Weinstein Family Fellows Research Project:
THE POLITICS OF RACE, PLACE, AND SPACE

Dr. Achter is an assistant professor in the Department of Rhetoric and Communication Studies. Before arriving at Richmond in 2004, Achter worked as a post-doctoral fellow and consultant on a National Institutes of Health (NIH) grant studying public responses to human genetics research. Dr. Achter’s past projects have explored race and race identity in political culture and in the entertainment media, and his essays have appeared in several journals, including the Quarterly Journal of Speech, the Southern Communication Journal, and Politics and the Life Sciences. In 1999, he received the Outstanding Teaching Award from the University of Georgia. He currently teaches courses in rhetorical theory, practice, and criticism.

Professor Simpson is an Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Richmond in Richmond, Virginia. Her first book, The Tie that Binds (New York University Press, 1998), won the “Best Book of 1998 on Racial Identity” award from the Race, Ethnicity, and Politics section of the American Political Science Association. Her current project involves research on women activists in the environmental justice movement. In addition to several book chapters on environmental justice, a book manuscript on gender and social movements is forthcoming from Oxford University Press.

Dr. Kevin Kuswa received his Ph.D. in Rhetoric from the University of Texas at Austin after being named the 1999-2000 Graduate Student of the Year. His dissertation, advised by Dr. Ronald Walter Greene, concerns the interstate highway system in the United States and the way it constitutes various places, persons, and motions. Dr. Kuswa is presently the Director of Debate at the University of Richmond where the team has qualified to the NDT three years in a row for the first time in the school’s history. As a faculty member in RHCS, Dr. Kuswa teaches Rhetoric and Public Address and a Rhetoric of Terrorism class that has been profiled by CNN and Voice of America. His current research projects include the intersection between environmental security and environmental justice; the rhetoric of mass destruction; and critical pedagogy post 9/11.
Student Researchers

Ricardo Rios

*Ricardo Rios* is a 4th year student at the University of Richmond. He is a double major in Political Science and Rhetoric and Communications. Ricardo is a native of California and the current president of the Spanish and Latino Student Alliance (SALSA), a new organization on campus. His current project compares issues of environmental justice and racism in Los Angeles and Richmond.

Andrew Ryan

*Andrew Ryan* is a senior at the University of Richmond. He is a double major in Political Science and Rhetoric and Communication Studies. Andrew is involved in a number of activities at Richmond, including the UR Debate Team, the Build It Community Service Initiative, the Bonner Scholars Program, and the Speech Center. He is working with Dr. Kuswa to establish an urban debate league for high schoolers in the Richmond area. His current projects focus on the rhetorical implications of defining the environmental justice/racism movement and the Environmental Protection Agency’s response to environmental justice policy.

Ryan Smith

*Ryan Smith*, a Dean’s List student, sophomore at the University, is a political science and environmental studies major. He is actively involved on the debate team and last year was part of the team that qualified for the National Debate Tournament. This was the first time in three years that the University of Richmond’s debate team qualified for national competition. This past summer he worked with Dr. Kuswa on a paper analyzing security rhetoric and its implications on the environmental justice movement. As part of this project, Smith and Professor Kuswa will expand this research to include case studies on military depot sites in the Richmond area.
Background

The spaces and places through which we ordinarily pass have much to tell us about how we live. From physical components such as foliage and age and condition of buildings, to accessibility of public transportation and of safe water, the seemingly banal contexts of the everyday are linked to our socioeconomic status, race, and political agency. Our lives are to a meaningful degree defined by those ordinary spaces through which we must navigate, our location a political matter involving competition for spaces. Nowhere is this more evident than in the contemporary struggle for environmental justice. Environmental justice advocates engage problems and case studies where there are significant ecological, physical, social, political, and economic inequities.1

In this proposal we ask: How do local, state, and national political policies help to maintain, or change, these spaces? What knowledge is available to residents of challenged spaces to become political actors? What is the difference between a green space and an ecologically toxic space? How can people achieve political agency in these environments?

Theory, Method

Edward Said has written that the struggle for territory is marked by a dynamic interplay of “overlapping memories, narratives, and physical structures.”2 Following Said’s lead, humanistic and social scientific research methods are necessary to understanding the intersection of power and place. Therefore, we seek to complement ethnographic studies, census/map data, and interview data with a humanistic approach to the research best described as “critical rhetoric.” The purpose of Critical Rhetoric is to affect social change by unmasking or demystifying the discourse of power.3

Place has always been central to human experience, but places have often been regarded as static, natural, or external to the human self. In our everyday experience, places are quite the opposite. They are dynamic and ephemeral, changing us as we speed through multiple spaces at work, home, or on the Internet. The concept of place offers Weinstein scholars a bridge between the external, physical world and the uniquely human planes of culture, identity, and communication. Despite the significance of location, however, it seems difficult to describe fully a place or to convey effectively its meaning. Theories involving the concepts of “place” and “space” are becoming more and more prominent as the fields of Rhetoric, Political Science, and Anthropology attempt to understand them. How can academic scholars best approach places

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1 Martin Melosi (2000) “Environmental justice, political agenda setting, and the myths of history.” Journal of Policy History 12 (1), pp. 43-71. Melosi argues environmental justice is different from environmental racism and environmental inequity. Environmental justice emphasizes “the right to a safe and healthy environment for all people. It defines ‘environment’ to include ecological, physical, social, political, and economic environments.”


such as Iraq, Ground Zero in Manhattan or Afghanistan? What happens when, instead of using chronological history, we map the place of the University? How does the struggle for environmental justice define places such as Memphis, Tennessee; cancer alley in Louisiana; Warren County, North Carolina; or Richmond, Virginia? What about contestations of space in Church Hill, Petersburg, Virginia, or around the James River? How do we use space in Weinstein Hall? Answers to these questions require a multi-dimensional theory of place—one that conceives of a place as a heterotopia or an intersection of competing spaces.4

“The Politics of Race, Space, and Place” offers an interdisciplinary springboard in Weinstein Hall that has sparked new conversations between departments and between faculty and students. One conversation has raised fundamental questions about the place of the grant itself: Is Weinstein Hall a place for humanists, social scientists, or both? What do the social sciences have to do with the humanities, and are the two compatible? Student-faculty collaborators are developing more research questions, selecting materials for the course syllabus, drafting lists of guest speakers, and planning brown-bag seminars. We envision exciting new opportunities for connections between the university and the surrounding community, and a continuation of the intellectual rigor that defines our place.

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4 Foucault, M. (1986, Spring). Of other spaces. *Diacritics, 16* (1), pp. 22-27. It is instructive that Foucault contrasts heterotopia to the concept of perfected future space, or utopia, pointing out that we often seek the perfect space, but end up with competing notions of what that means.
OUR SEMINAR-SPRING 2006

The Politics of Race, Space, and Place

THE JAMES RIVER, RICHMOND, VIRGINIA
This will be the first time there will be a joint project that combines the theoretical power and orientation of Rhetoric and Communication with the more applied and methodologically oriented discipline of Political Science. This project, with its attending brown bags and curricula, will expose University of Richmond to and intellectually rigorous and multi-disciplinary approach to problems of race, political agency, and environmentalism. Students will not only make connections between disciplines, but will understand how social problems are connected and cannot be studied in isolation. They will come away from this project with a richer understanding of how the world works and what lies beneath many of the social ills we face.

Toward these aims, we will craft a course involving our research area to be taught in the Spring of 2006. The tentative title for the course is “The Politics of Race, Space and Place.” The class will be team-taught by Drs. Achter, Kuswa, and Simpson. The course readings, lay-out,
guest-speaker series, and brown-bag sessions will be researched and planned during the summer of 2005. The initial outline of the course includes the following components:

- Readings and research on environmental justice, including the history and current condition of the environmental justice movement in Richmond.
- Background readings on the theories of critical place studies and cultural geography.
- Combining ethnography and political theory with mapping exercises using demographic data, including maps of Richmond tracing socio-economic patterns, industrial pollution, and school zones.
- A number of guest speakers, including at least one prominent cultural geographer.

  Doris Bradshaw—Environmental Justice activist and nationally recognized grassroots leader.

  Alma Moore—This communications and public relations specialist represents the “other” side of environmental justice. She is a risk communications specialist who handles clients who are the targets of environmental justice activists.

  Patti Jackson—Director of the James River Association for 22 years

- Brown-bag seminars open to the campus featuring University of Richmond faculty working on related topics and possibly additional guest speakers.
- A semester-long research project with developed literature review. Students will develop a research project with the faculty, culminating in a research paper.
- The presentation of research papers and projects, both individually and groups, by students and faculty.