescendent Neighborhood Network] in order to explore the possibilities for community based anti-racist organizing in Cuba. The Red Barrial Afrodescendiente is a network of small community organizations that was founded in 2012. It has chapters in the neighborhoods of Balcón Arimao, Pogolotti, Buena Vista, Alamar Playa, Párraga, Jesús María, La Ceiba, and Los Ángeles. All of these neighborhoods are predominantly Afro-Cuban with social realities shaped by complex systems of racism and marginalization, realities which the Red Barrial confronts in its community work. In the essay, I analyze the material and discursive aspects of racism and marginalization in Cuba as they have developed since the triumph of the Cuban revolution, with particular attention to the new social context created by the Special Period. I then take up the example of the Red Barrial Afrodescendiente and show how their community work addresses the intersecting systems of racism, marginalization, and sexism in the local context of these neighborhoods. I argue that the Red Barrial deploys a counterdiscourse articulated by and for the community that critiques racism, sexism and marginalization, while also developing concrete projects which aim to address the material problems of these communities. Through this analysis, I argue that the Red Barrial illustrates the possibilities and importance of community based anti-racist organizing in changing the daily lives of marginalized Afro-Cubans. communities through participatory organizing from below.

Name: Samantha King

Year: S2012

Tutor: Julio César Guanche

Title: "Sin el negro Cuba no ser'a Cuba: Impacts of Race in Cuba"

Medium: Essay

Samantha's research explores the topic of race in post Revolutionary Cuba. Beginning with a brief introduction to the history of race, her 38-page analytical paper focused on

how the Revolution sought to eradicate race through means of legislation and its eventual silencing of the topic within social discourse. Race resurfaced during the Special Period (1989-2006), augmenting problems of prejudice and racism that had previously existed but lain dormant during the 1970s and 80s. With this amplification emerged artistic and intellectual discourses designed to publicly address the problems that persist today. Samantha's essay explores some of these works along with political demands in an attempt to realize some possible changes in the way racial prejudice interacts with and impacts the general Cuban public.

Name: Aurelis Troncoso

Year: S2015, S2014

Tutor: Lázara Menéndez

Title: "Mujeres de Ocha: Voces con fuego en la lengua"

Medium: Poetry, Performance

Afrocuban culture has had a strong presence within Cuban society since the arrival of Africans who were enslaved in the fifteenth century and onward. Africans brought with them a number of religions, which continue to serve as a form of resistance and a way to preserve African traditions. *Mujeres de Ocha: Voces con fuego en la lengua* is the initiation of an investigation that began with my particular interest in black Cuban womyn's resistance within religions of African origin, specifically Regla de Ocha-Ifá. Black Cuban womyn face several forms of discrimination as they are positioned at the intersection of race and gender in the larger society, in addition to having to navigate spiritual spaces that are predominantly occupied by men. These power dynamics in turn impose limitations on womyn in the religion itself, despite the fact that womyn in this religion initially held roles as obba (master of ceremonies), oriate (diviner of diloggun), and as iyanifas (priestesses of Ifá). Throughout this investigation I have attended religious ceremonies, social gatherings, folkloric performances, and interviewed a number of womyn and men who practice Regla de Ocha-Ifá, regarding the representations of womyn in the religion and their opinions regarding the initiation of womyn into Ifá. In these participations I have observed the different tasks that womyn perform and how notions of patriarchy influenced such spaces and are denounced.

Name: Courtney Hooks
Year: S2009
Tutor: Rodrigo Espina
Title: Negra Luz/Black Light
Topic: Black women
Medium: Essay, Multimedia

I hope to raise the voices of black women and shine light on their life experiences from their points of view. For too long, the experiences of black women have been devalued, silenced, and erased. Enough already! I interviewed 35 women from diverse ages, vocations, economic situations, regions, skin colors, and hair types. We talked about various themes, including: how they view different forms of racism; the process of racial identity; the beauty ideals of black people; and their experiences with hair, hairdressers, perms, and other products. I am so grateful to all of the women who participated in and supported me throughout this project. They shared their food, their homes, their time, and above all, their truths.

Through this herstory I realized that hair is a site of happiness and pain, community and independence, oppression, and liberty. I would like all black women to know that we are beautiful as we are. Our natural state is not "broken" and doesn't need to be automatically "fixed." Our hair, our skin colors, our features don't need to be changed for anything or anyone.

In this project I use hair as a window through which I analyze racial identity and the position of black women in Cuban society. With these photos and interviews, I hope that the women in my project can illuminate their own stories and awaken some people that still don't know what significance the hair of black Cubanas holds, those who don't know that hair tells a grand tale.

Name: Divad Durant
Year: S2008
Tutor: Nelson Rodríguez
Title: Black Expressions
Medium: N/A

Black Expressions covers the various artist who work around theme of race and marginalization in Cuba. Black Expression creates a synthesis of the complexities of Afro-Cuban identity in Cuba. The history of slavery has created similar experiences of Blackness across the Atlantic. The expressions of the artist do not only address issues of racism that still exist in Cuba, they also suggest the need to create a more comprehensive understanding of Cuban identity.

Name: Mo Mulderig

Year: S2008

Tutor: María Cristina Aldana

Title: "Buscando la raya: searching for the line"

Medium: Creative Writing

It began with the question of race. Or maybe, it began much earlier, when I was a child growing up inside a very white, rural city where liberalism and idealism blocked out any possibility for racism to be seen. Now that I have had experiences outside of my primary home, I have learned that my whiteness, like any other skin color, carries with it a meaning beyond my personal identity...beyond my control? How much of my identity is constructed by how others perceive my body? In discussions about racism in Cuba, I found that instead of the racial segregation I believe still exists in the United States, in order to hide racism the Cuban socialist state has used language to emphasize a stronger sense of collectivity than individuality: Todos somos iguales. We are all equal. Nosotros tomamos café. We drink coffee. Or, as my teacher María Cristina challenges: Nosotros no tomamos café. We don't drink coffee. Thinking of the capitalist culture where I come from, I am reminded of the overbearing weight given to the "I," rather than the "We." How can a balance be found between these extremes so that one isn't eliminated, hidden, denied? I don't want to speak for anyone beside myself. I don't want to represent something beyond my own body and what it knows. But I know that the richness of life comes from our differences, like how each of us perceives the meaning of a simple gesture differently. And so, I have been exploring my relationship with Cuba and Cubans through one body- white, female, feminine, and foreign. I'm looking for the line drawn between the individual body and the collective body that I have felt and imagined, though never seen.