

## **Robert Youngs do Patrocinio: Capstone Project**

Ever since the first European encounter in the Americas in 1492, the colonial legacy of white imperialism has resulted in a syncretic and dichotomic fusion of a blending of worlds and cultures. Hundreds of years of slavery, oppression, exploitation, and violence have led to tragedy and woe which has clearly had a lasting impact on this hemispheric region. Social phenomena such as the African diaspora still resonate in the present, entrenched in western value systems and society. The stark inequalities have become clear to me particularly during this unprecedented time of COVID-19, which has seen African Americans in the United States, who account for 13% of the population (Maqbool, 2020), becoming the most susceptible and vulnerable social demographic. In Chicago, people of colour have accounted for a staggering 68% of COVID deaths (ibid.), highlighting the structural socio-political inequity which persists as a legacy of colonialism and slavery. Yet in the compelling words of Gabriel Garcia Márquez during his Nobel Prize acceptance speech titled *The Solitude of Latin America* he states: ‘In spite of this, to oppression, plundering and abandonment, we [the Americas] respond with life’ (Márquez, 1982). On a personal note I found his speech to be moving, for although he highlights the gross wrongs this region of the world has endured (the nadir), he chooses to pay tribute to its perfect counterpart (the zenith), the light and vigour of the Pan-American spirit and peoples; celebrated by the Latin American literary genre Magical Realism.

Personally, an exciting aspect of this course has been delving into the history and politics of the by-product Afro-culture, which has emerged as a consequence in the Americas. This explosion of rich and profound culture is a testament to the strength and resilience of people of colour, and has transformed and redefined traditionally white spaces within popular global culture. In this reflection on my first year of studies at UCL, I have chosen to focus on three case studies representing aspects of Afro-culture, namely Vodou, Capoeira and hip hop which emerged in Haiti, Brazil, and the United States; expressing in unique capacities elements of the black experience explored through the lens of spirituality, mobile culture, emotion and memory. This project will be both a reflection on and an application of the analytical process needed for a successful academic investigation. The method I will use in this reflection will evaluate the significance of these unique cultural expressions, and demonstrate specific aspects of my research this year.

Firstly, an interesting aspect of my research this year introduced me to the importance of primary sources and searching for historical evidence creatively. This became clear to me when I initially began investigating Vodou in Haiti, however, I struggled due to cultural complexities, namely a linguistic barrier (Haitian French creole), and a misconception of Vodou’s intrinsic national and social value. I realised this was largely due to the way in which the Western world has come to perceive the Vodou religious system, through a stereotypical cultural lens, which became clear when I watched Hollywood films such as *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1989). With hindsight, I now know that my original misconceptions were largely due to limited prior knowledge and my own ethnocentrism, which I quickly became aware of as I came to understand the richness of this unique religion. *Encountering the Americas* among my other modules has taught me the importance of academic impartiality and recognising that to some degree our lives and experiences contribute to how we see the world due to empiricism, yet it is essential to remain objective and critical in your method. This caused me to reapproach my initial investigation and reconsider my methodology, leading me to begin by researching the colonial context in which Vodou emerged in Haiti. The knowledge that Vodou played an important role in

initiating the triumphant Haitian Revolution (1791) led me to reflect on Vodou philosophies and work to access the body of indigenous knowledge it exemplifies and embodies.

Boukman's prayer alongside McCarthy Brown's research on this subject area was illuminating, as it became clear that Vodou is a complex system of knowledge which pertains to elements of the Haitian slave experience, making sense of the great sufferings the Haitians had previously experienced, such as colonial oppression and cruelty (1991, quoted in Michel, 2002, p.99). Moreover, Barrett's views on Vodou support the idea that it became a vessel of hope and faith, for although the coloniser was able to enslave the Haitians, spiritually Vodou allowed them to immortalise their fervour as a people, by developing an insuperable spirit (1977, quoted in Michel, 2002, p.104), which I was able to recognize in Boukman's prayer.

An additional aspect of my studies this year that I have learnt a lot from has been about how to approach conflicting historiography, which I came across when researching the origins of capoeira. My interest in this arose from trying to discover whether capoeira was a singular African creation, conserved and brought to Brazil by African slaves, or whether it emerged as a derivative of the Afro-Brazilian slave experience, utilising aspects of specific African cultures. However, this proved to be challenging due to the limited historical evidence and available information following Ruy Barbosa's decree to destroy Afro-Brazilian records in 1890. Consequently, the historiography is conflicted on this topic, with academics such as Professor Barbara Browning (1995), Brazilian anthropologist Luis da Camara Cascudo (1967), and capoeira Mestre Pastinha (1964) claiming capoeira originated in Africa, most likely Angola or Congo due to movements which resemble the Zebra dance. In contrast, other scholars such as J. Lowell Lewis (1992) have asserted that capoeira really developed and emerged as a systematised practice much later towards the end of the 18th Century as a strictly Brazilian artform. Etymologically, I found the very term 'capoeira' to be polemic, as its origins could be traced to Portuguese, the indigenous Tupi language, or Kikongo. I was able to work through this by reading around the historiography and realigning my initial

questions when investigating capoeira and accepting that its origins are unknown due to the nature and scope of evidence available. However, I was able to conclude that it is widely thought that capoeira has been strongly influenced by the African slave trade, African culture and the Brazilian slave experience.

Furthermore, another key aspect of my research on capoeira focused on how this Afro-Brazilian art form is actually able to preserve indigenous knowledge, as it is said to be transformational as a microculture by assimilating aspects of the Brazilian slave experience. Some researchers have even claimed that capoeira is able to 'marginally reconstruct the cultural evolution of colonial South America and its place in the larger context of the Euro-African diaspora' (Haugh, 2013, p.2), which initially amazed me. I was able to understand this further by carrying out some field research, utilising a qualitative method and observing the impact and significance of its traditions and practices, such as through oral song within the *roda*. This was incredibly interesting and challenging as my research led me into the realm of studying an artform which preserves esoteric knowledge in a non-tangible and abstract way, that an outsider cannot easily access. However, due to my heritage as an Afro-Brazilian, and my knowledge of the Portuguese language, I was able to participate and engage in this practice, and was transported via its dynamic blends of music, dance, combat, and martial arts. Capoeira's significance and reach (which is now global) is astonishing considering that it was criminalised in Brazil up until the 1930s. I have truly come to see that it remains 'a jubilant metaphor for defiance and liberation' (Downing, 1996, p.550) for many

Brazilians. To understand this further, I found it useful to utilise an interdisciplinary academic framework, by using ideas from different disciplines, primarily anthropology and philosophy. Specifically, in considering capoeira as being able to act as a mobile culture, especially in terms of Michel Foucault's philosophical concept of heterotopias, as it is able to

conjure and invoke a heterotopia which assimilates specific aspects of the Afro-Brazilian cultural experience via achieving a *world within worlds* type of simulation. Overall, it has become clear to me that capoeira 'is also an analytic lens through which the anthropologist can better understand relations of history, power, and race in Brazil' (Wesolowski, 2012, p.84).

Additionally, my language modules this year introduced me to the power and significance of language, and its role in the creation of culture. I have become increasingly aware of its political undertones and connotations, and that it plays an important role in 'defining collective consciousness' (Safran, 2010, p.1) as a shared experience. George Orwell's essay; *Politics and the English Language* (1946) sparked the thought that perhaps most, if not all, languages are political to some varying extent because 'if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought' (Orwell, 1946, p.7). *The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis* (1929) presents the idea of language relativity, and the significance of considering the way in which realities are framed via culture. In addition, how individuals within societies are able to interact with their socio-political experiences in the normative structure and institutional ethos. Moreover, although language systems feature patterns within their own linguistic families, such as the romance languages sharing Latin as a common root, they are manmade, and thus politically charged. I have recently become interested in the question; How do colonial language systems, which have been imposed on subjugated peoples, affect their experience and national-social memory of history? This is of particular interest when taking into consideration the famous words: 'for history is written by the victors and framed according to the prejudices and bias existing on their side.' Historically, language has been used as a political and cultural weapon in order to conquer the defeated both psychologically and spiritually, so how might the legacy of this affect a black individual from a poor socio-economic group and with little opportunity in the United States today? Do the effects of colonisation and oppression still resonate in today's societies even through language? An interesting example of this in Western culture has seen members of the black community reclaim the N-word, despite its abhorrent connotations, however, controversially other ethnic groups have become socially barred from using this term as it has become reserved solely for people of colour. An example of this has been the Afro-American music industry's (especially hip hop) increasing use of this word, with artists like Tupac or N.W.A.

Additionally, I was interested in Spike Lee's criticisms of Quentin Tarantino's excessive use of the N-word in his films, which Lee condemned as he felt it was inappropriate and in poor taste, as Tarantino is Caucasian, and Lee feels that he capitalises on using the N-word as a part of an *aesthetic*, to achieve a shock factor and to be avant-garde per se. Generally, the polemic surrounding the N-word is very interesting as it is essentially a monopoly on language, with members of the non-Afro-American group being publicly condemned and ousted for using this now taboo term. Interestingly, in contrast President Obama used the N-word publicly during a topical discussion on racial inequality within the United States, whereas Joe Biden's recent comment that 'if you have a problem figuring out whether you're for me or Trump, then you ain't black' (2020, cited from BBC, 2020), was condemned and retracted due to the implied illogical link between ideology and ethnicity. I am looking

forward to exploring this further in my next academic year, and perhaps studying and researching etymology as an academic discipline.

Finally, this year I have become interested in the study of music (musicology) as I have come to realise the value of music as a field of academic study, and what it is able to convey about political culture. Hip hop in the United States helped me further understand the current socio-political landscape which disfavours Afro-Americans due to social stratification. A key focus

of my research, thanks to an interesting conversation I had with Zadie Smith on current politics in the United States, has been on the contemporary, Pulitzer prize winner (2018), Kendrick Lamar. Lamar has emerged as an influential artist whose work has contributed significantly to popular culture with his music being identified by the black community as the apotheosis of the black experience, and has become linked to the Black Lives Matter Movement as the anthem of a generation (Manabe, 2019). *To Pimp a Butterfly (2015)* is an example of the significance of musical lyrics, as Lamar's narrative proves his ability to navigate complex political phenomena which permeate the black experience in the United States, as he delves into American culture and systematised racism. This may be seen for instance in the lyrics of the song *Alright*, '*Lookin' at the world like, "Where do we go, nigga?", we hate po-po, wanna kill us dead in the street for sure*' (Lamar, 2015) which allude to the contemporary experience of being black in the United States, and the racist milieu in the context of police brutality. Tragic police killings such as the recent murder of George Floyd (2020) have triggered social and political awareness of institutionalised oppression. This is reflected in the acuity of Lamar's lyrics throughout his album, yet paradoxically, the chorus inspires hope as Lamar declares, '*Nigga, we gon' be alright*' (ibid.). Essentially, Lamar's 'work calls into being a black universe of interlocked galaxies of evil and good where "every nigga is a star"' (Graham, 2017, p.125). *Alright* has been important in shifting the social narrative and empowering people of colour to express their experiences, which has become apparent during the recent protests in the United States (2020) that have featured Lamar's music deployed as a musical agent synonymous to resistance.

In conclusion, as a student I have found my course to be incredibly exciting as I have loved its interdisciplinary nature, which has allowed me to engage creatively and imaginatively in my studies of the American hemisphere. My history modules have taught me that history is not static, rather multidimensional, and its context has strong ties and links to the present world and contemporary culture. Moreover, I am now more familiar with the methodology a successful historian must adopt, utilising analytical skills when considering the past. Likewise, politics has introduced me to the current political landscape in the Americas, and supplied me with the necessary method in order to engage with this academic field of study. I am now more conscious of the social scientific academic framework, and I have come to appreciate the complexity of studying human social behaviour and patterns. Finally, studying Portuguese and French together with my other studies has facilitated and promoted lateral learning, and caused me to think from a different linguistic perspective. I am now more aware of what it means to get *lost in translation*, as I have come to understand that language is neither linear nor universal, but complex and constantly evolving as it reflects and shapes the way we experience the world.

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