TEACHERS INSTITUTE OF PHILADELPHIA  
UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA  

From West Africa to West Philadelphia: 
Cultural Routes to Common Ground 

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OVERVIEW 
Since the colonial period, Philadelphia has been home to diverse communities with African 
ethnic and cultural roots. In the city and the surrounding Delaware Valley we find 
touchstones to every stage of the still-unfolding history of the Black Atlantic: from Congo 
Square (now Washington Square) to well-known sites of the Underground Railroad, from 
Merion Cemetery to the theater districts of North Broad Street and West Philadelphia’s Fifty 
Second Street, down to the West African and Caribbean ethnoscapes emerging on 
Woodland and Lancaster Avenues today. The premise of this seminar is that the mixing, 
and brilliant fusions, of African cultural ideas with British, Spanish, French, Dutch, 
Portuguese and Native American ideas, so distinctive to the Black Atlantic, finds continuing 
expression in the streets, churches, marketplaces, playgrounds, and neighborhoods of west 
and southwest Philadelphia. In this seminar we will examine key historical and ethnographic 
writings on the development of African-based cultural forms in the New World. Then, 
turning to your experience and observations, and those of your students, we will 
“groundtruth” this scholarship in West Philadelphia. Our goal is to generate curricula that 
builds on the shared and distinctive aspects of West Philadelphia’s African-derived cultural 
life. 

Texts (ordered through Penn Book Center, at 34th and Sansom):

New World*. New York, Pantheon. 

University Press. 

New York, Vintage. 

Beginnings to the Zoot Suit*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press. 


Recommended:

Roger D. Abrahams. 1992. *Singing the Master: The Emergence of African American Culture in the 


For further reading and exploration on your own, please see the attached guide to bibliographic and online resources, a work in progress, to which you will be contributing!

**Course Blackboard Site:**

I will post required and supplementary readings and links to audio and visual recordings on a course blackboard site. To get to this site, you will need your Penn ID and password to log on at: https://courseweb.library.upenn.edu/

**Rosengarten Reserve Reading Room:**

I will place a set of reference books on reserve in the Rosengarten Reading Room of Van Pelt Library, and will post a list of these books to the course blackboard site.

**The Africana Studies Seminar Room**

This seminar room is on the third floor of Van Pelt Library, along the eastern wall. It’s a great place to go and browse the stacks and work in relative seclusion.

**The University Museum Library**

This library, containing a wealth of ethnographic studies and journals relating to West Africa, is located on the third floor of the University Museum, at 34th and Spruce Streets. You can use the main entrance on Spruce when the Museum is open, or the entrance on the eastern side if the main entrance is closed.

To check on Library Hours, which vary from one library to another, go to: http://www.library.upenn.edu/

**The Folklore Archive**

Penn’s Folklore Archive is located at 3619 Locust Walk, on the 4th floor. It contains seminal studies on a number of African, Caribbean, and Afro-American folklore topics, and is also a good place to work. The recorded sound collection contains hundreds of recordings made in the Caribbean and the Caribbean diaspora in the 1950s, 60s, 70s, and 80s. To browse the inventories of these collections, go to http://www.sas.upenn.edu/folklore/grad_program/handbook/archive.html, scroll down to
special collections, and click on Roger Abrahams, Jacob Elder, Jane and Horace Beck, MacEdward Leach, or Karl Signell. To visit the archive, please e-mail me, and I will open it for you during a time that is mutually convenient.

**Schedule of Readings and Topics**

**Jan. 15:** Introduction, orientation, and preliminary meeting

**Jan. 29 – Feb. 19:** Read the articles posted to the blackboard site, beginning with Holloway, Thompson, Robinson, Hall, and Szwed and Abrahams. Please keep a running journal, noting your responses. What rings true and what doesn’t? What surprises or insights do the readings offer you? What, in your experience contradicts or supports the authors’ argument? Bring your notes to class.

**Feb. 19:** Curriculum Unit topic, draft prospectus and unit reading list due.

**Thresholds to the Black Atlantic I: The Spoken Word**

**Feb. 26:** Conversational Styles and Genres

**Read:** Abrahams, “Black Talk as Art,” *Black America*
Abrahams, “Playing the Dozens,” *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel*
Folly, “Proverbs and Proverbial Expression in an African American Family.”
*Celebration of American Family Folklore*
Holloway, “Africanisms in African American Names,” *Africanisms in American Culture*
Labov, “Toasts,” *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel*
Mitchell-Kernan, “Signifying,” *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel*

**Mar. 4:** Forms and Functions of Narration

**Read:** Lancy, “Cultural Routines for Children’s Development,” and “The Kwii Way,”
*Playing on the Mother Ground*
Morgan, *Children of Strangers.*
Anderson, “Inner City Black Grandmothers in Transition,” *Code of the Street*

**Reflect:** How do different genres of storytelling relate to differences in social and economic organization cited by Lancy? How do the genres of stories reflect historical, geographic, and social changes in the communities of tellers? Do the functions of storytelling change as well?

**Bring:** Map of school neighborhood marked with locations of African and African American cultural scenes. Identify the scenes and indicate on a separate page what kinds of cultural routines are orchestrated through verbal communication and who participates?

**Mar. 11:** NO CLASS – Penn Spring Break

**Mar. 18:** NO CLASS – Meet individually with seminar leader to discuss unit.

**Mar. 25:** Field Trip to Evamos West African Restaurant

**Read:** Booklet on Liberian Stories and Foodways

*****(First draft of Curriculum Unit due)****
Apr. 1: Roots of African-American Verbal Art in the Plantation South
Read: White and White, *The Sounds of Slavery* (chapters 5-8) and listen to related sound tracks at [www.beacon.org/soundsofslavery](http://www.beacon.org/soundsofslavery)
   Abrahams, chapters 1, 4 and 5 of *Singing the Master*
   Pierson, “African Satire in the New World,” in *African Folklore in the New World*
Recommended: Abrahams, *The Man-of-Words in the West Indies*

Bring: List of kinds of verbal cultural routines observed in West Philadelphia (from one of your cultural scenes, if possible) that relate to examples cited in the readings. Choose one example and account for similarities and differences between what you’ve observed and what is described in the readings.

### Thresholds to the Black Atlantic II: Music and Dance

Apr. 8: Reciprocities in Motion
Read: White and White, *Stylin’ Out*, pp. 63-179 (Chapters 3-6)
View: Steppin’ (55 minute film) [http://www.folkstreams.net/film,134](http://www.folkstreams.net/film,134)
   Pizza Pizza Daddy-O (17 minute film) [http://www.folkstreams.net/film,73](http://www.folkstreams.net/film,73)
Bring: Updated neighborhood maps and lists, including sites where songs, musical performance, games, rhythms, and forms of dance happen.

Apr. 15: Rhythms and Blues (Guest Speaker)
Read: Evans, “Blues,” in *Encyclopedia of American Folklore*
   Finnegan, “Drum Literature.”
   White and White, *Sounds of Slavery*, chapters 3 and 4 and listen to related recordings at [www.beacon.org/soundsofslavery](http://www.beacon.org/soundsofslavery)

### Thresholds to the Black Atlantic III: Material Culture

Apr. 22: Ecologies of the Visible and Invisible
   Thompson, “Kongo Influences on African American Artistic Culture,” in *Africanisms in American Culture*.
View: “Quilts in Women’s Lives” 28 minutes [http://www.folkstreams.net/film,37](http://www.folkstreams.net/film,37)
   Slides of African American Quilts posted on Blackboard
   *****(Second draft of Curriculum Unit due)****

Apr. 29: Ecologies, cont.
Read: White and White, Chapters 1-2, and 7-8, in *Stylin’*
View: Hair Stories, by Yvette Smalls
Bring: Updated neighborhood maps indicating locations of sites where material culture of the Black Atlantic is displayed, produced, consumed, celebrated: murals, fashion, food, gardens, props for playscapes, and so forth. Note your questions and ideas about their meanings based on what you’ve learned from the readings so far.

May 6: Final seminar meeting
May 13 and 20: Reading and writing period; individual meetings with seminar leader.

May 27: Plenary Group Gathering at 4:30, location TBA

June 14: Deadline for completed curriculum unit.

July 7: Evaluations due

July 25: Seminar leader’s introduction to curriculum units due.
**From West Africa to West Philadelphia: Cultural Routes to Common Ground**

**Preliminary Working Guide to Bibliographic and Online Resources**

**History and Culture of the African Diaspora**


**Philadelphia-Based Studies**


Language Structures and Communication Styles


**Verbal arts**


Sherzer, Joel (2002). Speech Play and Verbal Art. Austin, University of Texas.


**Visual Arts**


Celebrations


Music


Food


Healing


Religion and Belief


Play


Elder, J. D. (1964). Song Games from Trinidad and Tobago. Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, National Cultural Council.


Traditional Arts


Some Online Resources

Penn’s Folklore Archive is located at 3619 Locust Walk, on the 4th floor. It contains seminal studies on a number of African, Caribbean, and Afro-American folklore topics, and is also a good place to work. The recorded sound collection contains hundreds of recordings made in the Caribbean and the Caribbean diaspora in the 1950s, 60s, 70s, and 80s. To browse the inventories of these collections, go to http://www.sas.upenn.edu/folklore/grad_program/handbook/archive.html, scroll down to special collections, and click on Roger Abrahams, Jacob Elder, Jane and Horace Beck, MacEdward Leach, or Karl Signell. To visit the archive, please e-mail me, and I will open it for you during a time that is mutually convenient.


Library of Congress Geography and Maps online. For historic maps of West Africa and the Caribbean, go to http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/gmdhtml/gnrlmapPlaces01.html

Smithsonian Folkways Global Sound archive. For downloadable mp3s of recordings go to http://www.smithsonianglobalsound.org/

Folkstreams videos of traditional artists and performers, including several that will be assigned for this class. To download and watch go to http://www.folkstreams.net/

Philadelphia Folklore Project, in West Philadelphia, offers information about local traditional performers and artists, including African Americans as well as immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean along with related publications and videos on its website. Go to http://www.folkloreproject.org/

At the University of Pennsylvania there are a number of websites with information on a wide variety of resources, as well as upcoming events and links to related sites that may be of interest, including:

The Africana Studies Center http://www.sas.upenn.edu/africana/home.html
The African Studies Center http://www.africa.upenn.edu/
Online classroom resources for K-12 lessons on Africa http://www.africa.upenn.edu/K-12/menu_EduMED1.html
The website of the partners in planning for West Philadelphia includes maps, lists of community resources, and the Philadelphia Planning Commission’s plan for West Philadelphia  http://www.penn-partners.org/wp/

The University Museum of Anthropology and Archeology collections include many artifacts from West Africa. For a description of some of the artifacts on display in the galleries go to http://www.museum.upenn.edu/new/exhibits/galleries/africa.html