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StoryCorps Griot

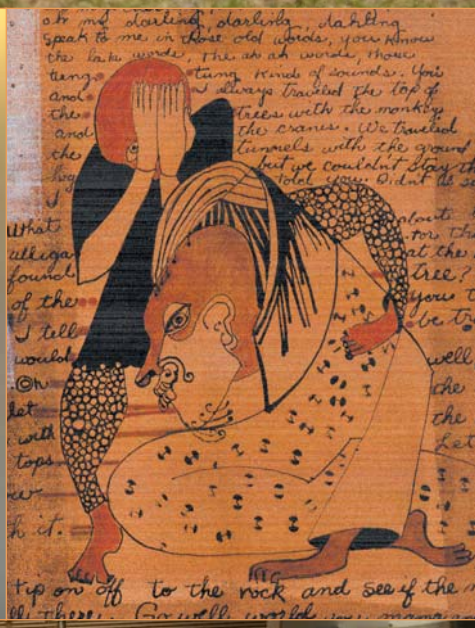
Cultural Confluency:
The Art of Sanford Biggers

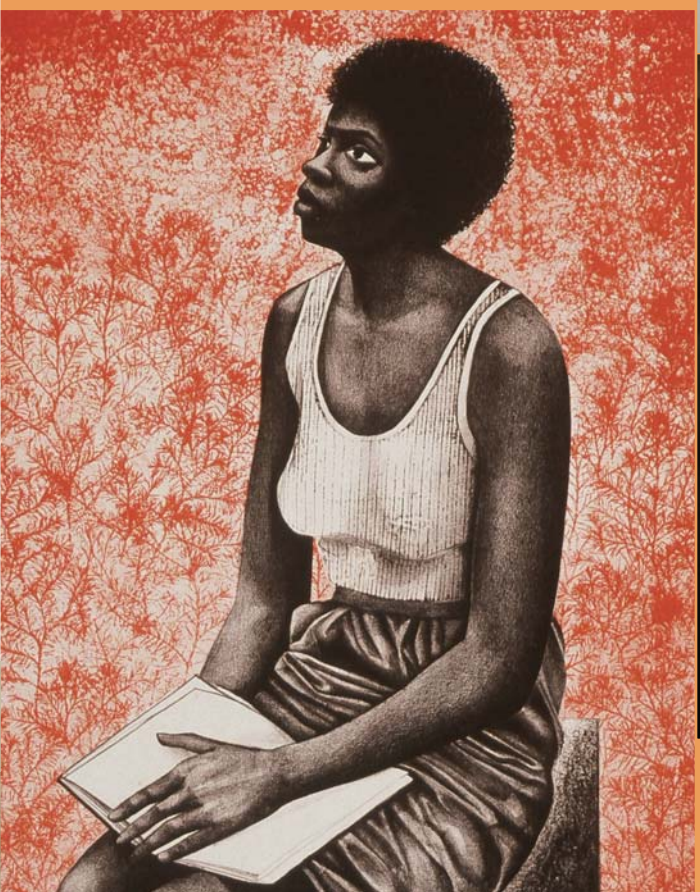
Gallery Tour at Tougaloo

Cave Canem Elder
Afaa Michael Weaver

African American Bluegrass

The Iron Chef From
Cote d'Ivoire





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Fashion by Alphadi

Africa in the News

• **Film:** Due to a growing film industry, Rwanda is often referred to as "Hillywood." The wordplay comes from Rwanda's official nickname, "Land of a Thousand Hills." Hillywood films are made by Rwandan directors and producers, filmed in Rwanda and the dialogue is in the local language, Kinyarwanda. Watching these movies has become a new national pastime and is celebrated annually during the Rwanda Film Festival. Films include a lineup of comedies, action flicks and movies for youth.

• **Rap:** Nigerian artist RuggedMan recently traveled to Ireland to promote his infectious style of rap. His video, "Peace or War," was number one for a record two-and-a-half months on Nigeria's top 10 video countdown, and he has received the country's top music awards. With pulsating rhythms and positive lyrics, RuggedMan demonstrates the variety of musical tastes found on the continent.

• **Fashion:** From Mali to Senegal to South Africa, fashion designers are making names for themselves at home and abroad. Alphadi, born Seidnaly Sidhamed in Timbuktu, Mali, has turned himself into an internationally respected brand with boutiques in Africa, the United States and Europe. Oumou Sy is Senegal's "Queen of Couture" who often creates clothing for African kings and queens. Last year, four talented South African designers unveiled their collections for the first time in Paris at Paris Fashion Week. Thabani Mavundla, David Tlale, Craig Jacobs and Thula Sindi were swamped by media and fashion buyers as they showed their collections to a powerful audience at the Cercle de l'Union Interalliée on the final day of this prestigious Paris showcase.

• **Science:** South African scientists recently sequenced the genome of a deadly strain of drug-resistant TB (XDR TB). Using advanced technology, scientists decoded and sequenced the strain in record time. "We have taken a sample of (XDR TB) ... and sequenced the entire genome of the strain of TB," said Carl Montague of Lifelab in Cato Manor. "(It) took us just over a week; using other technology would have taken up to a year," Montague said. The breakthrough will lead to an understanding of why this particular strain is resistant to drugs.

On the Cover

Top: Dom Flemons, Rhiannon Giddens and Justin Robinson of the Carolina Chocolate Drops, photographed by Jimmy Williams. **Middle left:** Chef Morou Ouatarra of Farrah Olivia, Alexandria, VA. **Middle right:** "Speak to Me in Those Old Words" by Camille Billops, © 1973, Hatch-Billops Collection Inc. **Bottom left:** "Red Leaves" by Elizabeth Catlett, 1978, courtesy of Tougaloo College. **Bottom right:** Bessie and Taylor Rogers with facilitator Elaine Davenport, courtesy of Storycorps Inc.

Beyond the News in Africa

A mental picture of Africa brings to mind bustling cities, state-of-the-art medical care, and world class arts and entertainment. Unfortunately, you might already be questioning if this a real picture or a dream, since most news from Africa is not so cheery. Which leads to another question: Do Americans really know for sure what is going on in Africa? The December issue of *Ebony* asks this question and suggests that 21st-century Africa, the one rarely revealed in Western media, will surprise and enlighten you.

It's common to consider Africa as an homogenous collection of countries with nearly identical cultures. That assumption is extraordinarily ambitious when you are talking about a continent roughly four times the size of the United States and 52 distinct countries in various stages of development. Like all continents, Africa is home to countries that are prepared for the 21st century and some that are chronically troubled. The troubles are well known, and it would be irresponsible to minimize them, but as writer Sylvestor Monroe points out in *Ebony*, "The distorted view of the continent that perpetually focuses solely on these problems is perhaps as big an impediment to the progress of many of these nations as the actual problems themselves."

"An increasing number of Black Africans live in modern cities, go to modern schools and work in modern office buildings with the same amenities (as) in the United States," Monroe continues. "From Johannesburg to Abidjan, Dar es Salaam to Dakar, many African cities sport towering skyscrapers, complex infrastructures and a sizzling nightlife. And far from being perpetual recipients of foreign aid, Africans make significant contributions to the world economy with an estimated combined purchasing power of more than $2.5 trillion, according to the United Nations Development Programme." Monroe goes on to describe, country by country, the contributions that are being made by African businesses, political leaders and citizens eager for opportunity.


Cape Town, South Africa, is one of many 21st century metropolises on the continent.

It is also not well known that democracy is alive and growing in Africa. Writing for the African Leaders State of Africa Report 2006, Ambassador Charles R. Stith, director of the African Presidential Archives and Research Center at Boston University, emphatically states that, "Democratization is firmly rooted on the continent. The most common commentaries on African politics and progress focus on 'false starts' like the tragic turn of events that we've seen in Zimbabwe ... a counterpoint is that the maturation of democracy in other nation states on the continent suggest that in many places democracy is off to a 'good start.'" *(Stith's 2007 report was not available at press time, but it will soon be posted at www.bu.edu/aparc/index.html.)*

The point is that keeping up with Africa in terms of the news is not the same as being informed about life in Africa. When reading through the headlines, take your own survey and decide for yourself if there is a slant.

Cultural Confluency

"Black Belt Jones," 2003. Courtesy of the artist and Mary Goldman Gallery.

The South Los Angeles community where Sanford Biggers was born was, as it is renowned for today, home to a diversity of ethnicities: African Americans, Latinos, Caucasians and Asians. His upbringing there during the '70s and '80s coincided with the incubation of a funky, soulful and energetic artistic expression that would eventually become a global, pop culture classic. It's called hip-hop. Fast-forward to the early '90s, when Biggers graduated from Morehouse College and took up residence in Japan as an English teacher. During his stay he found himself gradually immersed into and absorbing the basic tenets of Zen Buddhism. Buddhism appealed to Biggers as a nonlinear form of thought — where choices and philosophical positions are not strictly confined to polar opposites. It was a way of dealing with the world that effectively bridged gaps endemic to the conflict-ridden, either/or style of Western thought. Today, Biggers is a 38-year-old internationally acclaimed artist who works from a studio in Harlem while also serving as a professor of sculpture at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond.

"The Making of In Fond Memory of Hip-Hop Bell," 2004. Courtesy of the artist and Mary Goldman Gallery.

That biographical abstract, while all too brief, is necessary to understand the culturally transcendent, or syncretic, nature of Sanford Biggers' work, which encompasses sculpture, painting, textiles, dance, video and music. "I am drawn to concepts that explore the interconnectedness of cultures, especially the ways that people are unaware that they are connected," Biggers says.

If you want to gain appreciation for Biggers' sensibilities, "Black Belt Jones" is an excellent starting point. The piece is a 30-by-40-inch mosaic of '70s kung fu master Jim Kelley. The high-contrast effect of this iconic image was achieved by using black Indonesian rice alongside American short-grain rice. It is a creative idea that serves as a perfect segue into a thematic underpinning of Biggers' art: the idea being that two seemingly disparate cultures – urban, black, American youths and Japanese college students, for instance – can actually have many commonalities that are ripe for artistic exploration.

"There are, of course, strong linkages between Buddhism and traditions of the African diaspora" Biggers explained in an interview with Valerie Oliver, curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. "Most notable are the sensibilities of time, ebb, flow and vibrations. There is a flow — an embracing of the unknown and the indefinable or the ephemeral. The concept of time as both infinite and infinitesimal is also specific to both traditions. In African American culture, there is fluidity, a flow as well as spontaneity in terms of timing. You get that same sense when you watch Bruce Lee in 'Enter the Dragon.'"

The Biggers portfolio is replete with examples of the African American-Asian connection. To create "Hip Hop Ni Sasagu," (*and therein lies a fascinating story, which you can read at www.sanfordbiggers.com*) Biggers collected silver bling from pawnshops in Harlem and South L.A. He took the jewelry to Japan and had it melted down, then transformed into Buddhist temple bells by master craftsmen. The bells are not so much art to be viewed, even though they are quite exquisite, but actual instruments to be experienced by way of performance.

Biggers' work abounds with astute observations about human nature, of which there is too much to explain here. However, there is one other idea that drives his creativity, and that is wabi-sabi. "Wabi-sabi is the appreciation of the unrefined as a focus of the art," he explains. Another definition is seeing beauty in the imperfect, or finding profundity in the mundane.

To learn more, visit his Web site or check out the fall 2007 issue of the International Review of African American Art. The entire issue is dedicated to artists who explore African American-Asian connections.

Roots, Rock, Bluegrass

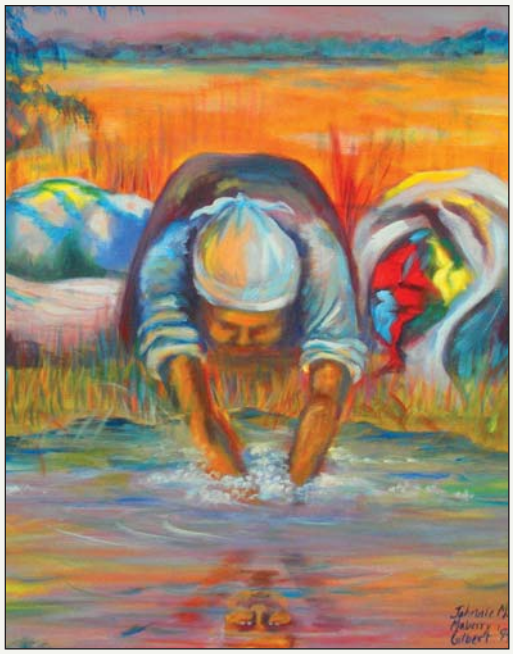
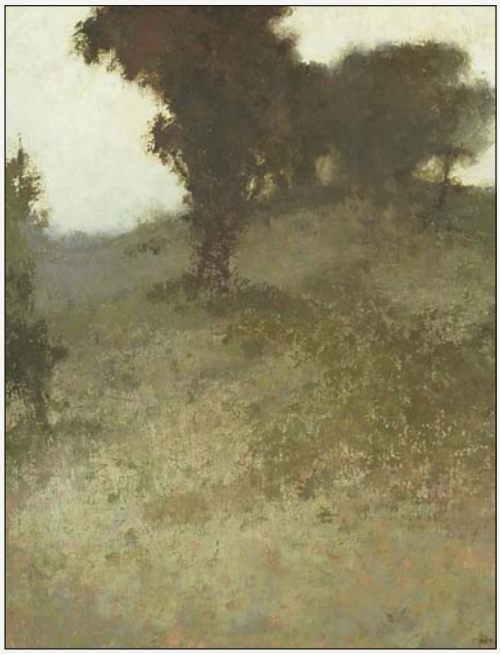
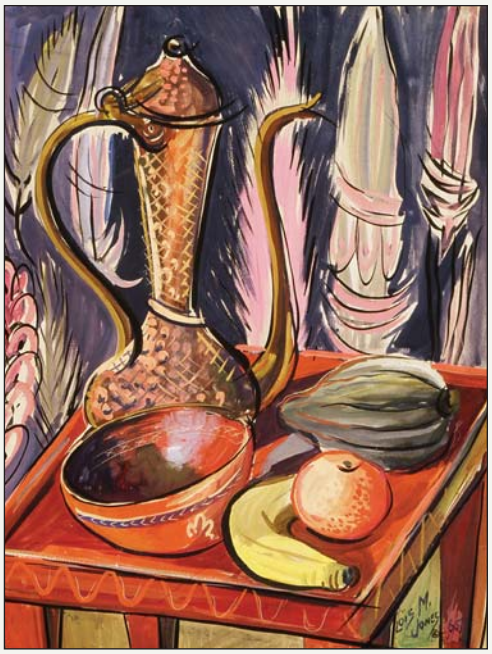
Unknown to many people, even a few who are well-schooled in musical trivia, Africa and banjos are about as natural a combination as notes on a staff. Yet, the common perception is that banjo music, specifically bluegrass, is a product of the hills of Virginia, West Virginia and the Carolinas, born of poor country folks sharing a Caucasian heritage. That perception, while certainly true in some respects, is reinforced by a general lack of contemporary African American musicians playing bluegrass and the popularity of folk music heros Bill Monroe and Earl Scruggs.

But then there are world-class pickers and fiddlers Dom Flemons, Rhiannon Giddens and Justin Robinson, three young and talented musicians who tour nationally and occasionally drop into a school or two to give a short history lesson. Their string band is called the Carolina Chocolate Drops. When visiting schools, the kids are riveted by the foot-stomping and infectuous rhythms but sit in awe when Giddens pulls out one of the band's heirlooms — an authentic African banjo made from a gourd, goat skin and a bamboo stick. African instruments such as the akonting and the xalam, both of Senegal, are preludes to banjos made by slaves and the creation of the modern steel-string banjo.

The members of the Carolina Chocolate Drops honed their skills under the tutelage of octogenarian Joe Thompson, who started his fiddling career at barn dances and wound up playing at Carnegie Hall. Thompson is said to be the last black traditional string band player. "We are proud to carry on the tradition of black musicians like Odell and Nate Thompson, Dink Roberts, John Snipes, Libba Cotten, Emp White and countless others who have passed beyond memory and recognition," says the group.

The Carolina Chocolate Drops keeps an active touring schedule and can be seen at music festivals across the country. A performance schedule, along with video and audio clips, can be found at www.carolinachocolatedrops.com.

The Carolina Chocolate Drops, photo by Bruce Deboer.

Left to right: "Washing the Tick Matress" by Johnnie Mae Maberry-Gilbert, 1992; "Rize" by Richard Mayhew, 1987; "Turkish Urn with Fruit" by Lois Mailou Jones, 1965.

On the Campus at Tougaloo College

TOUGALOO ART COLLECTIONS

A Triptych of African, European and American Masters

Founded in 1869, Tougaloo College is a private, historically black, four-year liberal arts institution located in Jackson, Mississippi. It is said that "The Amistad Incident" (the famous case that freed Africans accused of mutiny) begat the American Missionary Association, which in turn begat Tougaloo College and its five sister institutions.

Since its inception, Tougaloo College has garnered national respect for its high academic standards and level of social responsibility. The college reached the ultimate demonstration of its social commitment during the turbulent 1960s, when it was in the forefront of the civil rights movement in Mississippi. The college opened its campus to the Freedom Riders and other civil rights workers, and it helped change the economic, political and social fabric of the nation. Tougaloo is home to The Civil Rights Library and Archives, which contains the original papers, photographs and memorabilia of such luminaries as Fannie Lou Hamer, Medgar Wiley Evers and Martin Luther King Jr.

Tougaloo College strives to create an environment of academic excellence and a campus of engaged learners. Today, it is ranked as one of the best colleges in the Southeast by Princeton Review and one of the best in the country by U.S. News and World Report. In 2002, the college welcomed its 13th president and the first woman to serve in that post, Beverly Wade Hogan.

About the Collection and Artists

While some faculty members were trailblazers in social commitment and academics, others were committed to "visually" raising the level of social consciousness through fine art. Under the leadership of Ronald Schnell, a professor emeritus of art and a German Expressionist, the Tougaloo Art Collection was initiated in 1963 with the help of prominent New York artists, curators and critics. Schnell was a pioneer with a passion for art and for exposing students to works beyond the textbook. He began collecting art for the college from such notables as Romare Bearden, Fritz Bultman and David Driskell, and that foundation led to an impeccable collection that is unmatched by most contemporary museums. It is one of the most elite college art holdings in the United States. The Tougaloo Art Collection includes work by African, Asian, European, Mexican and American artists. It also includes one of the nation's most extensive collections of artistic materials documenting the civil rights movement.

Maberry-Gilbert

In celebration of African American History Month, this exhibition of works has been curated by the chairperson of Tougaloo's art department, professor Johnnie Mae Maberry-Gilbert, and features a sprinkling of the many prized works that are displayed in the President's House at Tougaloo College.

The oldest work in the Tougaloo Art Collection is an oil painting created by **George Morland** (1763-1804) titled "Slave Trade." Morland was born in London, apprenticed under his father and, by the time "Slave Trade" was painted in 1791, was an established artist. As the movement to abolish the African slave trade grew in Britain, Morland painted "Slave Trade" as well as other similarly motifed paintings.

Edward Bannister (1828-1901) was born in Canada and was orphaned at age 16. Although he painted in the 1850s and '60s, it was in 1870 that Bannister settled into his most mature and productive period. He was largely forgotten for almost a century for a complexity of reasons, but with the ascendancy of the civil rights movement in the 1960s, his work was rediscovered and again celebrated and collected.

Alma Thomas (1891-1978) had her first one-woman show at the age of 68 and, despite her belated start, went on to have exhibits at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, the National Museum of American Art and the White House — all in Washington, D.C. At Howard University, where she was the art department's first graduate in 1924, she became fascinated by abstraction and went on to develop the style for which she is best known today: large canvases filled with irregular patterns of bright colors.

Lois Mailou Jones (1905-1998) was an African American Harlem Renaissance painter and the first to combine traditional African form with Western techniques. As an artist, she was prolific and internationally acclaimed (a stature uncommon for African American women at that time). She received her bachelor's degree from Howard University in 1945, graduating magna cum laude and has a plenitude of honorary doctorates. Jones is heralded for manifesting the talent of black artists.

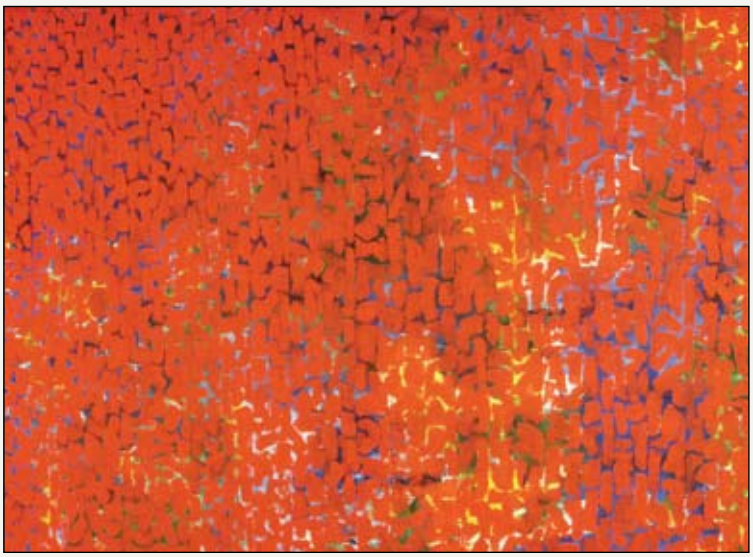
Romare Howard Bearden (1911-1988) is recognized as one of the most creative and original visual artists of the 20th century. He is best known for his richly textured collages, two of which appeared on the covers of Fortune and Time magazines in 1968. His life and art encompassed a broad range of intellectual and scholarly interests, including music, performing arts, history and literature. Bearden was a social worker with the New York City Department of Social Services and created his artworks at night and on weekends. Today, his work is found in many of the country's most distinguished museums.

Elizabeth Catlett Mora (1915-) is an African American sculptress and printmaker. She is best known for the black, expressionistic sculptures and prints she produced during the 1960s and 1970s. She is the grandmother of model Naima Mora. Catlett attended Dunbar High School then Howard University, from which she graduated cum laude in 1935. Catlett was influenced by American landscape painter Grant Wood, who urged students to work with the subjects they knew best. For Catlett, this meant black people, especially black women, and it was at this point that her work began to focus on African Americans.

Richard Mayhew (1924-) once noted that, "I am involved with the spiritual feeling of space. The paintings look like landscapes but that is not necessarily my preoccupation in painting. I paint the essence of nature, always seeking the unique spiritual mood of the landscape." Richard Mayhew was born in Amityville, N.Y., to Native American and African American parents. He is considered one of America's greatest living landscape painters. His alchemic use of color yields a timeless and serene quality evoking the warm and cool rhythms of jazz and the blues. In 1963, he and others founded Spiral, an influential group of black artists who were united in their dedication to civil rights in the art world. Like Bearden, Mayhew's works are housed in the permanent collections of the country's most prestigious museums.

Johnnie Mae Maberry-Gilbert earned her bachelor's degree from Tougaloo College and two master's degrees from Mississippi College. She has been creating images based on slave narratives for more than 14 years. She says of her work, "I was inspired to create images that would motivate curiosity and offer a pathway to a more accurate history through the slave narratives." Gilbert hopes her work inspires viewers with a story of faith, hope, patience, endurance and courage.

Clockwise from top left: "Sun and Candle" by Romare Bearden, 1971; "Cows Watering" by Edward Bannister, between 1875 and 1880; "Red Atmosphere" by Alma Woodsey Thomas, 1973; "Slave Trade" by George Morland, 1791. All images provided courtesy of Tougaloo College. All artwork photography by Bruce O'Hara.



Iron Chef From the Ivory Coast

Chef Morou Ouatarra Cooks With West African Flair

Executive Chef Morou Ouatarra, Farrah Olivia Restaurant

The good news is there is no shortage of African American chefs in the United States. The bad news is, African American celebrity chefs whose names have become glitzy brands are hard to find. "It's not that there aren't great African American chefs," Chef Morou Ouatarra explains from his new digs in Alexandria, Va. "It's that they aren't getting the recognition, even in media outlets that cater to African Americans." Difficulties aside, Ouatarra might be on the cusp of breaking into that elite crowd — the one with television shows, invitations to pro-ams and a rack of signature cookbooks. Just a few months ago, Ouatarra showcased his skills on "Iron Chef America," and in the Washington, D.C. area, where international panache and flawless execution are mandatory, he is firmly established as one of the best. His latest restaurant, Farrah Olivia, just opened in Alexandria.

Ouatarra was born in Cote d'Ivoire, or Ivory Coast as it is popularly known. Part of his success comes from his ability to break down recipes from his homeland and infuse the basic elements into dishes prepared for American palates. Like a number of great chefs, his first inspiration to cook was kindled while watching his mother. Her knack for whipping up huge family feasts on the fly was as equally impressive as her knowledge of African, French and Middle Eastern cooking techniques, all firmly rooted in the local cuisine. Ouatarra came to the states in 1988 and, with no formal training, learned to prepare exquisite meals with a familiar Euro-American style but accented with West African flair. It isn't a stretch to assume that most of Washington's power elite have, at one time or another over the last few years, enjoyed a five-course meal prepared by Ouatarra and his team.

"I basically use ingredients that are easily found here in the United States, but I keep a supply of spices and other ingredients indigenous to Africa," Ouatarra says. "The West African dishes are superb as they are, so I wouldn't use the word *upscale* to describe the essence of my style," he adds, gently reproaching a poorly worded question. "More accurately, I deconstruct the West African recipes and put them back together in a way that Americans tend to enjoy. That often involves toning down certain tastes, aromas or presentations, but the essence of the dish is still there." It is a method that has earned Ouatarra a faithful following among D.C.'s elite and a win in the local "Iron Chef" competition. That victory sent him to New York, where he was paired with Bobby Flay on national television. Ouatarra was unable to come out on top, but the visability was great for him and satisfied an audience clamoring to see more celebrity chefs with diverse backgrounds.

"I wish more publications would highlight our contributions in the kitchen as much as they do our contributions to music and sports. I'd like to see more of us on the covers of mainstream magazines, including *Essence, Ebony* or *Black Enterprise*," Ouatarra says as our interview ends. "Kids in particular need to see that the culinary arts is open to them and that they can succeed if they are willing to do the work."

Shrimp Yassa

Barbequed Black Tiger Shrimp
In Rich Vidalia Onion and Mustard Glaze
© Morou Ouatarra

16-20 black tiger shrimp
1 tablespoon oil
1 teaspoon garlic
1 cup white wine vinegar
1 teaspoon fresh squeezed lemon juice
1 bay leaf
1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
1 teaspoon fresh ginger, grated
Salt and pepper to taste
1/4 teaspoon coarse black pepper
1/2 teaspoon red pepper flakes
1 teaspoon parsley, chopped
2 medium onions, diced

Marinate the shrimp, onions, garlic, vinegar, lemon juice, mustard and ginger overnight. Drain onions and garlic, but retain the marinade. Remove the shrimp and set aside.

Heat oil in a heavy casserole dish, sauté onions and garlic mixture in the oil until soft. Add bay leaf, peppers, and salt and pepper. Simmer for 15 minutes until the onions are tender. Add marinade now and then so mixture remains moist. Season with salt, pepper, pepper flakes and parsley. Puree and chill. When cold, baste shrimp in puree and sear. Serve with warm sauce.

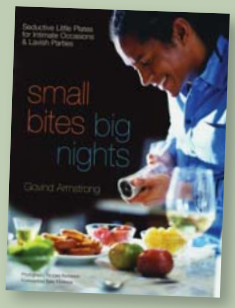
Coast to Coast

Govind Armstrong

Gourmands in Los Angeles are calling well in advance to get reservations at Table 8, where the food is prepared with a New York verve by Executive Chef Govind Armstrong. Armstrong, who is also a managing partner, was raised in Costa Rica and Los Angeles. At age 13, he was already in the kitchen with Wolfgang Puck at Spago. Since then he has trained with a who's who of the culinary elite in the United States and Europe. Overseas, he spent time in Italy, Holland, France and Spain. After returning to the states, he ran the kitchen at Pinot Hollywood and coordinated many celebrity-filled parties for movie premieres, the Oscars and the Grammys.

California and other West Coast states are very demanding of their best restaurants. Customers expect the best in fine dining and a firm commitment to sustainability, organics and local farmers. Armstrong doesn't disappoint. His kitchens (*Table 8 has opened a second location in South Beach, Miami*) work with local producers to obtain seasonal ingredients that are uncommonly fresh. His first cookbook, "Small Bites, Big Nights," was published by Random House in 2008.

"Small plates encourage people to be more adventurous, to share food, and to enjoy the mélange of flavors and textures," explains Armstrong. "'Small Bites, Big Nights' shows you how to put together a menu of small, sophisticated dishes. Guests get to enjoy a feast of flavors, and as the host, you'll be able to relax and have fun, instead of spending the whole night in the kitchen." Hors d'oeuvre recipes include Arugula, Dates, and Parmesan (a salad that's finger food); Rare Tuna Crostini with White Bean Puree and Tapenade; and Seared Kobe Beef on Mini Yorkshire Pudding.



In the Kitchen With

Chef Deborah Spriggs-Ross

Growing up in the Windy City with an executive chef for a father provided all the inspiration Chef Deborah Spriggs-Ross needed to launch her cooking career some 15 years ago. Except, her father was not an executive chef. Despite the fact that he did all the work that is expected of an executive chef, and even treated his customers to specialties like homemade beer and gourmet doughnuts, he would only be given the title of short-order cook. That was the top job for Negroes back then, even in a great city like Chicago. "My dad was an extraordinary chef for his day," Spriggs-Ross shares with *Unity*. "He was into organic and natural foods, and this was the '50s and '60s. He started his shifts at three and four in the morning, and his recipes went far beyond grill food or soul food. His Indian succotash was a community favorite," she adds.

Spriggs-Ross

Working alongside her dad instilled in Spriggs-Ross a natural feel for ingredients, measurements and aromas. She was also driven by an entrepreneurial spirit and began a catering business out of her home, but she soon learned starting a food business takes more than a passion for cooking. The city shut her down because there are regulations, permits and other requirements for legally operating a kitchen. Determined to resurrect herself and do it by the book, Spriggs-Ross began networking in associations like Women Chefs and Restaurateurs, reading dozens of books and aggressively searching for mentors.

Eventually, Spriggs-Ross did resurrect herself, relaunching a catering business that continues to grow. She also has diversified into a number of exciting culinary projects. She was recently named executive chef and food writer for *Girlfriend's Health Guide*, a Milwaukee-based, regional publication devoted to health issues for African American and Latino women (www.girlfriendshealthguide.com). "Unfortunately, women of color are still suffering from certain health issues in numbers disproportionate to their size in the overall population. That's just the way it is," Spriggs-Ross says. "So each quarter the magazine is published, I focus on foods to help combat one of those issues, whether it be hypertension, diabetes, obesity or breast cancer." Spriggs-Ross has personal knowledge of these issues. Her mother died of kidney failure and her father of Hodgkin's disease; her ex-husband was diabetic; and, she suffers from high blood pressure. "Proper diet isn't the total answer to these problems, but it is certainly part of the answer, because I've experienced the results myself. A good, healthy way of eating on a daily basis has improved the quality of my life immeasurably," Spriggs-Ross states.

Of course, this isn't the whole story of her work in the culinary arts. Spriggs-Ross is also active in her community, providing support, mentorship and, of course, lots of cooking instructions to organizations like the Girl Scouts and the YWCA. "I suppose I am most fond of the work we are doing at the Next Door Foundation," she says. The Next Door Foundation provides support to families living at or below the poverty level in the Milwaukee area. Spriggs-Ross works with those families to teach them how to plan grocery purchases on a tight budget and how to prepare healthy meals throughout the week.

Left to right: Chef Spriggs-Ross, Rochelle Minor of Girlfriends Health Guide, and intern Tammy Winfield.

Parmesan of Sole

(Serves 4)

1 ½ cups fresh bread crumbs
½ cup fresh Parmesan cheese
¼ cup chopped Italian parsley
1 teaspoon Spanish paprika
½ teaspoon fresh oregano
¼ teaspoon of minced garlic
1 teaspoons of kosher salt
½ teaspoons of fresh ground pepper
Pinch of cayenne
Dressed (cleaned) whole fillets of sole
¾ cup half and half cream,
Cooking spray (preferably olive oil)

Combine bread crumbs, Parmesan cheese, parsley, paprika, oregano, garlic, salt and peppers. Dip fish in the cream, then in bread crumb mixture. Arrange fish in a baking dish 11x 9x 2 inches. Spray fish lightly with olive oil. Bake in a 375-degree oven for 20-25 minutes or until fish flakes easily.

Pecan Praline Caramel Cake

Serves 8-10

"My father inspired this recipe. I made it for more than 300 chefs at the annual Women Chefs and Restaurateurs Conference in 2001."

2 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
2 cups sugar
3 teaspoons baking powder
1 teaspoon kosher salt
1/8 teaspoon ground cassia cinnamon
1 1/2 cups plus 1/3 cup whole milk
2 teaspoons plus 1/4 teaspoon pure Mexican vanilla extract
2/3 cups vegetable shortening
2 large eggs
1/3 cup butter
1 cup brown sugar
2 cups powdered sugar
1/4 cup pecans, chopped

For the Cake

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Grease and flour 2 9x2-inch round cake pans.

Beat all ingredients in the list up to, and including, the eggs (use 1 1/2 cups milk and 2 teaspoons vanilla). Beat on low until ingredients have all become moist. Then, beat on high speed, scraping down all ingredients so everything is included. Beating time is about 7-8 minutes.

Pour into prepared pans. Bake until toothpick inserted in center comes out clean, between 30-35 minutes. Cool for about 10-15 minutes and remove cake from pans.

For the Caramel Frosting

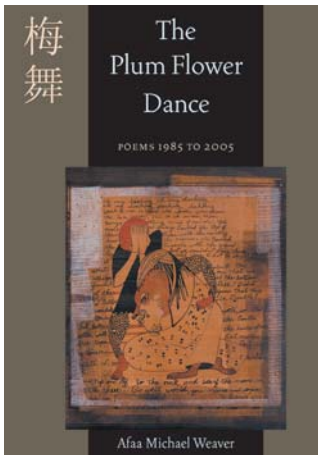
Prepare while cake is cooling. Using a 2-quart saucepan, melt the butter on medium-low heat, and stir in brown sugar. Heat until it boils, stirring continuously with a wooden spoon. Then add the remaining milk and vanilla, and stir until it boils. Remove from heat, and add the pecans. Cool.

When caramel mixture is still slightly warm, add the powdered sugar. Beat in sugar until caramel is very smooth. Be prepared to frost your cake right away. This particular frosting tends to harden fast. If it becomes too hard, add a few teaspoons of milk.

Helpful Hint

"Serve this dessert with the berries of your choice. I prefer raspberries because they reduce the sweetness of the caramel."

A Man of Words

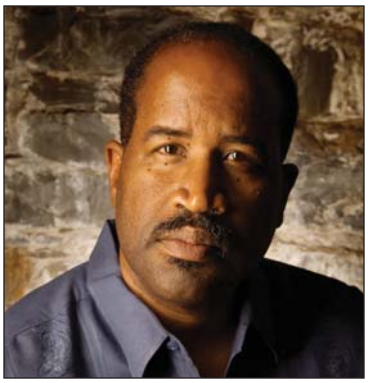


"The Plum Flower Dance: Poems 1985 to 2005" is Weaver's most recent work. It is part of the University of Pittsburgh Press' Pitt Poetry Series.

Afaa Michael Weaver's portrait was recently on display in nearly every book store across the country. It wasn't because he wrote a *New York Times* best seller. Weaver is a man of words, nonetheless. In fact, writing a story about him is slightly intimidating because Weaver is a man whose words are inseparable from his life — a man who takes great care to use words precisely, soulfully, rhythmically — a man who has spent his entire adult life in a love affair with words. He is also a retired factory worker, having spent 15 years stacking soap boxes and performing other laborious tasks at a plant in Baltimore.

Weaver's portrait was on the cover of *Poets & Writers* magazine because he is one of the most respected poets in the country, a Cave Canem Elder (see note below), a Fulbright scholar, a Pew fellow in poetry, and he holds an endowed chair at Simmons College in Boston as the alumnae professor of English.

Weaver, as he will tell you, was not born *to be* a poet (or a factory worker, for that matter) — he was simply born a poet, and there is a difference. Outside of his time working at the factory, he was busy writing and publishing poetry, short fiction and articles for the media. He read insatiably and was passionate about the works of Amiri Baraka, Askia M. Toure, Sonia Sanchez and Haki R. Madhubuti. He found time to create the now defunct 7th Son Press, enroll at Excelsior College and apply for a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, which he received. The grant allowed him to retire from factory life and enter Brown University's creative writing program on a full university fellowship. He received his bachelor's from Excelsior College, his master's from Brown and began teaching in 1987. A Fulbright scholarship in 2001allowed Weaver to travel to Taiwan, where he taught at National Taiwan University. That part of the journey led to yet another life-changing experience for Weaver. Today, he is a Daoist disciple who speaks, reads and writes Mandarin.



Affa Michael Weaver, Cave Canem Elder, Fulbright Scholar and Alumnae Professor of English at Simmons College in Boston

Despite gaining access to the most elite literary circles where one might expect an egotism that transcends common humanity, Weaver is never far removed from the plight of the unsung hero. His activism supports people who work with little or no compensation in the community — people who make life livable for millions with their tireless, unthanked efforts. "A poet touring the country performing readings on social justice isn't being effective, but a poet who also organizes a national child watch program for working parents is performing a valuable service," he explained in an interview for *Unity*. "We need a newly focused communal effort. We need to make sure a woman can get from her car to the grocery store without being accosted by drug addicts."

"The Plum Flower Dance: Poems 1985 to 2005" is Weaver's most recently published work. The book was inspired, titled and organized in harmony with the Eastern philosophy and thought that, for Weaver, has become a way of life. He meditates daily, practices Taiji and Xing Yi Quan, and is often seen working through fighting routines in his neighborhood.

About Cave Canem

Cave Canem (Latin for "Beware of the Dog") is a New York-based literary society founded in 1996 by Toi Derricotte and Cornelius Eady. It offers a safe haven for black poets — whether schooled in MFA programs or poetry slams — to work on their craft together and engage others in critical debate. The core program has expanded from a summer retreat to include regional workshops, a first book prize, annual anthologies, readings and events in major cities around the United States. It is a national community of emerging and established poets — a family of writers who create, publish, perform, teach, study poetry and support each others' work. www.cavecanempoets.org

Griot: (pronounced gre-o), musician-entertainer of western Africa whose performances retell tribal histories and genealogies; **storyteller**.

The StoryCorps Griot Project

If you love family reunions, not just Aunt Sally's corn bread and Uncle Joe's banjo pickin' but the captivating stories from other generations, places and times, you will love the StoryCorps Griot Project. Funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and an online exhibit of the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC, coming in 2015 to the National Mall in Washington, D.C.), the project gathers and preserves the life stories of African American families and friends.

In the Griot project, friends memorialize their stories in a recording booth. These participants are from Detriot.

Melvin Reeves, director of the project, is enthusiastic about the significance of the project for the African American community. "Everyday folks are encouraged to remember that their stories are just as important as anyone else's. These oral dialogues, an entrenched part of African tradition, will be preserved as family heirlooms that can now be passed down more easily throughout the years," he says. To gather stories, a mobile recording studio has traveled the country for the last year, stopping at major cities and colleges. There is a special appeal to reach WWII vets, who are passing away at the rate of about 1,000 per day. In a recording session, family members or friends dialogue in an interview format. Stories are archived for future generations at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress and the NMAAHC.

You can listen to recordings or plan your own interview session at storycorps.net, or visit the NMAAHC at nmaahc.si.edu.

Unity is a celebration the food, art and culture of diverse communities throughout North America. Published seven times per year, its stories are positive, inspiring and offer new perspectives on America's changing culture. *Unity* is exclusively distributed to clients of Thompson Hospitality and Compass Group, both leaders in foodservice who are proud to serve you. For more information about *Unity*, or to offer feedback or suggest story ideas, send an e-mail to unity@thompsonhospitality.com.

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