

III) Konferenzberichte | Conference Reports

1. Women in the Caribbean – Socare Conference 2025

Women in the Caribbean. Fragmentations – Crossroads – Interconnections.

Conference Report

After a year of intensive preparations, the 2025 Socare Conference was held on October 16-18 in the Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut, PK (IAI) in Berlin, bringing together scholars from across the humanities and social sciences. Over the course of three days, about 50 participants discussed the position of women in the Caribbean and its diasporas, the development of their political, social, and cultural interventions, and their relationship to gender roles, feminist- and LGBTQ-movements. The IAI offered a unique location, given its rich collection of books, magazines, and archives on the Caribbean, Ibero-America, and Ibero-Africa; the biggest in Europe in those fields.

The director of the IAI, Prof. Dr. Barbara Goebel, honored us with inaugurating the conference. She emphasized that the focus of her institution lies not only on Ibero-America but also Ibero-Africa, with the Caribbean as an important link between both. Her team regularly travels to the Caribbean islands to obtain the newest scientific and literary publications. On this occasion, Prof. Goebel was presented with a gift by Juanamaría Cordones-Cook (University of Missouri, Columbia) who donated her collection of CDs and books on Afro-Cuban artists, actors, writers, and intellectuals to the IAI. Ineke Phaf-Rheinberger (University of Giessen) contributed a rare book on the works of the sculptor Nelson Carrilho (Curaçao/Amsterdam), who had also provided the logo for the conference flyer. He is the creator of the iconic sculpture *Mama Baranka* in the Vondelpark, Amsterdam, dedicated to Kerwin Lucas Duinmeijer, an Antillean victim of racism in the Netherlands.

The conference featured four outstanding keynote lectures. In her opening keynote, Nadia Ellis



Inaugural keynote address by Nadia Ellis (photo credits: Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut, SPK)

(University of California, Berkeley), in “Habitations: Dwelling in Feminine Folk Figuration in the Black Diaspora,” highlighted aspects of her current research on the *Kumina* tradition in Jamaica. She showed that this tradition is organized by elder women who educate the younger generation in the dances, music, clothes, and songs that belong to the spiritual and festive gatherings. *Kumina*’s roots go back to the times of the slave trade between Africa and the

Caribbean, functioning as a memorizing practice to keep the spiritual resistance inherent in popular culture from this time alive. Ellis supported her presentation with short historical video clips preserved in anthropological archives.

The second keynote speaker was Jamaica Kincaid (Harvard University/American Academy Berlin), an internationally well-known fiction writer. She generally employs a female first-person narrator in her prose, describing family dynamics and daily encounters with an explicitly critical view on society. Kincaid's presentation, "My World after 1492," was set in a similar tone. She frequently mentioned the beginnings of Spanish colonization with a focus on Christopher Columbus' writings. Her native island Antigua still bears the name given by the Italian 'explorer' and conqueror. Kincaid expanded on the meaning of the word "wonderful" (*maravilloso*) he used to describe the Caribbean, denouncing the colonial view of the Spanish empire.

In her keynote address "Spectral Bodies, Subtle Power: *Godnas*, Materiality, and Transitional Strategies among Indo-Caribbean Women," Sinah Kloß (University of Bonn) gave insights into her anthropological research on elder women of Indian descent in Suriname, Guyana, and Trinidad. She explained the importance of body language and tattoos (*godnas*) as memory practices indicating background, descent, and belonging. Kloß also mentioned other practices such as bathing and clothing and illustrated her talk with images from her research.



Sinah Kloß during her keynote address (photo credits: Mario Laarmann)

In the fourth keynote lecture, Juanamaría Cordones-Cook, director of the documentary film *Belkis Ayón: Desasosiego/Restlessness*, gave insights into her documentary work in Cuba. Belkis Ayón is internationally known as an artist for her collography. She developed a visual language inspired by the Cuban *abakúa* religion which focuses on the figure of Sikán. In the African tradition, Sikán is the eternal betrayer of the secrets of the nation, comparable to the Malinche in Mexico. In works like *The Last Supper* (1991), Ayón converts Sikán's image from a malicious victim into a powerful actors. Cordones-Cook herself is known for her numerous investigations into Afro-Cuban artists (books, interviews, documentaries, translations) and her impressive archive about their intellectual and aesthetic role in contemporary Cuba.

What these four keynotes were able to establish is the importance of Caribbean women in intellectual and aesthetic memorizing practices, communal festivities, as much as literature and visual art. The conference's twelve panels then went on to further discuss the large variety of women's contributions in the field of literature, art, politics, and activism in the Caribbean.

The first panel started with Calypso Rose, the famous calypso queen of Trinidad, who established her music, compositions, and performances in a generally male profession. Her focus on women in songs such as "Calypso Queen" therefore meant a revolution in this musical genre. Two other presentations concentrated on film and discussed similarities between Sara Gomez from Cuba and Maria Luisa Bemberg from Argentina, comparing their depictions of gender, race, and class.



Ineke Phaf-Rheinberger, Jamaica Kincaid, and Juanamaría Cordones-Cook during the conference (photo credits: Juanamaría Cordones-Cook)

In the second panel, the presenters focused on the role of women as traders, storytellers, or *mambos* in Haitian literature, discussing silent resistance and ethical influence in works by Marie-Vieux-Chauvet, Gerard Étienne, and others.

In the third panel on environmental reflections, the reactions of women on natural catastrophes such as hurricanes were explored and a feminist ecological approach was presented. Panel four followed with a discussion of ‘voicelessness’ in Jamaica Kincaid and of Maryse Condé’s multiple objections to the all-male Créolité movement. A final contribution on the depiction of

women from Guadeloupe in French school manuals confirmed the difficulties to overcome prejudices in educational materials which often still focus on hair and dance.

The next two panels discussed podcasts, digital platforms, and cyber-activism in which Afro-Latin women are pivotal. The Interplay between illustration and narrative texts in publications from Colombia, ironic approaches to and resistance against Cuban state rhetoric, and gender-specific questions regarding performances and installation were addressed.

The discussions went on in the next panel titled “Gender Questions and Creating a Future.” First, the Surinamese Anton de Kom, famous for his pioneering book *We Slaves from Surinam* (1937), was discussed. Contemporary Surinamese female writers frequently revisit his work. Surprising was a video in which an old *abakúu* representative from Cuba explained his mother’s role in his initiation into this spiritual tradition. Afterwards, female writers in 21st century speculative fiction from Cuba were presented. This new genre, often characterized as science fiction, plays with gender in new and innovative ways.

In the next panels, the relationship between memory and archives in the depiction of enslaved women in museums, exhibitions, and commemorative events in the Caribbean was discussed. A special focus was dedicated to Irene Diggs, an African American woman who collaborated with W.E.B. Du Bois and studied in Havana with Fernando Ortiz in the 1940s but is largely forgotten today.

The afterlife of a colonial law in Barbados against “wandering” was studied from a female perspective in 2022 before two representatives of a Jamaican Women’s Rights Organization presented their work and the history of their association. WMW Jamaica works with voluntary activist and offers legal support to women in need.

The final panels discussed the image of women in recent Anglo-Caribbean fiction by Marlon James, Nicole Dennis-Benn, and Cherie Jones; in literature from the French-Caribbean (Françoise Ega), Panama (Joaquín Beleño, Ariel Rene Pérez Price), and Puerto Rico. A documentary film showed the efforts of female Dominican migrants to keep in touch with their family and children. A visual

artist, Diane De Dier, was presented, who works with mosaics to focus on the role of women migrants to Panama. Another contribution focussed on two Afro-Spanish women writers.

What the conference showed is that the mosaic of cultural expression by women, as much as the research focusing on women, is incredibly varied and largely present in various disciplines. The focus on literature prevailed, which is not surprising, as the organizers of the conference work in this field, but it also confirms literature's important role for this topic.

The atmosphere among the 52 participants (mostly women, but not only) was excellent and we hope that the conference helped to establish lasting connections. We thank the team of the Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut, the German Research Foundation, the Eichstätt Latin America Center, and of course all the participants and moderators for their support.

On behalf of the organizing committee,

Ineke Phaf-Rheinberger