



Final Report
Latin American Resource Center's Summer Teacher Institute
Performance in Latin America: Retracing African Culture
July 10-12, 2008

Thirteen teachers participated in the Latin American Resource Center's annual summer teacher institute, *Performance in Latin America: Retracing African Culture*. This year's institute coincided with the New Orleans Dance Festival which brought in dancers and students from around the world to the city to take part in a cultural exchange on performance in the Americas.

Two of the thirteen teachers participating in the LARC summer institute are from New York and the remaining eleven are local New Orleans teachers from subject areas such as Math, Spanish, Social Studies, Language Arts, History, and Dance. New Orleans teachers participating in this year's institute came from three different charter schools, two private schools as well as several Jefferson and Orleans Parish schools. Teachers participating in this year's institute were able to learn about the African diaspora in Latin America from dancers, cultural anthropologists, ethnomusicologists, Mardi Gras Indian Chiefs, Louisiana Department of State curriculum designers, teachers and local artists.

Integrating dance workshops, academic presentations, museum visits, and dance performance, this institute highlighted the power of using local community resources to address global issues. The institute traced the African diaspora in Latin America through movement and creative expression. Dancers from Haiti, Cuba, and the Congo highlighted specific movement and rhythms which can be felt and seen in the dances of Congo Square here in New Orleans, LA. All who participated in this institute, both teachers and presenters, were able to physically experience some of the many connections that New Orleans shares with Latin America. The institute enabled teachers to create curricula on Latin America and dance and it gave them the ability to make global connections to local resources and cultural identity. Presenters focusing on African diaspora and dance of different regions and disciplines were able to leave with a better understanding of New Orleans' cultural role in fostering African diaspora and movement from the Americas.



Skull and Bones Gang costume worn by Ronald Lewis to welcome Mardi Gras to the city at dusk on Mardi Gras day.

Scholars such as Andrea Queeley and ethnomusicologist Ned Sublette led the institute



Ned Sublette, Ronald Lewis, Maria Ruiz and other participants standing in the House of Dance and Feathers.

with discussions on identity and race throughout Latin America and New Orleans. Dance performer, Danys Pérez “La Mora” then guided the participants in a physically invigorating Afro-Cuban dance class which was later interpreted in a curriculum design workshop with local artist and teacher Dollie Rivas. The day concluded with a reception and visit to the contemporary Haitian art exhibit at the George & Leah McKenna Museum of African American Art, “Standing with Papa Legba.” Shantrelle Lewis, Director

and Curator of the museum guided the group through the museum. She shared the histories of all the artists

on display as well as the creation of the museum itself. Our visit to this museum enabled the participants to learn about the connections that Haiti and New Orleans share, and it provided another local resource for teachers to utilize. The next day all participants and presenters met with Elizabeth McAlister, reknown scholar on Haiti and Rara parades who shared the history and background behind these street performances in Haiti. Peniel Guerier, a New York dance performer from Haiti then worked with all participants in choreographing dance movements from Haiti appropriate for the K-12 classroom. We finished our day on street performance at the House of Dance and Feathers, a local Mardi Gras Indian museum housed in the lower 9th ward. Director and founder, Ronald Lewis shared his personal journey to restore and sustain his own cultural identity as a Mardi Gras Indian and this community’s culture at large by creating this museum. This is another local resource for New Orleans teachers and offered out of state teachers and presenters a unique glimpse of some cultural traditions in the lower 9th ward.

The last day of the institute concluded with a presentation by Helen Regis, cultural anthropologist from Louisiana State University who filled in the last piece of the journey of the African diaspora through performance in the Americas; the development of cultural traditions in New Orleans. This presentation brought the institute’s focus on Latin America full circle by revealing common connections in local New Orleans culture specifically in the Mardi Gras Indian community, to the street performance traditions of Cuba, Haiti, and Brazil. Participants concluded their participation in the institute with a Congolese/Brazilian dance workshop. Dance artist, Biza Sompá taught about the rhythms of the Congo found in Brazil as well as in Congo Square of New Orleans. The institute concluded with a final performance by the New

Orleans Dance Festival. Beverly Trask, festival founder and director highlighted the connection New Orleans shares with the rhythms of Africa and the Americas throughout the performance.

Overall response from teachers was positive. One teacher said: "I loved the combination of lecture, dance and museum visits, I particularly enjoyed Andrea Queeley and Helen Regis' presentations" (Spanish teacher from local charter school in New Orleans, LA). Presenters were also positive and excited to continue the discussions generated by the institute. Future development and projects on connecting local culture to Latin America have already stirred interest among local artists, teachers and community leaders. Collaborative projects are currently being designed as a result of this institute which will address similar issues that focus on the holiday *Día de los muertos*.

Coordinated through the Latin American Resource Center, this institute was sponsored by the Stone Center for Latin American Studies, Tulane University's Department of Dance and Theatre, the New Orleans Dance Festival, the George & Leah McKenna Museum of African American Art, and the House of Dance and Feathers.