



Post Fellowship Reporting - Project Summary

Report Title: A Busca da Mitologia Afro-Brasileira:
The Search for Afro-Brazilian Mythology

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Other Team Members:

Program: New York City Program

Trip Dates: 11/30/-0001 - 11/30/-0001

Location Visited: Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Post Fellowship Reporting Template: PFR Template 01

Project Summary: Anyone who has studied Literature is intimately familiar with Greek and Roman mythology, but few understand the intricacies of the largely oral traditions of African and African-American mythology. I remember learning as a high school student the mythical relationships between the gods, and working in units revolving around connecting their attributes to our own lives. In planning a course called Women of Color Writers, I thought it would be powerful to include mythology in the way I learned it as a student; my Black and Latina students would be able to draw strength and pride from reading feminine mythology that was reflective of their own cultures. On my list of books to teach for the course were prominent women of color writers from Sandra Cisneros to Nawal El-Saadawi, but something was missing. It seemed like second nature to include writers from North America, Anglophone Central/South America and the Caribbean, Spanish-speaking Central/South America and the Caribbean, Continental Africa and Asia. Not until I was knee-deep in books and lesson plans for the course did I realize that I neglected to remember Brazil.

At the time, my only frame of reference for Brazilian Literature was Jorge Amado. Because I wanted the course to focus on women writers who write about women, I looked beyond Amado's work; I could not forget his constant references to African culture as it survived in Brazil and longed to find a correlation. I resolved to look at the mythology itself instead of solely relying on works of fiction to fill the class' void. I reached out to translators, professors and anthropologists for help. While having different resources to provide, they all explained that while researchers have begun capturing the myths on paper the tradition remains oral. Each source advised the same thing; if I wanted to know about African mythology in Brazil I would need to be with the people who maintained the oral tradition.

I spent four weeks in Rio de Janeiro living in a religious compound where Afro-Brazilians have maintained their oral mythology since the days of slavery in Brazil. I was inspired by learning about the goddess Oshun who fought for the equal rights of women among the gods, or Nana who saved a warrior from peril by risking her own life. I was told of Iemanjá, a river goddess, who asked her father Olokun (owner of the seas) to protect Africans being sold into slavery during their trips across the Atlantic and the status that she now holds not only for Afro-Brazilians, but Brazilians in general. I met with an anthropologist who shared her experience in respectfully documenting information from within the compound, and spent days going back and forth to a unique African bookstore. I found nearly a dozen titles to bring home that I am translating for my students. I also spent a day at a small school called Para Ti (For You) school in a favela (shanty-town).

Life in a terreiro (religious compound) was like nothing to be imagined in the 21st century. We were naturally awakened by dawn, and I was allowed to observe prayers, singing and dancing for the Orisha (gods). I watched as the women in the terreiro were treated with the same amount of respect as the goddesses as they completed their daily tasks. We slaughtered our own chicken for dinner and hung white clothes in the sun to be bleached. The experience gave me not only literature to share with my students, but an understanding of my own that I will be able to share with them.

Career Impact: I was challenged primarily to keep in mind all of the things that I take for granted in my daily life. Small things like running water 24/7, indoor heating and hot water are luxuries within the terreiro. The challenge was not simply to appreciate what I have at home, but to encourage this appreciation in my students as well. I hadn't realized before the fellowship that I feared becoming a student again. During my time in the terreiro I became a sponge and one to be taught; I completely forgot how trusting one must be in order to be taught. I am reminded of this fear of letting go and giving up control each day that I teach, and am thankful that my students trust me enough to let go. I feel as though my experience in Brazil is only the beginning, and I intend to return to the terreiro as often as I can to continue learning from this community. Everything that I learned was taught through modeling, and it reinforced my own outlook on instruction in the classroom.

Classroom/Community Impact:As a result of my fellowship I am putting together a DVD to show my students featuring the folkloric singing and dancing for the Orisha that tells their stories. I hope to reach the diverse learners in my classroom by providing not only a DVD highlighting information about African mythology, but also photos, books and dolls that will be used in the unit as well. I look forward to working with another teacher who created a course called Images of Women in the Media to discuss how negative images of women can be turned into positive images by looking at the mythology. The information that I gathered will also be useful to my

peers who teach Latin American and African History, and Slavery courses at BCHS.

Open Response: As a result of my fellowship and to culminate the unit, my students will create their own myths using today's issues and creating goddesses with the qualities to combat the issues. Before leaving for Brazil I spoke at length with a woman who is currently working on translating Brazilian works of literature into English, and she suggested that I attempt to contact the publishers of mythological books that I bought to see if the translations can be published here. As of yet, there are no set plans for published translations, but I will continue to work in this vain.

Quote: "Há espaço para todos e para todas." - There's space for everyone, from Nana: A Senhora Dos Primórdios, Cléo Martins

Photos:



Religious compound/Terreiro of Candomblé where I stayed



Browsing for Books!



Candomblé feast at the terreiro



Museo do Negro



Orisha Oshun; Queen Goddess who fights for women's rights



Para Ti School - Vila Canoas Favela



Art by students at Vila Canoas Favela



Religious supply store