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Humes 103
Dr. Bory
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Campus Commentary
'Headstrong': Women Porters, Blackness, and Modernity in Accra
Laurian Bowles—Vann Professor of Racial Injustice
Book Launch, Reading, and Reception

The lecture/performance I attended was Laurian R. Bowles, Vann Professor of Racial Justice's book launch for *'Headstrong: Women Porters, Blackness, and Modernity in Accra.'* It was a celebratory gathering to announce the theme of her book, answer questions, and be surrounded by her peers who supported her book launch. At the beginning of the lecture, she specified that *Headstrong* is her retelling of how women porters (Kayayei), in Accra, Ghana, tackle what we know as modernity, polygamy, feminism and blackness. Western American conceptions of modernity, polygamy, feminism, and blackness are different from how the women in Ghana view their work as porters. Kayayei are proud and feel connected to their femininity through their role as porters. The term "headstrong" refers to their strength as women in the field. The book itself is written within a black feminist framework, discussing the experiences of women porters in a way that challenges stereotypical, nonconformist norms, such as the expectations of women's work and monogamy. To add, *Headstrong* also elaborates about "racialization, rooted in histories of colonialism and enslavement, undergirding capital accumulation in Ghana" (Bowles, *Headstrong* descriptor). Dr. Bowles then reads the introductory excerpt from her book, a powerful narrative that lays out the themes to be tackled, and answers questions from her students afterwards.

Through this book launch event, I believe there were 3 main goals in mind. First, Dr. Bowles wanted to celebrate utilising powerful language to increase visibility for non-Western black feminism by showcasing valuable stories, and her achievement is publishing a book that does exactly that. For example, she highlighted women's struggles as they first arrived in Ghana and continued to interview women on their journey to becoming porters. *'Headstrong'* was published in the (current) United States, a country with an extremely heated political climate. Second, it must've been difficult to write about such a sensitive, needed, and unexplored topic. I believe making it an easily accessible event at Davidson College engaged students to explore valuable Afro-feminism work further, as it challenges our existing Western perspectives of women in African societies affected by colonialism. Dr Bowles' push for visibility of "sensitive" topics that aren't usually explored in the anthropological field of studies pushes the field's bounds to include the study of women in African societies. And lastly, Dr. Bowles was honouring the women who sat with her and told their stories bravely, peers who stood by her as she completed her book, and peers who encouraged her to continue writing. Many of these peers

were her colleagues, enthusiastic to see an intricate piece of writing, and students who had worked alongside her.

From a non-subjective perspective, Dr Bowles definitely achieved the 3 main goals I outlined. She read out a powerful excerpt and gave visibility to afro-feminism, built a sense of community within that room, and proved herself wrong. She communicated that it was a difficult process for her as someone who didn't consider herself a writer. She initially thought she wouldn't be able to complete her book or have it published, but she did both. Many students, anthropology majors or not, were attracted to the book showcase, and it was a good exposure to a perspective beyond the Western perspective.

My own subjective perspective doesn't stray far from the non-subjective perspective I gave. I believed it was amazing for the head of the anthropology department to blur the lines of the fields (anthropology and possibly gender studies) and show how, actually, everything is intersectional! There was intersectionality in analysing how gender was affected differently within the porter industry and how that then culture shaped African society. Women were empowered to be porters and were seen as strong in Ghana for their brilliant work. As a writer, I believe Dr Bowles was thoughtful and empowering women to share their stories in a non-traditional, non-victimising framework. Activists in American society can at times frame African societies as unmodern; however, Dr. Bowles disproved those beliefs with her book *Headstrong*. The clever dual meaning of 'headstrong' did not escape me, and I believed it was brilliant to reshape the meaning of the word. It went from a woman who is seen as stubborn and a 'hardhead', to a woman who is strong-willed and brave. My pre-existing knowledge was limited when it came to women porters and their connection to their womanhood. I did not initially know what a porter was, and that's definitely where I feel like my perspective can be expanded. I also felt lost when it came to postcolonialist African societies and their current economic status; therefore, I know that is something I need to put the work into researching. I look forward to looking into non-Western jobs, practices, cultures, and their intersectionality with gender, race, class, and sexuality!

On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorised information regarding this work, I have followed and will continue to observe all regulations regarding it, and I am unaware of any violation of the Honor Code by others.

Amber Montoya

Work Cited

Bowles, Laurian R. *Headstrong*. 23 Sept. 2025.