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CRE Hosts 8th Faculty Forum
on Race and Ethnicity***CRE Hosts 8th Faculty Forum on Race and Ethnicity***

On December 6th 2013, the Center for Race and Ethnicity hosted its 8th Faculty Forum. This annual event brings together scholars from across Rutgers departments, schools and campuses to share their current research as it relates to race and ethnicity. This year, the one-day conference featured faculty and postdoctoral fellows working on topics related to race, place, and space; diversity and acculturation; and the global South.

Participants included faculty from Anthropology, Landscape Architecture, English, History, Psychology, Law, and the Center for Cultural Analysis, and hailed from the Camden, Newark, and New Brunswick campuses of Rutgers. The breadth of the disciplines was reflected in the panelists' different methodological approaches. But their discussions were linked by common threads of inquiry about how race relates to landscape, ethnic diversity and co-existence, and constructions of Africa.

Many of the panelists framed their presentations around their research questions. Among them were historical questions such as "how do you reconcile racial prejudices with beliefs about abolition?" and, "does ethnic diversity divide a city?" as well as questions about pressing contemporary issues such as how to address challenges faced by minority students, and how to preserve the value of equal protection law in a so-called post-racial society. Taken together, the questions the panelists raised helped explore and illuminate the constructions of race and ethnicity at play in everyday life, cities, nations, social dynamics, popular advertising, literary culture, and law.

The forum opened with a panel on Race, Place, and Space featuring David Hughes (Rutgers-New Brunswick, Anthropology), Anita Bakshi (Rutgers-New Brunswick, Center for Cultural Analysis), and Richard Alomar (Rutgers-New Brunswick, Landscape Architecture). David Hughes' presentation focused on the exploitation of energy in nineteenth-century Trinidad and Tobago, where potential sources of energy included slave labor, hydrocarbon-based fuels, and passive solar energy. In Trinidad, as elsewhere, Hughes points out, questions about energy and its uses are closely



Panel 1: Richard Alomar, Landscape Architecture (RU-NB); Anita Bakshi, Center for Cultural Analysis (RU-NB); David Hughes, Anthropology (RU-NB)

related to issues of race, place and space.

As a case in point, Hughes told the story of one of the central figures in his book: Conrad Friedrich Stollmeyer. A German-born political activist and abolitionist, Stollmeyer lived in Philadelphia in the 1830s. An admirer of the Utopian socialist Charles Fourier, Stollmeyer hoped to abolish not only slavery, but also manual labor. To that end, he established a plantation settlement in Trinidad and Tobago, which he planned to power with mechanical power rather than human labor. Stollmeyer initially envisioned using solar panels to supply the power his settlement needed—and dreamed of using robot workers.

But Stollmeyer’s dreams of solar powered “iron slaves” died in Trinidad and Tobago. He remained interested in energy, and developed a method of distilling kerosene from a hydrocarbon asphalt supply available in Trinidad and Tobago’s La Brea Pitch Lake. However, he made no attempt to use this new energy source to replace African slave laborers who worked in Trinidad and Tobago’s sugar mills. A ready convert to the racial prejudices common in this plantation society, he instead derided blacks as lazy and marketed kerosene as a source of power for lamps and street lights rather than a substitute for hard, exploitative labor.

Questions surrounding energy and its uses continue in the twenty-first century. Hughes notes that throughout the world, people without access to “hydrocarbons are described as

energy poor, because we now live in a world where energy is often conflated with fossil fuels and electric power.” Like contemporary dilemmas around energy scarcity, Stollmeyer’s experiences raise questions about the role of manual, and often exploitative, labor in the face of emerging new energy sources.



La Brea Pitch Lake, the world's largest natural asphalt deposit

Anita Bakshi’s work uses shopkeepers’ memories and maps to reconstruct the history of what became the Buffer Zone in Nicosia, the capital of Cyprus, which was divided in 1974. In its prime, this area was a mixed commercial center of the city. Today, encompassed within the inaccessible no-man’s land of the Buffer Zone, the area retains its dense urban fabric, but is unkempt and overgrown with vegetation. Bakshi interviewed shop-keepers and examined commercial catalogs, newspaper advertisements, and property records to research and document the history and locations of the businesses once located in this area. Her interviews revealed what



Anita Bakshi, Center for Cultural Analysis

she described as “divergent memories”—people often assigned the same place different locations on her map. These discrepancies, she argued, suggest that people remember the past differently. However, her work does not aim to prioritize one group’s past over the other. Instead, she maps their divergent stories to explore how the city’s ethnically divided residents shaped the urban space that they shared and negotiated their social differences.

Unlike Berlin, another formerly divided European city where memory plays a significant role in its residents’ perception of the city, Nicosia’s divided population included people with a number of different ethnicities and languages. The city’s Buffer Zone



Buffer Zone in Nicosia, 1974

housed Turkish, Greek, and Armenian Cypriots who lived and worked alongside one another in this thriving commercial center. Currently official Greek Cypriot historical narratives emphasize the unity of Nicosia in the past, while official Turkish Cypriot narratives emphasize the segregated nature of the city.

Richard Alomar studies African Americans' front yards in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, to answer his broader question: how do non-professional designers design spaces? A city sometimes described as "Katrina without the storm," Baton Rouge, Louisiana, is an economically depressed small, Southern city with a decaying infrastructure. Alomar centers his work around a neighborhood known as Old South Baton Rouge, which has a long history as an African American enclave: it used to be a part of a plantation during the nineteenth century.

The Old South Baton Rouge front yards that he examined reflect the agricultural and gardening practices used among Southern blacks. The neighborhood's residents are primarily African American female homeowners who use their front yard spaces in a variety of ways. Some dedicate the space to flower gardens (vegetable gardens are usually in the backyard); while others use theirs as work spaces, or to store concrete or other building materials; and some just have well-maintained, manicured lawns. One of the themes he noticed when interviewing residents was how much thought they put into these spaces.

Every plant has a story, which is a physical representation of oral history, and many of these homes had been in these families for generations.



Richard Alomar, Landscape Architecture (RU-NB)

The stories that people told about their gardens also suggested a number of other themes: they highlighted the traditions of resourcefulness that allowed the gardeners to transcend their limited resources. And these Baton Rouge gardens also display distinctly urban design characteristics, which have developed over generations, such patterns of assimilation in which many homeowners design their front yards in the same way. Front yards in southern Baton Rouge were also part of a larger community outreach project. Many residents, particularly African American women, may have participated in Southern University and Agricultural and Mechanical College's (a landgrant institution and a historically black university in Baton Rouge) co-op extension program, an educational program that helps foster and continue agricultural traditions in the South and part of

a larger progressive environmental movement.

Our second panel of the day was "Diversity and Acculturation," which brought together scholars from each of the three Rutgers campuses to discuss what diversity really means--both historically and now. Kent Harber, an Associate Professor of Psychology at Rutgers Newark, began this panel by discussing his research showing that minority students are often subject to "positive feedback bias." Building on the work scholars have documented performance gap between white students and students of color, Harber's work investigates its causes. The structural and cultural impediments faced by students of color do not tell the whole story, he suggests. They are also handicapped by the "positive feedback bias" that occurs when teachers subject minority students to less challenging work than other students.



Stacy Hawkins, Rutgers-Camden Law School, and Kent Harber, Psychology (Rutgers-Newark)

Harber documented the role of stereotyping in feedback received by black students in an experiment that involved asking ninety-two white undergraduates at the University of Michigan to read and comment on several student essays. Harber wrote the essays himself, but told the students that

half of them were written by black students and that the other half were written by white students. In addition, he also provided them with information identifying the race of the essay writers.

The comments provided by his test subjects suggested a clear case for positive feedback bias. Essays identified as being written by black students received more positive feedback than identical essays attributed to white writers--and fewer suggestions for improvement. The distinctive feedback the black students essays received, Harber suggests, was shaped by how the white student readers wished to see themselves. They were more cautious about responding negatively to essays that they thought were written by black students because they did not want to see themselves as racist. Moreover, their desire not appear prejudiced made them both less critical and less helpful in assessing the black students' paper, which is why they offered black students fewer suggestions for improvement.

Harber maintains that positive feedback bias is widespread. A subsequent experiment conducted by Harber at Rutgers-New Brunswick backs this up, as do studies by other researchers at a variety of institutions across the country—from elementary schools to colleges. Taken together, they suggest that African American students are often poorly taught, and that in order to ensure that black students receive critical and effective feedback, teachers must learn transcend their own biases. His

research helps us pinpoint positive feedback bias as one potentially correctable source of the achievement gap between black and white students.

Stacy Hawkins tackles issues of discrimination and diversity in her research as well, from a legal perspective. She is a law professor at Camden's Law School, and began her presentation by posing the very timely question: what does the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment mean in our modern, post-racial moment? A number of legal scholars now maintain, she noted, that this amendment has become meaningless because we are at the end of equal protection as we know it.

Hawkins believes, however, that the equal protection clause still has work to do and that the Fourteenth Amendment should not be abandoned as a legal remedy for racial inequality. It may not be useful in redressing past racial history, but we can use it to look towards the future of race in America, which she rendered a "pluralistic democracy." Specifically, this clause can help to ensure that minorities can fully participate in the political process, especially given the sustained attack on voting rights in 2013.

The Fourteenth Amendment was ratified in 1868, too late to benefit the women featured in Katrina Thompson's study. Thompson, a

postdoctoral fellow in the department of history in New Brunswick, is completing a book on the intersections of race, class, and status among New Orleans women of color from 1803-1865.



Katrina Thompson, History (RU-NB)

The city's black women have a unique history, Thompson explained. Because Louisiana was under the control of Spain and then France prior to the nineteenth-century, race relations there developed outside of the black-white binary common elsewhere in the American South. Women of color in New Orleans fell into a variety of color-coded categories, that included octoroons, quadroons and mulattos, and light-skinned, mixed race women often occupied a higher social class than other people of color. Slavery in New Orleans was a multi-layered institution, in which some women of color gained access to wealth and power via sexual relationships. Thompson's goal is to tell the histories of many of the prominent women of color in pre-Civil War New Orleans. She admitted to being frustrated by the incomplete historical record on phenotypical distinctions such as octoroon and mulatto, but she remains persistent: as a New Orleans native herself she brings a personal connection to her scholarship about free women of color.

Her enthusiasm for this project was clear from the outset, as was the case with her co-panelists. Though the papers ranged in time periods and fields, they suggested a historical narrative about the nuanced term “diversity:” the story of New Orleans cannot be considered complete as long as free women of color are excluded from the history; the achievement gap between black and white students cannot be rectified as long as educators believe substantial criticism is tantamount to racism; and lastly, our political process cannot be considered democratic if people of color are excluded.

The last panel, “The Global South” featured the works of Mukti Lakhi Mangharam and Olabode Ibrinke. Both are assistant professors in the English Department and both are interested in the traditional and modern appropriations of Africa. The panel was timely as conference participants recognized the passing of South African leader Nelson Mandela the day before the event.

Mangharam concentrates on World Literatures, in particular those of South Asia and South Africa, and is also interested in Postcolonial Studies, and Gender and Sexuality Studies. In her presentation, she looked at how the Bantu word, “Ubuntu” has been used in post-apartheid South Africa. *Ubuntu* is a term that references the unity and interconnectedness of humankind.

Often translated as “I am because we are,” *Ubuntu* was widely used during the anti-apartheid movement that brought down South Africa’s

oppressive regime. But it also has meanings that extend well beyond any particular political struggle. Famous religious and anti-apartheid leader, Bishop Desmond Tutu, explained that *Ubuntu* draws on the understanding that humans cannot exist in isolation. Nelson Mandela once noted, “The spirit of Ubuntu – that profound African sense that we are human beings only through the humanity of other human beings – is not a parochial phenomenon, but has added globally to our common search for a better world.” Today, the concept is ubiquitous in post-apartheid South Africa, where it is invoked to support racial reconciliation and national unity. Mangharam, whose work looks at the various ways in which the term was used during the 2010 FIFA World Cup games, observed the concept of *Ubuntu* has also been appropriated by corporations.



Mukti Lakhi Mangharam, English (RU-NB)

Mangharam points out that the government employed *Ubuntu* to promote black unification and a multiracial democracy, as well as to disseminate a message of

oneness of humankind to visitors and the world. At the same time, multinational corporations such as Coca-Cola featured *Ubuntu* in their advertisements. One of the longest standing partners of the FIFA World Cup, Coca-Cola implemented a worldwide campaign intertwining *Ubuntu*, the celebration of life and diversity, and drinking their beverage. Mangharam argues that the hegemonic appropriation of *Ubuntu* clashes with traditional and spiritual interpretations. Additionally, she contends that other traditional universal ideologies that are present in South Africa are ignored in the use of *Ubuntu* and national discourse.



An advertisement for Coca-Cola featuring an Ubuntu logo. Photo courtesy of Mukti Lakhi Mangharam

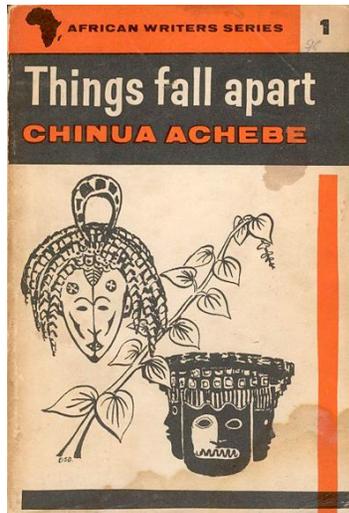
Ibrinke’s scholarship focuses on African American and African Diasporic literature and postcolonial book history and theory. In his discussion, “When Africa was in Vogue,” he examined the transnational conversations around Africa that occurred both during the Harlem Renaissance and then again during the 1960s and 1970s—as African writers became widely known in the West.

In his talk, Ibrinke suggested that black writers are often exoticized and that both Harlem Renaissance era writers, and later African writers, confronted issues of authenticity when their writing



Olabode Ibrinke, English (RU-NB)

moved away from a certain exotic script. Writers whose work was perceived as too European or American ran the risk of being branded inauthentic—regardless of the real life experiences they sought to record. Moreover, white definitions of what kind of black writing was authentic often determined which writers got published, and have thereby shaped the circulation of African and African American voices. White editors and publishers were influential promoting “authentically black” writers during the Harlem Renaissance, and likewise, the selections made at Heinemann, the British publishing house that began publishing an influential African Writers Series starting in 1962, had an enormous impact in defining African literature’s modern canon.



Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart, first in the African Writers Series by Heinemann Press

The CRE is committed to hosting interdisciplinary discussions of race and ethnicity that encompass different historical time periods and diverse geographies. Our Faculty Forums have long provided richly rewarding discussions of these subjects, and this year was no exception.

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