

# Bridges across the Nations: African American Culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

The conference is organized by the Catholic University of Lublin and Institute of English Studies, University of Warsaw and sponsored by the Embassy of the United States of America in Warsaw and the Collegium for African American Research

Puławy, Poland

February 2 - 5, 2006

We would like to express our gratitude to the American Embassy in Warsaw for its more than generous help. Special and deep thanks go to Ania Wilbik-Świtaj, who has offered us both her expert help and time. We would also like to thank the Collegium for African American Research for its financial and institutional support.

# Conference Program

## 2 February

- 15.00      **Registration:** Centrum Konferencyjne (Conference Center) “IUNG” Pulawy
- 18.00      Small reception and welcoming address (Centrum Konferencyjne)
- 19.30      Film *Blokersi* and a discussion

## 3 February

- 7.00-8.30      Breakfast

### **Workshops: Centrum konferencyjne, Room 1**

- 8.30- 10.00      Lillian S. Williams, “Bridges across the Nations: Club Women as Activists, Cultural Bearers, and Community Builders.”
- 10:00-10:15      Break
- 10.15-11.00      Chris Bell, “How to Have Racial Sensitivity in an Epidemic.”
- 11:00-11:30      Coffee Break
- 11.30-13.00      Heike Raphael, “Gazing at the Ghetto. The Emergence of Hip Hop ‘Street’ Fiction.”
- 13.30-14.30      Dinner
- 14.30-16.00      Jerzy Kutnik, “African Americans in the Visual Arts.”
- 16:00-16:30      Coffee Break
- 16.30-18.00      Coleman A. Jordan, “Harlem Speak: A Symbol of Defiance Aimed at Indifference.”
- 18.30-21.30      Dinner in the conference center or bonfire in the forest (warm clothes required)

## 4 February

7.00-9.00 Breakfast

### **Workshops: Centrum konferencyjne, Room 1**

9.00-10.30 Magdalena Zaborowska, "African Americans in Unexpected Places. James Baldwin's Turkish Decade."

10.30-11:00 Coffee Break

11.00-12.30 Kwakiutl Dreher, "'Don't Worry, Flo, I'll Take Care of It.' Mary Wilson: Taking Care of Business through Autobiography."

13.00-14.00 Dinner

### **Concert hall in the Palace**

14.30-16.00 Stan Breckenridge, "Ragtime, Blues, Stride, Boogie-Woogie, Jazz and Vocal Standards: Techniques for a Successful Solo Piano Performance."

16.00-16:30 Coffee Break

16.30-18.00 Stan Breckenridge, "African American Music: A Representation of American Identity."

18.30-19.30 Supper

19.30-20.30 Panel discussion. Chair: Chris Bell.  
"African American Studies in Central and Eastern Europe"

## 5 February

7.00-9.00 Breakfast, Departure

## Chris Bell

Nottingham Trent University

**Chris Bell's** essays and articles have appeared in *The Faces of AIDS: Living in the Heartland*, *Culture and the State: Alternative Interventions*, and *Positively Aware*. He has work forthcoming in *The Disability Studies Reader, 2nd ed* (Routledge) and *Illness in the Academy: A Collection of Pathographies by Academics* (Purdue). His book reviews have been published in *African American Review*, *Cercles* and *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, while his encyclopedia articles have been published in *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of African American Literature* and *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of MultiEthnic Literature*. Chris divides his time between Poland, his adopted home, and England, where he is a Ph.D. student at the Nottingham Trent University. His thesis focuses on US cultural responses to the AIDS crisis.

### **“How to Have Racial Sensitivity in an Epidemic”**

This paper begins by speaking to the different ways that AIDS has been reacted to over the past twenty-five years in the United States, ultimately arguing that the disease has failed to be negotiated along racial lines. Although there have been countless and concerted efforts to deconstruct the AIDS infected subject as a “gay white man,” thereby calling into question the institutionalized politics and praxis of homophobia, (hetero)sexism, and (hetero) patriarchy, and while there have been sporadic attempts to provide redress to, treatment for, and representations of women who are infected (e.g., the real life stories of Kimberly Bergalis and Mary Fisher, and the fictional albeit problematic example of “Boys on the Side”), AIDS has yet to be comprehensively theorized and acted upon along racial lines, particularly, as this paper focuses on, in black communities. This becomes all the more daunting a reality given the fact that, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, blacks comprise 12% of the entire US population, but 47% of AIDS deaths. By revisiting the legacies of Earvin “Magic” Johnson and Eric “Eazy-E” Wright, and by concentrating on the ongoing frenzy of the “down low” (that suggests that large numbers of straight-identified black men are engaging in sex with each other, and then passing HIV to their wives and girlfriends), I want to emphasize that AIDS is yet another lost opportunity insofar as addressing the racist positioning of the black body in the United States.

## **Dr. Stan Breckenridge**

Afro-Ethnic Studies California State University, Fullerton

Maria Curie Sklodowska University Visiting Scholar

**Dr. Stan Breckenridge** holds a Ph.D. in musicology at the prestigious Claremont Graduate University in Claremont, California. Dr. Breckenridge has nearly twenty years of teaching experience as an educator at numerous higher learning institutions. Some of these include California State University, Fullerton, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, Soka University (in Aliso Viejo), Irvine Valley College, and Saddleback College (in Mission Viejo).

Stan Breckenridge is the author of *African American Music for Everyone*, which is now in its second edition. A new book titled *Popular Music in America* is set for publication fall 2005. The manuscript is broader in scope in that it addresses genres that move beyond African American tradition to include zydeco, hillbilly, bluegrass, reggae, speed metal, punk, tejano, and other forms. Dr. Breckenridge served as consultant and developed the entire curriculum (20 courses) for the Recording Technology & Entertainment Certificate Program (RTCEP) for the South County Community College District, Mission Viejo, California (2001). Within the past four years he has written grants that total nearly \$100,000.00.

Performing professionally as a singer and pianist abroad and domestically for many years, Stan Breckenridge has delighted audiences in Western and Eastern Europe, Japan, Hong Kong, and many cities throughout the U.S. Various events and venues in the U.S. include The Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, The Hollywood Bowl, Capitol Records, Pepsi Battle of the Bands, The Greek Theater, The Forum (former name), The Sports Arena, the Watts Summer Festival, and various T.V. shows. Stan Breckenridge has performed with or for individuals such as Bill Cosby, Sam Riddle, Rowan & Martin, Greg Morris, David Ruffin, Martha Reeves, Moms Mabley, Nancy Sinatra, O.C. Smith, The Stylistics, The Gerald Wilson Orchestra, The Five Blind Boys of Alabama, Rosie Grier, Merv Griffin, Jerry Lewis, Avery Schreiber, John Travolta, John Wayne, and many others. Stan Breckenridge has recorded three CD's: *Expositions*, *Meditations*, and *Solo*, which all include original compositions for piano.

Stan Breckenridge is the founder and serves as the artistic director of the Afro-Ethnic Studies Community, Ensemble - - a performance group and co-curricular activity that actively engages

students, faculty, and staff in close collaboration to expand knowledge in a culturally and academically enriching environment that works to strengthen multicultural understanding and university-community relations.

**"African American music: A representation of American identity"**

The lecture/demonstration will introduce and explain what I call "Identifiers of American Culture." Some of these include democracy, diversity, ingenuity, freedom, and compassion. The aim, using research methodologies surrounding culture, politics, social behavior, philosophical and ethnomusicological inquiries, gave the audience an opportunity to attain a different perspective of American and African American cultures, and ultimately a fuller understanding of American Identity.

**Dr. Kwakiutl L. Dreher**

English and African American Studies

University of Nebraska, Lincoln

**Dr. Kwakiutl L. Dreher** was born and raised in Columbia, South Carolina. She earned a Bachelor's Degree in English from the University of South Carolina-Columbia, and her Master's from Clark Atlanta University in Atlanta, Georgia. Dr. Dreher received her Ph.D. from the University of California-Riverside in 2001. She credits her community in Columbia, especially her church with encouraging her to pursue her academic interests. Her research interests include film and visual culture, twentieth-century American literature (1970-present); mass marketed popular literature and popular culture, and Black autobiography. She is currently at work on a book entitled *Dancing on the White Page: Black Women in Entertainment Writing Autobiography*. In this manuscript, Dr. Dreher explores the lives of five Black women entertainers: Lena Horne, Eartha Kitt, Diahann Carroll, Dorothy Dandridge, Mary Wilson, and Whoopi Goldberg.

**"Don't Worry, Flo. I'll Take Care of It' Taking Care of Business through  
Autobiography: Mary Wilson and Motown"**

This paper is a study of a member of one of the most popular and sensational girl groups in the world during the 1960s: *The Supremes*, later *Diana Ross and the Supremes*. Wilson's text, one

that popularized celebrity autobiography, *Dreamgirl: My Life as A Supreme*. On one hand, Wilson's book is an attempt to *re-find* her *self* after being displaced as one of the lead singers and the subsequent crowning of Ross as her replacement at the expense of the group. On the other, Wilson's book is a postmortem apology to Florence Ballard, who went downhill after her tenure with The Supremes and died in poverty. While Wilson feels somewhat responsible for Ballard's dismissal from the group, her account of the dysfunction in the house of Motown exposes the forces that affect the relationship between the two women. "Don't Worry, Flo" deals with discovering along with Wilson how the teenager at the time (re)negotiates an identity that had been formed by adult Black men and women in power in the 1960s. How does this renegotiation take place when so much of it is tied up and into the *supreme* image and stardom? What were the *intra*-racial dynamics in such a *supreme* organization that introduced to Black teenage culture of the 1960s a hip, cool, kind of Black womanhood?

*Note: Mary Wilson's autobiography builds a bridge that allows for an understanding of the more popular autobiographical texts now being published by Black women in popular culture and mass marketed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, namely Confessions of a Video Vixen by former rap video star Karrine Steffans, The Wendy Williams Experience by Hip-Hop radio personality Wendy Williams, and Ladies First: Revelations of a Strong Woman by actress and rap artist Queen Latifah.*

### **Dr. coleman a. jordan (ebo)**

Taubman College of Architecture + Urban Planning  
The Center for African and Afroamerican Studies  
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

**Dr. coleman a. jordan (e)** is an assistant professor of architecture and design at the School of Architecture, with an appointment in the Center for African and Afroamerican Studies at The University of Michigan. He holds degrees from Ohio State University and Clemson University (MArch) and has conducted research at the Arkitektskolen i Aarhus and the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen, Denmark. He has practiced full time in the profession of architecture, and has been a full-time scholar and academic teacher since 1994.

His research focuses on the ways in which architectural spaces, detail, and forms can represent



and construct diverse cultural identities, and especially African American identity in both domestic and international contexts. His work engages architecture in a discourse with literature and history and argues for narrative and autobiographical approaches to American identity as inscribed in the structures of the past and present.

He received a W.E.B. Du Bois Fellowship from Harvard University to work on research related to his work on the Black Atlantic, and recently exhibited an installation in the “harlemworld: Metropolis as Metaphor” exhibit sponsored by the Studio Museum in Harlem.

Jordan is currently producing a publication, “Building Black Bondage,” inspired by his research on the slave holding castles in Ghana, Africa, and his readings of Western discourses of space and identity in Europe and the United States.

### **“Harlem Speak: A Symbol of Defiance Aimed at Indifference.”**

*harlemworld: Metropolis as Metaphor* an architecture show at the Studio Museum in Harlem, presented the work of 18 architects in a group analysis of Harlem’s unstable identity in changing times. A massive megaphone marked the location of the exhibit *Harlem Speak: Street Signs & Soapboxes* created by a team of collaborators, architecture faculty coleman a. jordan and Mark Weston, and art faculty Monte Martinez and Karen Sanders. Also assisting on the team was Anthony Harris, a recent architecture graduate student, and current students Jessie Allen-Young, Carrie Dessertine, and Jason Welker. Suggesting that the desire to be heard never really goes out of style, the project nods to Harlem’s rich history of protest and the once commonplace soapbox speakers who voiced their opinions on Harlem’s street corners.

As Harlem experiences vast developmental changes within the community—sometimes referred to as the gentrification of Harlem—many citizens within the community have been taken aback or surprised by the new shops and building projects that have recently appeared. Harlem Speak echoes the public’s feelings of disempowerment and lack of voice in these constructions through mediums such as text, drawings, audio, and video. In addition to the megaphone, a rank of three shopping carts contain items diverse in meaning and symbolism—an ancient wooden soapbox, and two video screens replaying “live-on-the-street” comments of Harlem residents. Flanking the exhibit is a protest toolkit—a suitcase stocked with Harlem street signs, spray-paint cans, a protest T-shirt, and miniature television with a surveillance video playing.

Through its many interwoven elements, the Harlem Speak exhibit does much to underscore this quote from the February 13 *New York Times* review of the Harlemworld show: “Architecture is now a hybrid...medium.... Its expressive possibilities are limited only by the individual talents of

*those who choose to operate in the field. It's up to them to improvise the laws of architecture as they go along."*

Dr. Jerzy Kutnik

Department of American Studies

Maria Curie Skłodowska University

**Dr. Jerzy Kutnik** is currently head of the Department of American Studies at Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin. Between 1992-2005 was director of the English Teacher Training College and between 1999-2005 was Associate Dean of Humanities at MCSU; in 2001 established the Department of English at the School of Natural and Social Sciences, a private institution in Lublin where he is currently Dean of Social Science; has published *The Novel as Performance: The Fiction of Ronald Sukenick and Raymond Federman* (Southern Illinois University press, 1986), two books on John Cage (in Polish, 1993, 1997), and over 60 articles on American literature, history, popular culture, and art; was an ACLS fellow at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in 1985-86, a Fulbright Fellow at Stanford University and San Diego State University in 1991-92, and a fellow at the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, New York, in 2000; has taught at the University of Joensuu, Finland, and the University of Canterbury, New Zealand, and has presented papers in the Czech Republic, Romania, Sweden, Germany, France, Switzerland, the United States, Hong Kong, and China; between 1966-2002 was a member of the board of the European Association of American Studies; between 2000-2003 was an international contributing editor of *the Journal of American History*; in 1993 was a co-organizer of 'the days of silence,' a John Cage Festival at the Center for Contemporary Culture in Warsaw; was the initiator, in 1998, of the Pulawy seminars in American Studies for teacher trainers from Eastern-Central Europe.

### **“African Americans in the Visual Arts”**

This presentation offers an overview of the most important developments in the history of African American art. The lecture is illustrated with projections of the most important works of leading artists.

## **Dr. Heike Raphael-Fernandez**

Department of English

University of Maryland in Europe

**Dr. Heike Raphael-Hernandez** is Professor of English at the University of Maryland in Europe. Her most recent publication, *AfroAsian Encounters: Culture, History, Politics*, co-edited with Shannon Steen, will be published by New York University Press in fall 2006. She is editor of *Blackening Europe: The African American Presence* (Routledge 2003). Among her other publications are  *Holding Their Own: Perspectives on the Multi-Ethnic Literatures of the United States* (Stauffenburg Verlag 2000), co-edited with Dorothea Fischer-Hornung, and several articles on contemporary African American writers, African American youth culture, and the Vietnam War and its legacy in African American literature. Her current research interests include not only hip hop ‘street’ literature, but also women, war and (post)-trauma.

### **”Gazing at the Ghetto: The Emergence of Hip Hop ‘Street’ Fiction”**

In Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas has to drive his multimillionaire employer’s daughter, Mary Dalton, and her communist boyfriend, Jan, to his neighborhood. As Mary expresses, she has that tremendous desire to see for herself how people like Bigger live. She tells him:

I ‘ve long wanted to go into these houses and just *see* how your people live [...] I’ve been to England, France, and Mexico, but I don’t know how people live ten blocks from me. We know so *little* about each other. I just want to *see*. I want to *know* these people. Never in my life have I been inside of a Negro home. Yet they *must* live like we live. They’re are *human*.... There are twelve million of them.... They live in our country.... In the same city with us. (Wright 69-70)

In the 1940s, Mary’s voyeuristic, white gaze eventually costs her life. Yet, six decades later, she would be alive because today she would be able to gaze safely at ghetto life by reading books. In recent years a new genre in African American literature, hip-hop lit, also called ghetto lit, street lit or urban lit, has appeared. In these hip hop street tales, readers “watch” young African Americans in their daily, often brutal fight to make it in the ghetto. Typical for the majority of these authors is their autobiographical background. Most either grew up in the hood or they know the hood from their work with the community, as has been the case with author Sister Souljah. Some have their own experience with jail. Victoria M. Stringer, for example,

wrote her semi-autobiographical novel, *Let That Be the Reason* (2001), while serving a 7-year prison term.

Any discussion of this new genre has to acknowledge that hip-hop street lit is problematic in several regards. In general, hip-hop has been accused of glorifying violence, crime, gender degradation, and consumer capitalism, and its literature seems not to differ. In addition, the sudden popularity of hip-hop street lit and the relative ease of self-publishing have caused many new authors to ride on that fast cash wave. It is indeed impossible to compile a list of authors, as they seem to be born on a weekly basis. Such an explosion of popularity has caused hastily written and thrown-together books as the books sell regardless of good stylistic, editorial and production quality. Furthermore, several mainstream publishers that at first turned down manuscripts as ‘too ghetto’ have now discovered the financial beauty of ‘ghetto flavor’ and have offered contracts to initially self-publishing authors. Their involvement allows now outsiders like Mary Dalton to ‘gaze’ en masse.

Until recently, academics have largely ignored this new expression of African American writing as they consider it pulp fiction. Some critics consider the fiction’s only advantage its potential to perhaps lure young people to Morrison via ghetto lit. I would argue, however, that the new hip-hop street lit is not only good for the idea that finally “reading becomes an important part” of certain young people’s lives as a *Black Issues* article claims, but fits well into the continuous tradition of African American autobiographical writing.

### **Dr. Lillian S. Williams**

Department of African American Studies

University of Buffalo, the State University of New York

**Dr. Lillian S. Williams** is Associate Professor and chair of the Department of African American Studies at the University of Buffalo, the State University of New York. A specialist in United States social and urban history, Dr. Williams' research is in the areas of institutions, ethnicity, biography, and women's history. Her research includes social institutions such as the Young Men's and Young Women's Christian Associations and the National Urban League; Jewish club women; she is working on a biography of Mary Burnett Talbert, an early twentieth century reformer.

Lillian Williams served as historian consultant on several history projects including the New York State Museum's permanent exhibition "*Black Capital: Harlem in the 1920s.*"

Williams edited the microfilm edition of the *Records of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs*, the oldest secular, African American organization in existence today; she is associate editor of the sixteen volume series *Black Women in American History*. She also is an associate editor of *The Encyclopedia of New York State*. The author of dozens of articles, Dr. Williams also published *Strangers in the Land of Paradise* from Indiana University Press in 1999; it was reissued in paperback in 2000. Professor Williams was selected as a fellow for the National African American Women's Leadership Institute Class of 2001.

**“Bridges across the Nations: Club Women Activists, Cultural Bearers, and Community Builders”**

This paper will focus upon the National Association of Colored Women's and African American club women, such as Mary Burnett Talbert, who have played key roles in preserving their culture and creating and preserving their communities.

**Dr. Magdalena J. Zaborowska**

Program in American Culture and Center for Afroamerican and African Studies,  
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

**Dr. Magdalena J. Zaborowska** holds an MA degree from Warsaw University in Poland (1987) and a Ph.D. from the University of Oregon (1992) in the United States. Her research interests include migrant ethnicities, feminist and race theory, and spatial politics of race, nationality, sexuality, and gender in a transatlantic context. She has taught and been a visiting scholar at the University of Oregon, Furman University, Aarhus University in Denmark, Tulane University, and the University of Michigan, where she is currently associate professor in the Program in American Culture and the Center for Afroamerican and African Studies. Her published books include: *How We Found America: Reading Gender through East European Immigrant Narratives* (University of North Carolina Press, 1995) and edited collections, *Other Americans, Other Americas: The Politics and Poetics of Multiculturalism* (Aarhus University Press, 1998), *The Puritan Origins of American Sex: Religion, Sexuality, and National Identity in American Literature* (Routledge, 2001), and *Over the Wall/After the Fall: Post-Communist Cultures in the East-West Gaze* (Indiana University Press, 2004). Her current project is entitled, *Erotics of Exile: James Baldwin's Turkish Decade*.

**“African Americans in Unexpected Places. James Baldwin’s Turkish Decade.”**

This talk employs the results of on-site research and interviews with James Baldwin’s friends and biographers, who witnessed and recorded his life in Istanbul, Turkey, where the writer spent nearly a decade and wrote some of his most important works. Although this part of Baldwin’s life is virtually unknown to most of his critics and readers, it is vital for understanding his contribution to American literature in general and his complex theorization of (African) American transatlantic national identity in particular. The talk intersperses original visuals (film and photography), local oral histories, the author’s letters, and popular Turkish press representations that refer to Baldwin’s locations, his activities as an intellectual/activist, and his persona as the world-famous African American writer of the 1960’s and ‘70s. These representations of Baldwin’s (African) Americanness in the Muslim setting of Turkey reflect the fact of American imperial omnipresence across the Atlantic, what Baldwin refers to in the soundtrack to Sedat Pakay’s film about his stay in Istanbul (“James Baldwin: From Another Place,” 1970-73) as, “the trouble probably is that ...what is happening there [in America] is going to affect the world much more than what happens in any other country at this point in the world’s history. Because so much has been invested in terms of human hope in America, and it’s been such a legend for so long.”