

September 28, 2006

Faculty Resource Network
Winter 2007 Faculty Enrichment Program
New York University
194 Mercer Street, 4th floor
New York, NY
10012

OBJECT: Application for "The Puerto Rican Dilemma: National Identity within the Borders of the American Nation"

This workshop on the cultural, political, and sociological dilemmas that many Puerto Ricans face cannot come at a better time in my research and teaching career. I have been working on the notion of collective memory, and on the ways in which people collectively remember their past to define their present and look toward their collective future. I have done extensive research on cases involving colonialism and the native populations of Canada and Hawaii. More specifically, I have studied expressions of collective apology about past wrongdoings and the impacts of such apologies on cultural and social identity. In all of my case studies, my research has focused on expressions of apology offered by different levels of governments, political organizations, and religious denominations. Such issues are particularly relevant at Dillard University where I teach African American students who face these issues all the time as they reflect on the legacy of slavery and mold their identities.

Now is the time for me to expand the scope of my studies and work with a different population that is still part of the United States. It will be fascinating for me to highlight the similarities and differences of a case as unique as Puerto Rico to my previous field research. The workshop "The Puerto Rican Dilemma: National Identity within the Borders of the American Nation" is the perfect opportunity. Moreover, my interests for Latin America are not recent. I have lived with a Spanish-speaking family and studied Spanish in preparation for research on Latin American lives.

I want to thank the Faculty Resource Network at NYU for their excellent work and for the time spent considering my application,

Department of Philosophy and Religion

“The Puerto Rican Dilemma: National Identity Within the Borders of America”
Faculty Resource Network Winter Seminar 2007 Statement of Intent

For several years, I have been hoping for a Faculty Resource Network seminar focused on Puerto Rico. My interest in Puerto Rico stems from my own experience as a long-time, active member of Austin’s salsa dance and music community. However, my academic research into the cultural traditions of Puerto Rico began in the summer of 2003, with a Faculty Resource Network summer seminar, “Literature of the Americas: New Approaches,” followed by a 6-week NEH seminar, “Caribbean Theater and Cultural Performance,” led by Professor Lowell Fiet at University of Puerto Rico-Río Piedras. The following fall I taught an upper-division course in Caribbean Literature and Performance and a new sophomore core curriculum literature course I designed, “American Literature in a world context,” both informed by these opportunities. Likewise, this fall, I am teaching an upper-division Topics in World Literature course, “Mexico, Hawai’i, and Puerto Rico in Literature and Performance.” This course, also informed by Faculty Resource Network activities, brings together the literature and other expressive arts of three distinct countries with unique histories and traditions, each with a special relationship (bordering nation, state, and territory) to the U.S. I am the only faculty member at my institution who has focused study on Puerto Rico, but I have had strong institutional support in this area of research. I intend to continue to develop courses that bring Puerto Rican, Caribbean and insular cultures to our curriculum.

The courses I teach encourage students to situate multi-cultural literatures and other forms of cultural expression in a global, particularly a hemispheric, historical and political context. Trained as a medievalist with a special interest in the effects of European colonization and social roles on identity, as manifested in literature and other arts, not surprisingly, the celebration of Santiago Apóstol in the Americas—particularly the Fiesta de Loíza Aldea—holds particular interest to me. I am not sure that the most recent scholarship on this topic sufficiently recognizes the unique ethnic and historical context of the Puerto Rican festival. I continue to research and write about this cultural, historical puzzle.

I am also interested in the way that arts, languages and traditions contribute to cultural identity formation and maintenance across geographic distance and in “minority” or insular populations, including those of my own community. In June 2005, while participating in a FRN Seminar about writing, a Network colleague from Columbia married to a Nuyorican, invited me to her mother-in-law’s home in the barrio for the annual Puerto Rican Day festival. With smells of plantains and the sounds of salsa flowing in the open window, I felt myself in San Juan. The 80-year-old Señora told me that she had no reason to return to the island: her doctor, her grocer, her people are in the barrio. In Austin, the experience of Puerto Ricans (and other Latino people) differs, although Austin has a large Spanish-speaking population, and the Caribbean population is quickly growing. Here native Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants primarily account for our Latin American culture. In the salsa community—aside from the vibrant Puerto Rican Folkloric Dance and Culture organization—Puerto Ricans have a special but sometimes conflicted place, often claimed and negotiated through their historic relationship to the music and dance all claim as “Latin.” Similarly, I am engaged in a study of the experience of our students of Spanish-speaking heritages in an historically Black institution, where they are a minority in a minority institution, located in east Austin where African American and Mexican American neighborhoods meet—not always easily—and students often find “Afro-Latino” a new concept.

Statement of Intent

Currently, I am an endowed Professor of Liberal Arts in African American Studies and English at Xavier University of Louisiana. In summer 1998, I began research on the history of the Mississippi River Parishes in Louisiana, with particular focus on Orleans, St. Charles and St. John the Baptist parish, where I live 35-miles west of New Orleans. To date scores of microfilm and original documents dating from 1712 have been reviewed in the vault room of the St. John the Baptist Parish courthouse, and the parish library. This includes marriage, birth, baptismal and death records; land and conveyance titles, and original acts. Additional research has been and continues to be conducted at the New Orleans Public Library and the Archives of the New Orleans Archdiocese. All of this work has been and continues to be directed toward writing papers on identity formation of inhabitants, particularly of African descent, who have been resettled in the Atlantic Corridor since the days of slavery. I have conducted presentations at national and regional conferences, and have had some of my work reviewed for publication.

When the United States purchased Louisiana in 1803, New Orleans and vicinity came under the newly organized Territory of Orleans and the rest of Louisiana under the authority of the Territory of Indiana. Inhabitants of the Territory of Orleans were not allowed to apply for statehood and hence were not designated as citizens of the United States until the U.S. Congress felt assured that European inhabitants in positions of power embraced being politically defined as *white*. It was debated in Congress (of which they wanted no record keeping), that a visit to Louisiana was like a visit to a foreign country because the land was occupied by "a polyglot nation of half-breeds." Hence from 1803-1812 citizens in the Territory of Orleans had to form an identity as a nation within a nation, neither being citizens of France nor citizens of the United States. Given that inhabitants in Puerto Rico continually address identity formation as a nation within a nation, I want to conduct a comparative study of identity formation relative to Territorial Louisiana (when many inhabitants were relocated to New Orleans after the Haitian Revolution in 1803, and particularly the 10,000 refugees from the Caribbean who entered New Orleans in 1809 and doubled its population). My goal is to draw from the seminar on Puerto Rican identity to add yet another dimension of comparative study in the teaching of my courses Intro to African History and Culture, Pan-Africanism, and the New Negro Movement (1920s). I also plan to write a number of articles, especially a 40-page paper on identity formation in the Atlantic Corridor for consideration as a monograph publication in Lagos, Nigeria.

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