



Friendship Born Knocking: Honoring Historian Kate Ramsey



I had a ritual I loved when arriving at the University of Miami campus in the mornings. Immediately upon exiting the elevator on the sixth floor of Ashe where the History Department is located, I would go make myself a coffee and then I would walk down the aisle of closed, empty grad student offices and knock on Kate Ramsey's door. In the first months of joining the department, she was a bit surprised that I was there knocking. She was also very busy, putting together one last thing to include in her lecture, or emailing a colleague, or trying to figure out what books to recommend to a student. Anyways, that knock in the mornings always interrupted something. Nonetheless, without fail she opened the door with a smile, invited me to sit, and I would pepper her with questions or stories or tell her about a bird I'd seen that I thought was pretty. As the semesters passed, that morning knock became more expected. And eventually her poise lifted and she would admit. "I can't today, Dominique. I really don't know how I'll get everything done on time." I would just laugh and say: "You're it! You know where my office is." And often she would tag me back. Or if not, she would call me up and say: "Look out the window! Do you see the birds? Aren't they amazing?"

Those mornings cemented my friendship with Kate, at least on my end because in most other situations I found her pretty intimidating. She was always so good at everything, so serenely calm and careful and astute. In comparison, I always felt a bit like a well-intentioned mess. With the students, Kate reassured, cheered, and stimulated. With visiting colleagues, she showed genuine engagement and curiosity. With bureaucratic and administrative snafus, she held firm and pushed to get through what was important. Without those coffees, I would have been a bit too awe-struck. With those coffees, I got to enjoy how the seemingly divine related to my messy mortal self.

One of the longstanding rituals I had was teasing her about how much she took on: how she never said no to anything and was always overextending herself. We calculated once that I usually woke up around the same time she closed her computer before collapsing in bed. A couple months before *Spirits of the Law* was published (I remember because she had a mockup of it on her desk and I kept eyeing its beauty), I took out my phone and recorded her promise that next semester she would not make the same mistake of teaching all new things, saying yes to all sorts of other academic things, and she would protect herself more. Year in and year out, I threatened to take out that recording to play to her. And inevitably she put up her hands and said: "I know, I know. But, really, this time I will!"

Well, she never really said "no" as much as I would have liked for her. But as she became more famous and as she was asked to do ever more things -- not just at the University of Miami, or in South Florida, or in relation to Haiti, but also in the Caribbean and the United States more generally -- she did strengthen her "no powers" in order to focus on what mattered more to her so that she had the space to say yes when it counted most. Thank god.

What Kate prioritizes is the students; the people who have less power than she does; the people who strive but risk being blocked. In the seventeen years I've collaborated with her, I could almost always guess what she was up to: she focuses on encouraging, defending, inspiring, excavating, creating, and challenging.

Personally, as I have said to her, I am devastated that she has decided it's time to leave our university and department, because there is so much she gives to us as a community and especially to our students. But for Kate, I'm happy she has decided to finally really take up the challenge of that recording we made eons ago. And I believe for all of us we will be the richer for it. Kate has some big fish to fry politically, intellectually, culturally, and personally. Hear, hear that she is prioritizing her time to make sure she fries up what she can with that excruciatingly sensitive intelligence of hers! And I, like all the rest of her UM community, can still metaphorically knock on her phone or computer even though we no longer will be able to knock on her door. It's not the same, of course. But it's good enough because this choice is the right one.

For my own sanity, I just hope I still get phone calls from her to remind me to look out the window to notice the vibrant beauty that surrounds us.

Dominique Kirchner Reill

(University of Miami History Department colleague of Kate Ramsey, 2007-2024)

Information about Kate Ramsey and her prize-winning work:

Kate Ramsey's research and teaching interests include the politics of religion, law, and performance in the Caribbean; histories of medicine and healing in the Atlantic world; museums in/and the Caribbean; and Caribbean intellectual history, artistic production, and social movements. Her first book, *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti* (Chicago, 2011), centers on the history and legacies of penal and ecclesiastical laws against the Vodou religion in Haiti. It won the Berkshire Conference of Women Historians First Book Prize, the Elsa Goveia Book Prize from the Association of Caribbean Historians, the Haitian Studies Association Haiti Illumination Project Book Prize, and a Médaille Jean Price-Mars from the Faculté d'Ethnologie, Université d'État d'Haïti. Ramsey is co-editor with Louis Herns Marcelin of *Transformative Visions: Works by Haitian Artists from the Permanent Collection* (Lowe Art Museum, 2015), and was co-curator of the exhibition by the same name.

Ramsey's current research is focused in two ways. One project studies how early writing about and laws against Afro-Caribbean spiritual practices were shaped by medical theories of mind-body interaction during the final decades of British Caribbean slavery. Her article "Powers of Imagination and Legal Regimes against 'Obeah' in the Late Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-Century British Caribbean" was published in *Osiris* 36. It was awarded the 2022 Percy G. Adams Prize of the Southeastern American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies, and the 2023 Forum for History of Human Science Article Prize Honorable Mention. Ramsey is currently working, as well, on the history of Vodou objects confiscated by U.S. marines during the 1915-1934 occupation of Haiti, and thereafter donated or sold to anthropology, natural history, and military museums in the United States and beyond. Based on collaborative research with Rachel

Beauvoir-Dominique, this project spotlights the interlinked histories of Afro-Caribbean religion, U.S. imperialism, and museum collecting during the early to mid-twentieth century. Ramsey serves on the Board of KOSANBA: A Scholarly Association for the Study of Haitian Vodou.