

Magnolia Reveries: My Journey to Claflin University and its Environs



by Barbara Lekatsas

I first went to see the provost about the Claflin-Hofstra Faculty Exchange in the fall of 2008. I had been to Louisiana and Georgia, as well as the Carolinas and Florida in brief visits, but my own professional and cultural background took me mostly to Europe, though I had occasions to visit Georgia more frequently in connection with my work on African-American art.

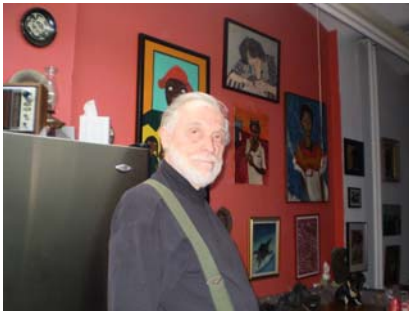
Since graduate school days, I had worked for and been affiliated with the Hatch-Billops Collection of African-American culture in Soho and participated in many of their

oral history, research and writing projects.



Artist, Camile Billops

I learned about African-American culture from this oral history, book and visual art collection (which has begun its own move southward to Emory University). I listened to and made written abstracts of countless taped interviews with black artists from all fields. I recall working besides George Wolfe, who was to become Joseph Papp's heir apparent at the Public Theater and a noted director:



Writer and scholar, James V. Hatch

I met artists and writers, was in fact, a member of the milieu artiste that was created at Hatch-Billops and I was allowed to develop in whatever ways my skills, talents, and interests took me.

When the collector, Wesley Cochran of La Grange, Georgia thought of exhibiting his prints of the artists, Will Barnet and Bob Blackburn together, at their request, Camille Billops, who is an artist and award-winning film-maker, herself, recommended me to write the interpretive essay. I interviewed both Will Barnet and Bob Blackburn (who died in 2003) and wrote the essay for the catalogue.

Mailer Created by Professor Habibur Rahman, Chair of the Art Department and Director of the Digital Design Program for the Will Barnet and Bob Blackburn Exhibition, March and April, Arthur Rose Museum



Thus began my ongoing relationship with the Cochran Collection of American Prints and with Georgia.



Wesley and Missy Cochran

I was in La Grange, Georgia, in fact, in August of 2008 to lecture on the work of Will Barnet and Bob Blackburn, which was on exhibit at the La Grange Museum of Art; and on African-American Art at the Cochran Gallery, next door to the Museum,

Wesley Cochran with Warhol's John
Wayne



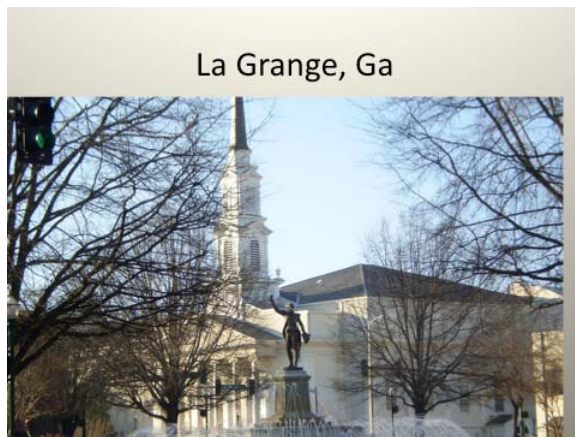
Palmer Hayden's



Ceramic Lamp
Camille Billops



when I first put Claflin and the Cochran Collection together in my mind.



I could bring the Barnett and Blackburn exhibition to Claflin and introduce the amazing Cochran Collection to the university, I thought. I had no clue how this was going to happen, whether Claflin had a museum, whether it would be interested in an exhibition, if the museum space would be available, or whether I would even go to Claflin. I didn't even know what the distance between La Grange, Georgia and Orangeburg, South Carolina was.

Introducing the work of Barnett and Blackburn (white and African-American artists who had a lifelong friendship and collaboration together) to an audience of students and townspeople at the La Grange Fine Arts Museum was a learning experience for me. The impact of a permanent exhibition of African-American prints by leading artists of the 20th and 21st century at the Cochran Gallery and an exhibition of Barnett and Blackburn, two American artists who had elevated printmaking to the level of painting, went far beyond the aesthetic value of the works: a cultural framework was created in a still fairly rural and predominantly white region of Georgia to present some of the finest art of African-American artists and to create an interactive space for diversity to occur in the most felicitous manner.

The students were full of questions after my talk about the art and artists, as they had an assignment to do on the exhibition, yet it was evident that they admired the art and thought the artists were cool.

When I went to meet the provost two months later, the exhibition was in the back of my mind. However as I entered his office, I began to get cold feet. I didn't drive a car and wondered how I would get around. Yet as if reading one part of my mind, he said without my even asking, "Oh and they have a museum." I asked what the teaching load was and when he said one class. I asked, "You think I could ride a bike there?" He said, "of course."

Our interview was much longer than that, of course, but the dye had been cast. A month and a half later, I went to Claflin for a day to check out the place. I met my liaison, Dr. Mitali Wong and my colleagues in the English Department, where I would be teaching, including Dr. Corrie Clairborne, who is teaching here now. I had already met Prof. Annette Grevious at Hofstra and would meet Dr. Ronnie Hopkins, the most hospitable Chair I could have hoped for, whose supportiveness and friendliness went beyond measure. I met Dr. Zia Hasan, Vice President for Planning, Assessment, and Information Services, whose office ran the exchange and whose door was always open to me, and began a relationship with his able assistant, Juretta Dash, who with Mitali Wong took care of me, gave me endless rides and in general was there for me beyond work hours should I need anything.

Dr. Ronnie Hopkins,
Chair, English and
Comparative
Literature, Dr. Mitali
Wong, Professor of
English, myself.



Vice Presidents
Dillard and Hassan
and I.



I briefly met Dr. Peggy Ratliff, the Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences, who I would come to know and admire. On that first visit I stayed only a few hours and flew back the same day. It was the end of the semester and I was also in the final stages of preparation for the Abroad program to Greece.

I did a lot on that first visit however to Orangeburg. I recall shuffling between the English Department in the Communications building, the venerable Tingley Hall, where most of the administration offices were, and The Arthur Rose Museum, where I met Mr. Herman Keith, the director and his assistant, Ms. Shakeeta Foster. When I told him what I wanted to do, he thought it was wonderful and called me, “heaven-sent,” because he had just returned after a sick leave and had not planned any shows.

Tingley Hall, Claflin University



Arthur Rose Museum/formerly Lee Library, Claflin University



Mr. Herman Keith, Director of the Arthur Rose Museum and Myself



I met President Tisdale as well. Mr. Keith told me to ask him for a showing of the Henry O. Tanner painting he had in his office. It was one of the first appointments I set up when I arrived. I did not yet know I would have Ron Neal's office in the philosophy and religion department in the basement of the chapel, where Dr. Sujai and the chair, Dr. Humbree created a serene atmosphere. From my first visit, I was welcomed at Claflin and the vision I had the summer of 2008 in La Grange, Georgia, began to take naturally take shape in the winter of 2009.

The center of the town of Orangeburg ended with Edisto Gardens.



Edisto Gardens



Roses at Edisto

It seemed to be about eight blocks long, like a movie set, including a five and dime that time forgot, which still miraculously survives, but also with closed-down shops, showing the strains of the economy.



Orangeburg

I wanted to live in this eight-block strip on Russell Street because I couldn't imagine what I would do without a town or a car.

Russell Street Looking East



I was scheduled to speak at a conference sponsored by the Comparative Literature Department of the University of South Carolina in Columbia in February and was already looking forward to visiting a large, old Southern city. I finally arrived in Orangeburg beginning of February. Mrs. Dash met me at the gas station closest to my new home after Captain Godwin, who had picked me up at the airport, dropped me off.

Prof. Miriam Chitiga, a day at Folly Beach



Mrs. Juretta Dash, Assistant to Vice President Hasan, and husband Bill outside of my home. My friend without whom life would have been more difficult.





where I lived, Foxberry Court

I saw my apartment down a dirt road off St. Matthews, a two-bedroom efficiency flat attached to one beside it. It was part of a housing complex u shaped around a parking lot. Mrs. Dash wearing a bright blue suit had come after church to meet me and took me to Walmart's. I food shopped and bought a bicycle. I followed her on the bike, a 21-speed Ladies' Schwinn whose gear system I had to get used to. She was very patient as I trailed behind her car. I threw my gears out of whack adjusting speeds. She finally led me down a back road off St. Matthews, till we reached her home, where she had me leave my bike. I think she was afraid I was going to get hit by a car. Luckily sidewalks were attached to the roadways leading to Claflin. They seemed just for me, as no one ever used them.



St. Matthew's Road



Chestnut Road leading to Claflin

A police car told me to get off the street once and on to the sidewalk! You get tickets for that in New York.

I had a Monday, Wednesday, Friday schedule and a class of nine students. I taught an Introduction to Literature class, a required course, to which I added a

comparative literature orientation. The Introduction to Literature sections used a common reader, edited by X. J. Kennedy and D. G. Kennedy, entitled, *Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*, which included American short stories and poems for the most part, with a novella and several classical plays thrown in, a section on Latin America, criticism on the works, and statements by the artists on the art of writing. The reader corresponded to composition readers including how to write an essay/s section and an instruction manual with reading interpretation questions and essay assignments. Midterms and finals were uniform for all sections with opportunities for tailoring the exams to your class needs. I thought that I could weave in a movement approach and look at the fiction, in particular, in terms of Realism and Symbolism. The same designated course, which I teach in my department of Comparative Literature, entitled “Introduction to Literature,” as well, follows Comparative Literature guidelines, in the introduction of literature of different cultures, using a spectrum of categories. The course at Claflin was tailored to the American experience. European literature was the least represented in the reader. I saw my pedagogical mission in terms of introducing an extra dimension to the students’ learning. The students were first of all very polite and hospitable. They had no trouble following the approach I was using. We compared the different forms of Realism in Stephen Crane’s “The Open Boat,” Ernest Hemingway’s “A Clean Well-Lighted Place,” and Alice Walker’s “Everyday Use.” We discussed the difference between fiction and non-fiction and the different approaches to Realism itself. We even read an excerpt from Zola’s *L’Assomoir* to look at the tendency of Realism to attach itself to a reporter’s type of specific detailing, but also to examine class issues. Their first paper assignment was a comparison of these three stories and their use of Realism. We then went on to

Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," and Poe's "Tell-Tale Heart," and we looked at these works in terms of Symbolism and the creation of works that aim to go beyond the real and their rules of composition, which were often the opposite of those applied to realistic description. We followed fiction with poetry, introducing an array of approaches, as we began with Shakespearean sonnets and concluded with contemporary poetry. We concluded with drama, we read *Oedipus the King*. I showed the class, *Gospel at Colonus*, a gospel version of the story of Oedipus, set as a Pentecostal service. The class went well. The students were capable and serious and when I found some fault to correct with their work, they would say, "yes ma'am." They were all impeccably polite and nicely dressed. Claflin has a dress code and the teachers have to try to measure up to the students! The students seemed fully engaged in college life. Performances and special events on campus were made a class requirement and the auditorium would be packed. It was at a program of dance and song that I discovered that Dr. Hopkins, my chair, was also a choreographer. I saw Annette Grevious do her rousing performance of "Aint I a

Woman” of Sojourner Truth, and heard the fabulous choir of Claflin.



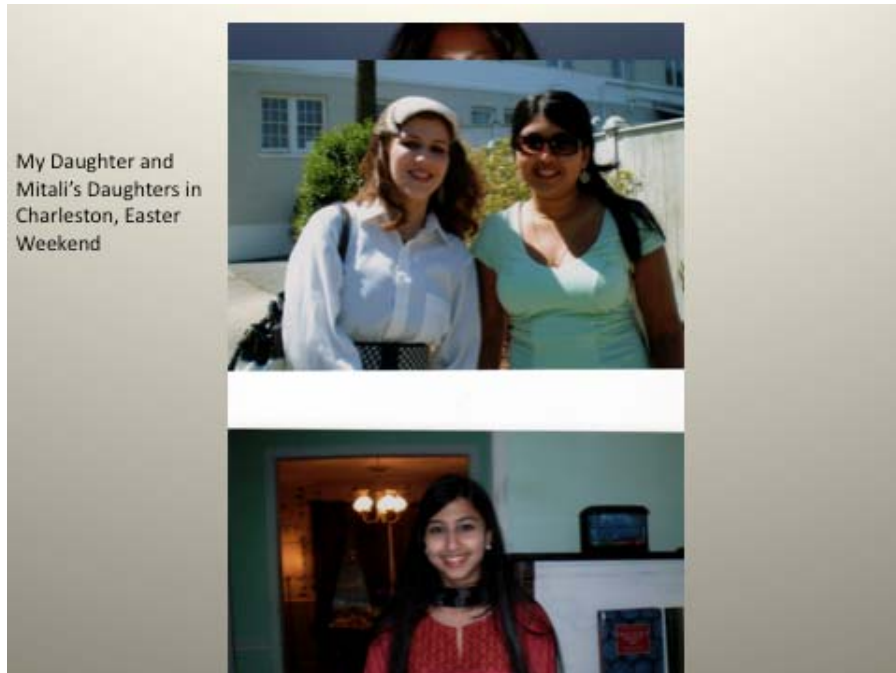
The push to be engaged is led by faculty. Every faculty member attends all faculty meetings. I was introduced at the first faculty meeting and my relationship with Claflin was launched. The school is much smaller than Hofstra, so the “Claflin family” is a working concept. At the faculty meetings work is done and designated, budgets are discussed and new grant opportunities are announced along with deadlines. People make things happen in teams that form during the faculty meetings. I had let the Dean of the Humanities, Peggy Ratliff, know areas where I felt I could contribute and it wasn’t long before I was recruited to be on the committee to put together and write the Challenge Grant for a new Humanities Building. It was a great way to make friends. Prof. Miriam Chitiga stayed holed up with me at my place for a week (she lived in Columbia) as we pushed to finish the grant narrative. Bleary-eyed, we hopped into her car when we finished and headed to Folly Beach.

The faculty meetings were always led by a prayer, as was any gathering at the university. Claflin is a Methodist College “in the buckle of the Bible belt,” as Daniel Humbree characterized Orangeburg. Both he and Dr. Sujai wanted to be more inclusive in their introduction of a diversity of religions, but it was not an easy sell in this Jesus-loving region. The powerful expression of faith influences all aspects of culture, social interaction and language in Orangeburg. I attribute much of the hospitality extended to me as related to the Christian fellowship that exists in the community. Southerners are also a bit suspicious of yankees, where the difference between a yankee and a damn yankee down south, I was told, is that a yankee goes home, but a damn yankee decides to stay!

There was no embarrassment about religion and religious expression, as there is in the New York secular environment. People openly revealed their faith in Jesus. There were Jews, Muslims and Hindus working at Claflin, and living in the area, but if they wanted to worship they would most likely have to go to Columbia. If I wanted to go to a Greek-Orthodox church, I would have to go to Columbia. I know the same is true if one were looking for a Synagogue.

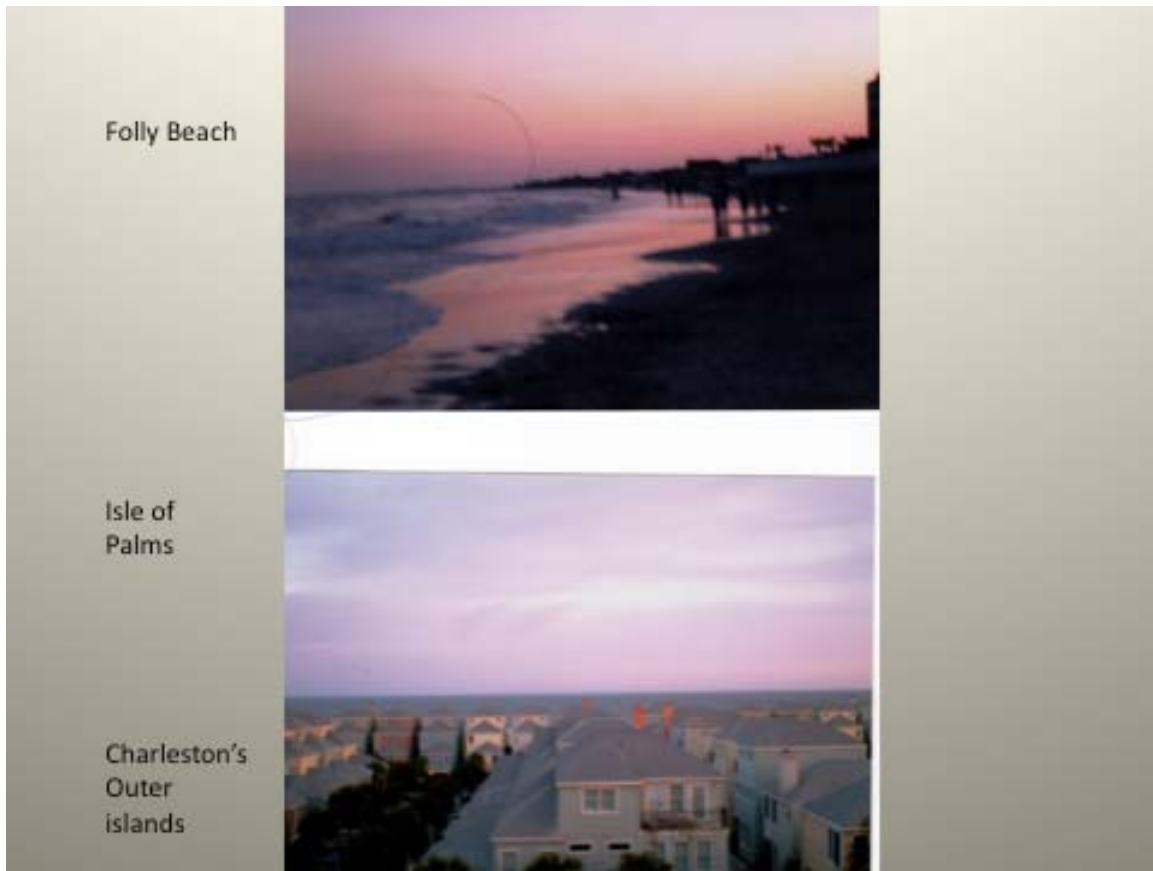
I went to a Pentecostal service on Easter Sunday with Juretta Dash. It was a congregation in motion. Bishop Ronald in his sermon condemned the municipality for not filing paperwork on time that would have brought in millions of dollars to the community. He then did an interpretation of the parable of the ten unprepared maidens with the oil lamps(Matthew 25: 1-13). Bishop Ronald saw this as a parable concerning missed opportunities and not letting go of these lost moments of opportunity that pile up to create a feeling of failure. “Let go, you will not be the basketball player you thought you would be,” he said, “the moment is gone.” Yet you

could be reborn, cleansed of false wishes, and be ready for a new opportunity. Then the congregation sang and began to move, some shaking allover, others from the waist up. I was in the second group.



My Daughter and
Mitali's Daughters in
Charleston, Easter
Weekend

My daughter had come down for Easter week and we spent the first two days of her visit in the Isle of Palms right on the beach. A friend I had made at the mall, who owned the Computer store, offered to drive us and then picked us up a day later. He knew I didn't drive and wanted my daughter and I to have a good start. These kind acts on the part of strangers are unforgettable. It is hard not to attribute a good measure of such hospitality to religion



The tribute to a colleague from the English Department who had passed away, took forty minutes of one of the faculty meetings at Claflin. The President, Vice President, Dean of Humanities spoke at length about him. The sense of taking time together for spiritual moments impressed itself on me. Everyone was busy but never hurried.

When President Tisdale visited the museum for a private showing of the Barnet and Blackburn show, he spent forty-five minutes looking at the exhibition, while giving me the history of the museum and its various transformations.

Brochure including
Foreword
by Herman Keith,
director,
Arthur Rose
Museum,
Introduction and
Checklist of the
Exhibition by guest
curator, Barbara
Lekatsas,
President's Message
by Dr. Henry
Tisdale,
Greetings from
Will Barnet,
A statement by
collectors,
Wesley and Missy
Cochran,
for Barnet
And Blackburn
Exhibition, April
2009



Brochure layout and
design by Professor
Habibur Rahman

The exhibition, in the meanwhile, was a great success and collaborative effort. Hofstra University gave us some financial support, as well, which enabled us to have a wonderful closing reception.

Dr. Kod Igway, Prof. Herman Keith,
Wesley Cochran, and Myself: Setting
Up the Exhibition



Exhibition Reception



Dr. Sujai prepares to deliver Invocation



Invocation at Reception by Dr. Amanti Sujai, Professor of Religion

- Our Creator, may the infinite light of love embrace the heart of friendship and bless the creative hands of partnership. May the infinite light of love open our awareness to what these two men, these two friends have created in the world. May the legacy of their friendship make us mindful that in a troubled world only creative beauty can bestow upon the world, peaceful relationship. Make us mindful that diversity and difference, expressed through friendship is a reflection of the Oneness of Infinite Light and Eternal Love of which you are the Ever Present Source. As we gather here today, in the spirit of Friendship, we invoke your blessings and your peace. And may all gathered together in the present moment say, Amen.



Blackburn Exhibition Reception,
Arthur Rose Museum, Barneet and

Exhibition



Exchange of Gifts between Mr.
Cochran and Mr. Keith



Students Looking at Will Barnet's "Early Morning" Woodcut



Exhibition



I had visited Will Barnet during Spring break, who is 97 years old, to get a greeting from him to Claflin for the exhibition, which he gladly provided.

Will Barnet at his Home at the
Gramercy Art Club



Will Barnet and I at his home



Many different sectors of the university participated in helping with the exhibition.

Members of Art Department, Cochrans, Dr. Peggy Ratliff, Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences, Dr. Zia Hassan, Vice President for Planning, Assessment, and Information Services, myself



My activities brought me close to fellow faculty. I did additional lectures, as well, on Greek Surrealism in the annual Colloquium series sponsored by the School of Humanities and Social Sciences and the English Department, read poetry in the International Poetry festival, attended events, and managed to travel to Columbia, Charleston and the outer islands, and La Grange.

In a moving ceremony in President Tisdale's office on my final day at Claflin with people I had worked closest with and friends I had made, who came to tell me good-by, such as the artist, Leo Twiggs, each summarized what I had brought to Claflin and thanked me with such warmth that it brought me to tears. I recall Professor Igwe from the art department saying to me every time he saw me, "If you need a ride, "anytime," he would say with his distinct Nigerian accent, "I mean it, anytime, anywhere."

In President's Tisdale's Office , a hail and farewell, a special afternoon in recognition of my contribution to Claflin with those I worked closely with: Professors Rahman, Robinson, Keith, Art Department, Hopkins and Wong, English Department, President Tisdale, Vice President Hasan, myself.



Since leaving Claflin, I have kept up with Zia, Juretta, Mitali, Peggy. I recommended the university for the South Carolina Governor's Award in the Humanities—the award required one recommender and I was glad to oblige. They were the only institution to receive this prestigious award for their contribution to fostering programs in the humanities, on behalf of the community. I welcomed the artist, Damon Howard from Claflin to NYC, when he came to show his works at the Drawing Center in the fall. We went to see the Kandinsky exhibition at the Guggenheim and afterward for lunch at the Nieu Gallerie.

I received an invitation from Ellen Zisholtz, the director of the Stanbeck Museum at South Carolina State next door to Claflin, a few weeks ago. She had come to the Barnett/Blackburn exhibition last year at Claflin and had met Wesley Cochran. The Stanbeck Museum is currently showing African-American Works on paper from the Cochran Collection. It is nice to see an idea grow into something concrete.

I went to Claflin in the spirit of adventure, and threw myself into the life of the university and in areas where I had something to offer. In return, it seemed the whole university participated and collaborated with me, encouraging me to “be a visionary.” They placed their faith and trust in me and then helped me raise the barn, so to speak. I am very fond of Claflin and proud to be affiliated with it and proud of all my new friends.

Additional Pictures:

Magnolia



Camelias



Central Square, Orangeburg, S.C.



Confederate Cemetery



State Capital, Columbia, SC



Dr. Sujai prepares to deliver Invocation



View across the road, Foxberry Court,
off St. Matthews, where I lived



A back road behind
my home great for
riding, walking,
running..



Down the same
Road...a farm...



Edisto Memorial
Gardens on the
Edisto River



Lizard in the
sun, Edisto
Gardens



Spanish
Moss, Edisto
Gardens



Edisto Gardens



St. Matthew's Road



St. Matthew's Road



Professor Dan Sciarra, First Hofstra faculty member to participate in Claflin and Hofstra Teachijg Exchange Program and President of Claflin University, Dr. Henry Tisdale, Recipient of an Honorary Doctorate from Hofstra and Speaker at Hofstra Honors Graduation, May 2009.



Me and my battery-devouring Olympus...



My thanks to Claflin, its students, faculty, administration and Hofstra, particularly the President's and Provost's Office, for the opportunity to expand my Intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic horizons; and for their ongoing support during my exchange semester.



Wildflowers
down the
same road



An incredible
pasture at the end
of the road



Houses
along the
road



The end
of the road



At the end of the
road



Pedagogy, Hope, and Transformation: Teaching Race, Religion, and Politics in an Obama Era

Classroom

By

Ronald B. Neal, Ph.D.

It was the last week of class. I expected Monday to go by smoothly. I would show excerpts from a film and encourage my students to bring their “A” game on Wednesday, the final day of class, the day they would do their presentations and hand in their final assignments. I had no clue that it would be the most explosive day of the semester. The film that they were supposed to watch was the Spike Lee documentary, *When the Levees Broke*, a chronicle of Post- Hurricane Katrina New Orleans. Before showing the film, I gave my students some food for thought. I shared my thoughts on the Katrina situation and weighed in on the racial, class, religious, and political dimensions of what occurred on August 29, 2005.

I took a chapter from the book that I had been working on and talked about our government’s response to the Gulf Coast and the media’s coverage of the catastrophe. When I stated that Hurricane Katrina exposed America’s unacknowledged Third World (America’s Haiti and Afghanistan) and our nation’s reluctance to confront race and class inequality, the class blew up. Two female students, one black and one white, who had not been very vocal in class, weighed in on what I said. The white student did not agree with my assessment and argued that opportunity exists for most Americans; that too many people use inequality as an excuse for not rising. The black female student became livid and responded by arguing that white people are blinded by white privilege; that most white people are in denial when it comes to race in America. Both students then went back and forth in an intense but civil exchange. Soon

other students entered the discussion. When the debate appeared to be getting out of hand, I intervened. Throughout most of the exchange I stood back and listened intently to the students. Before I knew it, the bulk of our class time had slipped away and there was no time to show the documentary.

Our last day of discussion was the most memorable day of my experience at Hofstra. It stands as the most rewarding day of my teaching experience as a Visiting Professor. At the outset of the course when I laid out the course objectives, I informed the students that we would have open and frank discussion; that we would do what most people, especially in America, are reluctant to do. We would engage race, religion, and politics with as much intellectual vigor and intellectual honesty as we possibly could. I informed my students that I believed in a fluid classroom; that the classroom should be a dynamic environment which would allow us to exchange ideas freely. I confessed to my students that when I was an undergraduate and a graduate student that the teachers that I appreciated the most were those who did not major in high level policing; teachers who sought to control classroom discourse for the sake of maintaining a particular point of view. I confessed to my students that I had my own views of race, religion, and politics and would share those views with them. But I made it clear that I had no interest in colonizing their views with my views. I informed my students that discussions would get hot, that there is no easy way to engage this subject matter; that there is no way to discuss race, religion, and politics without getting your hands dirty, without breaking your heels, without staining your starched white shirt. I also informed them that engaged discussion would add to and strengthen what they knew or what they thought they know about race, religion, and politics in America; that they should leave the classroom more enlightened and more engaged with respect to these matters.

What I communicated to the students constituted my hopes as a teacher. It represented the vision that I bring with respect to teaching, learning, and classroom outcomes. I see the classroom as an open space, a simulated utopia. It is a place where reflection and imagination converge with the aim of making the

world a better place. When you have students who willingly join you in this process, it makes the experience exciting and rewarding. And when you have the luxury of having history on your side, a pedagogical moment, it only adds to the excitement and the rewards that come with the classroom enterprise. The fact that I taught *Race, Religion, and Politics* on the heels of the 2008 presidential election only heightened what I experienced in the classroom and added to fire and hopes that I bring to the classroom as a professor.

I was fortunate to have Barack Obama as my teaching assistant throughout the entire semester. Without having to pay him a dime, his presence as the newly elected president of the United States, number 44, stood as an invaluable teaching tool from beginning to end. I suspected that most of my students enrolled in the course in part due to his presence on the American scene as the president of the United States. Like many people who admire and voted for Obama, they were able to relate to his person on a variety of levels. He is young, educated, cosmopolitan, charismatic, and ambiguously black. One of my white male students said he liked Obama because he is an intellectual, the polar opposite of president number 43. A Sicilian female student said that she liked him because he is cute and progressive. All of the students liked him because he is young; he symbolizes a generational shift in American leadership which they viewed as redemptive. They viewed him as young bi-racial messiah. Such Obama fandom facilitated our classroom the conversation on race in contemporary America. For my students, it was clear that a black person, a black man, achieved what was seemingly impossible. However, it was also clear that such a feat, a democratic miracle, was quite misleading.

From the beginning to the end of the course there was an unspoken sentiment that this moment in history is somehow severed from or galaxies away from recent or past history; that race still matters in America but it does not have gravity of past eras, eras such as Jim Crow and the era of slavery. This was made painstakingly clear when I started the course by turning to the early 19th century and later to the

era of Jim Crow. Students were required to read historical and philosophical texts. They read Alexis De Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* and an edited volume of essays, *Walking Integrity*, on the legacy of Benjamin Elijah Mays. I asked my students to bracket our present historical moment and suspend their excitement about Obama and consider race, religion, and politics in America from the standpoint of history. When I asked my students to step outside of the present, the response that I received was one that I am too familiar with.

It was a response that I have seen at my home institution and other institutions where I have taught. Like many of the students that I teach at Claflin University, and many college and university students across the country, the challenge of stepping outside of one's time zone and looking at the world from historical points of view is daunting. It is a challenge to get students to appreciate the past when he and she thinks that world history began in 1989 or 1990, the year they were born. As a teacher who uses the lessons and wisdom of history in all of his classes, I find it a unique challenge to make those lessons and such wisdom relevant and interesting. When I walked into the classroom I wondered if I would find any common ground between Hofstra students and Claflin students. With no amazement, it was at this level that I saw the connections. Notwithstanding this struggle with history, my students opened themselves to the content of the course. And for sixteen weeks we wrestled with America's complicated history where race, religion, and politics are concerned.

Apart from history and the common ground I found between Hofstra students and Claflin students, there were real differences. Our students are separated by geography, culture, class, and race. Many of my Claflin students have been shaped by the cultures of the Deep South. What they bring to the classroom are the rhythms, cadences, and pace of the South. Many of my students are the products of small towns. A good number of them are the first in their families to attend college. In contrast to my Claflin students, the students in my Hofstra classroom were not from the South. With the exception of

two students, the vast majority of my students were native New Yorkers. New York was in the house! What these students brought to the classroom was the immigrant flavor that has shaped New York, especially New York City. The countries of Haiti, Italy, Ireland, Guyana, and Serbia were all present in the classroom. This interesting hodgepodge of students is what stood out for me. But there is more. My Hofstra course was overwhelmingly white and female. There were nine students altogether; seven students were female and two were male. Two of the female students were black with Diasporic backgrounds; the two white male students had Eastern European and Italian backgrounds; four female students had backgrounds that were Irish and English. And the remaining female student was Italian. She was very interesting. She was a Sicilian who made it emphatically clear that she was not white. As far as the academic disciplines they represented, the students were an eclectic group. Among the majors present were mass communications, sociology, political science, and education. Although *Race, Religion, and Politics* was offered as a religious studies course, only one student was a religious studies major.

Overall, what the students brought to the course in terms of race, varying ethnicities, majors, gender, and class facilitated the aims of the course. *Race, Religion, and Politics* is an interdisciplinary course and eclecticism, pragmatic eclecticism, is what drives how the course is taught. As a teacher, the eclectic nature of the course allowed me to tap into the experiences, interests, and thoughts of the students and use them as springboards to illuminate the course content. What is more, a few students were then enrolled or had previously taken a race related course. These students freely made comparisons inside and outside of the classroom, comparisons between my course and the course that they were then enrolled in or had previously taken. My religious and political philosophy and my approach to teaching were compared against other professors, particularly white female and male professors in sociology. It was intriguing to hear students say professor so and so says this about race and racism, but you say this about race and racism. Who is right? Who is wrong? I found it very intriguing that for these students

different points of view with respect to race, religion, and politics in the university seemed unsettling. It was this kind of dynamic that was very much connected to the composition and interdisciplinary thrust of the course.

There were other dynamics at play as well, particularly the dynamics of race, gender, and age.

Throughout the course I was profoundly aware of my presence in the classroom. I was highly conscious of the fact that I am young, black, and male and that for a good number of the students I was either the first black male professor that they had ever experienced in the classroom, or one black male in a few classroom experiences with black males. My awareness of my presence in the classroom was unscientific; I took no surveys. I never asked my students, "Have you ever taken a course from a black male professor?" However, a couple of students were not reluctant to express their classroom race consciousness. The Sicilian female student, whom I mentioned earlier, was highly conscious of race and made me aware that she was aware of the paucity of black professors at Hofstra. Very early in the course, she made it clear to me that she understood how race affects the dynamics of the classroom. Beyond the Sicilian student, there was another female student who confessed that she had never taken a course from a black professor. She, along with rest of class, was required to keep a journal. It was through her writing that she made it known and I quote, "This class is interesting. I have never had a black professor."

Not only was I conscious of my gender, I was also conscious of the gendered majority in the classroom.

As I indicated earlier the class was overwhelming female. Having a female majority heightened my consciousness with respect to how I dealt the subject matter of the course. In general, when race is engaged in America, it is seldom addressed in gender specific terms. Having a significant female presence in the classroom elevates the importance of a gender sensitive approach to race and instruction. Having a significant female presence also forced me to think in new and different ways

about gender in higher education and beyond today. I have just begun doing new research and writing and gender stands at the center of this new endeavor. What I experienced at Hofstra, which I also experience at Claflin, facilitated this process.

Having shared my experience in the classroom, I wish to conclude by saying a little about scholarship and professional development, researching and writing at Hofstra. When I arrived on Hofstra's campus I was at the end of a four year book project on religion, race, and democracy in America. *Democracy in 21st Century America: Notes on Race, Class, Religion, and Region*, which will be published by Mercer University Press, is the text that I completed while at Hofstra. Teaching only one class (I typically teach between four and five classes) gave me the space to put the final touches on this manuscript. When I was not preparing for class, teaching, or running the streets of Manhattan and the streets of Brooklyn (sucking up as much of New York as I possibly could with the time that I had) I was in the library, in my office, and in the wonderful residential accommodations provided by the University, editing and documenting this text. The bulk of my research had already been done prior to my Hofstra visit. What I needed and did not have a lot of, was time to write. With time on my hands I was able to complete this project. And with time on my hands, I was able to engage in new research for my next book.

Overall, I see my visit and experience at Hofstra as being akin to the experience of Alexis De Tocqueville, who traveled from France to the United States to experience, study, and measure this notion called democracy in America. De Tocqueville came to America and for nearly nine months engaged the states, institutions, and mindsets of early 19th century America. Like De Tocqueville, I witnessed the possibilities of a full blown democracy in America at Hofstra, but I also witnessed and experienced the ongoing barriers to the idea of democracy in America at Hofstra. Although I felt relatively at home at Hofstra, I was profoundly aware that I was a visitor and a stranger. My outsider status is what stands out in my total experience at Hofstra. Although my experience as an outsider can be easily interpreted in negative

and pessimistic terms, I view my position as a visitor, a foreigner, and a stranger in constructive, hopeful, and transformative terms. Like De Tocqueville and others who succeed him: Zora Neal Hurston, Richard Wright, Ella Baker, James Baldwin, Benjamin Elijah Mays and Barack Obama, the foreigner brings something valuable and different to the table. The foreigner brings assets that are important. What the foreigner brings is hope and the possibilities for transformation. I am appreciative of my Hofstra experience and look forward to seeing what the future holds for our respective institutions (Claflin University and Hofstra University).