

Race, Ethnicity and the 2010 Census: Categorizing and Counting
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The New England Chapter of the JACL co-sponsored a panel on “Race, Ethnicity and the 2010 Census: Categorizing and Counting” with the MIT Center for International Studies on Saturday November 7. The panel featured Paul Watanabe as speaker and Melissa Nobles as commentator.

Professor Watanabe is Director of the Institute for Asian American Studies at the University of Massachusetts, Boston and a member of the U.S. Census Bureau Advisory Committee on the Asian population. Professor Nobles teaches in the Department of Political Science at MIT. Her award winning book, *Shades of Citizenship: Race and the Census in Modern Politics*, examines the political origins and effects of racial categories in censuses in US and Brazil.

Professor Watanabe began by noting that the census count provides a basis for allocating funds in Federal programs and for defining political power by establishing districts for the US House and for state legislatures. Historically, immigrants, ethnic minorities, the homeless and the poor have been undercounted. To reduce the undercount, the Census Bureau is offering translations of forms, follow ups on missing households and an outreach program. Watanabe turned to Norman Eng, a partnership specialist with the US Census Bureau, to provide details on an extensive outreach program to mobilize churches, voluntary social agencies and other community organizations.

During the discussion, Watanabe, Nobles and the audience engaged on points of controversy and historical interest. Ethnic groups face a dilemma, since identification as a distinctive ethnic group may enhance political standing but may also increase vulnerability. Watanabe observed that Arab-American leaders had pressed for inclusion of an Arab-American category through 2000, and then quietly dropped that request in the aftermath of 9-11.

Nobles and Watanabe also discussed evolving Census provisions for reporting national origin and race. Nobles described the extraordinarily elaborate specification of mixed racial categories in the Census of 1890, as Census workers classified individuals of African American ancestry as “black, mulatto, quadroon or octoroon” on the basis of visual cues. Watanabe described current provisions for self-reporting by persons of mixed national origins and race, sparking a lively discussion of the implications of classification systems on individual identity and political power.

New England JACL Board Member and 442nd veteran Susumo Ito closed the event with reflections on how the politics of national origins and race had changed in the past six decades, and how our classifications and the categories imposed upon us may change over the next six decades.