

In This Issue



President's Column.....	1
Washington Monitor.....	7
Op-Ed.....	9
Forthcoming in	
AAG Journals.....	10
Focus on the New York	
Region.....	11
Books Received.....	14
Profiles of Professional	
Geographers.....	15
Grants and Awards	
Received.....	17
Jobs in Geography.....	19
New Appointments.....	36
Specialty Group News.....	36
Call for Papers.....	37
Members of Note.....	37
Grants & Competitions.....	37
Award Deadlines.....	38
Events Calendar.....	39

“The City Beyond Symbolism” 2012 AAG Presidential Plenary

By Audrey Kobayashi

Since the AAG last met in New York City more than a decade ago geographers have had plenty of reason to re-assess their understanding of urban life. New York City itself has of course become a symbolic focus of what it means to be safe and secure in a modern urban environment. But cities throughout the world have seen a decade of unprecedented change that includes economic transformation and devastation, challenges and responses to the rights and freedoms of civil society, an inexorably widening gap between the wealthy and the poor, redefinition of spatial relations as a result of changing technologies, considerable redistribution of the roles that cities play regionally, nationally, and globally—and yes, violence in both new and old forms.

Geographers are attuned to these changes, and achieving social justice in the contemporary city

will be a major theme at our 2012 AAG Annual Meeting. Some of the topics that have excited my interest include issues of environmental justice; the impact of recent natural disasters; and the right to the city for disenfranchised groups, including undocumented workers, recent migrants and refugees, sexual minorities, people of colour, and the growing ranks of the poor. Geographers will also address the changes wrought within civil society: the revisioning of urban citizenship represented by the Arab Spring, the role of the Fourth Estate, the crisis of confrontations between state governments and their workers, and global processes that are redefining cities both symbolically and materially.

Within this context, organizing the annual Presidential Plenary is a tremendous delight. We will hear

Continued on page 2

The Fall and Rise of New York City

Growing up in New York City after World War II, I was convinced I was living in the greatest city in the world. No doubt I was influenced by local hype and my immigrant parents' choices. Yet, looking back, there were plenty of objective reasons to believe this.

The 2012 AAG Annual Meeting will be held in New York City. This article orients geographers in both time and space. After taking an historical approach to the city's fortunes, I discuss the concepts underlying its changing geography.

New York City at its Zenith

Many of the great European and Asian cities were in shambles and national economies needed fundamental rebuilding. (If I didn't finish my supper, the “starving children” were still in Europe.) The United Nations was headquartered in Manhattan. Refugees from both Fascist and Communist regimes flocked to New York in a cultural migration that made the city unmatched in many arts and sciences. The iconic midtown skyline had no peer then; corporate headquarters were locating in New York to be near its dominant financial and advertising sectors. The city still supported heavy industry along much of its abundant shoreline and also led the nation in the production

Continued on page 12



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The revitalization of historic brownstones helped to stabilize New York during its economic recovery. See article at right.

Deadline Extended to October 13 for AAG Abstracts

2012 AAG Annual Meeting—New York

Submit yours today at www.aag.org/annualmeeting.

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Douglas Richardson, Publisher
and Managing Editor
Jim Ketchum, Editor
AAG Voice 202-234-1450
AAG Fax 202-234-2744
newsletter@aag.org
www.aag.org

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President's Column from page 1

from five individuals whose work is synonymous with the quest for social justice in cities: **Frances Fox Piven**, original thinker and tireless activist, whose many books have helped us to understand how poverty, politics, and racism work together. They include *Poor People's Movements: Why they Succeed, How they Fail* (with Richard Cloward, 1977), *Why Americans Still Don't Vote: And Why Politicians Want it That Way* (2000), and most recently *Keeping Down the Black Vote: Race and the Demobilization of American Voters* (2009).

Grace Lee Boggs is a much honored philosopher and public intellectual whose major writings include *Revolution and Evolution in the Twentieth Century* (with James Boggs 2008[1974]) *Conversations in Maine: Exploring Our Nations Future* (with James Boggs, Freddy Paine, and Lyman Paine 1978); *Living for Change: An Autobiography* (1978); and recently, *The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-first Century* (with Scott Kurashige 2011). At 95, Grace remains much in demand as a public speaker, exceptional community activist, and weekly columnist for the *Michigan Citizen*.

Scott Kurashige, Director of Asian/Pacific Islander American Studies at the University of Michigan, has worked with Boggs for a number of years as both author and community activist. He has also published *The Shifting Grounds of Race: Black and Japanese Americans in the Making of Multiethnic Los Angeles* (2008).

Don Mitchell is a Distinguished Professor of Geography at Syracuse University whose many publications have influenced the field of social justice profoundly. They include *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space* (2003), *The People's Property? Power, Politics, and the Public* (with Lynn Staeheli 2008), and *Justice, Power and the Political Landscape* (edited with Kenneth Olwig 2009).

Ruth Wilson Gilmore is Professor of Earth and Environmental Sciences at the

City University of New York Graduate Center. In addition to *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*, she is working on three book projects: *Life in Hell: Or How Capitalism Saving Capitalism from Capitalism Must Fire our Political Imaginations*; *Big Things: Landscape, State Form, and the Infrastructure of Feeling*; and a collection of essays on race, polity, and place.

All five speakers are scholar-activists whose work goes beyond symbolic academic or political rhetoric to make a difference in urban life, and whose influence has been felt by many, many scholars and citizens alike.

In the same spirit, over the past several months, Cornel West, of Princeton University, and talk show host Tavis

Smiley have conducted a national Tour Against Poverty, broadcasting their interviews in cities across the country. West addressed the legacy of Martin Luther King (even as we waited for the unveiling of the new King memorial, delayed by Hurricane Irene), in an op-ed piece clearly influenced by his recent broadcast featuring Grace Lee Boggs. He says:

King weeps from his grave. He never confused substance with symbolism. He never conflated a flesh and blood sacrifice with a stone and mortar edifice. We rightly celebrate his substance and sacrifice because he loved us all so deeply. Let us not remain satisfied with symbolism because we too often fear the challenge he embraced. (Cornel West, "Dr. King Weeps from his Grave," NYT, August 26, 2011, A27).

I look forward to many sessions at the 2012 AAG Annual Meeting in New York in which geographers will explore the city beyond symbolism.

Audrey Kobayashi
kobayasi@queensu.ca



Kobayashi

Note to readers: AAG Executive Director Doug Richardson is currently on sabbatical. The "From the Meridian" column will be on hiatus until his return later this fall.