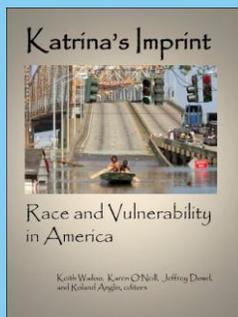


**Katrina's Imprint: Race and Vulnerability in America**

*A roundtable celebrating a new CRE publication which explores Katrina's tangled logic of vulnerability and examines the place of the disaster in the public memory*



New Book from the CRE: *Katrina's Imprint: Race and Vulnerability in America*, Rutgers UP (July 2010).

**Participants/Authors:**

- ❖ Karen O'Neill (Human Ecology);
- ❖ Mia Bay (History/CRE);
- ❖ Keith Wailoo (CRE);
- ❖ Roland Anglin (Planning and Public Policy);
- ❖ Ann Fabian (American Studies/CRE);
- ❖ Niki Dickerson (School of Management and Labor Relations);
- ❖ Jack Aiello (Psychology);
- ❖ Evie Shockley (English);
- ❖ Jeffrey Dowd (Sociology)

**In this Issue:**

**Katrina's Imprint: Race and Vulnerability in America**

- **From CRE Director Keith Wailoo**
- **The Tangled Logic of Vulnerability**
- **Katrina and 9/11 in the Collective Imaginary**
- **Forgetting and Remembering Katrina**

**Call For Panelists: 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Faculty Forum**

**Meet the Center's New GAs!**

**Upcoming Events at the CRE**



**FROM CRE DIRECTOR KEITH WAILOO**

Five years ago with the shocking images of Hurricane Katrina still vivid in the nation's imagination, the plan for the Rutgers Center for Race and Ethnicity was being developed. The goal of the CRE was to create a venue for bringing together scholars from across departments, disciplines, and schools at the university to deepen our discussion of race and ethnicity in the world. The CRE's first conference, on Hurricane Katrina, became the first of many vital and captivating cross-disciplinary meetings, symposia, and roundtables. The success of that initial conference, which drew together a diverse group of Rutgers scholars, teachers, and researchers to reflect on the lessons of the tragedy, revealed such a remarkable range of expertise and such insightful reflections on the lessons of the tragedy that the conversation continued, and a collection of essays emerged. *Katrina's Imprint: Race and Vulnerability in America*, published as the first volume in a new series *RU Press Studies in Race and Ethnicity*, embodies the CRE's enduring mission: to illuminate the university's unique expertise in

the study of race and ethnicity, and to exemplify the power of cross-disciplinary analysis for illuminating the intricate ways in which race and ethnicity shapes and is shaped by modern societies.

Keith Wailoo, Founding Director, Rutgers Center for Race and Ethnicity



*Karen O'Neill, Human Ecology, Rutgers-NB*

The CRE began the Fall 2010 semester by hosting a lively discussion to reflect on the continuing significance of Hurricane Katrina. This event celebrated the publication of *Katrina's Imprint: Race and Vulnerability in America*, the first volume in a new Rutgers University Press series about race and ethnicity. The discussion brought together the volume's authors, Rutgers scholars from a variety of disciplines, and a wide audience committed to teaching, learning and remembering the lessons of Katrina. The gathering continued the conversation that began at the CRE a little less than five years ago at the roundtable event "Katrina, New Orleans, Race, and the Fate of the Nation."

**THE TANGLED LOGIC OF VULNERABILITY**

During the discussion, the authors reflected upon the inequitable social relationships that increase the risks of harm during "natural disasters," and explained why certain segments of the population experienced greater vulnerability during Hurricane Katrina. While media accounts after the hurricane captured certain features and

causes of the city's vulnerability (ex. a below-sea-level geographic location and its location on the gulf shore), reporters struggled to represent the complex factors that the edited volume examines: racial and class segregation, socio-economic disparities, historic and structural racism, infrastructural neglect, environmental constraints, and federal powers.

Karen O'Neill, for example, explained that a question that kept coming back in the media was "Why couldn't the victims just get in their cars and drive away? Why couldn't the victims of Katrina just leave?" as if the outcome of Katrina were a matter of personal responsibility. However, O'Neill explained that the federal flood control program was in fact responsible for the policies that left the city of

***"After the storm, many asked naively, 'Why couldn't the victims of Katrina just get in their cars and drive away?'" – Karen O'Neill***

New Orleans vulnerable. A sophisticated evacuation plan was created for people with cars, but there was no practical plan for people without cars. Mia Bay illuminated the continuing racial disparities in access to transportation: “Of the 270,000 Katrina survivors stuck in New Orleans, 93 percent were black.” And those left behind shared characteristics that are often unevenly distributed by race. They were predominantly poor and unskilled. Poverty is one of the major reasons why many of the evacuees did not manage to leave before the storm. They lacked the resources to either travel or support themselves once they relocated. Because “*carlessness*” was a state that was more likely to affect low-income African-Americans, race was undeniably an important element in the unfolding of Katrina’s events.



Roland Anglin, *Bloustein School, Rutgers-NB*

Roland Anglin also highlighted the vulnerability caused by historic and structural racism. In the book, he wrote “the first images from New Orleans of African Americans stranded on highway overpasses and rooftops waiting to be rescued, and of black bodies decaying in filthy water below them, suggested that historic and structural racism had produced vulnerability by devaluing lives and devaluing a city” (*Katrina’s Imprint*; p. 45). In addition to raced bodies, other populations such as the ill and the elderly were made particularly

***“Why has Katrina been associated with shame in the public imaginary?” – Evie Shockley***

vulnerable by existing societal structures, according to Keith Wailoo. He explained that the region of New Orleans has a large population with kidney failure because of diabetes. Low income citizens rarely have access to healthy food choices, because they are expensive and not widely available in impoverished neighborhoods. During Katrina, many patients who were waiting for dialysis could not be treated because the process required clean water, running electricity, medical staff, and facilities that were lacking. The government, which made the commitment to provide free dialysis treatment to anyone in need, could not honor its promise during the hurricane. The inability to deliver services to bodies in extreme need led to portrayals of America as a third world country. This long history of vulnerabilities, brought forth by racism, poverty, and inequality, suggests in many ways that the disaster of Katrina was not simply “natural” but rather “man-made.”

#### **KATRINA AND 9/11 IN THE COLLECTIVE IMAGINARY**

During the discussion, panelists and audience members interrogated the place of Katrina in the collective imagination, comparing it to another national traumatic event: 9/11. Multiple questions emerged: Why didn’t the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina bring the nation together the way 9/11 did? Why has 9/11 become a centerpiece in American rhetorical and



Jeff Dowd, *Department of Sociology, Rutgers-NB*

legislative positioning, while Hurricane Katrina has already been forgotten by college students across the nation? Why has the one event become a badge of shame, and the other a source of patriotic pride?

Jeff Dowd commented that perhaps this has been the case because the events of Katrina have had so little political utility for politicians and other public officials, whereas 9/11 immediately became part of a national project of warfare. The media, he insisted, has framed and reframed Katrina as a story of unmitigated disaster—without depicting the rehabilitative alliances and unities forged in its aftermath. In other words, the government and the media saw few benefits in telling or retelling a story that mostly had negative connotations in the public sphere and which could potentially unveil the failures of America as a nation. Evie Shockley stated that Katrina has become associated with shame in the public imaginary. She concluded her presentation by stating, “Nobody *wants* to remember Katrina. We talk about 9/11 every day. 9/11 brought us together. The events of Katrina were terrifying, and such a *shame*, that people seem to try to forget.”

Karen O’Neill suggested that the events following the hurricane were a “severe test of cultural and national unity” that urged us to consider whether in fact we regarded New Orleans as a part of the United States. After all, New Orleans is not only one of the poorer, more densely African American cities in the United States, its history is one of intense colonialism,

racial mixture, and cultural, linguistic and legal hybridity. In many ways—historical, racial, cultural and legal—New Orleans has been simultaneously a defining location within the U.S. and an extra-national space, known for its cultural difference from the rest of the nation. Like New York, it is a destination for interstate tourism, and a source of both pride and revenue for the nation. But unlike New York City following 9/11, New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina has come to be regarded as a site of “special interests” rather than national interest.

Or perhaps, in Professor Busia’s words, New Orleans was abandoned—politically, rhetorically, and by the nation’s consciousness—because it is simply a place in which “the bodies always look like us”: black. Indeed, representing the tragedy of Katrina in the media or in the public imaginary as a national rallying point would require (re)imagining black bodies, vulnerable, damaged and resilient, as real citizens of the nation.

#### **FORGETTING AND REMEMBERING KATRINA**

One of the most important questions the roundtable raised is, “How can the lessons from Katrina be remembered?” Unfortunately, the panelists agreed that the general tendency today is to forget Katrina rather than to draw concrete lessons from it. As Ann Fabian noted, there has been a “receding of Katrina.” She observed that her undergraduate students barely remember the event, and when they do, view it as a historical reference (akin to the dust bowl tragedy) rather than parts of a lived experience.

Similarly, the lessons of Katrina did not necessarily bear fruits, as many panelists note that previous

***“There is a general tendency to forget Katrina, rather than to draw concrete lessons from it.” – Keith Wailoo***

inequalities are being re-inscribed today. Roland Anglin explained that in New Orleans today the powers before Katrina are reasserting their dominance, revealing the entrenched class interests that led to Katrina in the first place. Class differences are even more pronounced than before, as the hurricane wiped away a buffer class of middle-class African-Americans, who have left and have not returned in force. Similarly, Niki Dickerson discussed the ways in which resettlement patterns in New Orleans are only proving to recreate prior inequalities.

The public discourse on Katrina has facilitated the forgetting of Katrina, as well as a certain unwillingness to reflect constructively on its legacy. Therefore, an important question, which animated the panelists, was “what kind of ‘forgetting’ has emerged in the public sphere in the aftermath of Katrina?” Ann Fabian’s article “Seeing Katrina’s Dead” tackled this question through the study of a cultural phenomenon: the images of dead bodies



Ann Fabian, *American Studies/History, Rutgers-NB*

that flooded the public sphere after Katrina. She explained that the juxtaposition of these bodies, presented as destitute, unclaimed, and heavily racialized led to “deeper” forgetting because these bodies

were not viewed as individual victims, but faceless entities. In the same line of thought, Evie Shockley explained that Katrina victims are viewed as ghostly figures, which are uncivilized and incapable of creating homes. The theme of “gothic homelessness” signifies the feeling of not belonging (in New Orleans, in the United States) that African-Americans were made to experience in the aftermath of the storm, and are strongly reminiscent of the history of slavery and the second class citizenship of Blacks in the U.S.

According to Jeff Dowd, the media also had an important role to play in this logic of “forgetting.” The words used to describe the event and the recurrence of omissions were themselves symptomatic of the desire to bury Katrina’s memory. The media rarely had stories about the significance of Katrina. Instead, Katrina was used as a device to make sense of other disasters. He

gave the example of the I-35 bridge collapse in 2007 in Minneapolis/St. Paul. By comparing the bridge collapse (that was the result of a structural deficiency but could have harmed anyone, regardless of race or socio-economic status) to Katrina (the result of many structural deficiencies that were bound to harm certain segments of the population more than others), the media was implying that these two events were similar and in no way shape or form attached to social inequalities. Like Dowd, Niki Dickerson advocated for the use of language that stresses long-standing histories of structural inequalities in the description of Katrina. She provided the example of the South African term “Apartheid Gap,” which not only suggests that there is a discrepancy today between the educational achievements of descendants of whites and Blacks, but also that this discrepancy has its roots in a long history of discrimination during the

Apartheid. If the outcomes of Katrina are similarly shaped by disparities, the language should suggest it.

In light of these issues, the question remains: How can we best remember Katrina in the classroom, in public policy settings, in the media, and in society at large? In an attempt to answer this question, many of the panelists turned to the academic’s role as educator. Ann Fabian told the audience “our cultural work primarily takes place in the classroom. It is our charge.” Jack Aiello concluded that the fact that so many scholars from so many disciplines have come together to examine Katrina is a truly positive development. Indeed, continued conversations are exactly what is necessary, and the articles in the book will engender such discussions in and beyond the classroom. Re-imprinting memories from Katrina in the classroom and the collective imaginary is certainly one of the goals of the volume *Katrina’s Imprint*.

**CALL FOR PANELISTS: 5TH ANNUAL FACULTY FORUM ON RACE AND ETHNICITY  
WEDNESDAY, DEC. 1, 9:00 AM  
PANE ROOM, ALEXANDER LIBRARY, CAC**

On Wednesday, Dec. 1, 2010, the Center for Race and Ethnicity will host its 5th annual one-day forum for Rutgers scholars doing research relating to race and ethnicity. We encourage faculty from all parts of the university – ranging across schools, disciplines and departments – to join an already-forming group who will be sharing work, meeting colleagues, and hearing about new research at Rutgers. The meeting is part of an ongoing initiative to promote interdisciplinary exchange and intellectual collaborations, and to shape the evolving agenda of the Center for Race and Ethnicity.

**PLEASE RSVP by Friday, Nov. 12:** Faculty who wish to present 5 minute descriptions of their work and to participate in conversation about research trends and developments are asked to send a brief description of their work, a CV, and contact information to: [raceethnicity@sas.rutgers.edu](mailto:raceethnicity@sas.rutgers.edu). Please feel free to contact Professor Keith Wailoo, Director, [kwailoo@ifh.rutgers.edu](mailto:kwailoo@ifh.rutgers.edu), or Mia Kissil, Senior Program Coordinator: [mkissil@rci.rutgers.edu](mailto:mkissil@rci.rutgers.edu) with any questions. Recently-hired faculty members are especially encouraged to attend and speak about their work.

## Meet the Center's New GAs!

This year, four 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** returns to the Center this year as a fifth-year doctoral candi-



date in Media Studies in the School of Communication & Information. 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, the old 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 is a 2009 Dissertation Proposal Development Fellow through the Social Science Research Council.

**Simone Delerme** is a fifth-year PhD student in the Department of Anthropology. She is interested in "new" destinations of Latino and Latin American migration, community development, and housing markets. Her dissertation research examines social class formation, racialization, and the residential experiences of Puerto Rican homeowners living in suburban developments of Orlando, Florida who were greatly affected by the US mortgage crisis.



**Liz Reich** is a seventh-year doctoral student in Literatures in English interested in filmic representations of race and global minority politics. Her dissertation on the evolution of the figure of the black soldier in Hollywood and black independent cinema from



WWII through the Civil Rights Movement aims to demonstrate the centrality of racial representation to the development of the United States'

postwar film industry and its cinematic public spheres.

**Sonja Thomas** is a PhD candidate in Women's and Gender Studies. Through an interdisciplinary analysis of "Aryan" and "Dravidian" racial identities, she interrogates communal histories



which champion the belief that the Syrian Christians of Kerala, India are converted Brahmins. Brahmins in Kerala are thought to be from the Aryan race, and separated from the other castes who are Dravidian. She specifically traces this Aryan Brahmin/Dravidian low-caste divide through a detailed analysis of how caste and religious divisions are maintained today—through the ritualization of female sexuality through endogamous (in-caste/in-faith) marriages. Her dissertation refocuses the category of race in South Asia as a very real identity subject to social forces and operating as a way of comprehending, explaining and acting in the world.

## Upcoming Events at the CRE

- ❖ **Lecture: "There Goes The Neighborhood: Race, Resilience and Environmental Change"** *Patricia Finney, Department of Environmental Science, Policy and Management, UC-Berkeley*  
Friday, October 29, 2010, 3:00pm, Lucy Stone Hall, Room B115, Livingston Campus
- ❖ **Film Event: "Good Hair"**  
Wednesday, November 3, 2010, 4:30pm, Graduate Student Lounge, College Avenue Campus
- ❖ **5<sup>th</sup> Annual Faculty Forum on Race and Ethnicity**  
Wednesday, December 1, 2010, 9:00am, Pane Room, Alexander Library, College Avenue Campus

## The Center for Race and Ethnicity

**Address:** Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 191 College Avenue, 1<sup>st</sup> Floor, New Brunswick, NJ 08901

**Phone:** (732) 932-2181

**Fax:** (732) 932-2198

**E-mail:**

[raceethnicity@sas.rutgers.edu](mailto:raceethnicity@sas.rutgers.edu)

**Website:**

<http://raceethnicity.rutgers.edu>

**Director:** Keith Wiloo, CRE

**Associate Director:** Mia Bay, History

**Acting Director (Spring 2011):** Ann Fabian, American Studies/History

**Senior Program Coordinator:** Mia Kissil

**Graduate Assistants/Editors:**

**Jill Campaiola, Media Studies;**

**Simone Delerme, Anthropology;**

**Liz Reich, English; Sonja Thomas, Women's and Gender Studies.**

**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.

