

AAA Annual Meeting 2021

Baltimore

Executive Session

Vindication, Imagination, and Decolonization: African Americans and the Experience of Anthropology (The George W. Stocking, Jr. Symposium)

Friday, November 19, 2021

4:15 PM – 6:00 PM

Room: Holiday Ballroom 4-6

Lee D. Baker, Org.

Riché Barnes, Chair

Tracie Canada, Discussant

Abstract: As we commemorate 50 years of the Association of Black Anthropologists, it is incumbent to recognize that African Americans have been bearing witness, taking action, and holding scholars accountable to the truth since the very beginning of anthropology in North America. Frederick Douglass, for example, wrote a critical response to Josiah Nott's *Types of Mankind* in 1854. During every twist and turn in the history of anthropology, African American scholars have taken on the responsibility to insist that anthropology be a holistic social science that combats racism and oppression and leads to a more responsive and inclusive understanding of what it means to be human. At the same time, anthropologists throughout the African Diaspora have described and analyzed how violence, power, and oppression lead to atrocities and the worst forms of inhumanity. In this panel, we take a look at a sample of African American intellectuals who were leaders in the vindication struggle, were creative and imaginative describing culture, and worked hard towards achieving a decolonized anthropology.

Individual Paper Abstracts

“Frederick Douglass: Parent of Anti-racist and Progressive Anthropology”

Michael Blakey

Individual Abstract: Abolitionist intellectual, Frederick Douglass, began the American nature/nurture debate with his immediate critical response to *Types of Mankind* (1854) beginning public debate of slavery using scientific racism and ethnology. “Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered” (1854) is explicitly anthropology at a time when its formal institutions did not exist and all conversant in the new language of anthropology had equal claim to it. Douglass, a nationally renowned author, orator and anti-slavery lobbyist, simultaneously and synthetically innovates 1) a critique of scientific neutrality, 2) the environmental view of biology as created by its “circumstances,” and 3) activist scholarship. Between Equiano in the late 18th century and Firmin in the late 19th, Douglass and these other blacks are the only anti-racist ethnographers. The rest of anthropology in America and Europe was definitively racist.

“Mapping the Legacy of W. E. B. Du Bois”

Whitney L. Battle-Baptiste

Individual Abstract: This paper will look specifically at the legacy of the work of Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois from *The Philadelphia Negro* to *The World and Africa*. W. E. B. Du

Bois engaged directly with how race and class formed the foundation of our democracy and provides transformative methods for the interpretation of the African American past.

“Drylongso, Decoloniality, and African Diaspora Museology: Imagining the Anthropology of John Langston Gwaltney”

Deborah Johnson-Simon

Individual Abstract: This narrative imagines the anthropology of John Langston Gwaltney as ABA celebrates its 50th anniversary. This Syracuse University anthropologist’s self portrait of Black America in “Drylongso” is the quintessential reference which in black dialect refers to the ordinary kinds of people. Decoloniality is also explored through the lens of the “Gwaltneyites” a term coined by Savannah State University students who became Gwaltney’s anthropology followers. They see it as way to re-learn the knowledge of our forefathers and foremothers that has been pushed aside, forgotten, buried or discredited by the forces of modernity. Gwaltney’s work as scholar, teacher, writer, ritual wood carver, native anthropologist and African Diaspora museum anthropologist transcend being blind from birth to extraordinary anthropological imagination. Included as one the Second Generation of African American Anthropologists after the Pioneers, his influence on anthropology is still far reaching.

“W. Montague Cobb: Bioanthropological Humanist and Human”

Rachel J. Watkins

Individual Abstract: This presentation offers a brief reading of Cobb’s life and work that departs from a normalized professional, racial and gendered identity. Cobb’s personal and professional correspondence with colleagues is used to frame his departure from a Boasian orientation, as well as his incorporation of ideas suggestive of human biological hierarchies. Cobb’s work is also discussed in the context of his connections to local and national Black elite circles and artistic pursuits. Ultimately, his complexities and contributions are presented to illustrate *who can be and what can be* in scientific communities and elsewhere when humanity is shaped outside of norms for which race serves as the foundation.

“Zora Neale Hurston: Humanistic Anthropologist In the Shadow of Anthropology”

Irma McClaurin

Individual Abstract: Zora Neale Hurston was one of the most important reflexive anthropologists in the 20th century. Her contributions to humanistic anthropology are reflected in how she wrote ethnography and her theorizing about the significance of Black (Negro) cultural practices in the African Diaspora based on her ethnographic fieldwork in Florida, Bahamas, Haiti and New Orleans. Though her Native Anthropology approach has influenced generations of Black and other non-white anthropologist, she has remained in the “shadows” of the discipline. This presentation is intended to recognize and honor her contributions as an authentic Black “Native” card-carrying anthropologist and ethnographer who deserves respect.

“Negro Folklore Matters: The Hampton Folklore Society and Struggle to Define Blackness in the 1890s”

Lee D. Baker

Individual Abstract: In 1893 Alice Bacon launched the Hampton Folk-lore Society. The mission was two-fold. She wanted to salvage “all traditions and customs peculiar to the Negroes,” and measure how far normal school graduates rose from the lowly “cabin people” to cultivated and civilized people. However, she was adamant; however, that “the

work cannot be done by white people,” and “must be done by the intelligent and educated colored people.” Quickly a small cohort of Black teachers, nurses, librarians, and administrators took up her call and began collecting folklore, conjure remedies, songs, and jokes. These scholars were committed to both truth and responsibility. They used folklore as a way to describe distinctively African American traditions, shared authentic renditions of folk stories to counter the popular minstrelsy, and made the case that African American culture was valuable and worthy of study. Anna Julia Cooper was a member of the society, and she was very concerned that Negroes should strive to fashion a distinct and rich culture and not try to copy or parrot white folks. She explained that “servile copying foredooms mediocrity; it cuts the nerve of soul expression.” The members of the Hampton Folk-Lore Society established a pattern among Black anthropologists that continues today. They use anthropological methods and theory but employ a different epistemological frame to bear witness, take action, and provide a more just and inclusive vision of humanity.