

4th Annual Faculty Forum on Race and Ethnicity

Participants:

- ❖ Thomas Stephens, Spanish and Portuguese
- ❖ Jeffrey Robinson, Rutgers Business School-Newark
- ❖ Courtney Thorsson, English
- ❖ Renée Larrier, French
- ❖ Jennifer Warren, School of Communication and Information
- ❖ Tetsuji Yamada, Economics, Center for Childhood Research-Camden
- ❖ Keesha Middlemass, Political Science-Newark
- ❖ Beth Rubin, Graduate School of Education
- ❖ Nancy DiTomaso, Rutgers Business School-Newark
- ❖ Heidi Swarts, Political Science-Newark

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4th Annual Faculty Forum on Race and Ethnicity

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On April 16, 2010, Rutgers faculty from a variety of disciplines and campuses gathered to share their common research interests and concerns about issues of race and ethnicity.

The 4th Annual Faculty forum gathered faculty from all three campuses – Newark, Camden, and New Brunswick – in an effort to foster interdisciplinary dialogues about race and ethnicity. The forum brought together scholars at different stages of their professional career – from senior faculty to recent hires and post-doctoral fellows – and showcased the breadth of scholarship on race and ethnicity at Rutgers. For the participants, the one-day event was a chance to share new ideas or receive feedback on on-going or completed projects, while getting to know other scholars doing work on race and ethnicity at Rutgers. Across three panels, participants tackled a variety of topics, such as, spaces of cultural and racial identity, the importance of science and technology to understanding community’s healthcare needs, and the contemporary challenges to racial and ethnic equality in education, politics, and society.

PANEL I: NARRATING IDENTITY, RACE AND NATION

How does language allow individuals to claim, perform and impose racial and national identities? How does it separate or create tensions between various cultural groups? **Thomas Stephens**, Professor in the department of Spanish and Portuguese at RU-NB, pointed out how words or terms circulate and get used to signify people and race. He provided the

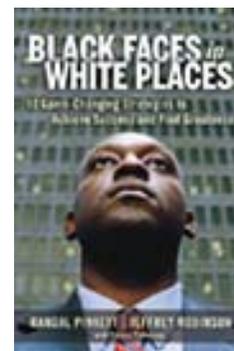
example of the colloquial expression “*a la mierda*,” which means “*shit talker*” in Spanish, but unfortunately came to be used by some as a synonym of “Cuban.” For Stephens, this example shows how people are separated discursively and geographically, and how different meanings are attributed to terms depending on place and space.



Tom Stephens, professor of Spanish and Portuguese

Jeff Robinson, Assistant Professor in the RU Business School in Newark, was similarly concerned with questions of geographical space. While segregation is often treated as an affliction of the past, Robinson explained that the work of desegregation is far from being over. Robinson’s book “Black Faces in White Spaces” reveals how people build community in separate spaces and seeks strategies to overcome the challenges of urban inequality in the United States. Following Robinson’s comments, Stephens noted

that often language can be used to cover up inequalities; however, as Stephens pointed out “the discourse on segregation has changed but the reality hasn’t.”



Black Faces in White Spaces, by Randal Pinkett, Jeffrey Robinson, Philana Patterson (pub. Oct. 2010)

While separatism is often imposed from the outside, it is also in many cases self-imposed, according to **Courtney Thorsson**, Post-doctoral Fellow, English, RU-NB. Thorsson discussed how a discourse of Black Nationalism was used as an alternative practice of community building and as a way to move away from the nation. Panelists foregrounded the tensions between the



Panel I (l-r): Jeff Robinson, Tom Stephens, Renée Larrier, Courtney Thorsson

imposition of narratives on people and how people use this separateness to build community.

Renée Larrier, Professor in the department of French, RU-NB, explained how Caribbean writers of color do precisely that, when they revive the slavery period in their writings. These authors are revisiting the past by commenting on the present. Larrier explored how groups might re-appropriate particular kinds of discourse and tell their own stories, so that they can produce a discourse from within the community rather than from the outside.

PANEL II: ASSESSING THE RACIAL POLITICS OF SCIENCE AND HEALTH

The second panel explored how science and technology shape, understand, and respond to community health needs while operating within political and economic contexts. Seen in this way, technology has political origins and ends and can also reflect pre-existing divides. **Jennifer Warren**, Assistant Professor in the School of Communication and Information, RU-NB, explained that interfaces on health related websites are often focused around dominant racial groups. As a result, the white middle class has a higher access to health information on the internet. She noted that it is extremely important to pay attention to *who* is designing websites and *which* communities are being targeted.



Panel II (l-r): Tetsuji Yamada, Jennifer Warren

Similarly, in his analysis of the efficacy of sex education programs on different communities in New York, **Tetsuji Yamada**, Professor in the Economics department and in the Center for Childhood research in RU-Camden, noted that the success of these programs is heavily dependent on the teachers, their training, and their ability to traverse different economic, social and cultural divides.

Both panelists agreed that scientific tools are often not sufficiently attentive to community needs and hence often do not resonate with those whom they are meant to serve. In other words, technologies need to be conceptualized in terms of social networks, and scientific tools have to be adapted to community's needs, language, and context. If interventions made through the tools of science and technology are not contextualized or culturally specific, they are less likely to provide the kind of access to quality information and services that people in other communities enjoy.

For example, some anti-smoking websites, Warren noted, are interactive and allow communities to engage and frame the anti-smoking campaign in their own terms, by including links to information published by the local church, or by listing events happening in other local environments such as the hair salon, the schools and so on. Thus technology is embedded in the material and imaginative space of community – and works best when framed in terms of and addressed to the community.

PANEL III: CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES TO RACIAL AND ETHNIC EQUALITY

In the face of social inequalities, what are effective strategies for

ground level activism and coalition building? This question animated much of the discussion of the third panel. Pointing to some of the contemporary challenges to racial and ethnic equality today, **Keesha Middlemass**, Assistant Professor of Political Science at RU-Newark, provided



Keesha Middlemass, Political Science, Rutgers-Newark

distressing numbers about the incarceration and re-incarceration rates of communities of color and discussed how a felony conviction operates like a disability long after one is released from prison. "We don't revoke your passport when we send you to jail; we just deny you everything that makes you a citizen," Middlemass noted.

The inequities created and perpetuated by the criminal justice system are echoed in the vast inequities in educational access. **Beth Rubin**, Associate Professor in the Graduate School of Education, RU-NB, explained that students' understandings of civic engagement vary greatly



Beth Rubin, Graduate School of Education, Rutgers-NB

as a function of their socio-economic experiences. In a research project that took her to classrooms all around the state of New Jersey to foster civic engagement, Rubin explained that students were asked to adopt an issue of their interest

and organize around it. Quite tellingly, a group of students in a wealthy area chose to lobby for the right to carry their backpacks with them when school policy required them to be placed in lockers. Another group of student in a more disadvantaged area chose the issue of murder and public safety. The vast differences in life experience work their way into the educational system in ways that require much more attention than they typically receive.

Exploring electoral strategies and racial coalitions, **Nancy DiTomaso**, Professor in the Business School, RU-Newark, connected the challenge of focusing people's attention on issues of inequity across racial groups to the realities of elections and voting in the United States. DiTomaso called attention to the fact that whites do not typically spend much time thinking about racial inequality - especially in this two-party political system - and asked how their lack of interest challenges broader electoral efforts. Her project is aimed at highlighting the mechanisms through which political institutions facilitate racial inequalities by making it easy for white voters to isolate themselves and ignore the inequalities that continue to characterize American society.



Nancy DiTomaso, Business School, Rutgers-Newark

To address these challenges, the panelists highlighted the need for ground level activism and coalition building. How can coalitions bridge the vast disparities that separate communities by race, class and interests? **Heidi Swarts**, Assistant Professor of Political Science, RU-Newark, discussed the challenges facing grass-roots organizations but also observed their surprising successes. Swarts described ACORN as the most successful community organizing effort in the country, which unfortunately, fell prey to the electoral politics



Heidi Swarts, Political Science, Rutgers-Newark

described earlier by DiTomaso. During a time of fragmentation in political organizing, panelists agreed that coalition building is a crucial step towards change. Finally, echoing the earlier panel discussions about the importance of attentiveness to the needs of different communities and the ways in which we continue to be divided by language, space and place, Rubin noted that it is important to understand the contexts and circumstances of various communities to be able to create those bridges that will reduce inequalities. These topics seem all the more important in New Jersey, a state with tremendous race and ethnic diversity that must address the needs of immigrants, as transnational subjects or as young citizens who have experienced violence at an early age.

CONCLUSION

The Faculty forum fostered rich discussions on race and ethnicity across schools and disciplines, generated new relationships, and furthered the strong intellectual community of scholars addressing issues of race and ethnicity. The CRE welcomes faculty to submit ideas for future programming on issues of or relating to race and ethnicity; you may contact us at raceethnicity@sas.rutgers.edu.

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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.

