

Black West is theme for year of programs sponsored by UCSD's African and African American Studies Project

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Note: Historical photographs depicting images of the black West are available.

A series of lectures, colloquia, performances and film screenings, all focused on the black West, will be sponsored this year by the University of California, San Diego's African and African-American Studies Research Project (AAASRP), culminating in a two-day symposium to be held in April.

According to Bennetta Jules-Rosette, professor of sociology at UCSD and the director of AAASRP, the symposium and the myriad other events scheduled for the academic year will highlight the historical significance of African-Americans in the West. All events are free and open to the public.

"For example," said Jules-Rosette, "twenty-six of the original 44 founders of Los Angeles were of African descent, including Maria Rita Valdez, who owned Rancho Rodeo -- now known as Beverly Hills -- and Francisco Reyes, an early mayor of Los Angeles in the 1790s."

Kicking off the AAASRP's series on the black West is a colloquium on Nov. 4 at noon on "The Black Western During the Silent Era, 1912-1948." The colloquium will feature a presentation by John Anderson, a professor of history at USC and an authority on African-American film and the black Western. The colloquium is co-sponsored by the UCSD Department of Communication and will be held in Room 201 at the UCSD Media Center. The colloquium will explore the history of the black silent Western in relation to the race films that Hollywood produced for the black community.

In February 1999, AAASRP will host noted composer, musician, and scholar Dominic Kanza, who will visit UCSD from Feb. 12-26 as a Regent's Lecturer. At UCSD, Kanza will engage in a series of lecture-performances on the origins of blues and jazz, and will meet with AAASRP faculty and students to explore these themes. His lectures and performances will trace African musical forms from their roots on the African continent to their vital transformations in the New World. On Feb. 19, Kanza will give a public lecture-performance on "A Musical Journey: African and African Diaspora Musical Forms in Comparative Perspective." Kanza's visit is co-sponsored by the UCSD Department of Ethnic Studies.

The symposium, "The Black West: Reinventing History, Reinterpreting Media," to be held from April 22-23, will address the settlement of the black West, its pioneers, heroes, and villains as they have been depicted in American historical narratives and media images. The symposium will include film screenings of nearly 20 films which depict the black West, including *Harlem on the Prairie* (1938), *Blazing Saddles* (1974), and *Silverado* (1985). Many of the films will also be aired on UCSD-TV the week before the symposium.

"Many of these films are rare and provide insight into the history of African- Americans in Hollywood," said Jules-Rosette. "Some of these films feature an all black cast and are important contributions to the creation of the black West as a cultural image."

The April symposium, which will include a distinguished group of scholars, will open with a session on black settlements in California, and the roles played by black pioneers, cowboys, explorers, soldiers, and miners in the history of California and the West. Presentations will highlight the significance of African-Americans in the West. During the Gold Rush era, black miners were active in California until its statehood and the adoption of the Plessy vs. Ferguson decision that implemented conditions of segregation and froze black miners out of California's economic boom. Nonetheless, by this time an elite group of wealthy black Californians had been established.

The symposium will consist of four sessions covering the history of black settlements in California, media images in the black West, adaptations of the Western to African diaspora and African-American popular culture, and the relationship between African-Americans and American Indians.

The AAASRP's mission is to promote research and intellectual understanding of the issues that face African-Americans and the African diaspora populations today from the perspectives of the humanities and the social sciences. The project sponsors public events that bring diverse groups of people together, both to foster a comparative and interdisciplinary environment, and to share information and exchange scholarly ideas on these topics.

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