

In this Issue:

March Events at the CRE

History, Memory and Their Uses on Hispaniola

Vigilantism, Race and the State

March Events at the CRE

This month the CRE hosted scholarly events taking up two very different subjects: one focused on the history of memory of Hispaniola--the island that is home to the nations of Haiti and the Dominican Republic--while the other offered a variety of perspectives on vigilante violence in the United States. Both events were well attended and attracted an interdisciplinary audience of Rutgers faculty, graduate students and undergraduates.

HISTORY, MEMORY AND THEIR USES ON HISPANIOLA

The CRE's lunchtime roundtable discussion on the uses of history and memory on Hispaniola took place on Friday, March 23, 2012. Organized by Jahaira Arias, a history Ph.D. candidate and graduate assistant at the CRE, the hour-long event drew a standing-room only crowd. The roundtable presented a lively discussion of the living memory of one of the oldest of Europe's New World colonies: Hispaniola has a history of European settlement that dates back to Columbus. Participants in the roundtable included faculty from the department of Latino & Hispanic Caribbean Studies, Africana Studies, and the French department, who presented a wide-ranging discussion on the various ways in which Haitians and Dominicans have remembered, written and rewritten the island's past, to create their own national narratives.



A map of the Island of Hispaniola from the 18th Century.

First up was Juan Ponce-Vázquez, from the department of Latino & Hispanic Caribbean Studies, who received his Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania this past December. Ponce, a scholar of the colonial history of Hispaniola, is working on a book on the transformations of Hispaniola society during the 17th century as the colony was relegated to a secondary role among the Spanish possessions in the Americas. Ponce's research underscores that Dominicans have a long tradition of presenting pessimistic accounts of their nation's past: he finds that that Dominicans began to narrate their island's history as a declension narrative as early as the eighteenth century. "Our island has been forgotten by kings," they professed, as Spain's interest in Hispaniola waned.



Juan Ponce-Vázquez, Latino, Hispanic and Caribbean Studies

These pessimistic accounts of Hispaniola's history have been both remarkably enduring and notably important to Dominican politics, Ponce contends. With the founding of the Dominican Republic in the 19th century, they were used by the new nation's educated elites to frame the country's colonial past, and were picked up in the early 20th century by

dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo. Trujillo both supported and disseminated a pessimistic view of the nation's past in order to present himself as savior of the Fatherland and leader of its redemptive present. One of Trujillo's main apologists, historian Manuel A. Peña Batlle, described Dominicans as "victims of defeated history" and described their history as following a "downward curve." Historical narratives such as Peña Batlle's told presented a narrative of decline, whereas the African-descended Haitians threatened what advocates of this version of history portrayed as Dominicans' pure Spanish roots.



Jahaira Arias, History/CRE

Jahaira Arias, who also works on the Dominican Republic, followed Ponce. Using a recent public opinion piece critiquing oligarchy as an entry point into Dominican public discourse, Arias explored the ways in which the significance of race and slavery is often minimized in retellings of the nation's history. Traditional accounts of

Dominican history, she explained, typically maintain that the Dominican population's history of racial mixing, and very small scale investment in African slavery limited the development of racism and racial animosity in the Dominican Republic, especially as compared to Haiti, which has a notable history of both slavery and racial conflict.



Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, dictator of the Dominican Republic, 1930-1961.

However, Arias points out, such perspectives on Dominican history are shortsighted because they tend to equate the presence of the Dominican Republic's overwhelmingly mixed population and the relative absence of slavery with an absence of racialized relations of power, in the past or the present, despite considerable evidence to the contrary. Arias illustrated the impact of such omissions in public discussions of Dominican history by recounting a clash between two prominent Dominican journalists, in which slavery and race are both discussed and evaded.

In an article published a year ago in the Dominican newspaper *Hoy*, journalist Diogenes Cespedes attacked the

pretensions of racial purity of fellow journalist Jose Baez by intimating that Baez was the direct descendent of a relationship between a master and his slave. In his rejoinder, Baez acknowledged his ancestry, but went out of his way to diminish and evade the real social and legal ramifications of having an ancestor who was a slave by claiming that his enslaved grandmother had been part of the family and revered as "Mai Teresa." The Dominican Republic's slave past never became a major part of the debate, which focused primarily on discussion of bloodlines and descent, and presented Dominican slavery as a mere formality in Baez' family history.

In order to combat the omissions and deceptions inherent in narratives of Dominican race and slavery like that told by Baez, Arias argued for "a more meaningful insertion of race relations and slavery into Dominican history." Such an insertion would clarify the obscured connections between the history of slavery in the Dominican Republic and present-day anti-black attitudes that the official national narrative of historic racial harmony and sameness cannot explain.



Yveline Alexis, *Africana Studies*

Dr. Yveline Alexis from the department of Africana Studies followed

Arias, moving us to the western side of the island. She looked at the portrayal of Haiti in the global world, and how it is studied and understood. She juxtaposed the prevalence of the triumphant story of Haiti overthrowing the colonial slave society to win its independence as a nation in the beginning of the nineteenth century with characterizations of contemporary Haiti as a failed state and one of the world's poorest nations. Among academics, Alexis went on to maintain, Haiti tends to be overstudied as a site of twentieth century disaster and eighteenth century revolution and understudied for its many "in between moments" of progress, flourishing and normalcy.



Crucifixion de Charlemagne Peralte pour la Liberte by Philome Obin, 1970 (image courtesy of the Milwaukee Art Museum)

However, she also pointed out that Haitians themselves have proved adept at narrating their own histories and remembering moments of triumph and defeat outside of the bounds of the Haitian Revolution and or recent

crises. By way of example, she discussed Haitian commemorations of Charlemagne Peralte, a Haitian nationalist who led an armed resistance movement against the 1915 U.S. American military invasion. Peralte was assassinated in 1919 by U.S. American soldiers who put his defiled corpse on display to break the will of the resistance. Even to this day, Peralte is widely remembered in Haiti as a martyred freedom fighter, whose "image is invoked by Haitians whenever the US threatens to reoccupy their nation." In her work, Alexis aims to document "how Haitians narrate their own story, and how they use history and memory of the past for their sovereignty and democracy."

"Haiti tends to be overstudied as a site of 20th century disaster and 18th century revolution, and understudied for its many in-between moments of progress, flourishing and normalcy."

- Yveline Alexis



Renée Larrier, *French*

Finally, Professor Renée Larrier from the French Department also spoke on Haitian history and how it has been a source of empowerment for Haitians.

Like Alexis, she maintained that “Haiti has become known for the wrong things,” and she illustrated this phenomenon by looking at Haitian struggles to correct the narration of their nation’s history in the Haitian pavilion at the 1893 World Columbian Exposition, or World’s Fair. Today, the Columbian Exposition Haitian Pavilion is largely associated with Frederick Douglass, who Haiti’s president appointed to preside over the facility, but the Haitian Pavilion was also an important site for Haitian accounts of the nation’s history.



Haitian Pavilion at the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago (image courtesy of eCUIP: The Digital Library Project, <http://ecuiplib.uchicago.edu/index.html>, and used with permission)

Larrier’s work recaptures the pavilion’s representation of Haiti’s history by showing that in organizing the Haitian display for the World’s fair, Haitians aimed to counter already established narratives of Haiti as a failed nation. They secured a prominent place for the Haitian Pavilion, which was “the first free standing building at a World’s Fair that represented a black nation” and was “situated on one of the finest grounds – in a privileged position between Canada and Germany.” Moreover, they also staged an exhibit articulating Haiti’s national identity and national pride by displaying culturally

significant items unique to Haiti such as various works of art, books, banners, photographs of market scenes, newspapers, needlework and spices. The Haitian Pavilion, Larrier maintained “gave an identity to Haiti and showed images that reflected its progress as a nation among nations.”

VIGILANTISM, RACE AND THE STATE

On the afternoon of March 27, 2012, the Center for Race and Ethnicity presented a roundtable titled “Vigilantism, Race, and the State,” which brought scholars from other institutions into conversation with scholars at Rutgers. The panel was organized by Kathleen Belew, a Post-doctoral Fellow at the Center for Historical Analysis, whose work focuses on the history of the racist right, and brought together several exciting scholars from outside Rutgers.



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

Dr. Belew opened the session by noting “no one should be surprised,” referring to the shooting of unarmed teen Trayvon Martin in Florida the previous month. Martin’s death has sparked nation-wide

discussions on vigilantism, race, and legitimate and illegitimate uses of violence. She argued that we ought not to think of these events as exceptional, as they are part of a long history of American vigilante violence. This history framed the fascinating and timely discussion that followed.



Lisa Arellano, American Studies/Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies, Colby College, Waterville, Maine

Lisa Arellano, an Assistant Professor of American Studies and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Colby College, who is currently completing a study of lynching and vigilantism in the United States between 1830 and the present, described her work as focusing on “the narratives that vigilantes produce about themselves.” Her research draws on the numerous accounts that US vigilantes have given of their actions, and one of her most notable findings is that vigilantes consistently “all say the same things about themselves.” Indeed, their discussions of their own actions form a genre of a sort, in which vigilantes routinely describe their actions as courageous; condemn the state for failing to address the important problem their violence is designed to address; describe their own actions as a moderate and orderly response to social and political disorder; and insist that their violence was an attempt to secure justice

for their community. In narrating their actions, vigilantes also tend to situate themselves as historical subjects attempting to control the ways their actions will be understood by future interpreters.

By looking at a range of vigilante accounts, Arellano challenges the conceptual barriers that usually divide racially-motivated vigilantism and other kinds of vigilante violence. The narrative record of vigilantism, she argues, suggests that such distinctions are more ambiguous than historiographical conventions have enabled us to understand. Vigilantes across American history have conceptualized themselves as defenders of an imagined sociopolitical order that is always constructed through a framework of a raced and gendered vision of legitimate political violence.



Rally in support of Joan Little, July 15, 1975, Wake County Courthouse, North Carolina (image courtesy of Prison Culture Blog, <http://www.usprisonculture.com/blog/>)

In concluding her talk, Arellano further challenged the audience to rethink vigilantism. Referencing her new project on three cases of gender-based vigilantism in the 1970s, she asks what it means when women and minority group members who resist gender- and race-based violence adopt vigilante narratives, subverting expectations

about claims to legitimate violence and potentially opening up a reconsideration of those cast in the role of vigilante.

By way of example, Arellano referred to the case of Joan Little who was tried for murdering a white prison guard while incarcerated in 1974. Little was the first woman to acquitted using the defense that she was justified in using deadly force to defend herself against sexual assault.



Benjamin Irvin, History, University of Arizona

Next up was Benjamin Irvin, an Associate Professor of History at the University of Arizona who is researching the history of tarring and feathering. Irvin discussed the persistence of this practice across several different eras of American history. Usually undertaken to support nationalistic visions of social and political practice, tarring and feathering first emerged as a popular practice during the Revolutionary period, according to Irvin. At that time, American patriots branded loyalists traitors to the American cause by covering them with tar and

feathers. Since then, the practice has re-emerged periodically, usually in times of great political or social tension. The history of tarring and feathering, Irvin noted, highlights the paradoxical relationship between vigilantism and the state.



American colonists tarring and feathering a British tax official (image courtesy of Georgia Info website, <http://georgiainfo.galileo.usg.edu/welcome.htm>, and used with permission)

Although the practice has always violated state laws, its practitioners have often claimed that their actions are designed to advance state agendas of social and political order. The title of Irvin's presentation references one case in point: "Tar and Feathers Made a Good American out of Me: Vigilantism, 100% Americanism," refers to a World War I era incident in which a German man was tarred and feathered and later represented in a local newspaper as having said that the experience had convinced him that the war effort was just and that he would send his sons to fight with the Allies.

The last panelist was Monica Muñoz Martinez, a Ph.D. Candidate in American Studies at Yale University. Martinez is completing a dissertation on the lynching of ethnic Mexicans on both sides of the Texas-Mexico border in the



Monica Muñoz Martínez, Yale University

early twentieth century, which explores the role of the Texas Rangers in committing and legitimating this violence. In her presentation, Martínez described the ongoing tensions between the storied role of the Rangers in creating modern Texas and the violent reality of their role in the early twentieth-century murders of over five thousand men of Mexican ethnicity. She emphasized the lack of protection that even legal status as US citizens conferred people of Mexican descent living in Texas, stating that “any ethnic Mexican regardless of citizenship could easily be labeled bandit and punished as the aggressor saw fit.” One element of Muñoz's study focuses on Mexican-Americans resistance to the narrative that identifies a heroic vision of Rangers with Texas itself, which takes the form of what she calls “vernacular history making,” wherein families pass on counter-narratives that speak to their own personal and community experiences.



Members of the 8th Texas Cavalry Rangers, a.k.a. Terry's Texas Rangers, circa 1861 (image courtesy of The Online Archive of Terry's Texas Rangers, <http://www.terrystexasrangers.org/>)

The panel closed with an extraordinarily thought provoking discussion in which the audience asked panelists questions such as “is America’s history of vigilantism unique?”, inquired into the race and gender of the most common victims of vigilante violence, and asked about state sanctions against this type of violence. In their responses the panelists discussed comparative perspectives on vigilantism; the roles that gender and race have played across the history of American vigilante violence and offered analyses of the relationship between the state and vigilantism. The panel concluded with agreement across the board about the critical role of the state in both controlling and distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate forms of violence.

The Center for Race and Ethnicity

Mailing Address:

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
191 College Avenue, 1st Floor
New Brunswick, NJ 08901

Telephone: 732/932-2181

Fax: 732/932-2198

Email: raceethnicity@sas.rutgers.edu

Website: raceethnicity.rutgers.edu

Director: Mia Bay (History)

Assoc. Director, Ann Fabian (American Studies/History)

Senior Program Coordinator: Mia Kissil

Graduate Assistants/Editors: Isra Ali (Journalism and Media Studies); Jahaira Arias (History); Christopher Hayes (History); Shatima Jones (Sociology); Wendy Wright (Political Science)