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ROUNDTABLE ON RACE, ETHNICITY, AND SOCIAL MEDIA

On October 29, 2013, The Center for Race and Ethnicity held a roundtable discussion titled "Race, Ethnicity, and Social Media." A discussion of how race and ethnicity play into the engagement and performance in social media, the event featured Rutgers faculty members Dr. Brittney Cooper (Women's & Gender Studies/Africana Studies), Dr. Khadijah Costley White (School of Communication & Information), and Jeffrey Dowd (Sociology). Using the platforms of Twitter, blogging, comment boards and Facebook, panelists engaged in themes such as forming activist spaces, negotiating online and offline identities, dealing with issues of surveillance and examining how racism is defined in exaggerated terms.

An avid social media practitioner, regular contributor to Salon.com and co-founder of Crunk.Feminist.Collective, Dr. Brittney Cooper discussed her exploration of social media as a performative space and a location for activism. Cooper uses social media as a platform for conversations about race, gender and class that extend outside of the academy. Among the challenges Cooper faces in doing so, is balancing her self-expression with her professional profile as an academic. On social media, she finds herself interacting with multiple audiences (that sometimes involve her family and unknown followers in the same conversations) and is associated with online identity that challenges power structures in ways that are considered non-traditional in the academy.



Race, Ethnicity, and Social Media Panelist (l-r): Jeffrey Dowd (Sociology), Khadijah Costley White (Journalism and Media Studies), and Brittney Cooper (Women's and Gender Studies/Africana Studies)

Cooper also described the history of her online home, the [Crunk Feminist Collective](#) (CFC), which she co-founded with a sister-circle of graduate students at Emory University, who originally came together as a support group. Its members adopted the site's weblog format as a vehicle for "thought activism" and sustainable site for posting social commentary and hosting online conversations. According to Cooper, whose CFC blogging name is "Crunktastic," the blog is currently the most followed website that journals from a black feminist perspective.



CFC posts provocative discussions that merge politics, pop culture and feminist causes and sustain a tradition of black female intellectuals who challenged patriarchal structures. The term *crunk* comes from Southern hip-hop, and describes a specific hip-hop genre born out of Atlanta rap culture. In adopting the term, the CFC references its own Atlanta roots while also further defining their own approach as *crunk feminism*: a strand of feminism that is situated in a recent wave of hip hop they detail in their mission as "our mode of resistance that finds its particular expression in



Dr. Brittney Cooper

the rhetorical, cultural, and intellectual practices of a contemporary generation."

CFC members, Cooper says, are collective champions for black women in media whose work deserves more recognition. For instance, they were part of an online movement pushing for the funding and further expansion of "Awkward Black Girl," a web-series featuring the life of a black female character who does not fit the regular representations of black women found in mainstream media.

Blogging is just one avenue for Cooper. She also actively posts on her Facebook page, a practice she often does when she is commenting on one of her favorite shows, *Scandal*. Cooper explains how she provides up-to-the minute commentary on her spectatorship, fusing social media with reception, a new phenomenon that has emerged in both platforms. Cooper believes that new media such as Twitter, blogging and Facebook furnish opportunities for users to both entertain and educate each other. However, she is also aware that all of social media is performative and often finds balancing offline and online relationships challenging. It can be unnerving, she noted, to meet someone offline who is familiar with "Crunktastic," the crunk blogger, and not Dr. Cooper, the Rutgers professor.

As an academic who has received substantial recognition for her online presence, Cooper is part of new generation of emerging scholars who employ social media to articulate their political and cultural positions. Furthermore, her work on the CFC has also helped open up a new site of knowledge production in cyberspace. Cooper's story of how she started her journey as an active social media participant begins much like a lot of new media platforms—a tool that was created out of specific need, yet grew into something that is far reaching

New Rutgers faculty member Dr. Khadijah Costley White explored how social media is retooled as a counter-public sphere, especially when it is applied to the new phenomenon of "Black Twitter." In addition, she interrogated how social media serving as an activist space that can be seen using a bottom-up approach in contesting hegemonic discourse. A former journalist, Costley White also spoke about her fascination of how social media users have re-appropriated the platform as a news source that has disseminated information to instigate political discourse and on-the-ground campaigns.

Costley White initiated her conversation with a brief exploration of how social media can be seen as a platform where people are allowed to create new alternative spaces she identifies as counterpublic spheres. The traditional notion of public sphere was proposed by sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas, who theorized public spheres as open assemblages of individuals who

meet to freely engage in critical discourse about the state and state affairs. In her discussion, Costley White invoked Nancy Frasier who contends that the customary notions around public spheres are narrowly defined, elitist spaces that are dominated by the dialogue of white, bourgeois males. To Costley White, social media defies these hegemonic locations because it allows people to create unconventional spaces of dialogue that have the ability to challenge and disrupt mainstream discourse.



Dr. Khadijah Costley White

The Journalism and Media Studies professor in the School of Communication & Information, pointed to the emergence of Black Twitter as a homogenizing media-constructed phenomenon when examining how black users on Twitter employ the platform to advocate or protest issues affecting African-Americans. Twitter is a popular social media micro-blog allowing users to post succinct messages to a network of followers in updates known as “tweets.” Twitter’s features allow

these messages to appear as streams of thought that can range from one user to multiple users, and it has the capabilities of aggregating multiple voices from all over Twitter to engage in focused topics with use of the hashtag symbol next to a subject. Black Twitter is a virtual community of Twitter users who mainly identify as African-American, or at the very least, support and engage in African-American news, pop culture or issues that materialize in Twitter conversations. It is a loosely formed, diverse collective that usually circulates topics involving race and often use #blacktwitter to bring up topics the community can engage.

Costley White also proposes that African American Twitter users draw on the media platform as a news source and an apparatus in which they mobilize around political and social issues. Since its launch in 2006, Twitter has become a medium for news communication. Because Twitter supports the real-time diffusion of current news, it assists in a simpler and faster propagation of critical information. Citing a recent example in the aftermath of the George Zimmerman trial, Costley White recounted how a juror from the case received a maelstrom of angry tweets within twenty-four hours of announcing that she was planning to work with a literary agent on a possible book about her experiences

around the court case. As a result, the literary agent rescinded the offer, first using Twitter and then through other news media outlets. To Costley White, the online movement initiates an interrogation into looking at Twitter as a new model in a bottom-up approach to dismantling and challenging dominant discourse. The nature of Twitter is to provide a platform for multiple voices at once, but when users mobilize a singular voice that ruptures the thought and conversations in dominant news, Costley White suggests that these innovative and unpredictable constructions of power need to be seriously studied.

According to Costley White, Twitter can function as an activist space; a point that was also brought up by Dr. Cooper. However, Costley White added that Twitter can serve as a protected space for blacks, and particularly black youth. She noted that unlike civil rights protests or black power movements of the past, social media allows users to participate without the repercussions of physical violence or harassment. However, she cautions that these spaces also invite surveillance in ways that were unknown before; yet and still, social media users are being watched by a dominant gaze that has historically surveilled people of color. At this juncture, Cooper interceded Costley White’s point by speaking on how sometimes people’s public discourse and media appearances have resulted in threats of physical harm. Cooper spoke of a case where a colleague spoke on reproductive rights and her life was subsequently threatened as well, her personal information such as her home address was broadcast. This moment lead to another discussion of

offline vigilantism that can occur from online discourse.

Switching to how whiteness is constructed in cyberspace, Costley White briefly talked about her research of the framing of the Tea Party in online, print, broadcast and cable news coverage. Focusing on online coverage, Costley White asserts that the Tea Party was a cooperate-constructed ideology that was branded as an on-the-ground, grassroots movement. She makes the case that the Tea Party fulfilled the needs of the elite with a campaign that was carried out by the masses who have not benefited.

Additionally, as a contributor to the blog, [RoleReboot](#), Costley White explored how social media can foster new ways for scholars to think about the production of knowledge. She has penned essays ranging from issues around race and hair and balancing the public persona with her personal life, to writing a personal apology to Rachel Jeantel, the lead witness in the George Zimmerman trial. Though her articles are in a space that reaches beyond the academy, Costley White says she is learning how to build her scholarly work from her blogs. From an academic perspective, the long-held tradition of publish or perish in the academy is being challenged by the circulation of conversations online, that also include academic works. The constant intellectual engagement that social media platforms encourage is confounded by the availability of online, open source journals. But it can also threaten a scholar's ability to cultivate and protect original academic

works that might assist in their career trajectory. Nonetheless, Costley White asserts that introducing concepts online as your own thought can be seen as marking intellectual territory for academicians to explore in the future, and it be documented.



ROLE / REBOOT

Make Sense of Men & Women

The final member of the panel, Jeffrey Dowd, focused on racial discourse on partisan blogs. He began by presenting some vitriolic comments in response to a racial controversy. Rather than simply lament what is often dismissed as little more than the partisan rancor many have come to expect of on line comments, Dowd's research examines the interaction dynamics within partisan spaces on the right and left.

A doctoral candidate in the sociology department, Dowd contends that during a racial controversy, partisans engage in a battle over where the racial accusation produced by the controversy will land. Dowd noted, "While this battle does involve frequent accusations of racism, how comment sections produce definitions of racism is more troubling." He demonstrated that within partisan spaces, commenters on each side worked with their fellow partisans to



Jeffrey Dowd, Sociology

settle on a default version of racism defined by support for de jure segregation, categorical racial inferiority, and/or racial animus. Dowd argued that, "to the extent that discourse remains tethered to battles over these universally-derided racial positions, that discourse is misaligned with contemporary racial divides."

Dowd's presentation focused on comments from two left blogs and two right blogs immediately after President Obama's nomination of Sonia Sotomayor to the Supreme Court. For example, he noted how commenters on the left responded to Pat Buchanan's remark that Sotomayor believed in "race-based justice...at the expense of white males." Commenters on the left called Buchanan a racist and claimed that Buchanan believed "anyone who is not a white male is unqualified..." Dowd pointed out that this counter-accusation "sidestepped Buchanan's stated position and replaced it with a less-relevant one that is universally considered racist."

In the discussion session, Dowd agreed that some racial accusations might be accurate. He responded, "While I agree with this particular commenter's designation of Buchanan as racist, it's important to note that s/he defined Buchanan's racism as stemming from a

hidden belief in categorical inferiority. The tendency of blog comments to reduce racism to a universally-derided position does two things: it provides those like Buchanan with plausible deniability and it misses the racism of his stated discourse, and, as such, obscures the actual divide between right and left on race.”

CRE SCREENS BYRON HURT’S SOUL FOOD JUNKIES

On Thursday, November 21, 2013, the Center for Race and Ethnicity, along with Health Services-Health Promotion and Education, presented a screening of *Soul Food Junkies* and invited filmmaker, Byron Hurt to discuss his work. The film explores issues around race, ethnicity, food and health. Hurt was joined by Susan Stephenson-Martin, Senior Program Coordinator for Middlesex County’s EFNEP/SNAP-Ed program, which provides nutrition education for low income families. She is also a school nutritionist and runs two Rutgers Nutrition programs for New Jersey.

Thanksgiving came early for the Rutgers students and faculty who attended the event. Or at least it seemed that way due to the abundance of food at the film screening, which featured soul food staples such as catfish, wings, potato salad, cornbread, red velvet cake and sweet punch. The food was supplied by Vonda McPherson, a soul food expert and the owner of “Vonda’s Kitchen” in Newark. Coincidentally, McPherson also appears in Hurt’s film. *Soul Food*



Byron Hurt, filmmaker

Junkies explores the subjects of food, family, tradition and health through the lens of African-American cuisine. Hurt’s impetus for making this documentary was to understand the death of his father, who lost his battle with pancreatic cancer in 2007. Hurt’s father, Jackie Hurt, was overweight and a consumer of soul food for much of his life. Could he have lived longer if he had adopted healthier eating habits? In the process of making the film, Hurt explored the history and health effects of this cuisine and documented its continuing popularity—especially among African Americans.



Soul Food from Vonda’s Kitchen, Newark

Although the film highlights the ill-effects of eating too much calorie and salt laden soul food, it is not overly

didactic. Instead, the film features a range of experts on medicine, race, food, and history, alongside interviews with people who enjoy soul food. It ends by asking the audience to grapple with a frustrating dilemma: how can we reconcile our love of soul food with the need to remain healthy?

We revisited this question during the question and answer section of the evening, in which both Hurt and Stephenson-Martin partook. The insights that Stephenson-Martin brought to the discussion included the observation that unhealthy food preparation is one part of the problem afflicting communities of color; the other issue is lifestyle--or lack of exercise. She pointed out that American culture has become more sedentary, but many Americans continue to consume large portions of food. We also often choose to sit in front of the television or take long car rides instead of being more physically active. These unhealthy habits can lead to a host of health problems.

Stephenson-Martin stressed that many communities of color face special problems in terms of access to healthy food, an issue that was touched upon by the film as well. She reflected that New Brunswick itself is a food desert that offers many of its low-income residents very limited access to food that is fresh and affordable, making it difficult for them to eat healthy. It has few supermarkets, and many fast food outlets.

She pointed out that soul food and healthy food can both be affordable, observing that when cooked with fresh ingredients, most home cooked meals



Susan Stephenson-Martin, Senior Program Coordinator, SNAP-Ed

are cheaper than buying a whole family food from McDonald's. She also suggested that in many low income communities a long term lack of access to fresh groceries has led to unhealthy cooking practices and suggested that classes on how to cook healthy food can help people improve their eating habits. Some of her work with Rutgers Outreach Operations programs includes hosting such classes to families in New Jersey.

When Hurt spoke, he posed a series of questions to the audience members about food in general: "Who intended to eat soul food on Thanksgiving," he asked, and "Who heard the term "food desert" for the first time in the film," and "Who now lives in, or grew up in, a food desert?" He also asked the audience about food related diseases that are often trivialized or not discussed among communities of color.

In addition to posing provocative questions, Hurt used his humor and personal anecdotes to further connect to the audience. For instance, he hyperbolically stated that people who do not eat healthily "cannot stand" those who do, because they perceive

the healthy ones as mere health nuts. The problem is that eating is a very personal endeavor, he observed. Both individuals and communities get attached to certain foods and cooking styles and find it difficult to change their eating habits after years of consuming the same cuisine. Changing eating habits also results in a fear that our racial, social, and family dynamics linked with the practices of sharing food with family may also alter. He shared his own story of growing up enjoying junk food and soul food with his family—adopting a pattern of unhealthy eating that was exacerbated by a former job at McDonalds. However, he made a conscious decision to change as he became privy to the physical damage that accrues from unhealthy eating practices.

One undergraduate student who identified as Latina, told Hurt that people from her community may



Miss Vonda

not eat soul food, but they too have unhealthy eating practices as they consume a lot of pork and fried food. Hurt responded that the documentary stirred up

interesting conversations between him and a member of his crew who also is Latina. Both were concerned about the growing health issues linked to the heavy foods found in both cultures.

Also, Hurt drew links between black culinary history, working class cultures, and access to healthy food. African-American cuisine grew out of a mix of African food cultures and the poor rations that were given to blacks who were enslaved. The distinct culinary style was maintained and is now a part of American cuisine. Like Stephenson-Martin he noted that today many low-income Americans often have minimal access to good grocery stores, and he also stressed that the high levels of Type 2 diabetes among U.S. blacks and Latinos are closely correlated with low incomes and limited access to healthy food. One of his goals in making the film, he said, was to make people aware of their communities' food related health problems.

He ended on an upbeat note, observing that since individual change is difficult to achieve, we can help each other improve our eating habits. On his stops at various schools, Hurt has been encouraged by seeing students purchase his film for their parents, in an effort to ensure that hypertension, diabetes, and/or high cholesterol will not shorten their parents' lives. Such actions, coupled with food justice activism initiatives taking shape in communities of color, Hurt suggests, may help us avoid continuing to be "soul food junkies." Recognizing that eating healthy food does not mean giving up soul food, which has deep ties to notions of self, community, and racial

connections, Hurt encouraged the audience members to learn how to make healthy soul food. Two members from the audience even shared their healthy soul food Thanksgiving recipes. They offered some healthy cooking tips that included making collard greens with garlic, vegetable broth or apple cider vinegar, and red peppers, instead of animal fat such as bacon. Another suggested baking chicken wings, fish, and sweet potatoes instead of frying them. Each of these food items sounded quite delicious even to the naysayers of healthy soul food in the audience, as they nodded in approval of such cooking changes! These recipe suggestions channeled the discussion towards offering a realistic way in which to tackle the very difficult task of changing eating habits, especially when they are associated with the history of a whole racial community.

Screening *Soul Food Junkies* was the perfect way to begin the Thanksgiving holiday. The documentary provided much food for thought, and encouraged us reconsider our diets. We would like to thank everyone who joined us that night, as well as our co-sponsors for helping with this event: The New Jersey Institute for Food and Health, Dean Cynthia Daniels, United



Vonda's Catering Serves Delicious Soul Food!

Black Council, the African American & Diasporic Graduate Interest Group and the Rutgers Public Health Association.

CALL FOR PROPOSALS: CRE'S 7TH ANNUAL GRADUATE FORUM ON RACE AND ETHNICITY

The Center for Race & Ethnicity invites Rutgers M.A. and Ph.D. students to take part in a cross-disciplinary conversation about graduate research related to the study of race and ethnicity. Students from all levels of study (from 1st year graduate students to ABDs) and from all campuses and schools at Rutgers, including Public Policy, Law, Social Work, Education, Business, and Arts and Sciences, are welcome! This event is part of the Center for Race & Ethnicity's ongoing initiative to promote interdisciplinary exchange and collaboration.

Panelists will give a brief 5-7 minute presentation of their work. Formal papers are not required for participation.

The event will take place on Friday, February 21, 2014, in the Pane Room, Alexander Library, College Avenue, New Brunswick. The deadline for submissions is January 21, 2014.

Send to:
CREgradforum@gmail.com

Submissions should include:

- 1) Your name, year in school, department, campus, and email address
- 2) A 150-250 word description of your presentation and argument
- 3) A brief 1-2 line biography

For more information about the CRE or this forum, visit

<http://raceethnicity.rutgers.edu> or email us at CREgradforum@gmail.com. Also check out the [CRE Facebook page](#) and "like" it for updates on our events.

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