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CRE Hosts Film Screening and Annual Graduate Forum

In February, the Center for Race and Ethnicity (CRE) hosted two events that catered to a variety of audiences. The first was a film screening and discussion on the 2014 American crime thriller, *Kill the Messenger*, and the second was our 9th Annual Graduate Forum on Race and Ethnicity, a popular event that brings together graduate students from across all Rutgers campuses to share their work.

KILL THE MESSENGER FILM SCREENING

The film screening discussion was facilitated by Rosemary Ndubizu, a doctoral candidate in the Women's & Gender Studies department, and a graduate assistant at the CRE. An audience of undergraduates, graduate students, and professors gathered to discuss the film's themes, which included an analysis of the racialized impact of the so-called "War on Drugs" in the United States.

Kill the Messenger explores the life of investigative journalist Gary Webb, who published a series of articles in the San Jose *Mercury News* that uncovered how profits from the Los Angeles' cocaine drug trade were funneled to Nicaraguan Contras—a right wing paramilitary group which opposed Nicaragua's Sandinista government.

Webb's series began as exploration of the deadly effects of the crack epidemic that was sweeping through African-American neighborhoods of South Los Angeles starting in the 1980s. But in researching how cheap Nicaraguan cocaine was reaching these disinvested, majority-black communities, Webb quickly uncovered troubling connections between Norwin Meneses (a Nicaraguan illicit drug smuggler), Danilo Blandón (a Nicaraguan cocaine drug distributor), and "Freeway" Rick Ross (a Los Angeles crack-cocaine distributor)



Published in three parts between August 18 and August 20, 1996, Webb's series did more than simply point out that this civil war was partially funded with drug money. It also linked this illicit drug trade to the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, which recruited and trained the Latin American guerrilla army. The basis for Webb's claims was primarily confidential court proceedings and interviews with drug distributors, lawyers, and bankers familiar with the Nicaragua-Los Angeles illicit drug trade.



Directed by Michael Cuesta, *Kill the Messenger* highlights the fallout from Webb’s news story. Although initially well-received, the Webb’s series was highly controversial. Both critics and government officials denounced Webb’s suggestion that Contra’s drug money was linked to the CIA. Moreover, their critiques inspired journalists from the *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, and eventually, even Webb’s editors, to review every detail in Webb’s series, looking for inaccuracies. As Cuesta dramatizes in the film, Webb himself became the story as critics focused on Webb’s suspect journalistic practices, often ignoring Webb’s cogent critiques about how the drug war devastated majority-black and brown urban communities.

Audience members thought the film took on an important subject and raised many troubling issues. One participant noted that Webb’s experience was far from unprecedented, given that historically, U.S. agencies, ranging from the CIA to local police forces, have often deployed media tactics to discredit a range of groups, from whistleblowers, victims of police brutality, to political dissenters.

But viewers also offered a critique of the film, which they felt failed to address the impact of U.S. drug laws had on low-income black and brown families nationally. More specifically, they lamented that the film ultimately elevated the voice of the “white male” messenger over the black and brown families who were leading grassroots organizing efforts to combat the

criminalization of drugs. Participants also faulted the film for not showcasing how Americans of color supported Nicaragua’s left-wing, socialist Sandinistas who were battling the Contras. And lastly, they bemoaned that the film left unexplored the legislative history of the War on Drugs and this “war’s” specific impact on Los Angeles.



Rosemary Ndubuizu, CRE Graduate Assistant and Ph.D. candidate, Women’s & Gender Studies Department, RU-NB

Ndubuizu reviewed that history, explaining that President Richard Nixon formally started the War on Drugs, which called for more federal, local, and state initiatives to prosecute and arrest illicit substance users, and President Ronald Reagan subsequently expanded this anti-drug war campaign through his administration’s “Zero Tolerance” policies. Scholars have shown, she added, that these policies resulted in a skyrocketing number of arrests of non-violent drug users. Other viewers noted that the Zero Tolerance policies were continued by George H. W. Bush, and expanded by President Clinton, whose 1994 Crime Bill was the biggest crime bill in

American history. Responsible for a dramatic rise in incarceration rates among blacks and Hispanics, this legislation was a tragedy for communities in South Los Angeles—and many other places.

CRE GRADUATE ASSISTANTS HOST 9TH ANNUAL GRADUATE FORUM ON RACE AND ETHNICITY

The Center for Race and Ethnicity (CRE) held its ninth annual Graduate Forum on Race and Ethnicity on February 26, 2016. Nearly forty graduate students, professors, and community members gathered to listen to fourteen graduate students present their ongoing research. These graduate students represented numerous departments, including political science, sociology, women’s & gender studies, education, art history, and history. And in addition to these graduate student presenters, this forum hosted a professionalization panel for graduate students to learn about the job market beyond academia as well as productivity strategies to succeed as a tenure-track academic.



The 9th Annual Graduate Forum on Race and Ethnicity, always a popular event on campus, once again, had a full room, with lots of participation.

While all of the presenters presented different research topics, each panel still had emerging research themes that

generated a riveting discussion. In the first panel, Policy and Politics in Contemporary Life, there were three panelists: Christabel Cruz (Political Science), Curtis Williams II (Public Policy and Administration), Miraida Morales (Library and Information Science). Panelists' work raised thought provoking questions about the need for healthcare, electoral, and educational reforms that would help



Grace Howard, CRE Graduate Assistant and Ph.D. candidate, Political Science Department, RU-NB introduces a panel at the 9th Annual Graduate Forum on Race and Ethnicity

reduce and not perpetuate structural inequities for low-income people of color.

The next panel, Education: Techniques of Exclusion, had four panelists: Deirde Dougherty & Sean Leavey (Education), Tieka Harris (Education), and Amy Pickard (Education). These speakers reviewed historical and contemporary examples of African-Americans' mistreatment and discrimination in the U.S' public education system. Audience members gave great suggestions for new sources of information that the panelists could use to enrich their already persuasive arguments.

The panel Tools of Resistance: The Real and the Imagined, had three panelists: Benjamin Foley (Sociology),

Tashima Thomas (Art History), and Tristan Jones (Anthropology). All of the presenters' work highlighted how racialized symbols of oppression were evident in seemingly progressive organizing endeavors. For example, two panelists reviewed social media campaigns where anti-black racist images (e.g. bananas being thrown to black soccer players and Africans being depicted as lazy or violent) were used to galvanize U.S. white progressives' support. These panelists argued that the historical meanings of these racist images are not lost simply because they have been taken up by younger white progressives. Instead, these historical meanings get reproduced and recirculated within the new technology media of social media.

The last panel, Histories of African American Life and Thought, had four panelists: Ashleigh Lawrence-Sanders (History), Carolina Alonso Bejarano (Women's & Gender Studies), Jomaira Salas (Sociology), and Kendra Boyd (History). The panelists stressed



Sally Bonet, CRE Graduate Assistant and Ph.D. candidate, Graduate School of Education, enjoys the camaraderie at the forum.

the importance of studying different historical strategies for pursuing racial equity and citizenship. For instance, one panelist contrasted black students' activism in the 1960's to 2010's. She noted that even though different activists organized differently, they shared a common political vision for racial equity.

The conference also included a professional panel led by Rutgers professors. Professor Mary Hawksworth (Women's & Gender Studies) argued 60 percent of all Ph.D. graduates will not secure a tenure-track position. She shared this statistic not to scare graduate students but to encourage them to expand their horizon and consider non-academic positions. She introduced to graduate students the many possibilities that existed beyond the academy, including positions in university administration, non-profit advocacy and philanthropy. Professor Dawne Mouzon (Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy) shared strategies to support successful publishing. She advised graduate students to start a writing group and keep a "brainstorming journal" to record ideas for research. For the graduate students who wanted to improve their knowledge of their research fields, she recommended students assist their advisers with reviewing articles. She warned that the article review is a labor-intensive and should not take precedent over dissertation completion. Professor Clark Chinn (Education) advised graduate students on how to secure grants. He admitted that there is no secret other than practice makes perfect. Other tips he shared were to talk with the grant

officers for proposals, use Rutgers' grant-writing support organizations, and find mentors who can help articulate why a particular research project is timely, unique, and necessary.

During breaks, everyone comingled and many participants networked. And after a full-day of panels and lively discussions during the forum's breaks, many participants stayed afterwards to connect to panelists and CRE graduate assistants.

The successful forum could not have been possible without the great leadership demonstrated by CRE graduate assistants. Special thanks go to the panelists, Rutgers professors, Gerlanda's, and the audience. Your contributions made the CRE graduate forum a success! We look forward to an amazing tenth graduate forum next year too!

RU ACTIVIST? IF SO, MARK YOUR CALENDARS!

On April 28 at 6pm in the Seminar Room of the Sociology Department (Davison Hall, 26 Nichol Street, Cook/Douglass Campus, RU-NB) the CRE will host a unique event that will highlight contemporary organizing efforts led by Rutgers undergraduates and graduate students as well theorize solidarity-based organizing.

This event is an outgrowth of our very successful Black Lives Matter teach-in, held last fall, where Rutgers professors spoke about the need for students to bridge connections between various organizing efforts to help improve

political analysis and strength. After this event, CRE realized that there was an intellectual need to highlight the experiences of student organizers and activists here at Rutgers. And we wanted to understand how Rutgers' student activists articulate and theorize solidarity-based organizing. For CRE's RU Activist event, we will situate Rutgers' student organizing within an international perspective, highlighting the many ways international students practice solidarity organizing.

Therefore, our event spotlights a roundtable discussion where students and professors sit alongside each other to reflect on these three questions:

1. What theory of change connects Rutgers' different organizing endeavors?
2. What are Rutgers students' current solidarity strategies to connect these different organizing endeavors?
3. Is there room for improvement? If so, how?

Following CRE's roundtable, there will an interactive town hall where students brainstorm how to infuse a solidarity praxis in their organizing endeavors.

We hope you join us! Please contact Mia Kissil (mkissil@rci.rutgers.edu) to find out more about upcoming events.

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