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Racialized Consumption***CRE Sponsors One Day Conference on Race and Retail***

The CRE ended the spring semester with a very successful day-long conference on the subject of race and retail. Dedicated to a discussion of consumer culture, economic citizenship, and power, the conference brought together an interdisciplinary group of scholars, whose distinctive research underscored the importance of race and place in shaping the retail experiences of American consumers.

RACE, SPACE AND RETAIL SPACES

Speaking in the conference's opening panel on *Race, Space, and Retail Spaces*, Mia Bay (Rutgers, History), Naa Oyo A. Kwate (Rutgers, Human Ecology), Traci Parker (University of Chicago, History), and John Spiers (Boston College, History) all presented work highlighting how much retail experiences can vary from place to place, and explored the ways in which retailers cultivate some customers and not others.

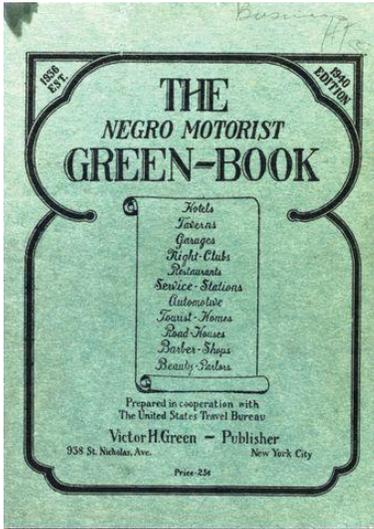
The historic roots of retail discrimination were most evident in Bay's paper on *Retail and Roadside Accommodations during the Segregation Era*, which showed that black travelers during this era wrestled with retail segregation, whether they rode trains, drove cars, or bought expensive seats on airplanes.



Panel 1: *Race Space, and Retail Spaces* (L-R): Mia Bay, Naa Oyo A. Kwate, Traci Parker, John Spiers

Often subject to segregated seating, blacks also had trouble purchasing food and other supplies when they traveled. African-Americans were not always admitted in railroad dining cars. Moreover, when admitted, they had to eat behind special curtains that separated the colored area of a dining car from white passengers, or consume their food in a second seating that took place after all white diners had been served. As the country entered the automobile age, blacks encountered new problems. They could buy their own cars, but they still had to stop for gas and food and, on long trips, to spend a night. While some businesses, including Esso Service Stations, appreciated black travelers, others did not, so

many travelers turned to commercial guides to avoid insults and physical dangers. The best known of these guides, *The Green Book* listed safe places for black travelers to eat, to sleep, and to shop.



Negro Motorist Green Book, 1940 edition.

Moreover, such problems did not end with the advent of air transportation. Although there was no formal segregation on planes, once on the ground, black travelers had to find food in Jim Crow airports, and locate Jim Crow cabs. Even the most celebrated entertainers, politicians, and athletes were not immune to the system's inequalities. Bumped from a plane to make room for white passengers, Jackie Robinson rode to the Dodgers' Florida spring training in the back of a bus.

Naa Oyo A. Kwate's research suggests that retail discrimination is almost equally pre-valent today. In *Lies, Retail Lies, and Ghetto Statistics*, Kwate underscores that while black consumers are rarely barred from stores today, many retail goods remain

scarce in black neighborhoods, and suggests that this scarcity is a consequence of the ways that "statistics" have been used to portray black shoppers and black neighborhoods as undesirable consumers. Social scientists and policy makers, she suggests, have perpetuated widely-held stereotypes of black consumers as unlikely to buy a wide range of goods, which often leave black neighborhoods without essential retail services.

These stereotypes, she explains, are based on studies of household income that mask the economic complexity of black neighborhoods and perpetuate racist marketing practices. Retailers see black neighborhoods as monolithically poor and instead of providing services, force black consumers to "actively demand higher quality retail in their neighborhoods."

Kwate's research on the delivery policies of online grocery store FreshDirect illustrates her point. Responding to Kwate's inquiry, FreshDirect explained that they did not deliver to certain predominately black Brooklyn neighborhoods because "there is no demand for our service in those neighborhoods." But FreshDirect makes no such assumptions about Brooklyn's white neighborhoods, where it uses advertising to stimulate demand. Kwate refers to this as the "racial tax," as it is levied on

black neighborhoods. Its costs are real, says Kwate, as black consumers face a world of narrowed choices.

John Spiers' work suggests that black neighborhoods that have been marginalized by developers often prove willing to accept commercial development, even though a project may not best serve the interests of the community and may present significant environmental concerns. In *Paying to Shop: Race, Retail, and the Environmental Costs of Commercial Development*, he discussed the recent history of Smoot Bay, a parcel of land in Prince George's County, Maryland, a suburb of the Washington metropolitan area. Trying to bring commercial development to Smoot Bay, an environmentally-sensitive property near the Potomac River, was a major goal of local officials and residents since 1980. This proved difficult, however, as an influx of black residents over the past few decades led Prince George's to become the first African American-majority suburban county in the United States during the 1990s. Despite an influx of middle and upper-class residents at that time, developers in the D.C. area looked past its largely black population to focus on more affluent, predominately white communities.

In the 1990s, a developer proposed National Harbor, a tourist-driven project with a convention center complex and upscale destination retail. Although some residents had misgivings about not being the primary target audience of National Harbor and about the environmental impact of large-scale development at Smoot Bay, they were

willing to overlook these concerns to finally gain access to in-demand shopping opportunities. The case of Smoot Bay and National Harbor suggests that residential settlement patterns not only structure retail options but also shape attitudes surrounding the environmental impact of commercial development.

Traci Parker, a Ph.D. Candidate at the University of Chicago, is completing a dissertation that looks at the racial divisions and allegiances at the point of sale, which provides an illuminating account of the role that labor practices have played in retail racism. In her presentation on *Sit-Ins, Linked Fate, and Department Stores: Integrating the Selling Floor in the 1930s and 1960s*, Parker began with the story of Dorothy Davis, the first African-American sales woman at W.T. Grant’s department store. Parker underscored that Davis’s employment was a product of a black struggle for such jobs that dates back to the “Don’t buy where you can’t work” and “Double duty dollar campaign” of the 1930s. But she also emphasized that Davis’s story does not end there. Her research shows that, once hired, Davis helped desegregate W.T. Grant’s customers by attracting a loyal black clientele and working with suppliers to stock the store with goods that would appeal to black customers.

The integration of the selling floor, Parker contends, involved more than just jobs. It transformed the white fantasy of “a world where upper class white women customers are met by white women sales clerks.” Chains like W.T. Grant’s recognized that personal

relationships helped sell goods and some began to see the economic advantage in hiring black marketing executives.

RACE, RETAIL AND NEIGHBORHOOD LIFE

“Race, Retail, and Neighborhood Life,” the conference’s second panel, picked up where the first one left off, exploring the intersection between retail markets and local spaces. Neiset Bayouth (Rutgers, Geography) focused on the coffeehouses and narghile lounges in Paterson, NJ. Her paper, *Marketing Identity, Negotiating Boundaries: Ethnic Entrepreneurship, Retail and Consumption in Paterson, New Jersey*, examined the role of Turkish coffeehouses and Arab narghile lounges in community building for the Arab and Turkish communities of Paterson, NJ. Bayouth contends that although coffeehouses and hookah lounges have a long history in the Middle East, dating back to rest stops along 16th-century trade routes, the forms and functions of these places have evolved, giving rise to different types of establishments with different marketing strategies. The more traditional coffeehouses and narghile lounges

are mainly marketed to the local community members, serving an important social function for Turkish and Arab community members, respectively, while more modern forms of lounges conceived as hookah-restaurants and hookah-bars are marketed to the general public, particularly college students and Paterson’s Hispanic community. Depending on the type of venue, the benefits of these ethnic businesses shift from the social to the economic and there are also variations in terms of the extent to which they are considered to bridge the Middle Eastern and American societies.

Erualdo González (California State University, Fullerton, Chicana and Chicano Studies) and Johana Londoño (State University of New York, Albany, Latin American, Caribbean, and U.S. Latino Studies) have been studying the development of Latino neighborhoods in Santa Ana, CA, and Union City, NJ. In *The Revitalization of Main Street USA and the Changing Landscape of Latino Consumption*, they explore the ways the collection of ideas known as “New Urbanism” and the “creative city” help explain the recent history in these two urban and largely Latino spaces. According to Londoño, both cities have adopted New Urbanism’s model of gentrification that has helped to



Panel 2: *Race, Retail and Neighborhood Life* (L-R): Neiset Bayouth, Erualdo González, Johana Londoño, Soo Mee Kim, Stacey Sutton

suburbanize their environments and marginalize their nonprofessional working class.

To explain recent developments, she summarized the Latino history of Union City. In 1959, the U.S. government and N.J. Catholics helped Cubans settle there and supported Cuban-owned business with loans subsidized by the Small Business Administration. For a time, Union City remained “Havana on the Hudson,” but in the 1980’s new immigrants from Central and South America reduced the Cuban concentration of the population and their percentage among business owners. Changes have sparked resentment among now long-established Cubans, who describe Union City as looking like any other barrio. Wealthier Cubans support a master plan with a New Urbanist focus on the arts, which they hope will promote gentrification while also putting Union City on the map as a creative center.

Latinos are a more recent presence in Santa Ana, González explains. One of Orange County’s earliest urban areas, the city was largely white until the 1970s, when white flight left it “poor and blighted.” By 1990, Santa Ana’s population was about 51 percent first-generation immigrants. In that city, groups have worked with a series of public-private partnerships to re-imagine the image of the downtown and surrounding neighborhoods.

In Santa Ana, there is a very nuanced case that goes beyond much of the traditional gentrification and

commercial literature around race and ethnicity. Within the past 20 years, the city has supported revitalization efforts that have propelled gentrification. This includes loft development, mixed-uses, artists districts, “hip” amenities, such as late night bars, restaurants, and entertainment to attract “creative entrepreneurs,” young, middle-class consumers, dwellers, and visitors.

Londoño and González see intra-ethnic controversy overlapped with issues of class and power. Their research seeks to uncover some new insights on how competitive struggles for downtown spaces cannot be untangled from broader neo-liberal models of revitalization policies and the ways in which they foster debates. They pointed out that there is variation of views by local anti-gentrification advocates for recent and working-class Latino immigrant interests and multigenerational, more assimilated and economically well off Latino civic officials.

In *Consuming (in) Koreatown, Los Angeles*, Soo Mee Kim (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, Sociology), describes an ethnic neighborhood very different from that studied by Bayouth, González and Londoño. The most vibrant Korean expatriate enclave anywhere in the world, Los Angeles’s Koreatown is home to shops that could have been plucked straight out of Seoul. But



Parade marcher during the 2008 Korean Festival Parade in Los Angeles' Koreatown

Date 2008-11-15 (original upload date) Source Transferred from [en.wikipedia](#); transferred to Commons by [User:Spyder Monkey](#) using [CommonsHelper](#). Author Original uploader was [Ripper777](#) at [en.wikipedia](#) Permission ([Reusing this file](#))

it is far from exclusively Korean. Its 116,953 residents are 28 percent Korean and 58 percent Latino. Although Korean-owned businesses designed to provide services for recent immigrants occupy many of its commercial spaces, its streets are dotted with modern residential towers and retail complexes that attract many non-Korean customers.

Recognized as a historic neighborhood by the city of Los Angeles in 2006, since 2009 Koreatown has also been part of a federal program to “Preserve American Neighborhoods.” A successful ethnic enclave that has succeeded in marketing itself to a broad audience, it is struggling to maintain its Korean identity, and achieve a political voice, while also meeting the social and retail needs of all its residents.

In *The Geopolitics of Black Business Survival in Central Brooklyn*, Stacey Sutton (Columbia University, Urban Planning) also discussed tensions between neighborhood revitalization and preservation. She focused on the often daunting prospects of survival for Black-owned



Photo by Gersh Kuntzman. Released into the public domain (by the author).

businesses established in predominantly Black inner-city neighborhoods. Many Black shopkeepers, Sutton's research suggests, find it difficult to remain in place amid local demographic shifts. Their stores are not displaced by big box stores, as is widely assumed. Instead, small businesses more commonly give way to processes of gentrification, including the selective enforcement of zoning and land-use regulations.

Sutton's paper is based on a study of previously "desolate corridors" in Central Brooklyn that became successful retail environments during the 1990s and early 2000s. She documents their histories and includes interviews with some past and present Black owners. To illustrate her arguments, Sutton tells the story of F&S Tire Shop in Fort Greene. The shop's Haitian-born proprietor has owned the building for 26 years. So it was not the rising rent that has troubled the owner. It was the NYC building inspector and fire marshal who forced the shop's 9-week closure

for building violations later dismissed. Through the case of the Tire Shop, this article demonstrates how land-use policies and practices intended to improve commercial corridors are erratically enforced. Thus may in fact hinder survival of small retailers considered out of context with emerging vernacular retail typology.

RACE AND RETAIL ACROSS THE DIASPORA

Our third panel looked outward to consider retail in a diasporic perspective. Melissa Cooper, who recently received her Ph.D. from the Rutgers Department of History, began with a paper on the marketing of diasporic subjects. She opened her paper *Selling Gullah: Purchasing and Touring Sapelo Islanders* by explaining that anthropologists, folklorists, and novelists have long imagined the residents of Georgia's Sapelo Island as exotic descendants of authentic Africans. Since the 1920s and 1930s, American writers have described Sapelo Islanders a "racially distinct" "Gullah," people, "authentic primitives in modern America," inhabiting an

exotic landscape. Since then "authenticity" has remained a key feature of the Island's tourist economy, fostering celebrations of the primitive and the authentic that distort and sanitize the island's complex history. Still, many of the island's current residents, who descend from Sapelo's slaves, now make their living by taking on "the role of sellers of Gullah" and "telling stories about African ancestors they never met."

Danielle Hedegard (Boston College, Sociology) describes a similar the tourist economy of Salvador, Brazil, in her paper on *Consuming Capoeira: Touring the Black Body in Salvador, Brazil*. She notes that *The Lonely Planet* guidebook, sells Salvador as the African soul of Brazil, highlighting Salvador as "a place to encounter Africa and blackness." Salvador, Hedegard maintains, has built this reputation largely around Capoeira, a Brazilian martial art that combines elements of dance and music.

Capoeira originated among Brazil's enslaved population and is still closely associated with slavery and blackness, both of which, according to Hedegard, are marketed as central to the tourists' experience of Salvador. The tourists from Europe and the United States, who have made Salvador Brazil's second most popular urban destination, come



Panel 3: *Race and Retail Across the Diaspora* (L-R): Melissa Cooper, Danielle Hedegard, Bridget Kenny

seeking a particular kind of blackness, which Hedegard finds routinely on display in the city's Capoeira studios. The Capoeira practitioners who perform there promote a "very limited set of symbols of blackness," which draw on histories of slavery, Afro-Brazilian culture, and contemporary black bodies. But neither tourists nor the Capoeira practitioners seemed to be aware of the racist elements that might be behind their experiences, nor of the complex history of martial arts and the blend of ethnic strains in the practice of Capoeira.

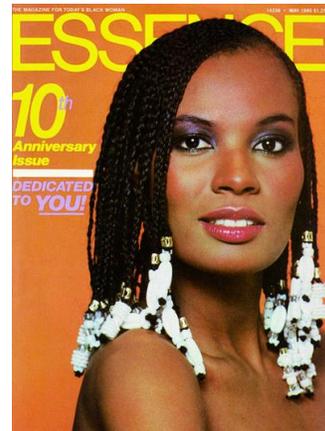
Instead, Hedegard contends, the "darker skinned practitioners have Capoeira nicknames that relate to slavery," and regale tourists stories about their names. A lighter-skinned practitioner competes for their attention by showing off a tattoo of Preto Velho (a dark skinned folkloric figure). Preto Velho, Hedegard concludes, was "a way to get attention despite being light skinned because it gave him a way to establish a (black) racial identity."

The panel's final speaker, Bridget Kenny (University of Witwatersrand - Johannesburg, Sociology), crisscrossed the diaspora with an examination of retail practices in Johannesburg and Baltimore. In *Servicing a Racial Regime: Race and Gendered Labor in Department Stores in Johannesburg, South Africa and Baltimore, MD, 1940-1970*, she asked why department stores became important arenas for labor conflicts. She finds that in both cities, such stores were once places where white female service workers modeled proper

female behavior and created "safe" white spaces. Wages were low, but department store sales jobs offered workers extra perks, like discounts, and the prestige and security of long-term employment. One woman described her sales job as a "much higher class work" than the factory jobs she had help during the Second World War. Black workers cleaned department stores, holding the jobs that "defined them as laborers not service workers."

THE INNER LANDSCAPES OF RACIALIZED CONSUMPTION

The images associated with consumption were also central to the day's final panel. Entitled "The Inner Landscapes of Racialized Consumption, it brought together scholars whose work explores retail's psychological effects on consumers—both good and bad. Siobhan Carter-David (History, Southern Connecticut State University) opened the session with a paper entitled "*A Fantasy in Fashion: African-American Empowerment in an Era of Opulence.*" Focused on popular magazines aimed at black audiences in the 1980's, it contended that such magazines offered their readers a sort of racial uplift through consumerism, style and fashion. Feature stories, advertisements, and editorials all depicted an elite class consumer world open to



Essence Magazine Cover, May 1980

middle-class black audience in luxurious detail. The fantasy was shortlived. The economic downturn of 1987 brought publishers and readers back to earth, but before then, these magazines marketed a distinctly black aesthetic of opulence that allowed African-American audiences to imagine their conspicuous participation in the marketplace.

By contrast, Azure Thompson, an Associate Research Scientist, Yale School of Medicine, stresses the negative effect of retail environments on African Americans. Looking at black neighborhoods, her paper "*Does Retail Environment Affect Mental Health? Satisfaction with Neighborhood Retail and Social Well-Being Among African-Americans*" (which was co-written with Sharise Porter, a doctoral student in the joint Ph.D. program in Urban Systems-Urban Health, Rutgers-UMDNJ-NJIT, and Naa Oyo Kwate (Rutgers, Human Ecology), contends that retail advertising and outlets in such neighborhoods have adverse effects on the mental health of their residents. In particular, her research shows retail outlets like fast-food chains and those that offer cigarettes and alcohol which dominate these

neighborhoods, have a have a measurably negative effect on their residents “social well-being”—or “sense one has valuable contributions to make to society.”

The conference closed with a presentation by Jerome Williams from the Rutgers Business School-Newark Campus. His paper, *Racial and Other Types of Discrimination in Retail Settings: A Liberation Psychology Perspective*, written with Rutgers Business School-Newark Campus colleague Geraldine Henderson, focused on the racial profiling black consumers often experience in retail establishments.

Their research, which documents the patterns of discrimination involved in such racial profiling, breaks down the discrimination racially profiled customers experience into two categories, “annoyance or avoidance,” wherein black customers reported feeling either harassed or ignored.

Using a video of an African-American man, who, along with his six-year-old son, was strip-searched after Bloomingdales’ security guards falsely accused him of theft, Williams described the feelings of humiliation, violation, and discrimination that characterize many black experiences of

retail. While narrow interpretations of equal protection statutes may make it hard to win suits against retail establishments, Williams suggests that lessons of “liberation psychology” – efforts to see things from the perspective of oppressed groups – might help to create more equitable retail environments.

The conference closed with a discussion of retail equity, and the many other race and retail questions illuminated by the panelists, who will collaborate in producing an edited book on the subject.

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Panel 4: *The Inner Landscapes of Racialized Consumption*
(L-R): Siobhan Carter-David, Azure Thompson,
Jerome Williams (not pictured: Geraldine
Henderson)