



# The Eric Williams Memorial Collection

P.O. Box 561631, Miami, FL 33256-1631, USA\*Tel: 305-271-7246\*Cell: 305-905-9999\*Fax: 305-271-4160

## Tenth Annual FIU Eric Williams Lecture Analyzes the Emergence of Barack Obama

**MIAMI, Fla.** (November 2, 2008)— Trinidad and Tobago-born Dr. Arnold Rampersad, the distinguished man of letters, waxed warm on his topic with his timely and thought-provoking delivery at the Tenth Annual Eric E. Williams Memorial Lecture on October 24, 2008. His lecture, *“The Challenge of Leadership in America: Race, History and the Emergence of Barack Obama,”* was held at Florida International University, as part of its African & African Diaspora Studies Program Distinguished Africana Scholars Lecture Series.

**Media Contact:**

Erica Williams Connell  
305-905-9999  
ewc.suilan@juno.com

Rampersad, an engaging and self-effacing lecturer with a markedly dry wit, is currently Sara Hart Kimball Professor in the Humanities (Emeritus) at Stanford University. He holds a B.A. and M.A. from Bowling Green State University and an M.A. and Ph.D. from Harvard.

But it was his sound historical knowledge on how the phenomenon that is Barack Obama could have occurred within the context of today’s current climate that was most notable, several times causing the 300-plus audience to erupt in both applause and approbation. Professor Rampersad effectively reviewed many of the century’s African-Americans - as well as whites - who, by their sheer talent, courage, persistence, and the infiltration of black culture into white consciousness, made Obama’s rise possible. Nevertheless, the lecture characterized Obama, himself, as unique - at one and the same time both an enigma and master orator – a man deemed virtually unflappable, with the capacity to be a great leader, but who could also, perhaps by the very nature of his “contemplative reserve,” be at risk of being a “passive and ineffectual president.” With a vibrant discussion of the implications for contemporary times, Rampersad paid tribute to America’s “relentless capacity for rejuvenation and re-invention.” In a sense, whatever happens on November 4<sup>th</sup>, Obama’s immense achievement will have been that of America’s as well – a land where less than fifty years ago, he would have had a difficult time finding a clerk’s job on 125<sup>th</sup> Street in Harlem.

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In the lively Question & Answer session that followed, Rampersad ably fielded numerous on-point questions, including a contrast of the “socialist” nametag attributed to both Eric Williams in his time and, now, Barack Obama.

Several US Federal and Florida elected officials, including **Governor Charlie Crist**, proffered courtesy greetings, Mayoral Proclamations, the silver Seal of the City of Miami, and hearty congratulations on the Lecture’s Tenth Anniversary. As in the past, pledges to the Lecture Endowment Fund were actively solicited.

The Memorial Lecture is named in honor of Trinidad and Tobago’s first Prime Minister and quarter-century leader, Eric Williams. An internationally-renowned scholar, best known for writing *Capitalism and Slavery*, his book was first published in 1944 and has been translated into seven languages, with Korean, Hindi and Urdu editions planned. “The Williams Thesis” was cited in the *New York Times Book Review* (1997) as continuing to be on “the cutting edge of slave trade research in academic circles.”

The Lecture, seeks to provide an intellectual forum for the examination of pertinent issues in Caribbean and African Diaspora history and politics. It is co-sponsored by: the Caribbean Consular Corps (Miami); Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs; FIU’s Ruth K. and Shepard Broad Educational Series – Department of International Relations, the Labor Center, Caribbean Students Association; AFSCME Local 1363; Capital World Wide Ventures, Inc.; Caribbean Airlines, Ltd.; Classic Realty, Inc.; Delancyhill, P.A.; Diane Galloway’s Herbal Gardens, Inc.; Dipcon Construction, Ltd.; Laureen Gosine Foundation; Priscas Cosmetics; Soca Afrique Creations; Sweet Hand Kathy; Zagada Markets.

The Lecture is also supported by the Eric Williams Memorial Collection at The University of the West Indies (Trinidad and Tobago campus), which was inaugurated by former **U.S. Secretary of State, Colin L. Powell** in 1998. It was named to UNESCO’s prestigious *Memory of the World Register* in 1999.

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