Through the development of recent undergraduate courses and a budding partnership with the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage (CFCH), the American Studies Department of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) has begun to promote a more critical engagement with the “heritage” concept and its uses, including the examination of related international discourses, such as those endorsed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Moreover, UMBC is the current “home” for the U.S. Chapter of the Association of Critical Heritage Studies (ACHS-US), which was co-founded with colleagues at CFCH as the U.S. component of an international network of scholars, students, and professionals working in the associated heritage and museum sectors that aims to interrogate long-standing, hegemonic structures responsible for the construction, designation, and uses of “heritage,” as well as to push for more democratic, local-level processes in defining what “heritage” is and can be.

With the support of the UMBC BreakingGround initiative for the course, *Issues and Ideas in Critical Heritage Studies*, students are critically engaging with the concept and uses of “heritage” as it is constructed, defined and promoted within museums and heritage sites from around the world, and in cultural policies at national and international levels. In particular, students have recently examined the concept of “intangible cultural heritage” (ICH), a relatively new term in the international heritage discourse that corresponds to living cultural practices and expressions, such as language, dance and music, which has been developed by UNESCO through its 2003 *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*. The 2003 Convention is becoming increasingly widespread due to the fact that 155 nations across the globe (excluding the U.S.) have adopted and/or ratified it with the promise of “inventorying” and documenting the cultural practices and expressions within their territories as part of an approach towards safeguarding them. As we have been discussing in class, this framework for understanding and, thereby, preserving living cultural practices and traditions, or what is referred to as ICH, can be argued to be highly political (since power rests at the national level) and full of a whole host of potential challenges (since such traditions live at the local level and in the hearts and minds of communities, groups and individuals).
On October 26, 2013, students traveled to the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage to discuss, debate and critique this framework—the concept of ICH and its associated convention—in an all-day seminar. It is important to note that CFCH has a deep history with the development of the ICH concept and convention over the past several decades, especially with respect to the momentous, international meeting in 1999 that examined how traditional culture can be safeguarded in light of the homogenizing forces of globalization, a meeting co-sponsored by UNESCO.

Pursuing the CFCH 21st Century Strategic Plan goal to “develop projects and programs that harness fresh energy from visiting students and scholars to simultaneously support the Center’s mission and enhance professional development,” the seminar was hosted by James Counts Early, director of cultural policy, and Meredith Holmgren, web production and education specialist within the Smithsonian Folkways Recordings section of CFCH. The main aims of the seminar were to: 1) provide avenues for emerging and mid-career professionals to contribute to Center initiatives in meaningful ways; and 2) define, recognize, and formalize our best practices in attracting and training young scholars from a wide variety of disciplines related to our work.

In addition to CFCH’s long-standing history as a key player in this international heritage discourse, the seminar is particularly significant since the U.S. is no longer a member state of UNESCO and, thus, is not a part of this convention or ICH framework. Moreover, critical engagement with these concepts and cultural policies is generally limited to the academic literature and particular sessions within international conferences. Nonetheless, the class has come up with critical points that should be considered by the international community—both heritage and museum studies scholars and professionals working in related sectors. Students are currently working on producing a document in response to this framework. The CFCH-UMBC seminar is the first project in a proposed Memorandum of Understanding between UMBC and the Smithsonian Institution to institutionalize a long-term collegial collaboration in cultural heritage policy studies and projects.

Student Reflections

Felix Burgos, Ph.D. candidate, UMBC

There is a constant debate around the concept intangible heritage and the different ways in which it is safeguarded and promoted. The UNESCO Convention on the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) is undoubtedly an advance toward the understanding and awareness of endangered cultural traditions and expressions. According to UNESCO, since these cultural practices energize the identity processes, thinking about the safeguarding of intangible heritage helps to open a dialogue between the nation and marginalized communities. In spite of its advances, the Convention is still limited since it reduces the cultural richness of the world into an inventory that replicates hierarchical structures within nations and
the world. Moreover, it still leaves unanswered questions regarding the creation and arbitrariness of the inventory, or the way in which popular expressions are safeguarded and promoted. These points have constituted an ongoing conversation in our class Issues and Ideas in Critical Heritage Studies taught by Dr. Michelle Stefano at UMBC. In order to have a better understanding of these issues, our class went on a field trip to the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage.

During our visit to the Center, James Early and Meredith Holmgren provided us information about the annual Smithsonian Folklife Festival, the main event of the Center, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, and the work entailed to these activities (community outreach, archiving, heritage policy). A common denominator in the description of these activities in the center is the focus on two aspects that are surprisingly not mentioned in the UNESCO Convention: the imagination and self-actualization of cultural bearers. James Early insisted that one of the main characteristics of culture is that it is not a ready-made artifact that people acquire to understand their position in the world. On the contrary, culture transforms as it enters into the minds and experiences of the communities from generation to generation. Different cultural expressions, therefore, are constantly crafted by communities’ imagination and worldviews. Following this idea, the activities at the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage provide a venue where cultural bearers exercise their agency and their knowledge regarding their practices, their traditions, and the way in which they construct their individual and collective identities.

In that spirit, our class entered into a conversation about the meaning of intangible heritage and the ways in which we, undergraduate and graduate students, could contribute to initiatives, such as those from the UNESCO and the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. The most remarkable aspect of our visit is that James Early and Meredith Holmgren did not present themselves as the authorities on intangible heritage, but as facilitators that opened different doors to understand the richness and difficulties that surround the understanding of cultural heritage. Indeed, our discussion found difficulties when looking at intangible heritage from a political and theoretical dimension. However, the final reflection of our visit is that such discussion cannot only be left to politicians or experts. As it happens with culture, individuals and their communities must be constantly invited to evaluate and to determine the meaning of preserving and safeguarding their (our) heritage.

**Ian Brown, Ph.D. candidate**

My research explores how senior managers access the indigenous knowledge of uBuntu as a resource at a large African bank based in South Africa, and through what ways uBuntu is employed by the bank. The critical heritage framework will be one of the tools utilized to explore and analyze the case of this bank, where uBuntu, understood as intangible heritage of people of Southern Africa (if not the continent), is the focus, particularly in its interaction with corporate culture, globalization, and other forces that exist in this setting. Understanding
heritage, and particularly intangible heritage from forward thinking scholars and discussions at the Smithsonian, has drawn my understanding of intangible heritage to people as the source of culture, and therefore heritage—heritage understood as the aspects of culture that people choose to keep. For me, the discussions at the Smithsonian solidified my understanding of culture (particularly knowledge and understanding of the world—intangible heritage) to be embodied within people. Culture does not exist outside of people as a separate entity. People have imaginations, which allow them to create culture as they live, which is expressed as tangible and intangible. As James Early put it, “You are culture. I am culture.” In this sense, understanding the bank’s senior managers and their conceptualization of their culture in relation to their work enables me to capture what heritage means to them, in relation to how heritage is depicted around them, in the bank and in the larger South African context. The critical heritage framework and discussions at the Smithsonian allows indigenous knowledge of uBuntu, as a subjugated and alternative way of making sense of the world, to be understood in the context of mainstream knowledge production and ways of life grounded in a different and dominant cultural knowledge system.

Molly Barnes, political science, class of 2015

My participation in the seminar at the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, in which my course mates and I analyzed both the benefits and drawbacks inherent in various organizations’ methodology with respect of preserving intangible cultural heritage, was eye-opening in many respects. Not only did we learn in depth of what its purpose and goals are in dealing with intangible cultural heritage and tour the offices in which some of this work was done, but we were encouraged to discuss amongst ourselves, as well as with staff members, proposed ideas to improve and further said aims. What struck me most was the perceptively strong conviction on the part of the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage that our input was not just sought out of a curiosity to learn what we had been studying, rather it was sought out of a genuine desire to refresh and invigorate the Center’s efforts toward this end. The notion was repeatedly stressed to us that we, as citizens of a democratic society, were ultimately responsible for the processes through which heritage, of any kind, was safeguarded or not. This was summed up in the simple yet profound refrain that “there is no folklore without the folk,” spoken by the Center’s director of cultural policy, James Counts Early. In the absence of this trip, I do not believe that we would have been able to receive this type of immersive, multi-layered exposure to the quandary of heritage discourse.