Press Release

Symposium on “Race and Expression”
April 8, 2015

On April 8, 2015, the Walter J. Ong Center at Saint Louis University will host a day-long Symposium on Race and Expression. This symposium responds to President Fred Pestello’s call for a conversation about race in contemporary America. The symposium is co-sponsored by the Ong Center, the Department of English, the Department of American Studies, and the African American Studies Program.

During the Symposium, Pius Library will feature a display of paintings and writings by Nathan Young, the noted African-American judge who founded the St. Louis American. His editorials and paintings document the civil rights movement in St. Louis and the nation. These works are selected from the Nathan Young Collection in the Pius XII Memorial Library. The Library will also display materials from the Walter J. Ong Archive, featuring Fr. Ong’s incisive comments on racism and language from the 1940s to the 1990s.

Houston Baker, Chancellors Professor at Vanderbilt University, will present the keynote lecture, “The Urge to Adorn: Generational Wit and the Birth of The Signifying Monkey,” at 4:30 pm in the Pere Marquette Gallery at DuBourg Hall. Professor Baker will discuss how the black community used the trickster language of “signifying” for mockery and mastery. Black critics, notably Henry Louis Gates, appropriated “signifying” to trace relationships between black writers (Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston, Ishmael Reed). Professor Baker discusses the implications of that strategy for the black community today. The twenty-fifth anniversary edition of Professor Gates’ influential work The Signifying Monkey provides an occasion to consider the relationship between vernacular cultural expressivity (including orality) and technologies of literacy. These concepts of orality and literacy were the subject of foundational research by Walter J. Ong, SJ. For Gates, any theory of Afro-American expressive culture begins with oral transmissions of Black life. Oral transmission represents a mode of vernacular expressivity; it captures the self-apprehension of a culture. Black literature is the extension of generational wit expressed in oral traditions.

Houston Baker is a renowned authority on African American literary criticism and theory. His many books explore different elements of black language, music, and literature. He received the 2009 American Book Award for Betrayal: How Black Intellectuals Have Abandoned the Ideals of the Civil Rights Era. His most recent publication is The Trouble with Post-Blackness (Columbia University Press, 2015), which he coedited with K. Merinda Simmons.

The lecture, and all the events, are free and open to the public.

The morning events will be held on the second floor of the Pius XII Memorial Library from 9 a.m. to noon.
The 9 a.m. panel, “Locating Ferguson: Race, Region, and Rights,” is sponsored by the Department of American Studies. Led by Dr. Heidi Ardizzone, who is currently teaching a graduate seminar on Race and Citizenship in St. Louis, the roundtable participants include members that class and graduate students Corinne Wohlford, Aretha Butler, Tandra Taylor, and Melissa Ford.

At 10:30 a.m., a second panel, sponsored by the Department of English, will discuss “Civil Rights and the Media: From Nathan Young to Ferguson.” The panel of English Department graduate students, chaired by Patrick Brooks, will include Lauren Kersey, Tarrell Campbell, and Joseph Love (graduate students).

Afternoon events will be held at the Pere Marquette Gallery.

At 1:30 p.m., a panel of undergraduate students in the African American Studies Program, led by Dr. Stefan Bradley, will discuss “The Black Freedom Movement from the 1960s to Now.” Jonathan Pulpus, Mariah Bender, Jason Ebinger, and Domonique Taylor are all majors in African Studies.

At 3 p.m., a faculty roundtable will discuss contemporary African American literature, film, and issues of violence. Speakers will include Professors Joe Weixlmann, Stephen Casmier, Joya Uraizee, and Harold Bush. Dr. Weixlmann edited African American Review for many years; Dr. Uraizee has published books on African writers, and is currently completing a book on child soldiers and violence in African film; Dr. Casmier is an authority on contemporary African American literature; and Dr. Bush has completed a study of American literature and parental grief, including a discussion of Emmett Till’s mother.