

## *Race and Photography* *The Photograph that Shocked America*

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- ***Race and Photography in American Culture***

"The complex intersection of the relationship between race, ethnicity, images of the flag and history are found in Masur's book" – Keith Wailoo

*This panel discussion explored the complex intersections among race, national history, and visual culture*

Panelists: Louis Masur (American Studies, Trinity College); Cheryl Wall (English); Tanya Sheehan (Art History); Keith Wailoo (History)



### Selected Events—Center for Race & Ethnicity—191 College Ave

Roundtable—Race, Ethnicity, and the Subprime Mortgage Crisis	Friday Mar 7
Student Conference—Graduate Forum on Race & Ethnicity	Saturday Mar 8
Interdisciplinary Conference—DNA, Race, and History	Fri-Sat Apr 18-19
Film Screening & Discussion—Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin	Thursday April 24
Roundtable—Between Privilege and Poverty: Perspectives on NJ Disparities	Friday April 25

### THE AMERICAN FLAG AS A WEAPON

"Images have the power to force people to rethink the assumptions of humanity and membership in the polity, and the ways in which African Americans embrace the American flag symbolizes that they too belong." – Louis Masur

The springboard for the discussion was Louis Masur's forthcoming book *The Soiling of Old Glory*, which follows the story of a single photograph: Stanley Forman's 1976 Pulitzer Award winning photograph of Joseph Rakes, a White anti-busing youth, assaulting Ted Landsmark, a Black activist and lawyer, with the American flag in Boston's City Plaza.

### THE DEVIANT LIE OF A SNAPSHOT GIVES US PAUSE

As Masur noted, the image "has not only been read: it was misread." Cropped and captioned by Forman's editor at the Boston Globe, the photo actually revises the very event it seeks to capture. The original photo

depicts a mass of people who look on, as one man helps Landsmark to his feet to escape as Rakes angrily swings the flagpole. The edited photo depicts Landsmark restrained with the flag pointed directly at his chest, like a lance. In the minds of many Americans, this image, taken during the nation's bicentennial became a testament to racism, inequality, and Boston's culture of bigotry. As Masur notes, this image showcases the representation of race and the encoding of race in visual images of America.

### SEEING IN BLACK AND WHITE

"The racial implications and applications of photographic images as 'having a strange effect on the body' forms part of the larger discourse how photography interacts with the racial politics in America" – Tanya Sheehan.

Historian of visual culture and Assistant Professor of Art History, Tanya Sheehan, raised "critical questions about blackness, whiteness, and the photographic medium" by observing the racial applications and implications of

photography in the U.S. since the medium's invention in 1839.

Sheehan reframed "The Soiling of Old Glory" by comparing it to a variety of photographs, from early slave daguerreotypes to images of Barack Obama in the 2008 presidential campaign. Observing the similarities between Forman's picture and early-twentieth-century lynching photographs, for instance, Sheehan asked how Forman himself and the mainstream media that disseminated his picture were implicated in the racial violence it documents: "Do we not find something disturbing about the fact that the 'perfect shot' for Forman, the one that would earn him the most coveted prize in photojournalism, is the one that captured the palpable threat of white brutality against a black body? Why is this moment – the second before a sacred symbol of American identity and culture would seem to penetrate the body of a prostrate black man – why is this the one that won Forman his prize?"

### CAPTURING EVERYDAY HISTORIES

"[Forman's] photograph becomes the catalyst for numerous contextualizations: the history of Boston, the busing/desegregation movement; history of photography; usage of images; and the history of race relations" – Cheryl Wall

Board of Governors Professor of English, Cheryl Wall, turned towards the importance of photography within Black America by discussing the place of family photos in Black women's memoirs, such as Lucille Clifton's *Generations*. As "pictorial genealogies" of post-slavery Black families, these photographs frame the "ghostly traces of a dispersed population." In so doing, they call up "a complex relationship between black family stories and the national history."

Keith Wailoo rounded out the discussion by noting the way photography depicts racial codes that are both seen and unseen. In his research for his book on race and sickle cell anemia, he came across a photo of a Memphis mayor holding open the door at a new segregated hospital for the city's middle class Black residents. An otherwise unexceptional, staged publicity shot, this photo sparked controversy among the Memphis White population who were building a backlash against racial accommodation. An image such as this illustrates the way in which everyday gestures can carry powerful reminders of racial tensions, as with recent photographs of those stranded during Hurricane Katrina.

"Photographs can capture powerful racial images and symbols – leading to the racial tensions found here in America" – Keith Wailoo

As this rich discussion demonstrated, visual literacy – learning how to read a text – is crucial for challenging what Masur identified as the "sense of objectivity ascribed to a photograph." Thinking about images in context, as manipulated and circulated texts, reveals them to be framed by history, even as they seek to document it.



### Rutgers University Center for Race and Ethnicity

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- Facilitating research and enriching education on matters of race and ethnicity in contemporary life in America, in New Jersey, and the world
- Promoting collaborations and fostering cross-disciplinary seminars and discussions on topics from immigration and work, to ethnic politics and racial classification, from preservation of cultural identity to its transformation, and including questions of poverty, discrimination, advancement, integration, and privilege.
- Identifying critical areas for future research and supporting race and ethnicity research and policy development.

**GENERAL INFORMATION** about the Center for Race and Ethnicity and its activities.

<http://raceethnicity.rutgers.edu>

**Teaching Race and Ethnicity across Disciplines** (syllabus exchange)  
<http://raceethnicity.rutgers.edu/TeachingRaceAndEthnicity.html>

**Katrina conference** and forthcoming volume  
<http://raceethnicity.rutgers.edu/KatrinaAuthorMeeting.html>

**Other Roundtable Discussions**  
<http://raceethnicity.rutgers.edu/TeachingUnimaginableExperiencesSummary.htm>