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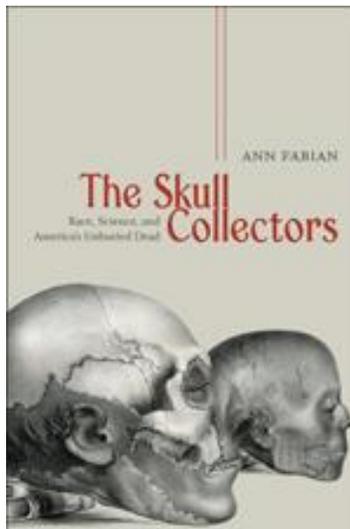


### ***Race and the Right Roundtable Discussion Well-Attended***

On Tuesday, November 15, 2011, the CRE hosted a roundtable on “Race, Ethnicity, and the Right” as part of our roundtable series.

The roundtable featured four prominent Rutgers scholars whose work engages a variety of strains in modern conservative thought. They included: **Ann Fabian**, professor of History and American Studies; **Kathleen Belew**, Mellon post-doctoral associate in History and the Rutgers Center for Historical Analysis; **Louis Prisock**, Assistant Professor of Africana studies and American Studies; and **Jefferson Decker**, ACLS New Faculty Fellow in American Studies and Political Science. This interdisciplinary group of scholars approached discussions of race and right wing ideology through literary, political, historical and cultural lenses. It was an interesting and wide-ranging discussion, marked by one major common theme. All four speakers stressed that even though most modern-right wing thinkers are eager to sever conservative politics from old associations with white supremacy, right-wing political initiatives and ideas often reinforce notions of racial difference and racial hierarchy.

Ann Fabian began with a story about race and biological difference. The author of a recent book on *The Skull Collectors: Race, Science and America's Unburied Dead* (2010), she did not set out to engage right wing politics. But when she published her chronicle of Samuel George Morton's and other nineteenth naturalist's now-discredited attempts establish a scientific foundation for racial



difference by measuring skulls she was surprised to learn that Stephen Jay Gould's long-ago encounter with biological determinists and the right-wing advocates of the “Bell Curve” had not yet run its course. Although Harvard paleontologist Gould advanced a devastating critique of Morton's scientific methods and measurements in his book *The Mismeasure of Man* (1981), which he reiterated in his 1994 critique of *The Bell Curve*, writing in 2010, Fabian found herself in an on-line encounter with a group of biological anthropologists determined to recuperate the Morton legacy.

“Traces of the right pop up in places other than right wing politics,” she observed as she outlined the conflict. Morton collected cranial measurements as a means to map racial differences, and his work marked a high water point nineteenth-century efforts to use biology to set limits on human potential. Twice last summer his new defenders among biological anthropologists turned up in the New York Times. They praised Morton for his modesty and objectivity and attacked Gould as a charlatan too ready to dismiss Morton for bias. But an understandable defense of science smuggled in a racist message.



*Ann Fabian, American Studies and History*

Fabian’s part in this story was a small one. Morton’s modern-day defenders warned her that her own efforts to see Morton’s work as one piece of a white racist culture of the 1840s left her book open to “collateral damage.” They touted evidence that Morton’s measurements were accurate. Fabian argues that these scientists’ extraction of only the measurements and numbers from Morton’s work as a means of defending the objectivity of science is dangerously misleading. Though the scientists claim that if you just look at the numbers Morton was not talking about racial hierarchy, Fabian contends that, “words show what numbers do not.” When both

Morton’s methodological approach and his measurements are studied; it becomes clear that Morton was making an argument about size and hierarchies and leaning towards a polygenetic understanding of racial difference. “Race science,” she argues, “should never be divorced from a lived experience of racial hierarchy.”

Fabian concluded her talk by suggesting that the biological anthropologists who defend Morton seem to long for a kind of intellectual purity similar to the longing for purity and certainty that sometimes characterizes right wing polemics. But the picture is a complicated one. On questions of race and science, Morton’s modern-day defenders sound profoundly conservative. But as promoters of scientific inquiry, they oppose right-wing evangelical attacks on evolution and climate science.

***“Race science should never be divorced from a lived experience of racial hierarchy”***

***--Ann Fabian, American Studies/History***

Kathleen Belew works on the impact of the Vietnam War on the racist right movement in the United States. In describing the appeal that the movement holds for many Vietnam veterans, she too speaks of a longing for purity, but in an extreme and racist form:

namely, in acts of violence. She calls the 1995 bombing of Oklahoma City by Gulf War veteran and white supremacist Timothy McVeigh a clear example of the kind of civilian-targeted violence that characterizes the recent history of the racist right.

Moreover, she explores the present day implications of her findings, citing a 2009 report issued by the Department of Homeland Security which warned of the potential for a surge of racist violence when today’s veterans return from wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Belew finds this warning compelling. From the Civil War onward, she notes, “membership surges in racist right groups such as the Ku Klux Klan correlate more closely



*Kathleen Belew, ACLS Post-Doctoral Fellow in American Studies, Rutgers Center For Historical Analysis*

with the return of veterans from combat than with any of the other social or economic factors historians have traditionally offered as explanations.

However, Belew also notes that the warning in the Homeland Security report is unlikely to be heeded. The report came under a barrage of criticism. Summarizing the views of U.S. Representative Lamar Smith (R-Texas), Fox News denounced the report: “The government considers you a terrorist threat if you oppose abortion, own a gun or are a returning war veteran.”

The idea of the returning veteran as a potential agent of terrorist violence

***“From the Civil War onward, membership surges in racist right groups such as the Ku Klux Klan correlate more closely with the return of veterans from combat than with any of the other social or economic factors historians have traditionally offered as explanations.”***

***--Kathleen Belew, American Studies***

ignited the most furor, with groups like the American Legion claiming that Timothy McVeigh’s bombing was a single, errant action, rather than part of a cohesive movement organized by veterans and built around the common story of the Vietnam War.

Moreover, the attacks on the report had an effect: after removing the report from its website, the Department of Homeland Security quietly reduced the staff charged with investigating domestic terrorism from six analysts to one—in stark contrast with the 25 agents tracking Islamic terrorism.

As long as we insist on treating racist violence from the far right as isolated acts of insane individuals, Belew insists, we will never understand the collective military experience behind it and the collective racist force that fuels it.

She also suggests that we will better understand our history of violence if we borrow a term from performance studies and think of the “scripts” we use to explain things to ourselves.

“Future efforts to prevent and limit this kind of violence,” Belew asserts, “depend on understanding the racist right as a cohesive movement galvanized by the Vietnam War script and dedicated to war on the state, rather than as a string of unconnected and irrational hate crimes.” Viewing violence towards civilians as individual acts of terrorism makes it hard to see a coherent ideology that reveals racist violence as part of a larger movement. According to Belew, elements in the post-Vietnam script include a heady mix of betrayal by authority, fixation on weapons and the trivialization of death.

Although scripts that justify violence are commonly associated with right-wing extremists, Belew stresses that it is important to keep in mind that extremism and mainstream conservatism share common themes and logics. Both draw on a mix of libertarianism and evangelicalism, taking similar stances against abortion, affirmative action, and immigration. Belew’s research suggests that mainstream conservatism can make space for and attempt to justify the acts of racist violence that she studies (both at home and abroad). It is not a story of blame, but rather an effort to understand the complicated workings of politics and culture and to prevent future civilian-targeted acts of racist

terrorism within the United States.

Although there may be a relationship between mainstream conservatism and the more extreme racist right, conservatism’s political and economic tenets can still appeal to black Americans. Louis Prisoek attempts to explain why. Why do African Americans participate in certain right wing movements historically linked to white supremacy? “It is easy to come up with blanket statements,” Prisoek says, “but when I dug just a bit, I found considerable ideological diversity among black conservatives, who are still very much under-researched.”



*Louis Prisoek, Africana Studies*

Black conservative viewpoints on the issue of abortion are particularly telling. Prisoek found that black anti-abortion activists invoke “the power of race and racism as a way to attract other African Americans to their cause.” They are “comfortable talking about conspiracy and victimization,” says Prisoek, and support their cause by labeling abortion as one more assault in a long history of attacks on black women’s bodies. Is abortion a contemporary remnant of the American eugenics movement? That history provides useful lessons for black anti-abortion activists who talk about the ways that white society has denigrated black femininity and motherhood, and suggest that fewer abortions will

***“Black anti-abortion activists are comfortable talking about conspiracy and victimization and support their cause by labeling abortion as one more assault in a long history of attacks on black women’s bodies.”***

***--Louis Prisock, Africana Studies***

demonstrate that black mothers do love their children and are just as capable as caring for them as white mothers.

Although Prisock admits that there are some “kernels of truth” in the histories black anti-abortion activists tell, he also maintains that they do not tell the whole story. By stressing abortion’s eugenicist origins, for example, black anti-abortion activists obscure the fact that, “black women have a rich history of agency, particularly concerning their reproductive rights.” Prisock further argues that, likewise, black conservatives who proclaim that racism is over and blacks can succeed if they only try harder, ignore empirical data that show that African American communities are disproportionately affected in the present economic meltdown.

Prisock points out that just because black conservatives sometimes omit truths that complicate their positions as advocates of conservatism does not mean that they are unaware of the complexities behind the arguments they make. Wisconsin State Representative Annette “Polly” Williams, for example, is a staunch supporter of the conservative initiative

of school voucher programs in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, who understands that whites might have very different reasons for supporting the program. She criticizes white colleagues whose ultimate goal is to create a school system that keeps their white



*Rep. Polly Williams and the public take part in a hearing on Milwaukee Public School reforms (photo courtesy of Third Coast Digest)*

children away from black children. But Williams also remains convinced that school voucher programs are valuable for those who live in neighborhoods with struggling schools. However racist the motivations behind them, she maintains, such programs can help black American secure better schooling for their children. In taking note of the complexity of the positions embraced by Williams and other black conservatives, Prisock’s work highlights the need for a nuanced analysis of black conservatism.

Jeff Decker works on the public interest law firms who took lessons from the left to advocate issues dear to white conservatives. In particular, his research explores the organizations of politically

conservative lawyers who since the 1970s have launched a series of lawsuits to roll back liberal measures passed during the civil rights era. These lawyers and litigators, Decker contends, “were not stirred so much by issues of a racist nature as they were unified in their opposition to environmental, economic and workplace safety regulations.” They mobilized the legal system to protect such conservative values as federalism, property rights, and the separation of federal and state government. Decker finds that their most successful attempt to roll back legal liberalism often appropriated its rhetoric. Conservative lawyers protected the interests of their wealthy clients by insisting that some of the protections won with such hard struggle during the long years of the civil rights movement should be extended to corporations and wealthy property owners. There are many ironies in this history—not just in a right wing appropriation of tactics of civil rights lawyers but also in the willingness to mobilize to their own ends an activist judiciary the right would so readily denounce in other circumstances.

Indeed Decker maintains that every non-profit legal pays tribute, at least obliquely, to Thurgood Marshall and the NAACP, who pioneered the use of such non-profits, their successful attacks on racial discrimination and the laws that supported it. Decker argues that the Warren Court’s decisions on race and racism convinced many lawyers that the law stood for “more than just grubby politics.”

The history he recounts is rich in irony. Conservative lawyers, although



Jeff Decker, ACLS New Faculty Fellow, American Studies

promoting a vision of limited government, used the rulings that Marshall and his allies had won to free people from race- based barriers to very different ends. They drew on civil rights law to argue that the state needed to go further to free the individual, not only from laws that discriminated on the basis of race, but from all sorts of licensing requirements, particularly those designed to protect fragile natural environments. Lawyers also adopted language of “colorblindness” to defend conservative causes. When the post-civil rights conservative lawyers chose to approach their legal defense of conservative values, Decker states, “America’s legacy of racial conflict was inescapable.”

Those who came to the roundtable learned that the current revitalization of right wing politics is evident in diverse and unexpected domains – in scientific knowledge, in federal studies of veterans, in black political thought, and in environmental policy. Several of the panelists and audience members raised questions that complicated ideas about right wing ideology. As one audience member put it, post-civil rights conservatism presents signs of

“old scaffolding being rebuilt in ways that make it harder to apprehend the function of racism in society” and also help obscure the historical roots and political logic of contemporary conservatism. As Decker’s work underscores, in recent decades, conservatives have appropriated the tactics and also the language of civil rights movement. Moreover, as other panelists noted, they have used this powerful language outside the courts as well as inside the courts, mobilizing conservative rhetoric about rights to tap into the feelings of frustration, anger, and fear of among many Americans, even of some black Americans.

However, contrary to conservatives’ avowals about the end of racism, the absence of particular racism on the part of conservative individuals does not signal an absence of systemic racism, as Fabian and other pointed out. If conservative legal, political and economic theories still serve to shore up white privilege, and underscore the asymmetric effects of the current depressed economic situation on different racial populations, then their ties to an old history of racism can and must be exposed.

***Call for Proposals: RACE & RETAIL: Consumer Culture, Economic Citizenship, and Power***

The Center for Race and Ethnicity is very pleased to announce an exciting upcoming conference entitled Race and Retail: Consumer Culture, Economic Citizenship and Power. We expect to draw scholarship from a variety of areas at this interdisciplinary conference. Additional information about the conference itself will be available shortly. Please see the call for proposals below:

CALL FOR PROPOSALS Deadline: February 29, 2012

CONFERENCE DATE: Friday, May 4 2012

Location: Rutgers, State University of New Jersey (New Brunswick)

Organizers: Mia Bay, Ann Fabian

Although everyone’s money is green, shopping had long been closely associated with racial and ethnic divisions.

While the formal abolition of segregation has expanded integrated retail spaces, even in the post-Civil Rights movement era retail establishments market themselves to specific communities, mirroring the patterns of residential segregation that continue to divide towns and cities into racial and ethnic neighborhoods. African American shopping districts remain common in many urban areas, while many elite shopping districts still cater largely to wealthy whites. In recent years Koreatowns, Chinatowns, Hispanic

shopping centers and other ethnic retail spaces have sprung up to serve immigrant communities in American cities and suburbs. Meanwhile, patterns of consumption, access to credit, levels of wealth, buying and social status also tend to vary greatly among different groups, creating distinctive experiences of race and retail even within integrated spaces.

This conference will build on recent scholarship on race, retail, and the service industry to both explore these experiences and to delve into questions of race and buying power, inequality, patterns of consumption, or discriminatory practice. It aims to bring together scholars from a wide range of disciplines – history, sociology, cultural studies, law, business, anthropology, economics, ethnic studies, and other fields – to examine the emerging and often complex connections between race, consumption, and power.

We are eager to receive proposals for papers on a variety of topics, including shopping and discrimination; credit practices; retail, urban geography, and gentrification; gender, race, and consumerism; purchasing power and boycotts; selling style and beauty culture; race, ethnicity and advertising; and poverty and consumption practices.

Applicants should submit a cv and paper proposal to the Center for Race & Ethnicity at <mailto:raceethnicity@sas.rutgers.edu> by February 29, and should expect to be notified by March 14. Paper proposals should be no more than 1-2

pages in length, engage intersections between race, retail, consumption, and power, and provide a platform for broad, cross-disciplinary discussion.

Travel and accommodation expenses relating to the conference will be covered by the Center for Race and Ethnicity. We expect that an edited volume will be published from the proceedings.

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## *Upcoming Events at the CRE*

The CRE has a host of exciting events planned for the Spring Semester. Please check our website and mailing list for information about these and other events still in formation.

- **“Neo-African Americans”** – Film screening and discussion. Wednesday, February 15, 2012, 4:30 – 6:30 p.m., CRE offices, 191 College Avenue, CAC
- **5<sup>th</sup> Annual Graduate Forum on Race and Ethnicity** – A one day forum. February 17, 2012, 10:00 – 4:00 p.m., CRE offices, 191 College Avenue, CAC
- **Race, Vigilantism and the State** – A roundtable discussion. March 27, 2012, 4:30 – 6:00 pm, Pane Room, Alexander Library, CAC

- **The Night Malcolm X Spoke at the Oxford Union: Racial Protest and the Subversive Special Relationship** – A lecture by Stephen Tuck, Oxford University. Thursday, April 12, 2012, 4:30 – 6:00 pm, Location TBD
- **Race and Retail: Consumer Culture, Economic Citizenship and Power** – A one day conference. Friday, May 4, 2012, Winants Hall Assembly Room, CAC

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