

2007

VOICES Newsletter, v5n2, [2006-2007]

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PANTHEON OF STELLAR WOMEN

With great anticipation, the staff of the Center for Multicultural Education looks forward to the show, *Ain't I a Woman*, which is a chamber music theater production rendered by the Core Ensemble, including a percussionist (Dr. Michael Parola), pianist (Hugh Hinton), and cellist (Tahira Whittington). The actress, Taylore Mahogany Scott, will play four



renowned women in U.S. history: Sojourner Truth, Zora Neale Hurston, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Clementine Hunter.

The Core Ensemble is not new to the University of Northern Iowa. The group first came to UNI to highlight the period known as the Harlem Renaissance in *Of Ebony Embers*, with Akin Babatunde portraying the likes of poets Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Countee Cullen as well as the esteemed philosopher Alain Locke. Upon their return visit just a few years ago, the Core Ensemble put on



Tres Vidas, which celebrates the lives of three Latin American women: Frida Kahlo, a Mexican painter; Rufina Amaya, a peasant activist in El Salvador; and Argentinean poet,

Alfonsina Storni. These two shows captured the intriguing stories of the historical figures being depicted, so much so that it was never a matter of if they were coming back to UNI, but simply when.

Ain't I a Woman, written by Kim Hines, conveys the challenges of racial and gender prejudice and discrimination faced and triumphed over by four African American women, who eventually left astounding and seemingly inimitable legacies still worthy of celebrating today. The title of the performance emanates from a speech Sojourner Truth gave at a Woman's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, during 1854. She boasted of her ability to do physical labor as well as a man and to be independent of a man's

graces. On one occasion in 1857, Truth, whose given name was Isabella Baumfree, was accused of being male, so she bared her breasts to prove the complainant wrong. All of her adult life, Truth was an advocate for the abolition of slavery and racial injustice, equality and equity for women, and the nonviolent resolution of conflict. After the Civil War, she was part of the reparations movement—demanding that the U.S. government donate land in the developing West to former slaves. She was a sought-after peripatetic preacher at a time when women were oftentimes disallowed from speaking boldly in public.



In addition to honoring the life of Truth (1797-1883), *Ain't I a Woman* lifts up the remarkable anthropological career of novelist and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston. Hurston (1903-1960) attended Howard University and earned her B.A. in anthropology from Barnard College (Columbia University) in 1928. Hurston's first book, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, was published in 1934 during the Harlem Renaissance to modest acclaim. The following



year, she completed *Mules and Men*, a look into voodoo of the Florida and Louisiana varieties. Her best praised work by far, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, came onto the literary scene in 1937. This book interweaves social science and the writing craft; it delves into the cultural style of blacks in the post-bellum South. Hurston performed research for America's premier anthropologist, Franz Boas, as well as assisted the Works Progress

Administration with her ethnographic fieldwork on the music and style of blacks. Hurston's subsequent books, such as *Tell My Horse* (1938), *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939), and *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948), had lukewarm to critical reviews, albeit *Dust Tracks on a Road*, her autobiography of 1942, was a commercial success. Hurston

did not dwell on race relations, she harbored the notion that blacks could construct a separate panacea somewhat modeled after her hometown of Eatonville, Florida, i.e., the first incorporated black community in the United States. After the Second World War, Hurston's celebrity diminished with the advent of the civil rights era. She was opposed to the nonviolent revolutionary movement and wound up supporting rightwing politicians. Author Alice Walker (*The Color Purple*) is attributed with resurrecting Hurston's work.

One person firmly ensconced in the mesmerizing miracle of the modern-day civil rights movement is Fannie Lou Hamer. Hamer was born into the Townsend family of sharecroppers in 1917 in Montgomery County, Mississippi, during the ostracizing effects of Jim Crow segregation. Her farming family was threatened and humiliated and their property vandalized and animals poisoned by white citizens intent on bankrupting that household. As a young adult, she worked on a cotton plantation and fell in love with a tractor driver, Perry Hamer, who worked on the agricultural estate. Hamer was literate and once that skill was discovered by others, she was summoned into service for white landowners. Hamer knew firsthand the debilitating poverty found in African Americans communities in the rural South and she dreamed of finding some way to exterminate racial oppression and improve the quality of life of black Mississippians.

That day came in 1962 when she joined the youthful Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). This group of young males and females—some of whom were white from the North—were operating among the grassroots to force local governments to register blacks to



vote. Two years later, she founded the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, which sought unsuccessfully to be seated at the Democratic National Convention. She even ran for Congress, but because she was black, she was not allowed to be placed on

the ballot; this suppression did not deter her from winning more votes off the ballot than her opponent won on the ballot! Early on in her civil rights work, she was badly beaten, the aftereffect of which was her acquiring a perpetual limp.

Hamer could not tolerate seeing her people in the throes of gripping poverty, and she sought through a cooperative farming operation to prop up poor farmers by giving them the opportunity to purchase their own land. Hamer's valiant efforts against racism put her in the forefront of social activists regardless of race, gender, or physical ability. Hamer is noted for belting out "Go Tell It on the Mountain" and for impassioned voice against injustice, declaring, "I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired!"

Unlike Hamer, Clementine Hunter was illiterate.

She was good with her hands, so she cooked, cleaned, and picked cotton in Louisiana for plantation owners. But she was also very creative—able to make quilts, curtains, and



baskets as well as expressive dolls for children. She had a lot of ingenuity and could utilize whatever was at her disposal to craft something unique, interesting, and superior. Sometimes during the 1940s, after she had entered her fifties, some paint was left on the plantation. Knowing her artistic talents, a plantation warden

encouraged her to put her creative genius to work. From then until her death, Hunter produced thousands of paintings using a host of traditional and unheard of materials as her canvas. In uncanny, innovative, and matchless ways, she captured the saga of daily life on the plantation: from field hands picking cotton to folks "getting happy" at a worship service.

A humble person, Hunter worked hard on the plantation, and she often took work home with her. She cared for a husband wracked with turmoil about his manhood; nevertheless, she made time to depict the bitter-sweet existence of African American plantation workers. Where she lived while growing up, near Cloutierville, Louisiana, was caricatured as the setting for Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Hunter burned the midnight oil, after doing the clothes washing and pressing, to hone her skills as a painter. Her work paid off in June 1953 when she was featured in an article for *Look* magazine. By the 1970s, her paintings comprised numerous private collections and by the 1980s, they were part of traveling exhibitions. Her paintings were worth thousands of dollars—a far cry from her initial paintings selling for a mere 25 cents!

Hunter died in 1988, just shy of her 101st birthday. Always modest and unassuming, she once stated: "God puts those pictures in my head, and I just puts them on the canvas, like he wants me to."

Ain't I a Woman will be showing at the Russell Hall Auditorium on Tuesday, February 20, at 7:30 p.m. The event is free and open to the public. Earlier in the day, there will be a workshop about the show taking place in the Center for Multicultural Education at 12:30 p.m.

Photograph of Core Ensemble found at www.core-ensemble.cc

*Photograph of Sojourner Truth, circa 1862
Portrait of Zora Neale Hurston by Carl Van Vechten, 1938
Photograph of Fannie Lou Hamer by Charmain Reading, n.d.*

Photographs of Clementine Hunter found at www.caneriverheritage.org

OBAMA-MANIA

The staff of the Center for Multicultural Education sought to schedule a visit from Senator Barack Obama to the campus of the University of Northern Iowa as a keynote speaker in tribute to black achievement in the



United States. The month of February has been dubbed Black History Month since Negro History Week was expanded in 1976, and the successes of Obama over the years would make a fantastic celebration in recognition of the well known and the not-so-familiar among African Americans. It was a joyous, but somewhat bittersweet, occurrence that Obama picked this month to

announce his decision to run for the Democratic nomination for the U.S. presidency in 2008. In order to be successful, Obama must repeatedly visit Iowa because of its first-in-the-nation status. Consequently, the CME might be graced by Obama's presence before the month or the semester is out!

Sen. Obama was born in 1961 in Hawaii. His mother, Ann Durham, is from Kansas, and his father, Barack Obama, Sr., was born and raised in Kenya. His parents met at the University of Hawaii. Given the history of American society, it is hardly unimaginable that the fact his mother is white and his father was black has strong significance. The biracial composition of Obama seems strangely, but positively, to add to his win-some personality. Perhaps, it is because he is biracial and, by extension, not the usual black American descendant of slaves, that enhances his appeal. Regardless of the racial complexities associated with cultural perspectives on the suitability of his candidacy, because of the subtleties of race relations in the United States, having him visit UNI as the featured presenter for Black History Month was unmistakably apposite at this time.

In 1983, Obama graduated from Columbia University in New York City, then moved to Chicago. While in Chicago, he worked on behalf of the indigent and marginalized. Realizing his sincere passion to do more for the afflicted required placement in a position of power, Obama elected to pursue a law degree at Harvard University. He earned his juris doctor in 1991, having acquitted himself so well that he became the first African American to be president of the Harvard Law Review. Choosing to return to Chicago, he worked as a civil rights attorney for a few years before making a bid for the Illinois state senate. He won, and served in that capacity for eight years. Still wanting to maximize his ability to effectuate change in this country,



Obama resolved to campaign for higher office. In 2004, he became the first U.S. senator of African descent since the period of Reconstruction (1865-1877). Like his efforts to be bipartisan in the state senate, Obama sought to transcend the backbiting and bickering that tend to mar the political process by focusing on the dynamics of globalization, the necessity of collaboration for constructive change, and the embracement of ethics policies that do not dismiss foul play.

Despite his inexperience in high-level decision-making on the national and international levels, Obama's endeavor to change the political landscape through determination, dedication, and commonsense has catapulted him into the top rankings of the heap of Democratic presidential candidates, according to most current polls. Gifted with charisma, straight talking, handsomeness, and verisimilitude, Sen. Barack Obama is someone to watch this year—hopefully here, at some point, at UNI under the auspices of the CME!

REFLECTIONS ON BARACK

By Carly Nelson

Before Senator Barack Obama's stop in Waterloo, I was not entirely sure what to make of this new presidential candidate who everyone was talking about. As an Iowa democrat who has always liked former governor Tom Vilsack, I planned to give him my support in this election, no matter how popular Obama and Hillary Clinton were. However, I still felt an interest in Obama and decided to see what he had to say when he came to my town. In the days leading up to his visit, I paid closer attention to the news and visited his website. I read the article in my People magazine that told all about his family. I watched Saturday morning as he officially announced his bid for the presidency. Like so many other people, I became increasingly interested in what he had to say. In spite of that, I still had my doubts about the senator.

When Saturday night finally arrived, I was still feeling a little cynical. While Obama's plans to change Washington seemed like a nice idea, I felt that he was being unrealistic. His talks about finding alternative energy sources and getting our troops out of Iraq seemed a little too good to be true. I wanted the things that he was talking about, but I felt that they were unattainable; that he was just another politician making whatever promises it would take to get into office. His speech Saturday night changed my mind. He won me over from the beginning with his humor and his respect for his wife. And as I listened to him talk about everything from education to healthcare, I became convinced that he might be exactly what our country needs. He is making some big promises, many of which I still do not expect to come true if he is elected, but even talking about these kinds of things is a nice change. The other candidates seem to be promising that they will

make things only slightly better. If we start out with low expectations, I do not think that we can expect to get very far. Perhaps we need to shoot at the proverbial moon in order to land among the stars. If that is the case, and I think it might be, then I am now convinced that Obama is the right man to do it

THE FATHER OF BLACK HISTORY

Carter Godwin Woodson (1875-1950) founded Negro History Week in 1926. His primary purpose for starting this period, much forgotten in recent times, was to compensate for the lack of attention given to Africa and the African Diaspora in school curricula. He wanted blacks to learn about their heritage and to discover how vital people of African descent have been for the advancement not only of the United States, but also of the entire world.



Even if he were not the founder of the weeklong celebration during the 1920s, Woodson would still have a very important place in the annals of American history in the twentieth century. Educated at Berea College, the Sorbonne, the University of Chicago, and Harvard University, he was a prolific scholar who dedicated his life to depicting the socio-cultural conditions of black people in the United States and to demonstrating how many overcame extrinsic impediments to make notable achievements in a variety of fields.

While in Chicago, Woodson, along with some colleagues, began the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in 1915. The mission of this organization, which still exists today (see <http://www.asalnh.org>), was to research, interpret, and disseminate information on black life, history, and culture to the world. Within a year, he

became the founding editor of the *Journal of Negro History*. In 1937, he inaugurated the *Negro History Bulletin*. His dedication to the cause of scholarship on black history inspired historians such as the retired Duke University professor emeritus, John Hope Franklin, author of the overwhelmingly popular text, *From Slavery to Freedom*. In honor of Woodson's indefatigable work and in recognition of the continual need to enlighten citizens on the multifarious contributions of African Americans to the lifestyle cherished in this country, Negro History Week was extended to a month-long observance in 1976, during the fiftieth anniversary of the celebration.

Today, the Association for the Study of African American Life and History offers thematic approaches on an annual basis to Black History Month. The theme for 2007 is "From Slavery to Freedom: Africans in the Americas." Programs during the month of February should

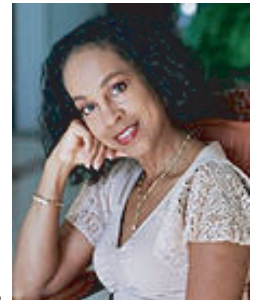


highlight the plight of African Americans at the time of their freedom from the bonds of physical slavery and beyond. Moreover, February 2007 should pay tribute to the work of John Hope Franklin, especially with respect to his delineation of the struggles of blacks to abolish slavery and to their perpetual and painstaking efforts to win their freedom—an endeavor that, arguably, continues to be waged.

A LITERARY GENIUS

Bebe Moore Campbell (1950-2006) was a remarkable writer likened to Anton Chekhov and Edith Wharton, on the one hand, and Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin, on the other. She was meticulous in her research, a perfectionist at heart, and very passionate. She wrote three works of nonfiction, three children's books, and five novels. The New York Times bestseller's list included four of the latter: *What You Owe Me* (2001); *Singing in the Comeback Choir* (2001); *Brothers and Sisters* (2000); and *72 Hour Hold* (2005), which was her last.

Born in Philadelphia, Campbell, née Elizabeth Bebe Moore, earned a Bachelor of Science degree in elementary education from the University of Pittsburgh (1971). She was an elementary schoolteacher in Atlanta from 1972 to 1975. But the classroom was too small to hold her vast mind and ambition. During her young adult years, Moore loved to write short stories. After many rejection letters, her first story was published by *Essence* magazine. More of her stories began to be accepted. Trying her hand at journalism, Campbell began to write nonfiction short stories. As a matter of fact, her first books dealt with marriage: *Backlash Marriage: The Two Career Family Under Siege* (1987) and *Successful Women, Angry Men: Backlash in the Two Career Family* (1989). She interviewed over 100 individuals to get an appreciation for the complexities of households in which both parents work. Her emphasis was on finding the keys for repairing relationships and for fostering mutual respect. She followed these reportorial and how-to texts, respectively, with a memoir about her relationship with her father, *Sweet Summer: Growing Up With & Without My Dad* (1989).



Campbell's articles appeared in a host of magazines: *Black Enterprise*, *Ebony*, *New York Times Magazine*, *The Washington Post*, et al. Campbell had a number of opportunities to interview famous African Americans, such as Whoopi Goldberg. She was also a reporter for National Public Radio's Morning Edition.

Campbell's first novel, *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine*, exquisitely develops a set of characters who deal with various stereotypes. This work of fiction was written

after research on the real-life drama of Emmett Till, an adolescent from Chicago who was murdered by white men while visiting relatives in Mississippi simply because he flirted with a white cashier in a store. Campbell adroitly shines light on the civil-rights era of the 1950s and 1960s, but she also skillfully divulges how much further we need to go regarding race relations and the search for justice and equity in the United States.

In the last novel that Campbell wrote, she deals with the oft-avoided topic of mental illness. *72 Hour Hold* is about a young woman who suffers from bipolar disorder



who intermittently lashes out at others, grows paranoid, and acquits herself in an outrageous manner. The mother discovers the lack of sensitivity among healthcare professionals and the system's bureaucracy that stymies real assistance. She latches on to a revolutionary group whom she believes can help her to secure

a decent future for her child. Through this book, Campbell spreads the message about the failings of the mental health community and the tragedy of the inaccessibility of healthcare for the working-class poor.

Bebe Moore Campbell died from complications of brain cancer on November 27, 2006. She will be sorely missed, for she brought a boldness of spirit and an ironic flair and an absorbing intelligence to her artistry. She is survived by a loving husband, Ellis Gordon, Jr., her mother, Doris Moore, a daughter, Maia Campbell, and a stepson, Ellis Gordon III.

MLK, JR. BY PHOTOJOURNALIST-FLIP SCHULKE

It was primarily through the photography of Flip Schulke that I became acquainted with Martin Luther King, Jr. as a youth. Although I could not express it at the time and



was certainly unaware of his copyrighted material, Schulke, in retrospect, seemed to capture for me the essence of what I garnered from the speeches and writings of the premier civil rights leader and peaceful warrior of the twentieth century. For nearly a decade, Schulke had the privilege of traveling with King and photographing him,

other civil rights leaders, demonstrators, and law enforcement during the height of African American protest against de jure and de facto segregation and discrimination.

During my undergraduate years at Wesleyan University, I spent a lot of time at the Atticus Bookstore,

not only to purchase textbooks, but also to buy gifts for members of my family. It was while shopping for a gift for my mother sometime in 1976 that I happened across the book *Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Documentary*, Montgomery to Memphis. Obsessed over the life of Dr. King, I could never summon up enough resistance to unplanned buying when it came to King memorabilia. Needless to say, I felt I just had to have this book! It had photos in it that I had never seen before: photos of King while preaching as well as during somewhat private moments and pictures of marches, demonstrations, and the like as well as confrontations with hate-filled mobs and unrestrained police. I was simply mesmerized! I loved my mother dearly—God rest her soul—but I felt forced to shortchange her on her present so that I could afford my selfish indulgence and buy Schulke's superb photo journal.

Believe it or not, it was not until recently that I discovered Schulke was Caucasian. I had unwittingly, almost naturally, presumed that a person so intimately connected to King—given the xenophobic customs of our society—had to be black. As a matter of fact, I engaged in another faux pas by concluding that Schulke's fame as an underwater photojournalist all but confirmed his whiteness, for it was stereotypically too anomalous for a black man to be snapping pictures in bodies of water with the likes of the French explorer Jacques Cousteau.

This assumptive malady notwithstanding, Schulke's photos had both a power and a sensitivity that I could not ignore. I cherished the photo-documentary as if it were holy scriptures, and no one would be allowed to handle the merchandise but me. Over the years since that time, I have deepened my appreciation for Schulke's photographic expertise. It is very challenging for me to separate my intellectual apprehension of King's social thought and action from the pictorials captured with his keen eye.

The photo at the beginning of this article is one that adorns my office. There is something magical about this photo to me: the genuine warmth of King's personality and disposition seems to exude from King's serene pose. It was simply perfect for the cover of that book detailing the thirteen years of King's adult life in what has become the classic civil rights era. The thirty intervening years since I bought the edition commemorating King's life, my resonance with the photography of Schulke's has not faded or waned an iota. Even though my writing and speechmaking on King still tend to be unquestioningly laudatory and hagiographic, I have had to come to grips with some of King's shortcomings, such as the flagrant plagiarism and the unrestrained extramarital trysts. Yet the sheer elegance of Schulke's depiction of King



consistently brings out the exceptional qualities of a person who possessed a perspicacious mind, an indomitable spirit, and a preferential option for the poor and marginalized of the world. In other words, the essence of the human being we know as Martin Luther King, Jr. is uncannily reflected in the civil rights imagery skillfully produced by Graeme Phelps "Flip" Schulke.

I am not certain whether the other photos Schulke took that had nothing to do with the civil rights movement and Dr. King would have a similar effect on me. However, I would suggest that the reader take a look at the life of this interesting individual by checking out, *Witness to Our Times: My Life as a Photojournalist*, by Flip Schulke and Matt Schudel (2003).

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Our mission is to provide programs and activities of a culturally diverse nature to the campus and wider communities.