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On March 8, 2013, the Rutgers Center for Race and Ethnicity hosted the third of the four conferences scheduled in its 2012-13 Andrew W. Mellon Sawyer Seminar on “Race, Space, & Place in the Americas.” Entitled “Race, Place, Nature,” the conference explored the intersections of ideas about race and the natural world. The day-long meeting featured a stellar line up of scholars from universities across the United States and Canada who spoke on topics as diverse as the racial scripts of the U.S. drug war, colonial Trinidad, California, the Illinois carceral system, anthropology in Brazil, Aboriginal identity in Canada, and one Arctic explorer’s search for a blue-eyed Inuit.

**LANDSCAPES**

“Landscapes,” the first panel of the day, explored how race shapes and is shaped by the landscape and its elements. The first speaker, Juanita De Barros (Associate Professor of History, McMaster University), discussed the landscape of the West Indian medical profession within the context of colonial and racial discrimination in, “Administering Their Own Country’: Race and Nation in the Twentieth-Century British Caribbean.” According to De Barros, Afro-West Indian physicians encountered several obstacles while studying and practicing medicine. There were no medical schools in the region until 1948. Small island economies made private practice economically unviable, a problem exacerbated by the preference for white doctors in state-run medical institutions. De Barros centered this analysis around Dr. Harold Moody and his involvement with the League of Colored People and the Negro Welfare Association. Highlighting the activism of Afro-West Indian physicians, De Barros noted, “despite their condemnation of racism and colonialism, an acceptance of class privileges underlay their demands.” The presentation underscored how the concepts of vocation and class privilege allowed physicians of color to make sense of the position of the West Indies within the British Empire.



From doctors in the Caribbean we shifted to citrus fruit in California, as Jared Farmer (Associate Professor of History, SUNY-Stony Brook) drew on his research for the forthcoming book *The Trees of Paradise: A California History*, which will be published by W.W. Norton this fall, to explore the connections between race and horticulture. His talk chronicled the rise of the state's citrus trees, which like virtually all of California's modern day trees, were first brought to California during the Gold Rush of 1848 by "migrants who wanted to soften the coarseness of mining society." These elite settlers believed that "high civilization accompanied the grafting knife," and encouraged the planting of trees.

In contrast to the state's famous palm trees, which were imported purely for their aesthetic appearance and provided neither fruit nor shade, citrus trees offered more than just an appearance of civilization: they could be used to grow a valuable crop. So their cultivation soon went from a leisurely pursuit of the elite to a profitable business. A profitable industry emerged that heavily relied upon immigrant labor – first Chinese, then Japanese, and then through Koreans, Filipinos and Punjabi Sikhs to a final stabilization with Mexican immigrant labor that has persisted to this day. Notions of a high civilization of white farmers



and their families living in the shade of beautiful citrus groves gave way to the harsh inequalities of commercial agriculture.

Moving the discussion from trees to bushes, Melissa Johnson (Associate Professor of Anthropology/Environmental Studies, Southwestern University) explored how interactions between human bodies and the natural environment can shed new light on ideas about race in "Racing Nature in a Creolized World: Race, Color, and Nature in Belize." Johnson analyzed the multiple meanings of the Belizean term, "bushy," which can refer to landscapes, gardens, and/ or their inhabitants. In Belize, rural uneducated people are described as "bushy," as is the tightly curled hair typical associated with rural Creole Belizeans (who are of African descent). The term connotes racial characteristics that link unrefined landscapes and

people--although it can also suggest toughness and ability to survive in all natural conditions.

In addition to exploring the racial meanings of the term bushy, Johnson also explored the racial implications of ecotourism, which ignores the presence of Creole Belizeans in order to show tourists (who are usually white and North American) 'untouched' nature. While she emphasized that a focus on the interconnections between human bodies and nature could help undermine "assemblages of White supremacy," Johnson also acknowledged that Whiteness continually reshapes itself "in its attempt to maintain privilege and control the social order," and is difficult to disrupt.

Finally, Ann Fabian (Professor of History and CRE Associate Director, Rutgers) brought a comparative focus to race and landscape in "In Search of the



Vilhjalmur Stefansson

Blue-Eyed Eskimo: Race in a Cold Climate.” Fabian contrasted the work of early twentieth century Canadian explorer and ethnologist Vilhjalmur Stefansson, who led several expeditions to the Arctic, with that of German-American zoologist Herbert Lang’s, who traveled to the Congo to collect artifacts. Stefansson’s much disputed discovery of the “blonde eskimo” in northern Canada, Fabian argued, was intended to “prove” that white men could survive the harsh Arctic environment. Although “sperm headed up the charge of the white man’s arsenal,” Stefansson rejected any possibility that the blonde Eskimos he encountered on southwestern Victoria Island were the product of intermixture between the Inuit and previous explorers or visitors of European descent. He was looking for pure whiteness above the Arctic Circle,

and with it, evidence that the white race was robust enough to withstand the region’s harsh climate.

Lang made very different claims for the Congo, contends Fabian. There, Lang’s accounts of his artifact-collecting expeditions affirmed white colonial rule by emphasizing the ease, or naturalness, with which the white man could dominate the Congo and its inhabitants. The two men’s work suggests a history of moral climatology that embraces natural landscapes, knowledge production, and racial hierarchies.

**BODIES**

“Bodies,” the second panel of the day, explored the human body as both part of and separated from the “natural” world. In “Owning the Dead: Environmental History and the American Corpse,” Ellen Stroud (Associate Professor of Cities and Environmental Studies, Bryn Mawr College) explored how bodies relate to their environments as organic material, commodities, and health hazards and how these relationships have shaped contemporary U.S. society and politics.

Stroud noted that, although laws have long prevented corpses from being bought and sold, there have long been financial implications in their handling and disposal. Stroud situated this issue within a funerary context, where the ability to bury one’s dead in a cemetery



Table from Josiah Nott’s Types of Mankind (1854)

has often been a marker of middle-class status in the United States. Stroud also noted that the bodies of middle-class families retain much of their humanity, while the bodies of the American poor, which were disproportionately Black and Latino, have more frequently become commodities. She concluded that recognizing the bodies as a “slippery” kind of property opens up avenues for re-thinking responsibility for property, life, and the social construction of the natural world.

Melissa Stein (Assistant Professor of Gender and Women’s Studies, University of Kentucky) focused on pre-Civil War scientific racism’s use of the body in her paper, “As Nature Intended: Slavery and Gender in Antebellum Racial Science.” By constructing a “biomedical history of antebellum era ideas about gender and race,” Stein traced the way that slavery was naturalized in the “civilized” order. Focused on ethnology – the nineteenth century “science of the races”-- her research revealed how race and gender differences were.

constructed to legitimate the naturalness of white patriarchy.

Stein also discussed how these differences, grounded in supposedly objective observations about bodies, created problems for black abolitionists who found themselves opposing not just slavery, but a “natural order.” In the process, Stein underscored how the artificial and constructed basis of the term “nature” contributes to legitimizing racial and gender oppression.

Amar Wahab (Associate Professor of Gender, Sexuality and Women’s Studies, York University) shifted the focus from the scientific study of bodies to artistic renditions of bodies at work in “Governing Eden: Race, Gender and Discipline in Colonial Trinidad.” Wahab’s work looks at how travel narratives, and the images that accompanied them, constructed the “natural” world of colonial Trinidad. He traced the process by which ideology



*Amar Wahab, Gender, Sexuality and Women’s Studies, York University*

obscures itself through claims to being “natural.” Wahab centered on “picturesque” images of the plantation culture that emerged following the legalization of slavery in 1793. These images frequently portrayed Afro-descendent slaves as content workers overseen by white plantation families leisurely enjoying plantation life. He contrasted these images with picturesquees of South Asian indentured workers who arrived after the emancipation of slavery in 1834. Post-emancipatory artists continued to substantiate white supremacy by depicting South Asians as a natural part of plantation life and portrayed the newly-freed Afro-Trinidadians as barbarians who needed the disciplining force of slavery. Wahab argued that examining the construction of the “picturesque” provides an opportunity to better understand the politics behind the shifting relations between white, black, and Indian-descended Trinidadians.

The panel’s final presenter, Rebecca Ginsburg (Associate Professor of Landscape Architecture/Education Justice Project, University of Illinois - Urbana-Champaign), discussed the effect of separation on imprisoned bodies in a paper entitled, “The Injuries of Separation: Reflections on the American Carceral Landscape.”



*Rebecca Ginsburg, Landscape Architecture/Education Justice Project, University of Illinois – Urbana-Champaign*

Specifically, Ginsburg portrayed the spatial logic of penal incarceration as a separation that spreads across a large landscape - not limited to prisons, but also neighborhoods, institutions, and certain social relations. Ginsburg argued that while prison is generally considered a static landscape, which is spatially determined by separation, in reality, imprisonment affects the daily lives of not only prisoners, but also their families and social networks. Ginsburg also asserted that the governing spatial logic maintains that incarcerated bodies are imagined as permanently fixed--always already separated, which creates a context in which the full humanity of the embodied person is unrecognizable. Ginsburg’s interest in the topic was generated from her experience heading the University of Illinois’ Education Justice Project, which is dedicated to

bringing higher education to prison populations. More information on the Project is available at

[www.educationjustice.net](http://www.educationjustice.net).

## TAXONOMIES

“Taxonomies,” the last panel of the day, sparked a lively discussion about the classification of racial categories. Chris Andersen, (Associate Professor of Native Studies, University of Alberta) began the conversation with an analysis of recent changes to the Canadian census. In “Underdeveloped Identities: The Misrecognition of Aboriginality in the Canadian Census.” Andersen



*Anadelia Romo (History, Texas State University-San Marcos) and Chris Andersen (Native Studies, University of Alberta)*

tracks the statistical consequences of an inquiring Aboriginal ‘self-identification’ question added to the Canadian census in 1986.

Whereas the census had previously only asked respondents to report if they had Aboriginal ancestry, the new question required them to choose whether they self-identified as aboriginal or not, restructuring the meaning of aboriginal identity around a narrower set of choices, which

produced fewer aboriginal people. Andersen characterizes the change as a “promiscuous use of the term identity by the government” that illuminates the fact that “populations don’t simply exist, they are produced.”

Census categories are not designed to capture diversity of experiences and identities within that community, Andersen emphasized. Instead, they are shaped by state policies and used by states to identify and make legible certain kinds of populations in ways that help realize state policies. According to Andersen, the neutrality attributed to statistics obscures the “100 years of sustained labor” on the part of the state to impose categories of Aboriginality to its benefit.

Anadelia Romo (Associate Professor of History, Texas State University-San Marcos) presented “The Invention of Tradition and Race in Brazil: Anthropologists and the Community Studies of the 1950s.” Writing with reference to the work of Emilio Willems (Germany) and Charles Wagley (United States), Romo noted that the foreign anthropologists who first developed the methodology of the community study were largely uninterested in race. Focused on rural Brazil in the 1940s, their studies juxtaposed the ‘folk’ versus the ‘urban’ --although they frequently described rural

‘cultures’ in terms similar to the language of ‘races’ popular at the turn of the twentieth century. At the same time, these community studies created a totalizing and undifferentiated category of culture that better fit the discourse of modernization that portrayed Brazilian rurality as ‘underdeveloped.’ However, not even the priorities of discourses of modernization could obscure the long legacies of racial inequality in Brazilian society, as community studies funded by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) would debunk the myth of racial democracy in Brazil only a decade later.

Natalia Molina (Associate Professor of History/Urban Studies, University of California, San Diego) offered an expansive view of the histories of racial inequality in the United States in “Alien Citizen Children: The Plight of Birthright Citizenship.” Molina traced the persistence of what she terms “racial scripts” across US court cases and legislative debates involving a variety of different racial and ethnic groups, disrupting the tendency of previous scholars to focus on the legal histories of specific groups. Such histories must be considered together, contended Molina, because arguments and ideas about racial difference—racial scripts-- “hang around and are readily available

and hence easily applied to other groups.” She cited the legal logic of the 1857 *Dred Scott v. Sanford* decision as an example, noting that in that case, the Supreme Court drew comparisons to Native Americans to justify the exclusion of blacks from citizenship. Moreover, such comparisons continued even after the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868 granting citizenship to any person born in the United States. “The question of who was fit to be a citizen remained far from settled,” she noted, and the Federal government and the courts continued to refer to time-honored racial scripts deciding the status of non-white immigrants.

Renisa Mawani (Associate Professor of Sociology, University of British Columbia) brought the notion of interconnectedness that Molina explored to encompass non-humans in “Insects, War, Life.” According to Mawani, human-centered definitions of life fail to engage the plasticity of non-human life forms, particularly their ability “not just to adapt but respond” to internal and external conditions, that links and permeates all life forms. Such connections, Mawani contends, can be seen in the way that insects have been both metaphorically and materially mobilized in the US ‘War on Terror,’ which has involved the military use of the metaphor of unmanned aircraft “drones” as well as its deploy-

ment of real honey bees to locate dangerous chemicals. “It is precisely insects’ plasticity,” Mawani maintains “that has rendered them easily appropriated, trainable, and adaptable as companions of war.” She also discussed New York City’s “War on Bedbugs,” which underscores how the plastic life of bedbugs has allowed them to thrive and defy attempts aimed at their eradication. The plasticity of all life has the potential to both liberate and oppress racial and ethnic groups, and is a particularly disquieting notion in a world where not even insects can escape exploitation.



In the final presentation of the day, Samuel K. Roberts (Associate Professor of History and Sociomedical Sciences at Columbia University) shifted the conversation on taxonomies to race and health in “Persistent Plagues: Race, Space, and Epidemiological Thinking in Illicit Drug Use Research in the United States, 1950-1980.” According to Roberts, “since the late 1960s and 1970s, our pop culture understandings and legal policy towards combating drug addiction has lagged far behind the actual

research on drug use.” He argued that drug use follows an almost predictable rise and fall that mirrors that of biologically infectious diseases. In a specific community, the use of a new drug typically increases, peaks and then declines—once the recognition of the physical and social consequences of long-term use becomes widespread. In popular discourse, by contrast, the prevalence of drug use is imagined as a permanent moral contagion that necessitates intervention. In an observation that called to mind Molina’s racial scripts, Roberts noted that ideas about where drugs are used and what populations are susceptible to addiction speaks to the “spatial situated-ness of racial constructions.”

Each panel generated lively discussions that addressed the broader implications of the research presented. Sometimes the comments addressed a specific issue. For instance, Rebecca Ginsburg, a native of South Central Los Angeles, thanked Jared Farmer for his analysis of the power relations implied in horticulture, explaining, “we always hated palm trees, but never knew why.” Other comments connected the papers to larger scholarly debates. The conference participants’ work crossed the disciplinary lines of history, anthropology, gender studies, Native studies, and sociology to explore the many

intersections between ideas about race and ideas about nature.



*Mia Bay, History/CRE, Rutgers University*

Taken together, as CRE Director Mia Bay (Rutgers, History) observed in her closing remarks, the panels illuminated how notions of race often incorporate not only people and places, but insects, plants and objects as well. The panelists' scholarship, Bay further suggested, "exposed the connections between landscape and legacies of conquest, reminding us that both cityscapes and what we think of natural world have, in the Americas at least, taken shape around highly racialized regimes, which in turn imbue everything from trees to objects with racial meanings."

## The Center for Race and Ethnicity

### Mailing Address:

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

Telephone: 848/932-2181

Fax: 732/932-2198

### Email:

[raceethnicity@sas.rutgers.edu](mailto:raceethnicity@sas.rutgers.edu)

### Website:

[raceethnicity.rutgers.edu](http://raceethnicity.rutgers.edu)

**Director: Mia Bay (History)**

**Assoc. Director, Ann Fabian  
(History)**

**Senior Program Coordinator: Mia  
Kissil**

### Graduate Assistants/Editors:

**Stephen Allen (History); Jahaira  
Arias (History); Ashley Glassburn  
Falzetti (Women's & Gender  
Studies); Kartikeya Saboo  
(Anthropology); Wendy Wright  
(Political Science).**