

The Impact of Russell Hamilton at the University of Minnesota

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As a faculty member at the University of Minnesota for the past forty-three years and a Regents Professor the past fifteen, I would like to briefly discuss Russell Hamilton's important contribution to the intellectual and cultural life of the University. I shall focus on three aspects that I consider extremely important.

Russell Hamilton's Challenge to Eurocentrism

From the moment Russell arrived in the Department of Romance Languages in 1964 he challenged the parochialism of the department and the larger University of Minnesota. Instead of focusing on Portuguese literature and the great works of Camões, his courses shifted the angle of vision to focus on the critically important cultural work in the colonies: the ways in which the notions of race, Lusotropicalism, Negritude, and Pan-Africanism helped shape the writings of many African artists. Furthermore, his scholarship revealed a pioneering global perspective looking at the influence of the African Diaspora and particularly of Brazil, thus anticipating notions of hybridity that figure so prominently in the discourse of post-colonial theory.

Russell's Interdisciplinarity

He was a strong proponent of interdisciplinarity at a time when academic departments were insular, as they vigorously defended the hegemony of disciplines. Thus, Russell brought historians, anthropologists, sociologists, art historians, and students of literature into intense conversation on Africa from which we all benefitted. It was out of these interdisciplinary exchanges and cross cultural debates, that scholars of my generation began to recognize that the most interesting work is often located at the interstices of disciplines. It was these ideas, which helped me and others to conceptualize the formation of the MacArthur- Mellon Interdisciplinary Program for the Study of Global Change at the University of Minnesota that has trained, since 1988, more than 500 graduate students primarily from the Global South.

Russell's Role in the Formation of Afro-American and African Studies

African American students took over Morrill Hall (the University of Minnesota's administrative hub) in the late 1960s demanding more courses and faculty teaching about the African continent and the African diaspora. My position in African history, among others, was created, and Russell was here to welcome me and provide intellectual support when others questioned whether Africa had a history worth studying. What many do not know is that Russell Hamilton was one of only few faculty members, including John Wright, Mahmud El Kati, August Nimtz, and Lansine Kab, who played a critical role in the development of an Afro-American and African Studies Program, first chaired by Lilian Anthony. In the early days, Russell's and Cheri's home was a regular gathering place for those demanding that the history and culture of Africa and the African Diaspora receive the attention at the University of Minnesota that they merited.