

"Reading Scriptures, Reading America"

The three-year ISS collaborative ethnographic and ethnological research project on scriptural readings within selected communities of color in the United States—Asian American, Arab American, Native American, African American, and Latino/a Americans—was convened as a conference on the campuses of the Claremont Colleges on 15-17 October 2009. The conference brought together for reporting on research, conversation, and debate the five teams of research directors and researchers, local and regional scholars, students, and community members.

The conference was opened with a conversation-framing address by ISS director and conference convener Vincent L. Wimbush. His address, "Knowing Ex-centrics/Ex-centric Knowing," urged conferees to consider how focusing on the experiences and knowledge claims of ex-centric peoples provides a challenge to re-consider the concept of the center as a sign of power and as part of the examination of the phenomenon of reading scriptures in the United States. He argued that in their wide-ranging and different but also sometimes similar engagements of scriptures, ex-centric peoples not only mimic the orientation to the center but also sometimes interrupt and destabilize it. Also arguing that the U.S.—as the inventor and embodiment of the myth of "America"—was constituted as a text-reading, specifically, scripture-reading nation, Wimbush hoped that rich ethnographic reporting would open up windows onto layered perspectives of "America" and "Scriptures."

The three-day conference was organized around the reporting of the five research projects, reflecting the five selected "communities of color" and their engagements with "scriptures." Both categories—"communities of color" and "scriptures"—were understood by all researchers to be tensile and elastic. Rich multimedia reporting complemented each group's presentation of its ethnographic research. The reports situated each community within wider historical, social and religious contexts, while at the same time excavating these communities' practices and ideologies and forms of expression.

"Asian Americans, Bible Believers: An Ethnological Study"

Research Director Tat-siong Benny Liew (Pacific School of Religion), Brett Esaki (University of California, Santa Barbara), Russell Jeung (San Francisco State University), Helen Kim (Harvard Divinity School), Lalruatkima (Claremont Graduate University), James Kyung-Jin Lee (University of California, Irvine), and Quynh-Hoa Nguyen (CGU) investigated scriptural readings of multiple generations of Vietnamese Christians in Anaheim, CA, and a variety of Asian American college students in Southern California and Boston, MA. The panel addressed the ambivalence(s) that Asian American Bible believers experience and express as both Asian Americans and Bible believers. Out of that double ambivalence, they develop ideology and practice representing both negotiation and non-negotiation with biblical inerrancy and/or authority and Asian American cultural orientation.

"Christian and Muslim Diasporas from the Arab Region: Between U. S. Empire, Homeland, Politics, and the Pressures of Racism and Assimilation"

The presentation made by Research Director Nadine Naber (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor), Matthew Stiffler (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor), and Sana Tayyen (CGU) focused on how Arab Americans—Sunni Muslims in Pomona, CA; and Maronite and Orthodox Christians in metropolitan Detroit, MI—attempt to respond to the

pressures and challenges, especially poignant after “9-11” of homogenization and domestication in the context of the United States while facing the cultural, ethnic, and regional particularities that are part of the complex world of Arabs. Among such peoples, religious identities and practices, including engagements of scriptures, are entangled in a range of historical realities among which are: the networks of social relationships that link Arab immigrant communities in the U.S. to their homelands; U.S. empire building and the U.S.-led wars in regions of the world that include Arab populations; the related internal histories and politics of their nations of origin; and the pressures of anti-Arab racism, immigration and assimilation in the U.S. The report illustrated how scriptures, within the communities studied, function as a tool to negotiate the tensions inherent in living in a diaspora while being deeply invested in respective homelands.

“Native Peoples, Evangelical Christianity and the Bible”

Research Director Andrea Smith (University of California, Riverside) and collaborator Terry LeBlanc (North American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies, Toronto) focused their research on Native evangelicals from diverse geographic and tribal backgrounds in the U.S. and Canada. Their presentation stressed the complexity of native peoples’ perspectives on and adoptions of Christianity. Through interviews and conversations and debates captured on film, the research team positioned native peoples themselves as theorists. The fifty-minute film that was created for the project featured individuals wrestling with the fraught history of Christian mission and European colonialism. It also reflected the humor of the persons interviewed, thereby showing how weighty matters are negotiated and interpreted.

“Scriptures as Sundials in African American Lives”

Research Director Velma Love (Florida A&M University), John L. Jackson, Jr. (University of Pennsylvania), and Renee K. Harrison (Payne Theological Seminary) presented their research on the scripturalizing practices of African Americans. Their reporting focused on: African American seminary students at Emory University, in Atlanta, GA; a 55 year-old African American woman who embraced various religious traditions throughout her adult life in order to develop a system of meaning that would affirm her self worth; a member of the African American Hebrew Israelites; and a Yoruba/Orisha Priest. By examining the self-reported life stories of these individuals the research team discovered dominant themes related to worldview, self understanding, and the dynamics of meaning-making through the engagement of selected texts. Their analysis suggested that a fundamentalist orientation may meet a psycho-social need for certainty and stability when faced with change and uncertainty, represent a form of agency and self empowerment, and/or act as a redemptive strategy and form of rejection of mainstream society. In other words, the group found that the “texts” that constitute scriptures were used in order to sustain them and help them reconfigure their world when necessary.

“Seeking Guidance from the Word: U. S. Latino/a Religious Communities and Their Scriptures”

The research presented by Research Director Efrain Agosto (Hartford Seminary), Brian C. Clark (Hartford Seminary), Jacqueline Hidalgo (CGU/Williams College), and Elizabeth Conde-Frazier (Esperanza College) examined Latino/a treatments of scriptures in five communities—Los Angeles Latino Muslim Association; the Latin American Bible Institute; two small Roman Catholic parishes in Connecticut; and the House of Restoration, a Pentecostal church in Hartford, CT. As the theme indicates, the panel stressed Latino/a Americans’ uses of scriptures as part of Latino/a efforts to construct identities and epistemologies of opposition within the U.S. Researchers found that for the Latino/a groups studied, authoritative texts form reading communities and, as guidance for life, scriptural readings provide the symbols and narratives that connect experience to practice.

Musical Event

A special highlight of the conference was a spectacular musical performance by the Ernie Watts Jazz Quartet. The hour

and a half set included "Spirit Song," a piece written by Watts and one of the members of his Quartet. With its blend of African and Native sensibilities, it was experienced as an expression that was consonant with the theme of the conference. Drawing by far the largest audience of the conference, Watts and his Quartet received a most enthusiastic response from the audience.

Keynote Address: "The Gutenberg Nation";

Spanning an array of topics, the keynote address by noted journalist and writer Richard Rodriguez, added another perspective to the theme of the conference. In his address, "The Gutenberg Nation," Rodriguez addressed briefly but poignantly the textedness of America—that "America," through its special texts, very literally wrote itself into being and continues to define itself through its engagement with such texts. With his characteristic passion and energy, he argued that in the writing of the Constitution and its activation there was an erasure of difference that occluded the multiplicity of American-ness.

Richard Rodriguez Keynote Address for the Institute for Signifying Scriptures Conference at CGU from Claremont Graduate University on Vimeo.

Closing Panel

A panel discussion that was chaired by Erin Runions (Pomona College) concluded the formal conference program. Panelists included all of the research directors and keynote speaker Richard Rodriguez. The panel explored ruptures, overlaps and divergences among the studied communities of color. It was also occasion for the expression of thoughts about the implications and ramifications of the overall project. Among the issues that emerged were the intersection of place and religion; temporality and one's relation to scripture; transnational and diasporic identity in relation to scriptural reading; a community's relation to an imagined past; and affective orientations to scriptures.

Questions for Ongoing Consideration:

1. What is at stake in the way the research project and conference foci were framed? In a self-reflexive turn, how do the intersections between the various terms and categories employed—reading, scriptures, America, ethnicity, race, religion, canon/authority, sexuality, politics, and so on—interrupt the self-evident notions and presumptions about any one and all of them?
2. What might it mean to think about any nation in terms of scriptures and scripture-reading?
3. What might it mean to think about ex-centrics and their readings in terms of the texture of the nation?
4. What might it mean to think of scriptures as ongoing site for negotiation of identity-construction and power relations?

[Click here for conference program booklet](#)

[Click here for conference posters: Ernie Watts](#) [Richard Rodriguez](#) [conference flyer](#)

