

MEMORIAL RESOLUTION KENNELL A. JACKSON (1941-2005)

Kennell Jackson, Professor of History and perceptive chronicler of African and African American cultures, past and present, died on November 21, 2005, of pulmonary fibrosis at Stanford Hospital. He was 64.

The son of a schoolteacher and a building contractor, Kennell grew up in Farmville, Prince Edward County, VA. He described his hometown as a community of 2500 "striving" Black Americans that included low-lives and small business owners, eccentrics and intellectuals, as well as a number of professionals. And Sally Hemings, consort to President Thomas Jefferson, was born down the road from his Aunt Christine. In a 1997 interview with Diane Manuel of the Stanford News Service, Kennell recalled, "It was fabulous, growing up in this diverse little black community, but it coexisted with a very determined form of segregation." Indeed, his high school years coincided with Prince Edward County's massive resistance to the dictates of *Brown v. Board of Education*, and in 1959, the year of his graduation, the County shut down the schools for five years rather than integrate them.

Kennell matriculated at Hampton Institute (now Hampton University). At Hampton, he found an African American professor with the memorable attributes of speaking fluent German and French, traveling frequently to Europe and Africa, and dressing in dapper suits and pointed shoes. Speaking of this professor, Kennell told Ms. Manuel, "He linked us up and made us understand that our experiences as African Americans were not like a subset of the whole human condition, but were the human condition."

This mentor influenced Kennell to study for his doctorate in East African history. His pioneering work focused on the local meanings of changes in popular culture, particularly among the Kamba, an ethnic group in central Kenya. He believed that popular culture deserved serious intellectual analysis, and his work as a historian was characterized by his use of symbolic systems to understand how certain aspects of culture change over time. After his early work on Kenya, Kennell became a critical admirer of the philosophy and praxis of the first generation of African nationalist leaders, especially Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, and his work in African history, broadly defined, and provided a foundation for numerous students who followed him. However, the formative influence on his scholarship and teaching remained that "striving" community of Farmville, a cohesive group of highly verbal people who were interested in world affairs as much as in local gossip. He was an astute commentator on African history and culture, and an equally keen student of what he called "the epic that is the Black American past." It was only natural for him to connect these two strands in his teaching.

Kennell joined the Stanford faculty as an assistant professor of History in 1969. His colleague in History, Jack Rakove, noted that Kennell saw the rich connections between Africa and America before most other scholars, and he exposed Stanford students to what is now called “transnational history” well before students at other comparable universities. As an example of the range of his interests, we note that he was one of the first scholars to be interested in black hair, and in 1992 he began teaching an upper-class seminar called *Black Hair as Culture and History*. The topic was derided as being unfit for academic study when it was first introduced, but it has since become recognized as important to academia. One of his co-teachers in the highly successful freshman Humanities course, “Europe and the Americas,” Mary Pratt, now at New York University, described his teaching as “fascinating and impressive,” adding that “He didn’t much believe in political parties or social movements, but in hearts and minds.”

When he directed Stanford’s African and African American Studies program from 1980 to 1989, he jumped at the opportunity to reach the “hearts and minds” of groups outside the university. Driving this outreach was his distress over the persistence of racial injustice in America, and his conviction that (to quote from his book, *America Is Me*) “[a] proper understanding of the Black American past can be a spiritual resource for the [entire] country.” However, his biggest impact on “hearts and minds” was on the thousands of Stanford freshmen who passed through Branner Hall, the university’s largest all-freshman dorm with 160 students, where Kennell was Resident Fellow from 1980 until his death. Perhaps his most memorable program was “Branner Presents”, a speakers’ bureau that invited cutting-edge intellectual, cultural and political figures to campus during the 1980s and 1990s. Freshman Dean Julie Lythcott-Haims, an undergraduate in Branner in 1985 and later one of Kennell’s resident assistants, said, “He had very high expectations about how we should behave. He was inspiring and eccentric. He had little patience for 18-year-olds talking about silly things. He wanted us to be interested in the topics of the day. As RAs, he wanted us to infuse a sense of intellectualism in the dorm.” And Jody Nyberg, RSAS in Branner Hall from 1989-1999 and currently in the Freshman Dean’s office, said Jackson would buck conventional norms if he thought something was important. As a result, “he had a lasting impact on students’ lives, and he developed a loyal cadre of students who returned to visit him long after they graduated.”

Beyond the confines of Branner Hall, Kennell’s influence can be seen in several programs, such as the Undergraduate Scholars Program, which he started in 1986 to provide one-on-one mentoring and research guidance by faculty members to minority and other students. John Rickford, Professor of Linguistics and formerly the Martin Luther King Jr. Centennial Professor and Director of African and African American Studies, noted that Kennell “constantly sought to stimulate the highest level of intellectual pursuit among undergraduates, deliberately choosing the title, “Undergraduate Scholar”, as a way of dignifying that pursuit. Perhaps this was his way of exporting his unparalleled model of Resident-Fellow-as-mentor from Branner to the wider campus.” Happily, the format of this program is now a central part of undergraduate life. Kennell also started Faculty Night in the 1970s when he was a Resident Fellow for Serra House in Stern Hall. Faculty Night gives students a chance to interact with faculty members over dinner in the campus dining halls, and this program is now enjoyed across campus. In recognition of his university service, Kennell received the Lloyd W. Dinkelspiel Award for Distinctive Contributions to Undergraduate Education in 1972. Then, in 1990, he was awarded the Allan V. Cox Medal for excellence in fostering research among undergraduates.

Kennell continued writing and teaching until the very end. On his deathbed, ministered unto by Jamila Rufaro, Michelle Voigt, Sally Dickson, Todd Kerr and others, he boasted about his last book, *Black Cultural Traffic: Crossroads in Global Performance and Popular Culture*, co-edited with Harry Elam, Professor of Drama, and published less than a month after his death. Kennell rarely boasted, but his magisterial *Introduction* to this collection of essays is a final testament to the clarity and depth of cultural analysis that his supple and wide-ranging intellect could produce. At the core of his analysis is a comparison between the cultural performance in mid-19th century France, England and the USA of William Wells Brown, ex-slave and a member of the American delegation to the Paris peace conference, and the “dizzying black cultural movement” of today. He was a part of that movement, recounting to his bedside attendants stories from “the glory days of growing up” in Farmville and from “the segregated world that was quite vicious in many respects”, but assuring us that “[he had] come slowly to be able to balance these two radically different histories occurring in the same place.”

We also learned at Kennell’s bedside that he was avid art and book collector with a discerning eye, and that he had amassed an extraordinary array of contemporary art works and first edition rare books. In fact, those last visits to the Stanford hospital were so revealing of the man and his creed that they both deepened our appreciation for his life, and increased our sadness at his untimely passing. Oh, how fluently he would be expatiating in our present season about that prominent descendant of Kenya’s Luo group, Barack Obama Jr., and his historic campaign! And is it not tempting to speculate about which of the four aspirants to highest office would have been the featured speaker this year in “Branner Presents?”

In these ways, quotidian and profound, Kennell’s presence continues to be felt – through our memories of him, and through the impressive collection of art and books that he donated to his younger brother, Otis, of Chesapeake, VA, to the Cantor Center for Visual Arts, to Hampton University and to many of his friends and colleagues. The Stanford community held an extended celebration of his life on January 17, 2006, Part I taking place in Memorial Church and Part II in the Faculty Club. President John Hennessy used the occasion to announce that Kennell’s posthumous gift to Stanford University pushed fundraising for the Bigger Black House Project over the threshold and allowed construction to begin (the Project was completed this year), and endowed undergraduate research opportunities in the African and African American Studies program. Therefore, long after memory becomes unreliable and artifacts lose their lustre, Stanford undergraduates will continue to feel the tug of Kennell’s durable legacy.

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