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CRE Hosts Forum on Diversity in the Classroom

On Friday, January 20th, faculty and students from across the university convened in Alexander Library's Pane Room for our one-day forum on diversity in the classroom. Inspired by a series of events that took place within the graduate division of the English Department last semester, the forum was organized to help faculty and students address the multitude of complex concerns revolving around diversity in higher education. The topics discussed ranged far and wide, from how to talk about matters such as race and sexuality in the classroom and how to teach them, to how to support fellow faculty members from underrepresented groups, to what we can do to bring more people of different colors, genders, sexualities, abilities, nationalities, and classes into the academy.



Thea Abu El-Haj, GSE

The day, running from 9:30am to 3:30pm, was split into two main panels, which were bookended by opening remarks and a final session dedicated to four simultaneous small-group workshops on resolving problems in the classroom. Our Ford Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow Dr. Brittney Cooper began the day welcoming us all, followed by Thea Abu El-Haj, a professor in the Graduate School of Education. Dr. Abu El-Haj briefly went over the immediate impetus for the forum,

which involved a racist email that circulated among some members of an English Department Graduate class, and then introduced the first panel, "Race, Pedagogy, and Power in the Classroom: An Open Conversation."



Morning Panel, "Race, Pedagogy, and Power in the Classroom: An Open Conversation" (L-R: Donovan Ramon, Amy Pickard, Kathleen Belew, Joan Adams, Stéphane Robolin, Deborah Gray White)

Joan Adams, a licensed clinical social worker from New York City who frequently leads workshops training educators on aspects of identity, moderated the conversation. Deborah Gray White, Board of Governors Professor of History, started off the conversation with the issues that she faced as an African American woman entering the academy nearly forty years ago and how they have changed, or not changed, since then.



White began by stressing the “continued need for a university committee on diversity” and how “we still

Deborah Gray White, History

need to work on our imperfect union here at Rutgers,” and then went on to present a litany of issues still facing academics of color today, especially those she has personally experienced as a black woman. Although she prefaced her comments by noting that she does not deny that some things have changed, she identified a host of major obstacles faculty of color still face in their dealings with students and fellow professors. Among her examples were: the perceptions that black professors’ presence has more to do with affirmative action than excellent abilities; that black professors’ knowledge is strictly limited to black people and issues; that minorities cannot be objective, and that faculty members of color are overly sensitive. White also discussed some of the distinctive problems black women

academics often encounter, which include dealing with students who refuse to use their professional title, or insist on treating them like mothers, sisters, or aunts and negative professional interactions with white colleagues who are unfamiliar with these difficulties and unwilling to consider their pedagogical impact when reviewing teaching evaluations.

Stéphane Robolin, an Assistant Professor of English, continued the discussion, making several key contributions. In his discussions of the teacher/student relationship, he stated that we must “dispense with any romantic notion of the classroom as any kind of neutral space.” Instead, he advocates for a race-conscious pedagogy in place of a “color-blind” approach to the classroom. As a white male professor, Dr. Robolin noted, he is accorded an authority that is informed by his race as well as by his professional credentials. Students of different backgrounds recognize his authority for different reasons, with black students often viewing him with heavy skepticism and reserve, wondering what a white man could have to teach them about black people. Through approaching teaching with an explicit consciousness of the role of race and power, he is able to engage rather than ignore these concerns.

Next, Donovan Ramon and Amy Pickard, both graduate students,

spoke on related aspects of the same theme. Ramon, an English Ph.D. student, was a member of the class in which the email incident took place. Disturbed by the hostile environment it created, he has lobbied for a more effective departmental response to it, and questioned the meaning it held for other students in the class. In his presentation, Ramon discussed the



Donovan Ramon, English, and Amy Pickard, GSE

silence with which many of his fellow students met the offending email and the controversy that followed, and noted that these events also elicited little immediate response from the English department’s faculty and administration.

One way in which Ramon plans to address the departmental problems exposed by the events of last semester is to host a gathering designed to recruit prospective English graduate students of color. At the event, an interdisciplinary group of graduate students will meet with these potential students to help them network, find allies and establish a basic level of comfort before they enroll. The overall goal is to help diversify the racial, ethnic and ideological composition of the English department’s student body, which is primarily white.

Amy Pickard, a Graduate School of Education student, spoke on the role of white racial alliances in the email incident and other similar events. She contended that incidents in which white



Joan Adams, LCSW, Panel Moderator



Ann Fabian, American Studies/History



Stéphane Robolin, English

students play down expressions of overt racism in classroom discussions and other interactions often expose a presumed racial alliance among white people. She described this alliance as an unexamined atmosphere of majority group comfort, in which white students feel they can safely say offensive, derogatory things about whomever they like and find acceptance for their sentiments. While often passive rather than active, this alliance has a great deal of power, Pickard maintains. It creates an atmosphere that can silence both people of color and whites who might otherwise question racist comments, fostering negative atmosphere that can extend well beyond the classroom. A commitment to avoiding such silences at Rutgers, she further explained, was what inspired Pickard and some classmates to engage in a public discussion of recent events within the

English Department, in letter that appeared campus newspaper, the *Daily Targum*. The letter critiqued the English department's lack of response to the email incident and expressed support for the students who were deeply troubled by the email.

Dr. Kathleen Belew, a Mellon Foundation/History Postdoctoral Fellow at Rutgers was the panel's final speaker. In her work and teachings on white racist fringe movements in this country, Belew is routinely required to challenge extremely racist ideas and practices, which can present a host of issues in the classroom. Most notable are the emotional and material impacts of assigning racist reading materials to a racially diverse group of students, and negotiating their responses to the offensive language and ideas

contained in such readings. In addition, Belew frequently finds student perspectives on racism challenging. Many white students begin her classes by proclaiming they are not racist and offering her such information as "my family didn't own slaves" or "I didn't support segregation." Belew notes that while such statements are often a reflection of the defensiveness with which some students confront discussions of race, they can also alienate other students from different backgrounds. So Belew includes "principles of respectful discussion" on her syllabus in an effort to maintain a civil environment that minimizes verbal and emotional harm to students.

Faculty members and students in the Forum's audience also contributed greatly to the discussion during its question and answer session. They hailed from a wide variety of backgrounds, and were able to share

diverse personal experiences in the classroom that illuminated panel's themes. Indrani Chatterjee, Associate Professor of History, spoke on the role of living and working as an outsider and the power one can derive from it if desired. Powerfully summarizing the morning's exchange, she opined, "All ignorance is political. All ignorance has an enormous and debilitating influence on our politics, including mine. I don't have the privilege of remaining ignorant about African American history, nor do you have the privilege of remaining ignorant about mine.... Neither of us is innocent. All of us are equally culpable about reproducing ignorance."

After lunch, Dr. Ann Fabian, Professor of History and American Studies and the CRE's Associate Director, began our second panel, "Strategies for Inclusive Teaching and Learning." Diana Melendez, from the Anti-Racist Alliance, the Northeast organizing group for The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, was the first to speak, and addressed the subject of undoing racism. Ms. Melendez, who is



Diana Melendez, Anti-Racist Alliance

a Mexican American social worker in New York City, outlined several strategies oppressed people and people of color can employ to mitigate the psychological and physical effects of racism in their lives. Among other things, she maintained that people

need to share their experiences, and "build a net that works," which she defined as a set of strong relationships with people, with whom you can discuss uncomfortable subjects and whose words and actions you can question without being rebuffed. Undoing racism begins close to home, she emphasized. It involves a form of community organizing that is less about going door-to-door and standing on a street corners, than it is about challenging racism within your "family, as well as at work, and in institutions."

Keisha Green, a Presidential Postdoctoral Fellow in the Graduate School of Education, followed Ms. Melendez with a presentation on the role of spoken word as activism. A form of poetry dedicated to social activism, Green explained, spoken word offers young people a vehicle through which they can express righteous indignation and demonstrate "that young people are able to be advocates for themselves." Moreover, spoken word and other forms of creative self-expression are valuable pedagogical tools because they allow young people to "make connections to how they feel as well as how to verbalize their thoughts."

Dan Battey, also from the Graduate School of Education, where he is an Assistant Professor of Elementary Mathematics

Education, brought the issue of microaggressions to the table. He defined microaggressions as small actions that may be nearly imperceptible to many observers, but have powerful effects on the people against whom they are directed, as well as how other people see the intended target.

Battey studies the microaggressions as a pedagogical problem in elementary school math classrooms, where teachers can sometimes discourage students with repressive body language such as rolling eyes, turning away, or create the same effect with statements about their students' talents and abilities. His work aims to help teachers recognize such behavior and minimize it.

Microaggressions are, Battey notes, "present in people that we would consider good math teachers, who do exactly what they should" and yet who often unknowingly display some of this negative behavior in dealing with students.

Peter Guarnaccia, Professor in the Department of Human Ecology at Cook College and Investigator at the Institute for Health, Health Care Policy and Aging Research took on the subject of inclusive teaching from a different perspective, by discussing the challenges that many advanced degree programs face in recruiting and retaining a diverse student body. In particular, he discussed the strategies for diversifying health policy research pursued under the auspices of Project L/EARN, a program that he founded and has helped to run for the past twenty years. Its goal "is to increase the number of students from underrepresented groups in the fields of



Afternoon Panel: "Strategies for Inclusive Teaching and learning" (L-R: Ann Fabian, American Studies/History; Seth Koven, History; Peter Guarnaccia, Human Ecology, Dan Battey, GSE; Keisha Green, GSE; Joan Adams, LCSW, Diana Melendez, Anti-Racist Alliance)



Keisha Green and Joan Adams



Peter Guarnaccia and Dan Battey



Audience Members at the Diversity in the Classroom Forum

All photos by Wendy L. Wright

health, mental health, and health policy research, thereby expanding the breadth of health research to include a broader range of ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic issues, concerns and perspectives.” The main way that Project L/EARN accomplishes these goals, Guarnaccia explained, is through an intensive ten-week summer course in which undergraduate students with and interest in these fields can master the research culture and tools they will need to be successful applicants to graduate school. Those leading the program assist the students in building social capital that they did not get in the high schools they attended, by supplying them with role models, mentors, and professional contacts. The program also stresses strong teaching and high expectations.



Seth Koven, History

Seth Koven, Associate Professor of History, was the panel’s final presenter. His talk touched on themes that ran throughout the day – silence, the need for safe spaces and what it means to be a white ally. While agreeing that oppressed people need spaces where they can express themselves without fear of silencing or reprisal, Dr. Koven also argued that we need to figure out how to make classrooms safe enough for people to say the really stupid things that they may be thinking, particularly bigoted ideas. He asserted,

“If we create classrooms in which racism cannot speak, it becomes more powerful.” Educators need to be able to draw out and challenge those thoughts and ideas, or else they will remain simmering within, never to be questioned.

Again, a lively and passionate discussion session followed this panel, addressing a wide range of experiences and concerns. One of the most compelling and relevant exchanges was inspired by a question posed Brittney Cooper, who wondered whether there was any way to effectively address sustained micro-aggressions. She related a story



Brittney Cooper, Ford Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow, Center for Race and Ethnicity

of a professor she had in graduate school who singled her out in front of class as the representative of all hip hop and posed questions to her as such, as though she bore any responsibility for what anyone did with the culture and music. Cooper repeatedly challenged the professor’s assumptions, getting into confrontations that left Dr. Cooper feeling exhausted and uncertain. Adams, the moderator from the first panel, reiterated Diana Melendez’s earlier point about how undoing racism

requires a network of people rather than individual interventions.

“Again, you can’t do this work by yourself.” Adams told Cooper. “If you have no external validation then you end up feeling like you are crazy.” Adams’ statement was particularly timely because it summed up the recurring themes expressed throughout the panel: people need to work together. People of color need to support one another and seek out support systems. White people who identify as antiracist need to make their commitments public and become active allies to people of color who confront disrespect in the classroom. Finally, educators should police both themselves and their classrooms for micro-aggressions as well overt racism.

The conference ended by exploring practical techniques for addressing sensitive issues in classroom pedagogy. Working with volunteers from the audience and the panels, Graduate School Education faculty led four simultaneous “Problems of Practice” sessions designed to demonstrate a three-step process that can be used to resolve problems in the classroom. Session members worked through the three steps in the “Problems of Practice” workshops, which involve: 1) have a person with a specific problem of practice define their problem, 2) have other members of the group ask questions to clarify the context and parameters of the problem, and 3) and have the person with the problem sit and listen silently as members of the group suggest possible solutions. The format is designed to allow both the person experiencing the pedagogical problem

and those offering solutions feel they are doing so without fear of judgment in an open forum.

The workshops reviewed problems such as a scenario introduced by one professor who was troubled to note students in one of her classes expressing forms of sexualized racism toward an Asian student in her class in the immediate aftermath of a unit that she had taught on pacific war narratives, which had included racist comments about Asian people. Participants in the workshop questioned the professor about the demographic and social make up of her class, and suggested a variety of useful solutions that ranged from addressing the behavior head-on by historicizing and discussing the feminization of Asians; to reverse role-playing to using media and news clips to make the connection for students between smaller, seemingly inconsequential acts and larger and more readily condemned racist acts. The workshops, like the conference panels, underscored that antiracist education is a challenging endeavor that requires collective commitments and insights.

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.

- **History, Memory and their Uses on Hispaniola** – A roundtable discussion. Friday, March 23, 2012, 12:30 - 2:00 pm, 191 College Avenue, 1st Floor, CAC.
- **Bad Friday: Rastafari After Coral Gardens** – A film screening and discussion with the film’s director, Deb Thomas. Also featuring a drumming performance by the group *Ancient Vibrations*. Monday, March 26, 2012, 7:30 pm, Art History 100, Douglass Campus.
- **Race, Vigilantism and the State** – A roundtable discussion. Tuesday, 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, Pane Room, Alexander Library, CAC.
- **The Help** – Film screening and discussion. Monday, April 16, 2012, 4:00 – 7:00 pm, Graduate Student Lounge, Rutgers Student Center, CAC.
- **Race and Retail: Consumer Culture, Economic Citizenship and Power** – A one day conference. Friday, May 4, 2012, Winants Hall Assembly Room, CAC.

The Center for Race and Ethnicity

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