

# MINIGRANT APPLICATION FORM

Title of Proposal:

Racial/Ethnic Identities and Institutional Discourses

Principal Investigator:

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Department:

English

Proposed Project Period:

Total Minigrant Request:

\$ 976.00

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Start Date: January 1, 2011

Total Cost Sharing:

\$ 1,132.00

End Date: May 31, 2011

Total Project Cost:

\$ 2,108.00

Abstract of Proposal (a maximum of 100 words and underline key words):

I propose to spend twelve days in Washington D.C. and New York City visiting national and regional museums that address critical issues regarding the representation of racial/ethnic identities in the United States. This trip, combined with a more theoretical study of museums and the roles they play in society (a study with which I am currently engaged), will serve as foundation for my next major study: Racial and Ethnic Identities and Institutional Discourses. The study will include race/ethnicity-specific museums as well as more general museums (about American history, for example) in which racial and ethnic representations are integrated.

Proposed Research (a maximum of 1,500 words):

## Research Problem

As I have begun my work in this area, several questions have emerged.

- What are the primary discursive strategies employed by museums to represent racial/ethnic identities and discuss racial/ethnic issues in the United States?
- In what ways do these strategies (and the representations that result) affirm popular notions about identity/identities? In what ways do they resist or challenge those notions?
- What do museum exhibits about racial/ethnic identities in the United States suggest about the significance of race/ethnicity as a theoretical and/or political identity category in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

## Significance

There are a number of institutional discourses that have been particularly important in the shaping of racial and ethnic identity in the United States. It is a long list including legal and medical documents, ethnographic and documentary cinema, as well as historical museums and monuments. I am particularly concerned with what film theorist Bill Nichols calls the “discourses of sobriety” --those public accounts that readers or viewers take to be “real” stories/histories about a particular person or group, about a particular moment or event in history. Often, these discourses hold sway not simply in casual conversation but in discussions about politics and policy. My previous research and teaching have explored the discursive mechanisms by which certain institutions have shaped how we think about identity in the United States as well as some of the social and political implications of those representations. This study would be a continuation of that work: an exploration of the strategies of representation of race/ethnicity as well as the cultural consequences of those representations in another institutional context.

Furthermore, the demographic research is clear: the United States is becoming increasingly racially and ethnically diverse. One of the critical questions being entertained in the academy as well as in popular culture revolves around the question of “American” identity at this moment of increasing diversification. While some scholars continue to suggest that for a national culture to survive, it will be necessary for racial/ethnic “others” to abandon those particular affiliations and embrace a broader “American” identity, others argue that this is a deeply problematic assertion and that it is entirely possible for citizens to embrace both racial and national identities. Historically, in times of economic and/or other political crises, battles over identity have intensified. Given some of our current economic and political circumstances such as a lingering economic downturn and persistent battles over immigration, this may be a particularly apt time for such a study.

### **Method**

I propose to spend twelve working days at some of the most important national and regional museums that deal with identity issues in the United States. I anticipate visiting 10-12 museums during this time period. My working list currently includes the Anacostia Community Museum, the National Museum of the American Indian, and the National Museum of American History in Washington D.C., and the Ellis Island Immigration Museum, the Jewish Museum, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, and the Museum of the Chinese in the Americas in New York City. These visits will supplement visits to other museums that I have already made including the National Portrait Gallery in Washington DC and the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles, California. Next week, I will visit the National Border Patrol Museum in El Paso, Texas.

This is a new project. I have not yet defined the specific direction it will take --cultural criticism of particular exhibits? a comparative study in which I examine strategies of racial representations across discourses (museum exhibits and documentary films)? an exploration of the politics of representation in certain institutional settings? I have begun and will continue an intensive study of museum theory and practice with particular focus on issues of identity and representation. My specific goal for these visits is to make careful but preliminary observations about museum mission, architecture, and exhibits and to situate these observations within the larger contexts of identity studies in the humanities and museum studies. My goal is to spend 2011 engaging in this intensive exploration of both academic texts and museum exhibits that address issues of racial and ethnic identity in the United States. At the end of the year, I will determine the specific direction of a project or projects for publication.

### **Need for Grant Funds**

My sabbatical (January-June) will provide me the time needed to conduct this research. Travel to Washington and New York, however, is costly. As a result, I will require funding to help cover travel and per diem expenses. I have outlined these costs below and in the attached budget form.

### **Future Funding**

Given that I am in the preliminary stages of this study, I am not yet positioned to assess precisely which public or private agency might be most appropriate for future funding. I do believe, however, that I will pursue additional funding to develop and complete the project once I determine a focus. The most likely agency is the National Endowment of the Humanities. I would likely be seeking funding for a return visit to one or more museums to complete the collection of data needed for the final project.

Please list your previous minigrant awards with titles and year of award:

None