

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

Between Three Continents: Rethinking Equatorial Guinea on the Fortieth Anniversary of Its Independence from Spain

Hofstra University, Hempstead (New York)
Thursday April 2—Saturday April 4, 2009

Conference Welcome remarks

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I would like to begin by taking a moment to thank, publicly and warmly, Athelene Collins, Natalie Datlof and all their colleagues at the Office of the Hofstra Cultural Center, for their initial faith in the project I presented to them for this conference, and, subsequently, for working so devotedly on it for many consecutive months. My thanks go too to all those fellow faculty professors on campus, both in my own department and in others, who have shared my belief in the urgency of this project, offered their expertise, and provided appropriate arenas for speaking, writing, and publishing about Equatorial Guinea.

I should not forget here my patient students who, particularly in the last two months, have occasionally caught me off guard in class, unwillingly shifting geographies and chronologies, thinking of Africa while teaching Latin America.

The many offices, academic departments, programs and units at Hofstra University who have generously and enthusiastically contributed to make this conference a reality are all gratefully acknowledged on page 18 of the program you finally hold in your hands today.

But I have always conceived this project as one that would go beyond the borders of the campus gates. From its inception, the project was imagined as a collaborative enterprise. Naturally, it was in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea's capital, upon the occasion of a four-day international conference, in July 2006, organized by the then-director of the Spanish Cultural Center, that the concept began to emerge. It gradually crystallized in the course of conversations with two supportive friends and admired colleagues who, like me, flew all the way from the United States, to attend the conference in Malabo: Prof. Michael Ugarte (from the University of Missouri-Columbia) and Prof. Susan Martín-Marquez (from Rutgers University).

It was in the same collaborative spirit that, over the last year, I have sought the cooperation from many other universities, east and west in the United States, to host panels, and guest speakers on the days immediately preceding or immediately following the conference we are inaugurating today. Bradley Epps and my tireless co-director Baltasar Fra-Molinero have worked intensely to host Justo Bolekia, Remi Sipi, Francisco Zamora and Donato Ndongu in their respective campuses at Harvard University and Bates College, on Monday and Tuesday this week; Juan Caamaño brought together at Queens College Juan Manuel Davies and Gerardo Behori yesterday afternoon; also yesterday, Toni Hertel brought Tutu Alicante to her college for a compelling talk; Michael Ugarte has welcomed José Siale at the University of Missouri for the last three days; María Hernández brought Donato Ndongu to her classes, also yesterday; The Catalan Center at New York University hosted the film *Memoria negra* and a debate with its director and Adolfo Obiang on Tuesday afternoon; María Nsue almost (but not quite) made it to Spelman College, Morehouse College and Emory University where she had received invitations to speak; and the University of Vanderbilt is now home to the *Afro-Hispanic Review*, a journal that in the October 2009 volume will dedicate a monographic issue to Equatorial Guinea of which Baltasar and I will be guest editors. The Instituto Cervantes will open its doors wide open to host us all for a round table of nine Guinean writers tomorrow.

Equally remarkable is the effort of the Spanish Cultural Centers in Malabo and Bata respectively, which have brought to us a new insight into the plastic arts; and the collaboration of the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism, and the Ministry of Economy and Commerce of Equatorial Guinea, is most appreciated and welcome in this project.

It is, therefore, a sincere honor and a deep pleasure, to welcoming you all – as conference participants and attendees— to this gathering. You have enthusiastically responded to the call, and it is *you* who deserve a great debt of gratitude for your commitment to this path-breaking project: one which, for many present here, has meant laborious travel across two, and in some cases three, continents.

I am sure that you will find congenial surroundings in the Hofstra University campus, which has already developed an international reputation for its engagement in civic and political dialogue, and which was recently – of course – been the stage for the third and final debate in the 2008 Obama presidential campaign. In the United States generally, and at Hofstra University specifically, this is clearly a *time* of rethinking: a time for rethinking transatlantic relationships, for reconsidering the multiple forms of African agency, in Europe and in the Americas, as well as within the continent itself, and for reflecting anew upon our identities.

Over the past years, I have become deeply invested – both personally and professionally – in the question of what, and how, Equatorial Guinea signifies, historically and academically, within the frame of the African continent, but also beyond: that is, within

the framework of its relations with Europe and with the Americas (north and south). My critical inquiries have to do with processes of decolonization, colonial legacies, nationalisms, and the current globalization moves. I am simultaneously a firm believer that academic discourses shall be capable of penetrating well beyond the walls of our ivory towers, and shall, in the end, have some active agency in transforming situations, even if their results are sometimes less tangible and less immediate than we might have wish. Cultural theory, particularly when one is writing about post-imperial conditions, must have the power to make a difference in how the public thinks about contemporary politics. Theory matters most when it helps to reshape public opinion.

Equatorial Guinea, often reduced in discussions of Africa to the trope of its limited size, is a reminder – if any were needed – that small nations have often assumed a disproportionate role in global affairs. It is in large part this global role, past and present, and the presence of Guinea at the very heart of an economic and cultural nexus, which this conference will explore: in film and through other media, as well as in the remarkable range of academic panels which you will find in the conference program.

I would, finally, like to express my regret at the absence of others who could not, for various reasons, join us here today. I can only wish for a fruitful, engaging, mutually respectful, and academically challenging dialogue over the next three days, one that will hopefully have many more venues, in the years to come, to continue the conversation. Thank you all, very much, for your presence here.
