CENTER FOR RACE AND ETHNICITY

Race, Ethnicity and Regionalism in American History, Politics and Culture

Panelists:

- ❖ **Brad Evans (English, Rutgers-NB)**
- ❖ **Rocío Magaña (Anthropology, Rutgers-NB)**
- ❖ **Donna Murch, History, Rutgers-NB**
- ❖ **Beryl Satter (History, Rutgers-Newark),**
- ❖ **Al Tillery (Political Science, Rutgers-NB)**

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Race, Ethnicity and Regionalism in American History, Politics and Culture

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On February 1, 2010, the CRE drew together five Rutgers scholars to discuss the politics of region and regionalism in the United States. What difference do regional dynamics make in shaping social outcomes across race and ethnic lines? How do we understand and account for cultural constructions of regional identity? How has the U.S. South in particular, and cultural constructions of the South, helped to define America's place in the world? Rutgers scholars shed light on these among a host of other provocative and timely questions related to the significance of region and regionalism in U.S. history, politics, and culture.

THE IDEALIZED SOUTH: REGIONALISM AND THE NATIONALIST IMAGINATION

Region and regional*ism* are not the same, English Professor Brad Evans explained. According to Evans, "regionalism is a cultural commodity that circulates and is put into circulation." Evans' work explores the mobilization of regionalism in the 19th and early 20th century, a period when American authors were writing the country into being through regional literature. This was a period in which a desire for "authentic" regional flavor led to the commode-fication of America's "backwaters"—regions that were outside of the realm of industrial and economic development. In other words, even as modernization and globalization led to homogenization, there was a simultaneous glamorization of the unevenly developed place. As Evans explained, region-alism shored up national identity and helped to define America's place in the world.

As a cultural construct, the U.S. South has been integral to the development of national identity. As Evans explained, literature of an idealized South gained popularity in the post-Civil War period in response to a great sense of unrest and discomfort that many Americans felt in dealing with Native Americans—who could no longer be dismissed as savages—newly freed African Americans—who were no longer slaves—and the arrival

of immigrants from various regions of Europe. Cultural objects such as the Uncle Remus stories, which provided glimpses of life in the American South, became powerful tools in representing the U.S. on the world stage. History professor Donna Murch added that it is also in the immediate post-Civil War period that we see the emergence of the trope of the "vanishing South"—one that expressed the fear that the South's original identity was in danger of being eroded by migration and development. The "vanishing South" helped, ironically, to fix the South in the national imagination as the quintessential and authentic United States. Indeed, the idea of the South continues to shape America's national consciousness

RACE AND THE ECONOMICS OF REGION

The migration of African-American and Latino populations to and from the South has been a vital force in shaping the nation's politics, economy and culture. According to Murch, African-American migrants from the middle South states shaped the economy and culture of states like California. By studying the birth of the Black Panther Party in California, Murch illustrates how specific regional factors shape historical outcomes. In her forthcoming book *Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California,* Murch addresses

"Regionalism shored up national identity and helped define America's place in the world."

--Brad Evans

a significant gap in historical scholarship that overlooks the experiences of Black Californians and their place in the nation.

Following World War II, there was a wave of African-American western migration from the middle-South and these migrants—many of

Donna Murch, History, RU-New Brunswick

Brad Evans, English, RU-New Brunswick

whom settled in Oakland, California – were skilled workers who took on defense industry jobs and whose children benefited from the relatively less segregated educational system in California. The founding members of the Black Panther Party were the children of these migrants. Having come of age at a time of global decolonization and in a climate of optimism, these young radicals formed a study group in Oakland, California that was the beginning of the formation of the Black Panther Party.

African Americans in California enjoyed educational opportunities denied to them in the South, but, as Murch pointed out, they also encountered a profoundly punitive carceral state, which disproportionately affected them and other radicals who were people of color. Murch thus highlighted the ways in which regional factors produced opportunities as well as constraints. Anthropology professor Rocío Magaña also referred to this tension in her discussion of the Southeast (particularly North Carolina and Virginia), which is rapidly becoming a new site of migration, both legal and illegal, from Mexico. Magaña pointed to a number of factors why the Southeast had become a site of migration for Mexicans, employment opportunities in the agricultural sector being the crucial driving force. As she explained, employers offered prospective employees H1 visas and asked them to recruit other migrants who might work for them. However, although local economies in the U.S. South demand and invite migration, the poor housing opportunities, low wages, and lack of healthcare make the opportunities provided by the South a mixed blessing for Mexican immigrants.

Mexican migrants in the South also have to deal with much anti-immigrant sentiment, with the resurgence of white supremacist politics, and with a growing carceral state. The southern United States, Magaña pointed out, experiences higher rates of immigration enforcement than other regions of the

Rocío Magaña, Anthropology, RU-NB

nation. Migrant populations live in fear and are the targets of a national politics of anxiety that rests on and re-activates mythologies of the authentic South and the "true America." As Murch reminded us, there is a mythic South that remains part of our popular memory, but there is also a multi-ethnic South whose history remains to be told.

REGIONAL STIGMAS, RACIAL STEREOTYPES

One of the problematic consequences of regionalism is that rigid associations between people and place can get formed—associations that build upon and perpetuate racial and regional stereotypes. For Magaña, this is reflected in Mexican migrants to the U.S. South who work in agriculture, and are perpetually connected to this form of labor long after they have begun to work in other industries. Similarly, History professor Beryl Satter noted how African Americans who moved to the West Side of Chicago during the Second Great Migration (at the end of World War II) were labeled as rural outsiders and were associated with rural, Southern unsophistication long after they had moved to the city.

In *Family Properties: Race, Real Estate, and the Exploitation of Black Urban America*, Satter explores the consequences of the systematic exclusion of African-Americans from housing in the post-World-War II period. Housing speculators took advantage of the unique economic opportunity provided by the wave of African American migration to Chicago, a movement that occurred at a time when the city was suffering from a severe housing shortage. The federal government's endorsement of "redlining," a system used to appraise property values according to a host of factors, including race, already made it

Beryl Satter, History, RU-Newark
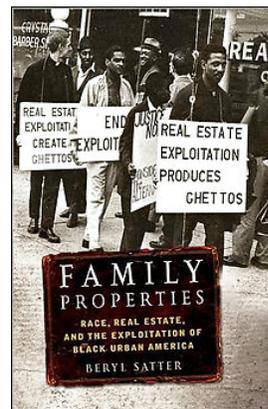
Family Properties: Race, Real Estate and the Exploitation of Black Urban America, by Beryl Satter

Al Tillery, Political Science, RU-New Brunswick

possible for banks to deny African Americans the mortgages they needed to purchase homes in white neighborhoods. With limited housing and credit opportunities available, speculators sold African Americans sub-par housing at exorbitant prices. When they were unable to pay for their housing, speculators evicted them and repeated this cycle of predatory lending all over again.

Professor Satter suggested that in order to understand the problem of residential segregation in Chicago, we need to realize that this "is a national issue with regional variations." In other words, she recommended that we ought to go beyond narrow conceptions and stigmas about the people living in this housing and instead consider factors such as the racially divided, dual housing market—which can be traced back to federal initiatives that emerged from the New Deal administration such as the Federal Housing Administration— and practices like redlining that limited credit opportunities for African Americans and people of color. In other words, while we need to attend to the specific dynamics of region, we also need to be wary of the opposite problem—a narrow view of region that ignores the larger, national and global, factors shaping regional dynamics.

Also calling our attention to federal policies that shaped regional economies, political Science professor, Al Tillery, explored how region and race intersected in the context of two wealth transfer programs in America—the New Deal and the GI Bill. While these programs for wealth transfer have been widely hailed as successful, they had a more limited impact on African Americans, Tillery argued. And yet, Tillery also pointed to some unexpected and largely underexplored outcomes of these federal programs. In his research on the achievement gap within the contemporary United States, Tillery found that African Americans who have higher SAT scores are the descendants of black southerners who had attended historically black colleges and universities and who also received GI Bill benefits. In other words, African-Americans who tended to benefit from federal

programs were more likely to be southerners who had been educated in Southern black institutions. There is the widely perceived notion that the South is a location for black exclusion; but this case demonstrates how the education provided by historically black colleges and universities might in fact have served Southern African Americans and influenced subsequent generational achievement outcomes. Southern black populations might have managed to derive and pass on the benefits of what largely has been a "failed transfer of wealth" for African Americans.

CONCLUSION

Panelists' presentations invited us to take seriously the specific dynamics of regional politics and economy while at the same time being careful to not overlook the broader national and global forces at work. In the end, they each reminded us of the ways in which the political-economic dynamics of region and the mythologies of regional race and class constructions were co-constitutive and mutually reinforcing of one another.

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Mission Statement:

- 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.