

**Race, Ethnicity and the Francophone World**

**Panelists:**

- Ousseina Alidou (AMESALL)
- Barbara Cooper (History)
- Renée Larrier (French)
- Matt Matsuda (History/Dean, Honors Program)
- Zakia Salime (Sociology/Women's & Gender Studies)
- Derek Schilling (French)

**In this Issue:**

**Race, Ethnicity and the Francophone World**

- **French Universality and the Republican Ideal**
- **Hybridity in the Metropole and in Postcolonial Nations**
- **The Language of Race in the Francophone World**

**Upcoming Events**

*CRE's Mission Statement:*

- *To facilitate research and enrich education on matters of race and ethnicity in contemporary life in America, in New Jersey, and the world*
- *To promote collaborations and foster 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*
- *To identify critical areas for future research and support race and ethnicity research and policy development*

What are the legacies of French colonialism, and how do they shape racial categories? How are racial categories lived in the Francophone world?

On February 4, 2011, the CRE sponsored a roundtable discussion with Ousseina Alidou (AMESALL), Barbara Cooper (History), Renée Larrier (French), Matt Matsuda (History/Dean, Honors Program), Zakia Salime (Sociology/Women's & Gender Studies), and Derek Schilling (French) on race and ethnicity in France and the former French colonies. Together, we explored the following questions: How does diversity function in the Francophone world? What are the legacies of French colonialism, and how do they shape racial categories? How are racial categories lived in the Francophone world?

**FRENCH UNIVERSALITY AND THE REPUBLICAN IDEAL**

Focusing on the category of "Frenchness," panelists exchanged ideas and criticized France's official discourse of universality, which articulates a common cultural identity for all French subjects. This official discourse argues that to be French is to be a citizen of France regardless of origin, race, or religion. Thus, a citizen is "French first and foremost," while race and religion are downplayed. Panelists pointed out the failure of the French republican ideal to accommodate the lived multicultural reality of many citizens, particularly those with origins in West Africa and the Maghreb.

Barbara Cooper (History) discussed the counting and

lack of counting of ethnic populations in France and the former French colonies as a way to understand the visibility and invisibility of race in the Francophone world. She argued that there is a long history of counting people in the Third World and that "to count is to govern." According to Professor Cooper, the metropole's internal approach to citizenship follows the thinking, "If you don't count difference, you don't have to see it." However, she argued, the 2005 riots prompted self-reflection in France and made racial tensions hyper-visible. In 2005 Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy (who is now the President of France), provoked this civil unrest by suggesting that La Courneuve, an immigrant suburb outside of Paris, metaphorically be cleansed with a Kärcher--a high-pressure cleaning system used on building and monument exteriors. Cooper argued that the reference to a Kärcher signaled the leaders' desire to return to "monumental purity." This can certainly be interpreted as a failure of French universality at the highest levels of leadership.



Barbara Cooper, History, RU-NB

Derek Schilling (French) described a shift in

***"The metropole's internal approach to citizenship follows the thinking 'if you don't count difference, you don't have to see it.'"***

***-Barbara Cooper***

metropolitan France from the invisibility of race to its heightened visibility over a 50-year span. He claimed that, in the past, raced-subjects were described with the generic label, "immigrant laborer." Whatever their professional and educational background in their home country, once in France these laborers were considered part of the unskilled workforce.



Derek Schilling, French, RU-NB

Migrant laborers were perceived as temporary residents, and therefore subject to geographic isolation, limited involvement in the public sphere, and alienation from labor unions. According to Schilling, this began to change with a new visibility of ethnic markers and the "right to difference" movement launched in the early 1980's by "second

generation” immigrants. Despite growing educational credentials amongst minority populations, these groups have not seen corresponding gains in participation in the workforce. This has led to a contemporary crisis which Schilling associates with “the failure to eradicate endemic discrimination,” and “a split between the official discourse of a color-blind nation and the lived reality.”

As panelists pointed out, “the question that confronts the French is how to get beyond facile categorizations.” Schilling argued that census data, now expanded to recognize immigrant origins, does increase awareness, and that there is a move to open up hiring practices in an effort to equal opportunity. For example, anonymous CV’s that omit candidates’ names and pictures are becoming more popular. Territory-based approach to combat inequalities have targeted impoverished zones (rather than ethnic or minority groups) to receive benefits. Still, the paradox remains: the republican ideal of French universality is sharply contrasted with the lived experience of religious, racial and ethnic intolerance.

### HYBRIDITY IN THE METROPOLE AND IN POSTCOLONIAL NATIONS

Turning to consider the ways in which the former colonies have complicated identity politics in the Francophone world, the panelists discussed the various flows of culture that define the complex relationship between the metropole and the country’s numerous colonies. In France, immigrants from former colonies such as Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco, bring cultural diversity and a richer, multi-layered definition of French culture. In the former colonies, individuals have to withstand the lingering influence of French power even after independence,

while at the same time negotiating their own complex and layered identities. In an effort to describe such mixing and interpenetration of culture, panelists discussed the concept of “hybridity”—how individuals embody multiple and, at times, seemingly contradictory cultural identities in the post-colonial era.

Both Cooper and Schilling argued that hybrid identities are not celebrated in France. While the influx of immigrants from former colonies has given rise to new forms of hyphenated citizenship beyond the traditional concept of the *Français de souche* [100 percent French], it has been difficult for immigrants and their children to claim their ethnic and multicultural background publicly. While the French insistence on secularism and “Frenchness” would seem to guarantee a climate of tolerance, in actuality they are part of a governmental and cultural machinery that works against both public displays and private identities of hybridity.

By contrast, Matt Matsuda argued, many postcolonial nations celebrate hybridity. “In Polynesia, the ideology of multicultural blending is presented as a paradise rhetoric to mask existing ethnic divides,” he explained. Giving the example of the three main candidates for the Presidential election—Gaston Flosse (of French and Polynesian descent), Oscar Temaru (of Haitian and



Matt Matsuda, History/Dean, Honors Program, RU-NB

Polynesian descent), and Gaston Tong Sang (of Chinese descent)—Matsuda described how each candidate presented a paradise rhetoric of hybridity of the type, “we are all mixed, so we all love each other,” while at the same time defending the specific interests of their own ethnic groups.

### “Can a woodcarving be French?”

--Matt Matsuda

However, hybridity is not always ripe with tensions according to Zakia Salime. She explained that young people in Morocco are able to take ownership of a variety of colonial, global, and local discourses, and gave the example of the production of rap songs that successfully mix French, Arabic, and the Moroccan dialect Darija. While Ousseina Alidou agreed that more emphasis should be placed on the autonomy of the subject in various forms of cultural blending, she also wondered whether the term



Zakia Salime, Sociology/Women's and Gender Studies, RU-NB

“hybridity” should be used at all when discussing the influence of the French culture in formerly colonized nations. She said “the word hybridity reflects the mixing of culture, but leaves the question of power and hegemonic colonial discourse out of the picture.”

Finally, Alidou added that the reach of French culture in former colonies is rather limited today, and that therefore the idea of a post-colonial culture of hybridity may be an overstatement anyway. In Niger for example, Francophone culture is the only preserve of elites, who have chosen to acquire power through the

colonial system and its infrastructures following the independence. While they use French as a means of class distinction, less than 10 percent of the population of Niger speaks French today. She concluded by saying “in that context, how Francophone are we?”



Ousseina Alidou, AMESALL, RU-NB

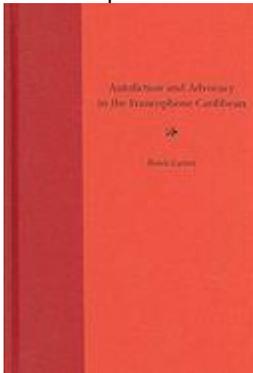
### THE LANGUAGE OF RACE IN THE FRANCOPHONE WORLD

Considering both the extensiveness and the limitations of the reach of French, panelists identified language practices as a means of racial and ethnic expression and resistance in the Francophone world. As Matsuda explained, language shapes the way in which France approached colonization of the Pacific. Focusing on the cases of Tahiti and New Caledonia, he described that while other powers (such as the Samoans) landed on New Caledonia saying “Nice island, we’ll take it,” France approached colonization through a different language: “Nice island, we’ll take it, *there’s nobody here.*” Language also shapes how cultural expression from the region is understood. For example, woodcarving in New Caledonia is a form of cultural expression that is often overlooked and/or misunderstood by France because the very idea of “cultural expression” is predetermined by French language and culture. Matsuda asked, “can a woodcarving be French?” This provocative question caused the audience to reflect on the practices of “reading” race and ethnicity in the Francophone world.

Ousseina Alidou’s presentation on language in Niger asked us to “rethink the paradigms of literacy.” The French education system in

Niger has produced a generation of African interpreters. As a result, knowledge of indigenous scripts is not recognized as “literacy.” Official recognition of the French language alone erases histories and cultures. Alidou’s research attends to this erasure, focusing on the “lullabies of our grandmothers” and poetry written in indigenous scripts.

Renée Larrier discussed how language can be an indication of the way in which race functions across multiple ethnic and national groups. In Guadeloupe and Martinique, racial imaginaries are limited to either Blackness or Whiteness. Yet, as Larrier explained, there is a significant population of South Asians in Guadeloupe and



*Renée Larrier is the author of Autofiction and Advocacy in the Francophone Caribbean (Univ. Press of Florida, 2006)*

Martinique—descendants of nineteenth-century indentured workers from India who were recruited by the French to replace the newly-free Black population on the plantations. After many years of struggle, Hindi and Tamil (and Creole) were finally recognized by the government as official regional languages. They

are now taught in primary and secondary schools and at the Université des Antilles et de la Guyane. Larrier’s research complicates the Black/White color binary of race in the Caribbean Francophone world by examining how the issues of race, class, gender, and color are represented in Caribbean literature d’expression française.

Zakia Salime’s presentation similarly examined language and racial binaries. Her earlier work examined the feminist movement in Morocco and the language of feminist expression. Should feminist writing be in Arabic? Or French? Many times, feminist groups had ties to French NGOs, causing them to write in the French language. Yet Moroccan feminists’ use of the French language was rejected as unpatriotic and even suspicious. Salime’s current research on Moroccan hip-hop and rap music reveals that the Arabic/French binary is much more complicated. According to her research participants, the general feeling was that Moroccan youth speak Moroccan—a dialect of Arabic. As Salime explained, lyrics to Moroccan rap are written on the internet in Latin letters. Unpronounceable sounds are given the numbers 3, 7 or 9. Therefore, Moroccan rap is not necessarily speaking to the Francophone world, or to the Arab world, but is telling us something else, something different and new. For Salime, “the subaltern is speaking” through Moroccan rap.

The roundtable was an extraordinary opportunity for students and faculty interested in Francophone

studies to meet beyond the confines of their own departments. Professor Matt Matsuda welcomed the opportunity of the roundtable. “We are rarely given the chance to talk about French colonies from such a variety of perspectives; this discussion was like a mini-tour of the Francophone world from France, to North and Western Africa, to the Caribbean, and to the Pacific Islands.” One French student, who connected with participants and other audience members after the event said “I am at Rutgers for five years now and it is the first time I hear French spoken on-campus, it is so great to be able to communicate in French with other scholars.”

### Upcoming Events at the CRE

- ❖ **Film Event: “Rules of the Game” Post-screening discussion with director Jörg Focke and stars of the film.**

Thursday, April 14, 2011, 4:30pm, Graduate Student Lounge, 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: 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 Delorme, Anthropology;**  
**Liz Reich, English;**  
**Sonja Thomas, Women’s and Gender Studies.**



