New Perspectives

On October 2, 2010, Oberlin faculty in history, sociology, CAS, and the MRC organized a symposium titled “Immigration Tomorrow: Alternative Narratives for Arizona and Beyond.” This event was an opportunity for faculty, students, and staff to discuss the far-reaching impact of Arizona’s anti-immigration legislation, SB 1070, on immigrants and Latina/o residents in Arizona in particular, as well as to consider the profound implications of SB 1070 on collective understandings of national identity, race, security, citizenship, and human rights.

The symposium’s keynote speaker, associate professor Karen Leong of Arizona State University, spoke powerfully of SB 1070’s reliance on racial profiling and surveillance for immigration enforcement and how the attendant discourses regarding homeland security and national identity undermine liberal democracy’s promise to protect individual liberties and equality before the law. While SB 1070 has rightfully captured the political attention of scholars, legislators, and activists across the U.S., Arizona’s HB 2281—legislation banning ethnic studies curriculum in Arizona public schools—has received less attention. The symposium’s afternoon panel engaged specifically with the repercussions of HB 2281 and featured Professor Leong’s presentation about the impact the legislation has on Arizona students, as well as a brilliant talk by CAS senior, Eric Oeur, about how ethnic studies has changed his life.

Given rising nativist sentiments across the U.S. and ongoing mischaracterizations of CAS and ethnic and queer studies at Oberlin, we decided to forego the usual director’s letter, and instead publish an excerpt from Gina Pérez’s talk about challenges to ethnic studies programs and anti-immigrant legislation:

Ethnic Studies Speaks
Gina Perez, Associate Professor and Director of CAS

The challenges facing ethnic studies programs have deep roots both inside and outside of the academy. In his efforts to defend ethnic studies curricula at all levels of the U.S. educational system, Chicano scholar Rudy Acuña admits, “it’s very difficult to sell ethnic studies,” not only to the general public, but even within academia. In recent struggles to appeal HB 2281, teachers, scholars, activists, lawyers, students, and community members have argued for the inherent value of an ethnic studies curriculum that provides a broader understanding of American history and society, to include the experiences of those historically marginalized from narratives of American national identity, such as Latinos, African Americans, Native and Asian Americans, and LGBTQ communities. Moreover, research reveals the ways that such curricula bolster the retention of students with high dropout rates (According to the Pew Hispanic Center, for example, Latino youth—the youngest and fastest growing demographic in the U.S. today—continue to have low levels of academic achievement and index the highest dropout rates in the nation, with Puerto Ricans and immigrant youth in particular having the lowest levels of education).
Critics of ethnic studies disregard these arguments and advance instead a vision of American education that celebrates a unified national identity and national history. In a press release following the passage of HB 2281, former Arizona school superintendent Tom Horne (who authored the bill and was key to successfully pushing it through the legislature) argued, “Traditionally, the American public school system has brought together students from different backgrounds and taught them to be Americans and to treat each others as individuals and not on the basis of their ethnic backgrounds. This is consistent with the fundamental American value that we are all individuals, not exemplars of whatever ethnic groups we were born into. Ethnic Studies programs teach the opposite, and are designed to promote ethnic chauvinism.”

While this is certainly (and thankfully) not the sentiment shared here at Oberlin regarding ethnic studies, many of the local concerns and anxieties surrounding CAS are of the same nativist cloth. Unlike other majors on campus, CAS is often regarded as ideological, hostile, and fundamentally driven by identity politics. This mischaracterization elides the long-standing intellectual work of scholars (within the college and beyond) whose research has helped to build new areas of knowledge, advance novel theoretical frameworks for understanding the complexities of our increasingly globalized and transnational world, and provide literary, artistic, as well as empirical research investigating new social formations. This mischaracterization also belies our alleged commitments to respectful civil discourse, a value that should, indeed, characterize our college community.

Unfortunately, this luxury of listening and respectful engagement is sometimes not afforded to those closest to home. While I acknowledge that the “CAS paradigm” of race, class, gender, and sexuality can be used as a bludgeon (a term I borrow from my colleague Meredith Raimondo), many of the critiques leveled at CAS—that it doesn’t attend properly to issues of class, that it is merely a celebration of difference, or that it is simply identity politics and ideological—are often not empirically based. Despite our best intentions, we are not always open to listening and learning from others with different points of view, and we are often reluctant to embrace and value other methodological and epistemological approaches to traditional areas of inquiry. I attribute this failure, in part, to the anxieties new epistemologies and methodologies often provoke, and how given the curriculum’s insistence on an analysis of power that attends to various axes of difference, including class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, some may feel personally attacked and made to feel responsible for the very power inequalities so many on campus work so hard to address. Let me be clear: neither CAS nor ethnic studies is designed to promote “ethnic chauvinism” or guilt; nor are they any more ideological than other fields of study. Perhaps the most radical feature of CAS and ethnic studies curricula is not its attention to difference or even to group-based identities, but, rather, its analytic focus on the contexts of social inequality in which these differences are forged, sustained, and reproduced over time. Scholarly attention to an analysis of power in its varied forms and locations can be disquieting, uncomfortable, and offers a challenge to traditional ways of knowing and being.

American studies scholars have long argued for the recognition of the ways in which new spatial and social relations shape what we know in the world. George Lipsitz notes, for example, that “new social relations create new social subjects who inevitably create new epistemologies and new ontologies—new ways of knowing and new ways of being.” Recent demographic changes within the U.S. and globally, writes Lipsitz, “compel us to rethink some long-established beliefs and concepts.” This kind of critical rethinking is at the heart of liberal arts learning and is central to its mission. According to Oberlin College’s mission statement, there are clear, identifiable goals for an Oberlin education. Among them are:

1. Help students learn how to “think
   with intellectual rigor, creativity, and

MEET OUR OKUM VISITING PROFESSOR

Afia Ofori-Mensa is a visiting assistant professor of Comparative American Studies and African American Studies and an Oberlin College-University of Michigan (OKUM) Partnership postdoctoral fellow. She recently completed her PhD in American culture at the University of Michigan. Her dissertation, “Beauty, Bodies, and Boundaries: Pageants, Race, and U.S. National Identity,” utilizes beauty pageants as case studies to trace relationships among race, gender, and U.S. national identity throughout the 20th century and into the 21st. The highlight of her first semester at Oberlin was a capstone project for her course, How To Win a Beauty Pageant, in which she took students on a field trip to the Miss Gay America drag pageant in Columbus, Ohio, in October.
invited participant at a national transforming community project workshop/conference at Emory University. Representing the college, he was recently elected to the steering board of the Consortium for High Achievement and Success and cochair of the GLCA’s Committee on Institutional Commitment to Educational Equity. He also supervised practicums for two graduate students from the Higher Education Program at Bowling Green State University. One project focused on allyship, and the other on the activist history of Oberlin from a student perspective.

Janet Fiskio teaches environmental studies with a particular focus in the humanities. Her regular courses include Environmental Justice Literature (ENVS 304), Americans Agribusiness (ENVS 302), and Climate Change: Ethics, Equity, Narratives (ENVS 219). Her current research focuses in two areas: rethinking the concepts of place and citizenship in agrarian thought; and examining environmental justice literature and epistemology as strategies for bringing the sciences into democracy.

Meredith Gadsby continues to in her position as president of the Association of Caribbean Women Writers and Scholars. While spending a wonderful semester in London in spring 2010, she had the opportunity to continue her research on black British women writers. Along with her students, she enjoyed attending the Black Women’s Film Festival and the launch of Red: Contemporary Black British Poetry, the first anthology of its kind published in the United Kingdom. Meredith is now chair of the Department of African American Studies and looks forward to celebrating its 40th year.

Harry Hirsch started a term as chair of the politics department and has completed two professional papers: “Theorizing the First Amendment,” which will be published next year, and “Association and Exclusion: The Paradox of Liberal Democracy.”

Wendy Kozol taught a new course last fall titled Cultural Citizenships, which examines how Americans have historically negotiated the inclusions and exclusions of citizenship through a study of national media and popular cultures. She recently published “Filming the Care Chain: A Review Essay,” The Scholar & Feminist Online 8.1 (Fall 2009), www.barnard.edu/sfonline. In addition, Wendy continues to work on her book project on U.S. militarism, visual culture, and the ambivalences of witnessing.

Shelley Lee is spending 2010-11 on leave. Her book Claiming the Oriental Gateway: Prewar Seattle and Japanese America was published in December by Temple University Press. She is currently writing a new book, tentatively titled Pacific Crossings: A New History of Asian America. Shelley looks forward to returning to the classroom next year and especially to teaching a new course on the history of immigration in modern America.

Pablo Mitchell is on sabbatical for 2010-11.

Gina Pérez spent 2009-10 on sabbatical leave working in a variety of projects. She and her coeditors, Frank Guridy and Adrian Burgos Jr., completed the anthology Beyond El Barrio: Everyday Life in Latina/o America (NYU Press, 2010), and she continues to work on her book-length monograph “Creating Better Citizens: Latina/o Youth, JROTC, and the American Dream.” Gina is currently collaborating with anthropologist Luis Plascencia (Arizona State University) on a special issue for the Latino Studies Journal on Latinas/os and militarism.

NEW COURSES FOR SPRING

CAST 117: Immigrant and Second-Generation American Literature, Afia Ofori-Mensa
This survey course treats the experiences of immigrants of color and their American-born children as central to United States literatures of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. We will learn about literary close reading and oral history by using those methods to examine themes of language, identity, place, and culture. Our texts will include novels, autobiographies, and semi-autobiographical writing about immigrant families from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America, and the Middle East.

CAST 272: Disease, Democracy, and Difference, Meredith Raimondo
From yellow fever to H1N1 flu, disease has been central to the construction of the nation, revealing important differences in race, class, gender, and sexuality. This interdisciplinary course investigates the politics of health and illness in the United States through several historical and contemporary case studies. We pay particular attention to the contestations and collaborations between policy makers, health professionals, and community activists seeking to define and promote wellness.

ALUMNI HAPPENINGS

Daniel R. Domaguin, 2006
I'm currently the youth center therapist and health and fitness educator at the San Diego American Indian Health Center, serving urban American Indian and Alaska Native youth between the ages of 9 and 22. My primary responsibilities include individual/group/family therapy, crisis intervention, academic counseling, physical fitness programming (including a weekly martial arts class), and proper nutrition education, utilizing traditional nutrition models from different tribes. CAS teachings permeate my practice and the activities I get my kids involved in. For example, I had my youth take my art class, and proper nutrition education, and this fall developed a new course, Introduction to Native American Studies, which introduces students to the field through a focus on literature and cultural histories from the 18th century to the present. She is also currently completing her first book, A Future Perfect: Time, Queerness, Indigeneity. In addition, she presented a paper at the American Studies Association this fall about the Shadow Wolves drug trafficking unit in the context of Arizona's SB-1070 and is coeditor for a special issue of the online journal Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture entitled, "Cultural Productions of 9/11," which includes an essay by Wendy Kozol.

Lydia Pelot-Hobbs, 2007
I live in New Orleans and have been involved in a variety of projects locally and nationally since graduation. I've been continuing my work in finding ways to contribute to a radical left intellectualism grounded in and relevant to social movements. To that end, I'm currently finishing a master's degree in urban studies at the University of New Orleans, where I am completing a thesis on prisoner organizing at Angola Penitentiary during the 1980s. I'm also working with a police oversight group to document the history of racism and corruption in the New Orleans Police Department. For paid work, I have been serving as director of religious education at the First Unitarian Universalist Church of New Orleans for the past two years. Since graduation, I've also been a member of the board of directors of the North American Students of Cooperation (NASCO). Over the past year, I cofounded the Anti-Oppression Resource Training Alliance (AORTA), a national collective committed to strengthening movements for social justice and a solidarity economy through education, training, and planning. Last but most importantly, I am a...
Since leaving Oberlin, I enjoyed a relaxing summer, traveling within the U.S. to visit family and friends. This past fall, I moved back to Oberlin to take on a temporary, part-time contract position working at Asian Services in Actions, Inc. (ASIA). At ASIA, I conducted community outreach around health information and services, targeting the Vietnamese population in Cleveland and surrounding areas. My contract ends mid-December. While working, I have also started the graduate school application process. I am applying to various schools of public health with the hopes of earning a master's in public health, with a focus on improving the health of underserved communities.

**Yujean Park, 2010**

I moved to Philadelphia a week after graduation. In late August, my family and I traveled for two weeks around the Czech Republic and Germany, where I took photographs. I now work as a photography assistant at Bauman Rare Books, a rare and antiques book company. The caliber of material that comes in and out is pretty incredible; one of my first days, my boss said to me, “Don’t freak out, but the book you’re holding sold for $300,000.” In my hands was one of two signed editions of *The Catcher in the Rye.* I’m pretty sure I overreacted in spite of her warning. Beginning in late January, I’ll be TA’ing a class that I took during my semester at the Philadelphia Center called Exploring Relationships in Fiction and Film: Sex, Gender and Sexuality. Even though I am a very recent graduate, I’m reminded on a daily basis how much Oberlin and CAS prepared me to move on and adjust to life after graduation. For that, I’m incredibly grateful!

**Lauren Salazar, 2009**

Hello CASers! I graduated in 2009 with CAS and history majors. I’ve been living in Lima, Peru, teaching a variety of English classes since July 2009. I am planning my return to the U.S. in April 2011 hopefully to begin a master’s in public policy in the fall of 2011.

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**MEET OUR STUDENT MAJOR REPRESENTATIVE**

In the fall, Cordelia Loots-Gollin ’11 sat down with CAST’s student assistant, Alyson Halpert ’13, to talk about how her first winter-term experience at Oberlin has influenced her long-term career goals.

**Can you tell me about this internship?**

When I was a first-year, I was placed in Meredith Raimondo’s first-year seminar, *HIV/AIDS in America.* I became really interested in HIV prevention and public health, and it inspired me to intern with the public health district in my county at home. I interned with the Mobile Health Unit of Champagne Urbana Public Health District, and I rode around in this converted RV. The back bedroom had been turned into an examination table full of information about health services in the area. I rode around with Tammy, who was a nurse, and her assistant, Isabel. We drove to low-income residential areas, like mobile home parks, as well as rural apartment complexes and rural towns. It was exciting for my first winter term, because they needed help, and I really found my place within the organization. I helped them make connections with other people in the community and developed some information about community resources, especially concerning domestic violence, which is something they hadn’t had before.

**You said that you viewed this winter term as having shaped the rest of your time here. Can you talk about that?**

It made me really interested in becoming a social worker and making social change work a part of my life. I’m applying to social work schools now. When I think now in my Comparative American Studies classes about social justice and about having a society in which everybody has access to things they need, I think about the many factors that have to be addressed in order for one problem to be fixed. I guess it’s kind of like a Jane Adams approach. You give people housing, you give them food, you give them childcare, and then when they have those things maybe they can change something else. I like to think about things that way.

**What are you doing for your honors project?**

I’m studying how the CDC addresses issues of racial and sexual difference in their prevention materials for HIV. So I’m looking at how they adapt certain interventions for specific populations.
CAS FACULTY AND STAFF

**Core Faculty:**
Wendy Kozol, Professor
Shelley Lee, Assistant Professor, (on leave 2010-11)
Kara Thompson, Visiting Assistant Professor
Afia Ofori-Mensa, Visiting Assistant Professor
Meredith Raimondo, Associate Professor
Gina Pérez, Associate Professor and Director

**Comparative American Studies Program Committee:**
Kazim Ali, Assistant Professor of Creative Writing
Jan Cooper, John Charles Reid Associate Professor of Rhetoric and Composition
Pawan Dhingra, Associate Professor of Sociology
Eric Estes, Associate Dean/Director, Multicultural Resource Center, Adjunct Assistant Professor of CAS and History
Janet Fiskio, Assistant Professor of Environmental Studies
Meredith Gadsby, Associate Professor of African American Studies
Daphne John, Associate Professor of Sociology
Gillian Johns, Associate Professor English
Harry Hirsch, Professor of Politics
Pablo Mitchell, Associate Professor of History (on leave 2010-2011)
Renee Romano, Associate Professor of History

**Administrative Assistant:**
Judi Davidson

**Student Representative:**
Cordelia Loots-Gollin ’11

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