



Faculty and students visit Cincinnati, known as the “London of the West” during the 1830s—1850s. The field trip was highlighted by visits to the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center and Harriet Beecher Stowe House. Read more on page 7 of this issue. Photo by Tiya Miles.

American Culture

Program in American Culture
at the University of Michigan

Spring 2006

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American Culture On the Road: Faculty and Students Visit the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center and Harriet Beecher Stowe House

This academic year students enrolled in Re-envisioning American Slavery (CAAS 495.02); Blacks, Indians, and the Making of America (AC 301.08 / CAAS 333.01); and the American Culture doctoral program traveled by bus to the “Queen City” of the Midwest, otherwise known as Cincinnati, Ohio, to visit two museums. Cincinnati has a unique place in African American and U.S. slavery history because of its intermediate location on the Ohio River, which marked the boundary between the slave state of Kentucky and the free state of Ohio. Amidst contemporary controversy over police brutality against young black men, Cincinnati’s rich history of free black community-building and abolitionist activism is being recalled and adopted as a hallmark of civic identity. This current political and cultural moment illustrates once again that the past matters for the present.

Thus, in the weeks before Thanksgiving, twenty-nine students, two AC/CAAS professors (Tiya Miles and Lori Brooks), and one determined bus driver (Felicia Turman of Getaway Tours) set out to explore slavery and abolitionism in the “London of the West,” as Cincinnati was described in the 1830s-1850s -- a period of intense immigration, urban development, anti-slavery activism, and anti-black mob violence. In this quest we were generously supported by funds from the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, the Arts at Michigan Course Connections program, the American Culture and Afroamerican & African Studies departments, and Services for Students with Disabilities.

Our approach to the city from the north was marked by the view of rolling hills, still green in the golden light of mid-autumn. Once we had reached downtown, our primary stop of the first day -- Cincinnati’s newly founded National Underground Railroad Freedom Center -- took us all by surprise. We were impressed by the architectural grandeur of the building itself (an experience that some students later analyzed in their assigned museum reviews), and by the lovely scene that unfolded as we neared entry doors that fronted

a sky blue bridge spanning the Ohio River. Once inside the museum, students who had been reading studies in class of black slavery, Native American enslavement and slaveholding, museums as culture-making institutions, and the black heritage industry, set about their tasks – not only of gleaning all they could from the museum’s docents, exhibits, and films, but also of critically assessing the museum’s representation of its chosen subject matter.

Later, after checking into our historic 1930s-era hotel, (which one student and faculty member agreed was reminiscent of the set in the movie, *The Shining*), students sighted a famous singer, went out on the town for dinner, and returned to the Hilton-Netherland Plaza for an evening class session. Our two-hour roundtable discussion and evaluation of the day’s events was engrossing for everyone, despite the late hour. Many students commented on the strong emotional impact the Freedom Center had had on them and expressed a conviction to remember the history of slavery as they went about their daily lives and chose career and community service paths. Others brought a critical lens to their assessment of the Freedom Center and made connections between the Center’s desire to draw in and entertain diverse audiences, the financial constraints faced by museums, and the erasure of historical realities and complexities in the resulting exhibits. On day two our primary stop was the Harriet Beecher Stowe House, the former nineteenth-century home of the eminent preacher and seminary president, Lyman Beecher, his famous-author daughter, and his activist family. The house museum, located in an economically-challenged African American neighborhood, is currently in a state of disrepair and under-use. Members of various local community organizations have launched a campaign to save and transform the museum and are the recent recipients of a sizeable city grant. Prior to our trip, students in CAAS 495 had studied Harriet Beecher Stowe’s life, the neighborhood of Walnut Hills where the house is located, and the free black community in Cincinnati. They therefore had probing questions that took our tour guide quite by surprise, but yielded fascinating proposals for the future of the Stowe House – the final assignment for students in this class.

At the end of our trip, as we gathered our belongings from beneath the bus, said goodbye, waited for rides, and lamented the loss of the unseasonably warm southern Ohio weather, we reserved a space in our memories for this special outing. A second Cincinnati trip, as well as a tour of Ann Arbor’s Underground Railroad sites, are in the works for future joint CAAS/AC courses.



Students Ashley Harris and Rachael Howery in front of exhibit at the Freedom Center