

## Ethnicity and the Politics of Language Across the Globe

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*"Eastern European governments have tended to view people who are multilingual as 'amphibians,' or as 'people whose identities are uncertain and who need to be pinned down by the state.'" – Paul Hanebrink*

*"Studying the role of language within a society is a good way of tracing the links between macro-level structures and micro-level interactions." – Laura Ahearn*

*"Language is cognition." – Lilitiana Sánchez*

*The CRE began Fall 2009 by hosting a lively roundtable discussion on ethnicity and the politics of language across the globe. Rutgers scholars from a variety of disciplines came together to discuss the role that language plays in the formation and consolidation of ethnic, national, cultural, and class identities. On the one hand, language is vital to the survival and transmission of a group's cultural heritage, but on the other hand, it is often implicated in the maintenance or reinforcement of ethnic and social divisions. Four primary themes emerged through the course of the roundtable conversation: language and nationalism, language as power, multilingualism as problem and as resource, and the costs of language loss.*

#### **ONE NATION, ONE LANGUAGE?**

Modern states have consolidated the idea of the nation around a single language, and, as a result, many governments all around the world fear multilingualism. Lilitiana Sánchez (Spanish and Portuguese) suggested that the idea of "one nation-one language" emerged with the birth of the modern nation-state in 17th century Europe. This idea does not reflect real societies, she noted, as "most nations are multilingual, and in traditional societies this was not considered strange." Yet, those made anxious by multilingualism argue that it is an obstacle to national unity, a problem for educational systems, and/or an excuse for minority groups to agitate against the government. These attitudes towards multilingualism are best understood as illustrations of what Laura Ahearn (Anthropology) called "language ideologies"—the many conscious or unconscious beliefs and theories we hold about language as a whole or about particular languages and linguistic groups. Language ideologies, especially prescriptive statements about language, tend to serve the interests of powerful segments of society at the expense of others, Ahearn noted.

Paul Hanebrink (History) underscored the importance of language ideologies to

nationalism by exploring the case of Hungary, and Eastern Europe more broadly. Language use and cultural survival have always been contested issues in the Eastern European context, especially given the overshadowing of Eastern European languages by globally influential Western European languages like English, German, and French. Hanebrink quoted a Hungarian poet who described his language as "the hardest coffin and the softest bed." This evocative quote brought home the ambivalence that Eastern Europeans might have experienced as they loved and took pride in their languages and yet struggled to be heard in the broader European context.

But if Eastern European states feel marginalized within the

broader European context, these states have in turn marginalized minority language groups within their own borders. Hanebrink noted that Eastern European governments have tended to view people who are multilingual as "amphibians," or as "people whose identities are uncertain and who need to be pinned down by the state."

*"Language ideologies...tend to serve the interests of powerful segments of society at the expense of others"*  
- Laura Ahearn



*Left to right: CRE Acting Director Lisa L. Miller poses with panelists Ousseina Alidou, Lilitiana Sánchez, Laura Ahearn, and Paul Hanebrink*

## LANGUAGE AS POWER

The panelists provided multiple illustrations of the ways in which nations' treatment of minority languages reflected underlying power differentials between majority and minority populations. Ousseina Alidou (AMESALL/Comparative Literature) spoke of the situation in Niger, where, in 1991, after years of marginalization, a number of minority languages were considered for inclusion into the category of "national language." Although, in this instance, the state attempted to formally recognize minority languages, it nonetheless failed to name and categorize these languages in a way that was consistent with the views of the speakers and users of these languages. Many within the minority language groups objected to the state's modes of formal recognition—and implicitly to its manner of imposing an identity on them in the act of recognizing them. Alidou provocatively asked, "How do you name language and who names what?"—pointing to how the politics of naming and classification might reinforce uneven power relations even when there is an attempt to include minority groups into the national framework.



*The audience included professors and students from a variety of disciplines*

Niger's difficulty in introducing adequate "language reform" has meant the perpetuation of the colonial power structure. Alidou described how within Francophone and other post-colonial contexts, the

*"How do you name language and who names what?"*

- Ousseina Alidou

language of school remains separate from the language used at home. Scientific knowledge is taught exclusively in European languages, thus reinforcing language hierarchies between the European and African languages. Liliana Sánchez described a parallel situation in the South American context where the dominance of Spanish has meant that languages such as Quechua are reserved for home use—and even when used in the home are increasingly inflected by the patterns and structures of Spanish. The situation in Niger and in South America testifies to how, as Laura Ahearn put it, "language is thoroughly intermeshed with relations of power and with identities—whether these identities are ethnic, gendered, racial or national. Language use reflects and often reproduces these power relations." Studying the role of language within a society is therefore a good way of tracing the links between, as Ahearn put it, "macro-level structures and micro-level interactions."

## MULTILINGUALISM: PROBLEM OR RESOURCE?

Within nations such as the United States, multilingualism is perceived as both empowering and disempowering, depending on who is multilingual. As Liliana Sánchez pointed out, the multilingualism of poor immigrant workers in the U.S. is viewed as a problem, while the multilingualism of college students or elites is highly regarded. In other

words, Sánchez argued, elites are allowed and encouraged to be bilingual. In fact, within elite contexts, learning Spanish or French in addition to English is seen as giving people an economic advantage. On the other hand, native Spanish-speakers are often encouraged via peer pressure, the educational structure, or by their families to lose their first language and to adopt English as their only language. It matters, then, "who is multilingual or bilingual" and "in which languages." Depending on one's social position, multilingualism can be a privilege or a burden.

As Ousseina Alidou commented, we need to consider the many kinds of multilingualisms because having a command of "world languages" brings vastly different practical benefits from having a command of "regional languages." In post-colonial contexts such as Niger, where individuals speak French in schools, converse in their native language at home, and, in recent years, also learn English in order to be competitive in a global economy, it is clear that only some languages like French and English can open doors to highly paid jobs. Proficiency in local or regional languages such as Tasawaq or Tamajak, on the other hand, does not help citizens climb the social ladder.

## Call for Papers: Special Issue of *Race, Gender, Class on Climate Change*

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina and the IPCC's (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) most recent report on climate change it behooves academics and activists to ensure that the interrelated issues of race, gender and class are not further obscured but become as central to combating climate change as the policy that enforces corporate reductions in carbon emissions. In his New York Times Op-Ed piece on 8 / 22 / 2009 writer Thomas Friedman observed that climate change is being discussed in a social, political and economic vacuum with little or no reference to the contributing issues such as poverty, food production, energy creation and consumption, etc. However, his analysis overlooks the systemic and endemic forces that are creating the "whole array of integrated problems" that he himself mentioned—these forces are of course the social, political and economic articulations of unequal power relations as created by the ideologies and practices of racism, sexism, classism, nationalism, ethnocentrism, speciesism, etc. Thus, the need for more inclusive, interrelated and complex analyses of climate change is dire.

This special issue of *Race, Gender, Class* seeks articles that take on this challenge in their approach to climate change by including the interrelated and integrated layers of race, gender and class. Submissions may focus on any aspect of climate change (legal, political, social, educational, agricultural, economic, religious, sexual, ideological, international, local, etc) but the analysis must be multifaceted in terms of race, gender and class, bringing to the fore a complexity that has been sorely lacking. Approaches may be empirically or theoretically based, may be qualitative or quantitative and may represent a variety of styles and perspectives; but they should be well supported by argument and/or data and should attempt to bring new and provocative insight to the discussion of climate change.

Abstracts (500 words) should be sent by April 1st, 2010 to the address below. Selected authors will be notified by May 1st 2010, and the deadline for submission of the final paper (8000 words) will be June 1st, 2010. For further information or submission of abstracts, please contact by email [phoebe.godfrey@uconn.edu](mailto:phoebe.godfrey@uconn.edu) or by snail mail: Phoebe C. Godfrey Assistant Professor-in-Residence, Sociology Dept., 344 Mansfield Rd., University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT 06226-2068.

## LANGUAGE LOSS AND THE COSTS OF MONOLINGUALISM

The struggles over languages such as Tasawaq, Tamajak, or Quechua reflect a broader global phenomenon of “heritage language loss.” As a result of a narrow conception of one nation-one language, a number of languages are in danger of extinction over the next forty years. But in addition to causing the loss of heritage languages, nations’ embrace of monolingualism also has a profound impact on all of our cognitive abilities. For, as Liliana Sánchez reminded the audience, “Language is cognition.”

Bilingualism or multilingualism is not only an economic resource but is also known to enhance abstract thinking, mathematical abilities and creativity. Through their familiarity with more than one language, bilingual and multilingual speakers intuit that there are always alternative modes of viewing, perceiving, and understanding the world. In other words, learning a number of languages enhances our cognitive abilities.

In the end, “what do we lose when a language dies?” asked Prof. Laura Ahearn. What we may lose, she argued, is cultural identity. Having access to more than one language preconditions us to realizing that there is always more than one way of apprehending and making sense of our realities.

## Meet the Center’s New Graduate Assistants!

This year, six graduate assistants are affiliated with the Center for Race and Ethnicity. These students assist with program planning and event staffing, and are integral in producing our newsletters and other written work for the Center. Here is background information on the people you will be seeing in connection with the Center:



**Jill Campaiola** is a fourth year doctoral candidate in Media Studies in the School of Communication and Information

(SCI). Her dissertation investigates the extent to which Moroccan TV dramas are shaped by local, national and global cultural flows, such as wider

influences from the Arab world, colonial power - France - and from American popular culture. The purpose of her research is to understand how television drama can be used as a form of mental emigration in the era of globalization. She has a 2009 Dissertation Proposal Development Fellowship through the Social Science Research Council. This is her first year at the Center for Race and Ethnicity.



**Bridget Gurtler** is a fourth year PhD student in Women's and Gender History and the history of Health and Technology. Her research

focuses on the history of assisted reproduction and addresses the role of patients and popular culture in shaping and understanding medical practice. Her dissertation on the history of artificial insemination, 1900-1980 pinpoints pivotal moments of change in the history of this medical technology and works to unravel the complicated meanings of consumption, knowledge, gender and race when medicine, profit and the pursuit of parenthood intersect.



**Frederick A. Hanna**

is new to the Center this year, and is a third year doctoral

candidate in Social and Philosophical Foundations in Education. His interests include: How macro social, cultural, and historical issues impact families, schools, and educational outcomes, and how race and class issues undermine the success of black male students in the United States. His primary area of interest links the social epistemology emerging from the development of the Black Church with emancipatory education. His dissertation focuses on interrogating the Black Church as a source of emancipatory education for 19<sup>th</sup> century African Americans.



**Shakti Jaising**

returns to the Center this year as a sixth year Ph.D.

student in English. Her interests are interdisciplinary and include Postcolonial and Anglophone Literature, Marxism, Film and Cultural Studies. She is currently working on her dissertation project which analyzes a range of Anglophone literary and cultural productions from the post-Cold War period to understand how the nation-state is re-imagined in what is being called “the era of globalization.”

**Stephanie Jones-Rogers** is a third year doctoral student in the African-American History program. She earned her M.A. in United States History from Rutgers-Newark and her B.A. in Psychology from Rutgers-Livingston College. She is interested in articulations of racialized and gendered power in slavery, emancipation, and Reconstruction. Her dissertation examines the ways in which white slaveowning women navigated the new economic and juridical terrain of the post-revolutionary South, the social and ideological implications of slaveownership for white women in the antebellum era, and their economic investment in the perpetuation of chattel slavery. This is her first year at the Center.



**Fatimah Williams Castro** returns to the Center this year as a sixth year doctoral candidate in Anthropology. She researches black activism in Colombia, South America to determine how blackness and black rights are defined in a self-proclaimed racially democratic nation. Using event observation, interview, and archival



research from 2007-08, Williams Castro investigated how members of the Afro-

Colombian social movement develop and influence public policies and legislation that address racism, racial discrimination, and other disparities experienced along ethno-racial lines.

## Upcoming Events at the CRE

Hungry for more? The Center has a number of events planned for the fall on a variety of subjects broadly related to race, ethnicity and culture. Additional information and flyers for these events are available on our website, <http://raceethnicity.rutgers.edu>.

- **Roundtable Discussion - Governing Inequality: Race and the Challenge of American Federalism**

Friday, October 23, 2009, 12 noon, 191 College Avenue, NB

Does the very nature and structure of American politics perpetuate inequality? A panel of Rutgers scholars from across disciplines and campuses will discuss the relationship between racial inequality and the multi-layered structure of U.S. federalism.

- **Author Event – Moustafa Bayoumi, How Does it Feel to Be a Problem? Being Young and Arab in America**

Tuesday, November 3, 2009, 7:00pm, Rutgers Student Center, Multipurpose Room, NB

Co-sponsored with American Studies, Asian-American Cultural Center, Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Arab Cultural Club, BAKA, and College Avenue Campus Dean.

Just over a century ago, W.E.B. Du Bois posed a probing question in his classic *The Souls of Black Folk*: “How does it feel to be a problem?” he asked. Today, Arab and Muslim Americans, the newest minorities in the American

imagination, are the latest “problem” of American society, and their answers to Du Bois’s question increasingly define what being American means today.

- **One-Day Conference: Emerging Directions in African and African Diaspora Studies**

Friday, November 13, 2009, Assembly Room, Winants Hall, NB

Organized by the CRE in coordination with the School of Arts and Sciences (SAS) and Africana Studies, this gathering aims to illuminate the history and the current richness, breadth, and pressing challenges animating African and African-American studies today.

- **Film Event – Al Jazeera: Voice of Arabia**

Tuesday, November 17, 2009, 5:00 pm, Rutgers Student Center, Graduate Student Lounge, NB

Facilitated by Jill Campaiola, Media Studies, SCI

This film takes an inside look at the most watched news network of the Arab world, through a collection of newsroom discussions, interviews and news footage. Come see this important film and discuss it with Rutgers students and faculty.

- **Roundtable Discussion – The New Nativism? Immigration and Social Policy Conflicts**

Tuesday, December 1, 2009, 12:30 pm, 191 College Avenue, NB

Panelists Linda Bosniak, Peter Guarnaccia, Jan Kubik and Jamie Lew take a look at how the U.S. and other nations react to the influx of new immigrant populations with respect to social policies on education, health care and law.

- **Lecture and Discussion featuring Drucilla Cornell - “Indigenous Values and the Law: Africanizing the South African Constitution”**

Thursday, December 3, 2009, 4:00 pm, Pane Room, Alexander Library, NB

Join Dr. Cornell, professor of Political Science, Women’s Studies and Comparative Literature for an interdisciplinary discussion of the intersection of indigenous identity, group rights and constitutional law.



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Jill Campaiola, Media Studies;  
Bridget Gurtler, History; Fred  
Hanna, Graduate School of  
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English; Stephanie Jones-  
Rogers, History; Fatimah  
Williams Castro, Anthropology.**

- 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.