

Introduction

Within African Diaspora Studies, we see repeated tropes and motifs across languages, literatures, film, dance, music, and philosophy. Paying homage to one's ancestors, for example, is integral to traditional African culture; this idea is found in the works of African American playwright August Wilson, in the installations of Cuban artist María Magdalena Campos-Pons, in the poetry of Brazilian writer Miriam Alves, certainly in African American choreographer Alvin Ailey's *Revelations*. And yet many times, scholars will present their research only in their specific fields, without crossing national or linguistic boundaries. *Let Spirit Speak! Cultural Journeys Through the African Diaspora* was designed so that specialists in seemingly disparate areas could share their research, could compare notes, so to speak, thereby providing an opportunity for further collaboration. Each day featured a performance of some kind (musical performance, spoken word) as well as an ongoing art exposition, thereby putting scholars of the ivory tower in touch with the vibrancy of New York City's cultural scene. Conference participants will therefore be inundated with the sights and sounds of the African Diaspora.¹ Traditional thinking dictates that a conference be narrow in scope so as to maintain focus: this conference goes against that train of thought, revealing that breadth does not necessarily mean lack of specificity. On the contrary, it creates new ways of thinking.

The mission of The City College of New York is to provide both accessibility and excellence in education; *Let Spirit Speak!* reveals both of these qualities. In keeping with the mission of CCNY, we established registration rates that encourage attendance in this conference rather than discourage possible participation. The general registration fee for three days was \$50; for the faculty and staff of The City University of New York system, it was \$25; for graduate students, it was \$10; and for

1. We define the African Diaspora as those persons who have migrated from Africa to the Americas, Europe, Asia, and Australia, or whose ancestors migrated to these places, whether forced or voluntarily.

high school and undergraduate students, the conference was free. We were strongly compelled to provide a conference of the highest order, one in which participants could enjoy amenities often experienced at conferences that charge much greater entrance fees. Access to knowledge should not be impeded at any cost, certainly not because of financial difficulties; we worked hard to provide a quality conference that was stimulating to our participants.

We received more than seventy abstracts for this three-day conference for paper presentations, roundtables, and performances, and more than 20 percent of them have come from abroad, with scholars from Norway, India, China, Brazil, Nigeria, Israel, and Sierra Leone responding to the call for papers and online registration. Over the course of three days, from April 22 to 24, 2010, there were more than thirty presentations, three spoken-word performances, two film screenings, and a musical concert. In addition, select conference presentations will be published in a collection of essays: in this way, scholars and cultural workers will not only present their work but also have the opportunity to advance their scholarship through publication. The goal of this conference was to create a space whereby scholars, students, and cultural workers, those of us who work in the field of African Diaspora Studies, could meet and exchange ideas, giving way to new ways of thinking, new approaches to this expansive field.