"LANDSCAPES OF ENCHANTMENT: COSMOLOGY, RITUAL, AND IDEAS OF PLACE IN THE ANCIENT YORUBA CITY-STATE"

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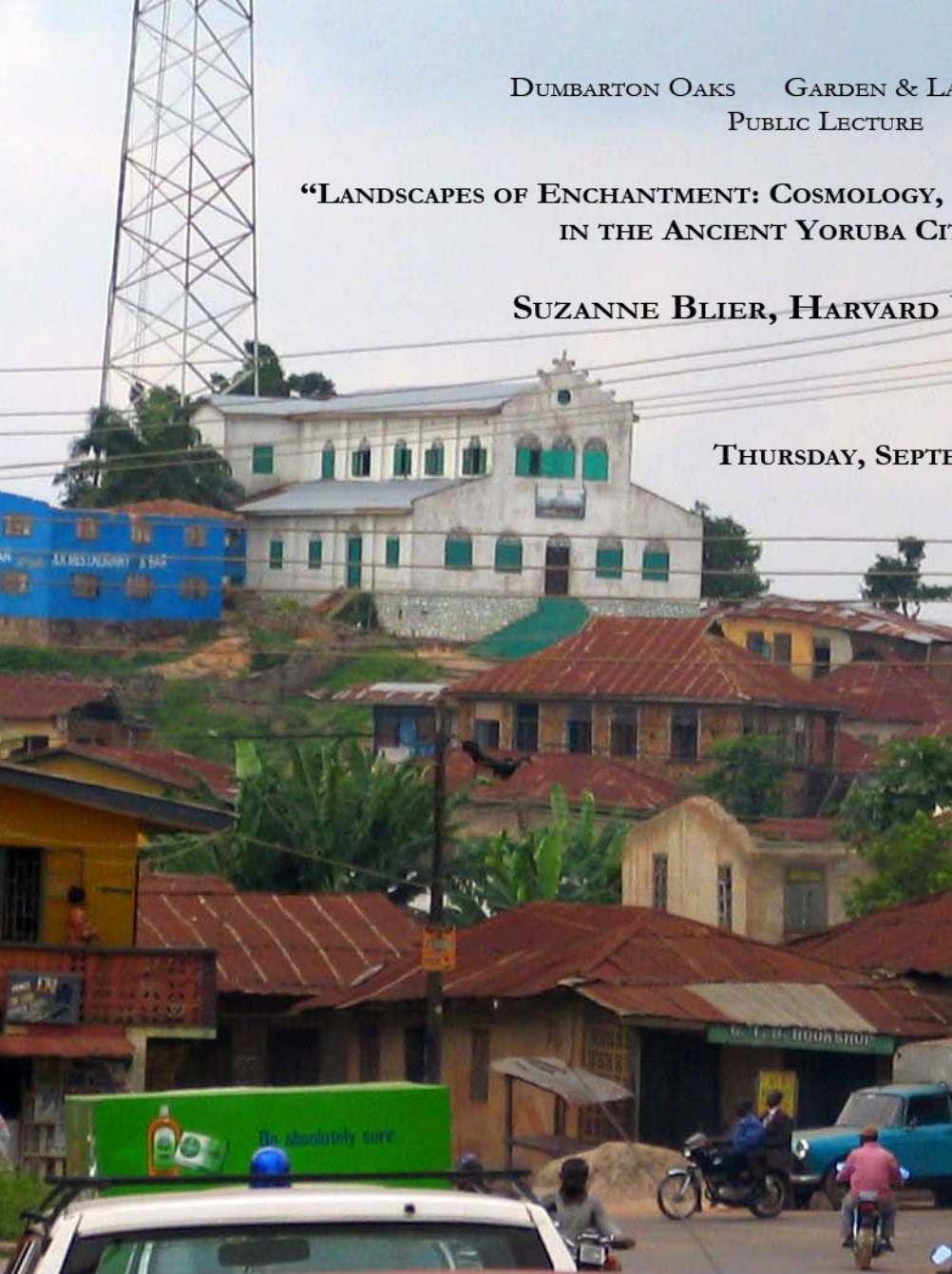
Ifa Temple, Nigeria

Ogun Mogun Shrine, Nigeria   *Images © Suzanne Blier*

Cities of the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria and adjacent Benin Republic often feature densely crowded, almost maze-like thoroughfares, neighborhoods, and residential compounds, consistent with urban centers dating back in some cases to the early fourteenth century C.E. and today housing populations that often reach the millions. Less well known in these same cityscapes is the rich and complex role that landscape plays within each city highlighting the ritual primacy of place, history, and belief within each locality and among the Yoruba more generally. Envisioning landscapes of the past is often a difficult task, particularly in contexts for which there are few if any written documents. This lecture will also address the ways in which GIS and a new website at Harvard University called Worldmap (worldmap.harvard.edu) provide the means to begin to access an array of data about landscape symbolism and use in both the past and the present.

SUZANNE PRESTON BLIER is the Allen Whitehill Clowes Professor of Fine Arts and of African and African American Studies, Harvard Univesity; she is an historian of African art and architecture. Her first book The Anatomy of Architecture: Ontology and Metaphor in Batammaliba Architectural Expression (1987) won the Arnold Rubin Prize; her second book, African Vodun: Art, Psychology, and Power (1995) received the Charles Rufus Morey Prize. Past fellowships include: CASVA , John Simon Guggenheim, NEH, Princeton, Fulbright Senior Research, and the Getty Center for the Study of Art. She is Co-Chair of an Electronic Geo-Spatial Database: Africamap, a site expanding into Worldmap.