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Borders and Belonging Theme of CRE's Second Sawyer Conference



On December 6-7, 2012, the Center for Race and Ethnicity hosted a conference on Borders and Belonging--the second of the four conferences on its 2012-13 schedule. Like our inaugural conference on Scale and Racial Geographies, as well our upcoming conferences on Race, Place, and Nature, and Cities, Towns and Suburbs, the Borders and Belonging conference was part of the CRE's ongoing seminar on "Race, Place, and Space in the Americas." A year-long program funded by a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation's John Sawyer Seminar on the Comparative Study of Cultures Program, the seminar series also

features an interdisciplinary works-in-progress group made up of Rutgers faculty, graduate students and postdoctoral fellows, which meets bi-weekly throughout the academic year. (The full conference and seminar schedule is available on the raceethn.rutgers.edu website).

NAYAN SHAH GIVES KEYNOTE ADDRESS

The Borders and Belonging conference opened with a keynote address by Nayan Shah, Professor of American Studies and Ethnicity at the University of Southern California, who spoke on "Border Intimacies and the Problem of Estrangement." In his presentation, Shah drew on his recent book, *Stranger Intimacy: Contesting Race, Sexuality and the Law in the North American West* (2012), to outline the complex legal, social, and sexual terrain traversed by the tens of thousands of South Asians, who migrated from India to Canada and the US West during the first half of the 20th century. Shah's wide-ranging presentation set the tone for the conference sessions, which took place the following day, and included panels on "Citizenship and Borders," "Narratives of Belonging," "Borders and Bodies," and "Displacement and Belonging."



Nayan Shah, Professor of History, University of Southern California, and keynote speaker, Borders and Belongings Conference, Dec. 6, 2012.

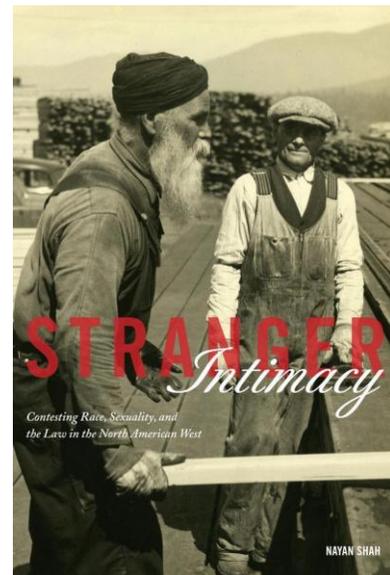
Dr. Shah brought to light the connections and relationships between South Asian migrants and other itinerant laborers they encountered at various transit points in the journey towards United States at the beginning of the 20th century. Largely Sikh, these sojourners included some Muslims from the Punjab and also Bengalis. Most were male laborers, and they often crossed several national borders as they moved from place to place in search of work, and communities where they would not be subject to lethal levels of nativist hostility. Yet the transient and often embattled character of their lives did not prevent them from forming “intimate ties,” which took shape around “transnational kin networks, interracial marriages, and various temporary intimate encounters”—including prostitution and same-sex relations. Shah’s talk explored their intimacies, making innovative use of court cases, marriage licenses, labor and property agreements, and census and naturalization records to discuss the daily lives of men whose stories fall

largely outside conventional histories of immigrant households.

As a foreign people of color, South Asians were subject to racial restrictions that heightened their outsider status and at the same time shaped their intimate lives. Classed alongside the Chinese as an Asiatic race, South Asians were subject to Alien Land Laws, immigration restrictions and antimiscegenation statutes that largely excluded them from normative forms of sexuality, sociability and intimacy. Few of the migrants were able to form the kinds of nuclear families most often studied by scholars of the immigrant experience. Instead, they often lived alongside other male workers from other places in transnational households that took shape in boarding houses, bunk houses, and labor encampments. There, Shah argues, they create new forms of community that have largely been ignored by scholars intent on promoting “assimilation narratives that emphasize nuclear family settlement.” Shah argues that both surveillance and sociability with immigrants of other nationalities and ethnicities produced unique life histories for these immigrants.

Intimacies were frequently fleeting in these migrant communities, and they often involved crossing racial lines and/or challenging gender norms.

The largely male world of these transient migrants fostered intimacies between men, as well as a variety of relationships with non-South Asian women. Shah underscored that all the migrants’ intimate relationship were subject to state surveillance and frequently criminalized. Indeed, many of the stranger intimacies his book records are documented in vice cases: the migrants frequently found themselves subject to charges of sodomy, indecency, and the vague but related charge of criminal vagrancy. The relationships they formed with women also opened South Asian men to charges of miscegenation. Thus the migrants were not only racialized in terms of their foreignness, but also in terms of sexuality and heteronormativity. Subject to complex process of difference-making that involved national, imperial and regional policies, rather than just racial attitudes, South Asian migrants were widely defined as inassimilable outsiders.



Stranger Intimacy: Contesting Race, Sexuality and the Law in the North American West, by Nayan Shah (University of California Press, 2012)

CITIZENSHIP AND BORDERS

The conference's first panel, "Citizenship and Borders," focused on changing meaning of U.S. citizenship, and on the ways in which race and ethnicity have complicated some Americans' claims to citizenship. Martha Jones, Associate Professor of History and Afro-American and African Studies at the University of Michigan (Ann Arbor), presented a paper, "Leave of Court: Race and the Right to Interstate Travel in the Era of Dred Scott," in which she explored the antebellum era significance of citizenship as a site of meaningful, if contested, rights and privileges. Jones' work challenges recent scholarship that argues that prior to the Civil War citizenship was "not a relevant legal category—it was a category without content," by focusing on the struggles of free blacks to retain their right to travel after the Supreme Court held that African Americans were not citizens in *Dred Scott v. Sanford* (1857). The court's ruling that "The negro has no rights which the white man is bound to respect," further eroded the fragile freedom enjoyed by antebellum era free blacks, who were required to secure travel permits to leave and reenter many Southern states. Designed to curtail and control the mobility of the region's blacks, these laws inspired free blacks to defend their right to travel in local courts, even after the Dred Scott decision seemingly precluded any such right. Moreover, they generally secured travel permits, along with other forms of day-to-day recognition of certain basic legal rights

such as the right to sign contracts, collect debts and buy and sell property. By continuing to exercise such rights even after the Dred Scott decision, free blacks successfully contested the legal logic of courts' ruling and laid the groundwork for emancipation era struggles for equal citizenship.

Linda Bosniak, Professor of Law at Rutgers–Camden, further considered the relationship between race, citizenship and the law. Bosniak began her paper,



Linda Bosniak, Professor of Law, Rutgers-Camden

titled "Birthright Citizenship, Undocumented Immigration, and the Slavery Analogy," by noting that the contemporary debate over immigration in the United States cannot be divorced from the history of slavery and noncitizenship as exemplified by *Dred Scott* decision. Indeed, these subjects come up regularly in debate over whether U.S.-born children of today's undocumented immigrants should continue to be eligible for citizenship. On one side of the debate, opponents of

birthright citizenship (BRC), maintain that the children of undocumented immigrants should be ineligible for citizenship, because these "anchor-babies" provide legal footholds for "illegal" parents. On the other, supporters of BRC maintain that without it, the children of undocumented immigrants would become like slaves, insofar as they would pass on alien status generation after generation. They argue that abolishing BRC for children born in the U.S. of unauthorized immigrants "would reproduce and augment a class of severely disadvantaged and exploitable persons whose status as such would likely remain perpetual." Bosniak observes that this analogy to slavery has undeniable rhetorical power, but questions its conceptual clarity. Citizenship and legal rights are not one and the same, she pointed out. "Even in the absence of citizenship... the Constitution now stands against the 'social death' that [Orlando] Patterson and others have described as constituting slavery's core." Concluding, Bosniak proposes that this analogy creates an opportunity to re-examine the nature of the status of the undocumented immigrant: how well does the idea of slavery capture what is distinctive about the disadvantage experienced by undocumented immigrants in the U.S.?

The final presentation of the first panel came from Thea Abu El-Haj, who is Associate Professor in the Rutgers Graduate School of Education. Abu El-Haj's work, "Home/Land Insecurity: Palestinian American Youth Negotiating Belonging and Citizenship in U.S. Schools," looked beyond legal questions

raised by Jones and Bosniak to explore the meanings citizenship holds for young Palestinian Americans, who negotiate citizenship status as both a cultural and a legal category. Drawing on her six-year ethnographic study of Palestinian American high school students in Philadelphia, Abu El-Haj described the conflicts and creativity in the lives of these young people who identify as Palestinian yet also see themselves as American. She found that many embraced both sides of their dual nationality. The students often find ways to mobilize their American-ness in service to their values as Palestinians. For example, Abu El-Haj pointed to several instances of students insisting that their First Amendment rights protected their freedom to express their support for controversial Palestinian organizations and actions.

NARRATIVES OF BELONGING

The second panel, "Narratives of Belonging," continued to explore embodied citizenship by looking at how ideas about race and identity take shape within narratives of border crossing. Kornel Chang of the Rutgers – Newark History Department opened up the discussion by recounting how cautionary tales about the British colony of Natal, South Africa (now South African's KwaZulu-Natal province) helped white Canadians justify imposing restrictions on Asian immigrants in early twentieth century British Columbia. In his presentation "Imagining Natal: The Transnational Tale of White Declension in the Anglophone Colonial Settler World,"

Chang explains that the story of Natal, where British settlers were ultimately outnumbered by the thousands of indentured laborers



Kornel Chang, History Department, Rutgers-Newark

who they imported from India to work on the colony's sugar plantations, was told and retold throughout the British empire as a cautionary tale of white declension and 'yellow peril.' In Canada, Chang argued, the story helped build support for Asian exclusion laws, and also had the "ironic effect of nationalizing white settler societies and facilitating the emergence of a distinct 'White Canada.'"

By contrast, Columbia University historian Karl Jacoby's presentation, "Passing the Line: A Trickster's Tale from the U.S. – Mexico Borderlands," focused on the ways in which moving between national boundaries can be a site of shifting racial identities. Jacoby's case in point is the story of Guillermo Enrique Eliseo, whose biography Jacoby is currently completing. Eliseo was

born a slave in pre-Civil War Texas, and as an adult moved between the U.S. and Mexico, shifting his racial and national identities to suit different times and places. Jacoby suggests that to capture the life of a man like Eliseo we need to rethink the ways we imagine geographies, organize archives, and construct historiographical traditions. Eliseo's life story helps us understand that although people of African descent were liminal subjects in



Guillermo Enrique Eliseo

both Mexico and the U.S. during his lifetime, their experiences varied considerably in each place. Jacoby argues that while turn of the century Americans "were increasingly fixated on white racial purity," "Mexicans took up the rhetoric of mestizaje" during the same period. These parallel, but very different developments, created a range of racial possibilities for Eliseo, who sometimes represented himself as Mexican, and sometimes represented himself as black.

The third speaker, Sheila McManus of the History Department of the University of Lethbridge, introduced a

new perspective on North America's western borderlands by challenging the ways in which narratives of race and violence constructed in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands have over-determined how borders and borderlands are theorized in the North American West. In her presentation, "Writing the Edges of Exclusion: The Historiography of Indigenous and Asian Peoples in North America's Western Borderlands," McManus argued that comparing the historiographies of the U.S.-Canada and U.S.-Mexico border, especially those works which focus on the experiences of indigenous and Asian peoples, can shed light on precisely how both borders have been used and are still being used to create insiders and outsiders. Comparing the interactions across the U.S.-Mexico and U.S.-Canada borders also highlights the inadequacy of "allowing an uncomplicated whiteness and masculinity to stand unchallenged and unnamed at the center of our analyses of borderlands." Whiteness in the United States, McManus emphasized, often looks different from whiteness in Canada or Mexico. Closer attention to the many varieties of racialized and gendered categories, she further suggested, may provide different frameworks for imagining American borderlands.

Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel wrapped up this panel with a discussion of, "The Afro-Boricua Mirror Stage: *Down These Mean Streets* as a Foundational Narrative of Puerto Rican and Chicana Studies." A Professor of Comparative Literature and Latino and Hispanic

Caribbean Studies at Rutgers-New Brunswick, Martínez-San Miguel reflected on national, ethnic, and regional identities at play in Piri Thomas' memoir, highlighting Thomas's increasing identification with Mexican Americans and African Americans. Like Guillermo Enrique Eliseo, Thomas did not always remain the same race. In her discussion of Thomas' shifting sense of racial identity, Martínez-San Miguel diverged from Jacoby by cautioning against the use of ideas such as "passing" to discuss the new racial affiliations often adopted by Caribbean migrants to the U.S. Passing, she noted, can be a simplistic and problematic theoretical framework for understanding subjects whose identities shift as they move across geographic and national borders.



Piri Thomas (image courtesy of Suzie Dod Thomas; available at : <http://www.blackpast.org/?q=aab/thomas-piri-1928>)

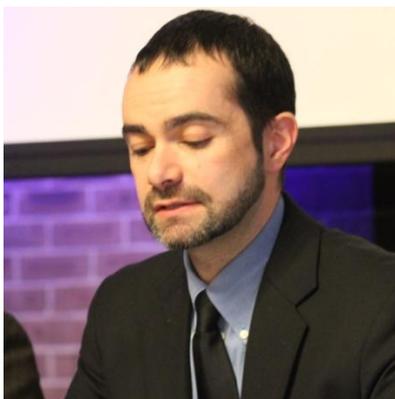
BORDERS AND BODIES

The presenters on the third panel of the day, "Borders and Bodies," emphasized the elasticity of borders as they relate to group identities. David Chang, Professor of History at the University of Minnesota, began the conversation by exploring the impact that ideas about Native Americans had on Native Hawaiians, particularly during the years Hawai'i was drawn into the imperial fold of the United States. In "Hoohalikeia Aku Me na Poe Iilikini/Made to Resemble the Indian Peoples: American Colonialism and Native Hawaiian Thought on American Indian People, 1836-1923," Chang argues that the way native Hawaiians thought about American Indians changed noticeably over time, and that the changes reflected their gradual embrace of an indigenous identity.

Initially native Hawaiians defined themselves as utterly distinct from that the mainland's indigenous people, whose cultural practices they marked as alien. "From the 1830s to the 1850s, American Indians were to Hawaiians what they should not be: they must not eat wild game, they must not wander, they must wear shoes," said Chang. But by the 1890s the increasingly noticeable dispossession of Hawaiians at the hand of settlers prompted native Hawaiians to "commiserate with the immiseration of American Indians." And after the United States annexation of Hawaii in 1896, native Hawaiians would come to understand themselves as 'indigenous' in the way that American Indians were: they too were "not just born in a place but born in a settler colonial space." As

Chang asserted, Hawaiians didn't cross the border, the border crossed them.

The Mexican migrants of Anthony Mora's presentation, "Migrations in Black and Brown: African American and Mexican American Interactions in the Early Twentieth Century," crossed more than one border when they journeyed to Chicago in the early 1900s. Mora, Professor of American Culture and History at the University of Michigan (Ann Arbor), became interested in the interactions between African Americans and Mexican Americans when he noticed that present-day media coverage "presented stories of increasing Mexican migration to places like South Carolina as one of African Americans and Mexicans" as though these two groups were "meeting for the first time." Mora was struck by how little was known about the historical interactions between these two communities. His current project is dedicated to recovering the experiences of early twentieth century Mexican migrants to the United States



Anthony Mora, Professor of American Culture and History, University of Michigan (Ann Arbor)

Focused on Chicago, Mora's research underscores the uneasy position

Mexicans occupied in the segregated racial landscape of the early twentieth-century United States. During the World War I era, Chicago's expanding industrial economy attracted Mexican immigrants and African American migrants from the southern US alike, creating racial uncertainties among members of both groups. African American newspapers of the period dramatize these uncertainties insofar as they display "contradictory impulses" in their discussions of Mexicans. While some black reporters insisted that, "Mexicans were black or comparable to blacks giving emphasis to their joint oppression under US imperialism"; others feared that the Mexican migrants would take jobs from African Americans, and denounced them with nativist claims that they were "not properly American."

Mexicans also struggled with the issue of how to relate to African Americans. Although generally considered white under American law, in their day-to-day experiences Mexicans found themselves subject to racial discrimination and often construed by whites "as just a shade away" from being black. However, their experiences of racial discrimination did not necessarily lead them to identify with African Americans. Instead, in a system where blacks were subject to intense prejudice, many Mexicans were eager to distance

themselves from African Americans. Both Mexican Americans and African Americans, then, took part in the larger debates about race in the United States and both groups had a stake in defining the racial status of "off-white or in-between" Latinos in early twentieth century Chicago.

Sherene Razack, professor in sociology and equity studies at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, brought the conversation north of the Canadian border in her talk, "The Space of Difference in Law: Inquests into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody." Razack began with a vignette of a sixty-seven year old aboriginal man, Paul Alphonse, who died in the custody of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) in Williams Lake--a small city located in British Columbia. Although his death was ruled a natural death by the both the police and the coroner, an inquest found a clear boot print imprinted on his chest--suggesting he died of a blunt force trauma. Both the violence Alphonse suffered, and the fact that it was so easily overlooked, Razack suggests, typify the ways in which aboriginal people are routinely subject to police violence. "The colonial project is ongoing," says Razack, who maintains that, "aboriginal bodies pose territorial challenges so wherever they are is a border."

Moreover, such challenges are particularly acute when aboriginal men and women trespass into the "white space" of the towns rather than staying on reserves, as was the case with Paul Alphonse. A Shuswap Indian,

Alphonse was a creation of the very conditions that frequently propel native Canadians into settler space. He was a survivor of residential schools once maintained by Canadian officials to integrate aboriginal children into



Sherene Razack, Professor of Sociology and Equity Studies, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto

Canadian society. Removed from their families, and subject to physical and sexual abuse, few of these children fared well. Known as “Street Troopers,” the survivors have high rates of alcoholism and homelessness and Alphonse was no exception this trend. He lived on the streets, and was detained by Mounties after being found passed out drunk under a picnic table in a park. Both Alphonse’s life and the circumstances that led up to his death, Razack further argues, dramatize “the public nature of aboriginal life, which is itself a product of dispossession.” The presence of his aboriginal body converted the park into a frontier where “it’s impossible to tell if the law is being broken or upheld,” contends Razack, who maintains that the Canadian police treat aboriginals as “bodies to whom the normal rules do not apply. It is possible to kick, punch, and drag

Aboriginal bodies with impunity.” In the colonial state, the right to possess aboriginal lands “has to be reestablished over and over again wherever these bodies are encountered.”

Rocío Magaña, professor of Anthropology at Rutgers-New Brunswick, also described how violence is often obscured when it is deployed against certain kinds of racialized bodies, in this case the bodies of people who illegally cross the Mexican-US border. In her presentation, “Desolation Bound: Border Enforcement and Bodily Exposure along the Arizona-Mexico Boundary,” Magaña asked us to consider “what we make of a government policy that kills people?” The policy to which Magaña refers is the now two decades old militarization of Arizona’s border, which had effectively pushed the geography of illegal border crossing into the desert. Barred from entering the state elsewhere by security checkpoints and other physical barriers, crossers can only reach the United States by walking across some of Arizona’s most searingly hot and desolate desert terrain. As a matter of policy the Border patrol allows them “to exhaust themselves through the physical exertion of traveling through these wide open and exposed desert spaces,” creating a process of border crossing that can last days or even weeks and has been responsible

for the heat-related death of thousands of migrants.

Such deaths seem to be one of the objects of the policy, suggests Magaña, who notes that the number of crossing deaths has increased steadily since its implementation. Moreover, they also dramatize the desperation of those that brave the odds. She advocates “not looking at borders as just points of entry but as a long process that transforms subjects.” In the desert, asserts Magaña, “the border is not strictly enforced where the boundary line lies, but on exhausted bodies that have walked endless miles across hostile terrains.” Migrants are permitted to walk until they



Rocío Magaña, Department of Anthropology, Rutgers-NB

drop and in doing so they experience desolation, a state of “bodily abandonment” to the harsh elements of the desert that not only works to weaken migrant’s minds and bodies but also to mark them “as banned, as being outside of (the protection of) the law.

DISPLACEMENT AND BELONGING

The final panel of the day, “Displacement and Belonging,” featured scholars working on new ways to conceptualize the intersections of race,

ethnicity, and mobility. In his presentation “The Doctrina de Martí: Migration, Diaspora, and Cuban Racial Politics in 19th Century New York,” Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof, Associate Professor of American Culture and History at the University of Michigan (Ann Arbor) focused on *La Doctrina de Martí*, a Spanish-language news-paper in New York City published by Cuban and Puerto Rican migrants of African descent in the late nineteenth century.



Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof, Professor of American Culture and History, University of Michigan (Ann Arbor)

This newspaper served as a forum for artisans of color to assert themselves and their politics within a nationalist movement, led by José Martí, that celebrated its own anti-racism and privileged cross-racial political alliances without always living up to its promises of equality. While Cubans and Puerto Ricans of African descent used this newspaper to participate in the creation of Cuban and Puerto Rican "myths of racial harmony," ideas which scholars have often interpreted as precluding any exclusively black political organizing or African diasporic alliances, the newspaper reveals that they were also active in African American political organizations. Indeed African

American religious and civil rights leaders were often included in events that brought together Cubans and Puerto Ricans of color with the white leadership of the independence movement. As Hoffnung-Garskof asserts, "participation in a nationalist project that claimed to transcend race did not, to the authors and readers of *Doctrina de Martí*, seem to contradict contact and solidarity with other people of color across national and ethnic lines." *La Doctrina*'s content, Hoffnung-Garskof suggests, forces a rethinking of Latin American and U.S. racial systems as exclusive of one another. These nineteenth century Spanish Caribbean migrants navigated multiple systems of racial meaning, and the writings born of their migrations were crucial to the evolution of each.

Kathleen López, Assistant Professor of Latino and Hispanic Caribbean Studies and History at Rutgers-New Brunswick, discussed the Chinese presence in early twentieth-century Cuba in a paper entitled “On the Borders of Nations: Chinese Migration and Exclusion in the Americas.” López stressed the need to examine Chinese movement throughout the Caribbean from a hemispheric perspective that traces both the transnational migrations of Chinese workers and “the traveling discourses of the ‘yellow peril.’” Chinese migrants often used Caribbean

cities as gateways to the United States, López explains. Their transnational smuggling networks crisscrossed Jamaica and Mexico, and were especially active in Cuba, where U.S.-mandated exclusion laws were not effectively enforced. In the eyes of Chinese migrants, America was never a specific destination. Instead, it could refer to North America, South America, or the Americas as a whole. This fluid view of America allowed the Chinese to evade U.S. entry restrictions and change their destinations when faced with anti-Chinese campaigns elsewhere.

In the final presentation of the day, “Resolving Blackness: The Emergent Politics of Afro-Desplazados in Colombia,” Roosbelinda Cárdenas, a Mellon Postdoctoral fellow at the Rutgers Center for Race and Ethnicity talked about the land reform project that granted land to Afro-Colombians in the early 1990s, and the displacement that ensued when paramilitaries seized their lands just a few years later. According to Cárdenas, “Blackness in the 1990s became ethnicized as a form of otherness and tied to particular types of land.” Colombia is ranked second in the world in displaced people (as a result of the long civil war that began with the period of *La Violencia*), and roughly one-third of those displaced people are Afro-Colombian. Among Afro-Colombians, the recent experience of dislocation from a rural to an urban environment created a group racialization that is largely new. Displaced Afro-Colombians have embraced black identity that in some cases has led to political projects and has also opened new pathways to address structural

racism within Colombia. Afro-Colombian groups have sought international allies in the form of human rights groups, faith-based groups, and even the Congressional Black Caucus of the United States. Their political activity, Cárdenas concludes, “shows that the experience of forced displacement” can also foster “creative responses to old forms of racialization, which have in turn triggered ways of thinking about blackness that had been previously impossible.”

After the last panel, Co-Directors of the Sawyer Seminar, Mia Bay and Ann Fabian, gave brief concluding remarks and synthesized some of the themes of the day. They noted debates over bodies and belonging are a constant feature in borderlands studies, as are themes of intimacy and



Mia Bay, Department of History/Director, CRE, Rutgers-NB

estrangement. They praised the conference participants to delivering papers that dramatized the many ways in which geographical borders, and the different societies they separate, highlight the intersections between race, space and place in the formation of national identities, notions of settler space, indigenous politics, modern

notions of citizenship, and both national and hemispheric immigration policies. Fabian and Bay closed by emphasizing the study of race, space in the Americas is a necessarily collaborative venture that requires conversations between scholars working many different regions, and thanking the international group of scholars who participated in the conference.

Please see our website for additional details about these conferences.

Looking Ahead: Dates and Themes for Spring Conferences

If your interest has been piqued by what you read about this conference, please be sure to save the dates of the Spring Conferences, which are sure to be equally illuminating.

- ***Race, Nature and Geography*** - Friday, March 8, 2013, 9:00 am – 5:00 pm. A one-day conference featuring scholars from varied disciplines and universities within the U.S. and Canada.
- ***Cities, Towns and Suburbs*** – Thursday and Friday, May 2-3, 2013. Highlights include a keynote lecture by Douglass Massey, Princeton University and a one-day conference with scholars from a variety of fields.