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Spring Semester Events Focus on Black Women's Activism and Documentary on The Central Park Five

In April 2014, the CRE hosted two events that highlighted important moments in 20th century African-American history and culture. The first was a film screening of the documentary *Central Park Five*, which tells the story of five black youth who were wrongly convicted and jailed following the notorious rape and beating of a white woman in Central Park in 1989. The other was a moderated conversation between the authors of two recent books on black women performers whose work involved activism for civil rights and other causes.

SCREENING OF CENTRAL PARK FIVE

On April 19, 1989, a white woman was raped in Central Park in New York City. Shortly thereafter, five African American and Latino teenagers—Antron McCray, Kevin Richardson, Yusef Salaam, Raymond Santana, and Kharey Wise—were arrested and charged with the attack. They served prison sentences ranging from six to eleven and a half years. Thirteen years later, however, all five would be exonerated after another man confessed to committing the crime. The Central Park Five would emerge not as criminals, but as victims of a racist judicial system, in which they were hastily tried and convicted for crimes they did not commit.

Twenty-five years later, the teenagers are now adult men still trying to piece their lives back together. The miscarriage of justice they suffered is the subject of *The Central Park Five* (2012), a critically-acclaimed documentary directed by Ken Burns, Sarah Burns and David McMahon. The CRE screened the film for an audience of students and faculty on April 15th 2014 in the Graduate Student Lounge on College Avenue.

The film, which draws on expert analysis of the Central Park Jogger case as well as interviews with the five accused men, their families, and their lawyers, explores how and why these young men ended up wrongfully imprisoned. It reminds us that all five were very young—between 14 and 16 years old—at the time of their arrest, and that their convictions were largely based on their taped confessions. Moreover, it also documents how these confessions were secured.



The teenagers were interviewed for hours, encouraged to implicate each other, and promised that they would get to go home if they offered some small admission of guilt. Looking back on these interviews as adults, the men recalled being terrified, and confessing to the rape because the police detectives who interrogated them told them that they would be in even more trouble if they did not do so. For their part, the New York City Police Department detectives who handled the case were eager for a quick resolution to a high profile case, and sure the boys were “guilty of something.”

The young men were also quickly convicted by the media. The reporters who covered the case took little interest in the question of whether these particular young men were guilty of the crimes with which they were charged. Instead, coverage of the case built on time-honored fears of young black men on a rampage to insist that the attack had involved a mob of out-of-control teenagers. The young men had been “wilding,” reporters maintained, popularizing a term the police invented to describe their vision—an imagined gang rape committed by young men who they were willing to see as animal-like predators.

The teenagers all served their prison sentences, but their convictions were vacated in 2002, after Matias Reyes, a man convicted for multiple cases of rape of women in New York City finally confessed to the crime—while also admitting to acting alone. His admissions forced the police to revisit their slipshod investigation, which had ignored evidence pointing to Reyes. As the documentary shows, the police had DNA samples for Reyes as well as evidence that he was in the park that night. But they never investigated him for the crime. There was no DNA bank in 1989, so even though Reyes was arrested for another rape later that summer, the fact that his DNA also matched the only DNA collected in the investigation into Central Park Jogger’s attacker went unnoticed.

Despite this miscarriage of justice, media reaction to the exoneration of the Central Park Five has been tepid. The revelation that these young men were wrongfully convicted has never received anywhere near as much publicity as the stories that portrayed them as “wilding” predators.

After the screening, Nina Siule (Rutgers University-New Brunswick), an assistant professor in anthropology and criminal justice, provided insights into the many ways in which this case illuminates ongoing problems within the U.S criminal justice system today. Siule’s current research focuses on investigations of the US “crimmigration” system: that is, she examines how the criminal justice system and the immigration system meld together to marginalize young Latino men. She has also worked with medical care and social service providers to support and improve services to those released from the prison system as well as to new immigrants.



*Nina Siule,
Anthropology/ Criminal
Justice, RU-NB*

Wrongful convictions remain common; Siule told an audience member who asked whether what happened to the Central

Park Five could happen today. Young black and Hispanic men are heavily policed, and they are easy targets for law enforcement officials bent on achieving impressive conviction rates. Once accused of a crime, few such men can afford effective legal representation, and often end up in the hands of overworked public defenders, who do not have the resources to defend their clients and often urge them accept plea bargains—whether they are guilty or not.



ANTRON MCCRAY
JAILED 6 YEARS



KEVIN RICHARDSON
JAILED 6½ YEARS



YUSEF SALAAM
JAILED 6½ YEARS



RAYMOND SANTANA
JAILED ALMOST 8 YEARS



KHAREY WISE
JAILED 11½ YEARS

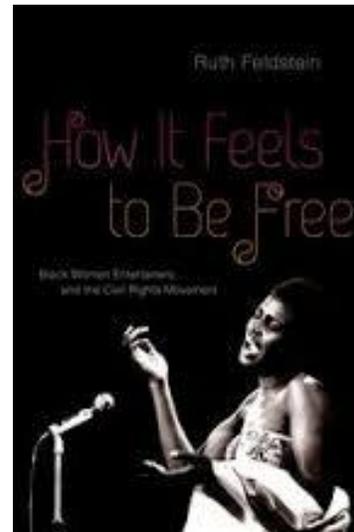
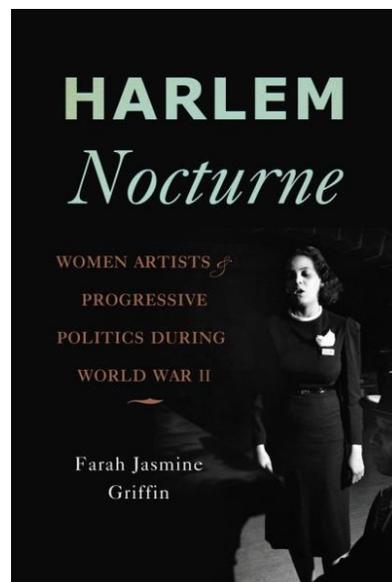
Indeed, Siulc maintains what is most troubling about the case of the Central Park Five youth, is that it is “emblematic of how the criminal justice system functions in our society today.” Incarceration rates are high and the state governs not through an attention to rehabilitation but by focusing on the criminal act. When asked by an audience member, “how do the detectives who investigated the case live with themselves, given how flimsy their evidence was,” Siulc suggested that the prosecutors and detectives felt no compulsion to secure concrete evidence proving that the teens raped the white woman because they were convinced that “they would have been arrested anyway.” They failed to see the Central Park Five as individuals, but instead saw them in terms of popular stereotypes related to the criminal tendencies of black youth. Such blindness is endemic to the criminal justice system, she suggested, which often governs with more attention to moral panics than to facts or truth. When public fears about crime are high, a suspension of reality often enables entire communities and media--and jury members--to partake in the production of moral panics and myths that justify initial stereotypes.

Siulc, who screens this film in her classes at Rutgers, also reminded the audience that the Central Park Jogger case is not yet fully resolved. Twenty-five years after the initial arrests, the five men are still grappling with what happened to them and have never received any sort of apology or restitution. Though exonerated, all five are still waiting for a financial

settlement from New York City, but Mayor Bill DeBlasio is dragging his feet.

BLACK WOMEN AND ACTIVISM: A CONVERSATION

On April 28, 2014, the CRE and the Black Atlantic Seminar hosted a conversation with the authors of two new books: Farah Jasmine Griffin, a Professor of English and Comparative Literature and African-American Studies, Columbia University, who is the author of *Harlem Nocturne: Women Artists and Progressive Politics During World War II* (Basic Civitas Books, 2013), and Ruth Feldstein, a professor of history at Rutgers-Newark, who is the author of *How It Feels to Be Free: Black Women Entertainers and the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford University Press, 2013).



Both scholars are notable for writing pioneering works exploring the intersections between artistry and activism in the lives of black female performers and artists, and their conversation, which took place at Alexander Library on College Avenue, introduced these works by exploring the common concerns and distinctive historical moments that shaped the lives of the black female subjects they studied in their books.

Griffin explained that she came upon the idea for her project while working on album liner notes for the reissue of work done by Dinah Washington and for Lena Horne’s *Stormy Weather*. She was intrigued to note that beginning in 1943, a number of black women entertainers began to receive coverage from the black press and mainstream white newspapers such as *The New York Times*. The press coverage, Griffin noticed, focused mainly on women who were vocal about their political activity and identity.

Her work focuses on three such women—Pearl Primus, Ann Petry, and Mary Lou Williams—who have not

received a great deal of popular or scholarly attention since then. Connecticut-born Petry, Trinidadian-born Primus, and Southern-born Williams, all convened in Harlem in the 1940's. Their celebrity and political leanings emerged during World War II, a period in which African Americans waged a national campaign called the "Double V," which meant victory for the United States' abroad (and the black soldiers who fought for them) and victory for blacks who were fighting against discriminatory domestic laws and policies.



Pearl Primus dances Langston Hughes' poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (Image courtesy of Wesleyan University Press's Accelerated Motion: Toward a New Dance Literacy in America (<http://acceleratedmotion.wesleyan.edu/dancehistory/identities/section2.php>))

Pearl Primus is one example of the political engagement among these women. She was a dancer and choreographer who studied Afro-Caribbean, African-American and West African dance styles. She immigrated to the United States from the West Indies and was reared in New York. Born in Trinidad and Tobago, her political roots began at an early age because she grew up in a Garveyite

household (supporters of Marcus Garvey, who advocated for Black Nationalism and black economic empowerment). While attending Hunter College in New York City, she became a Leftist by joining a young Communist group. Intending to become a doctor, she supported herself with various jobs while studying for a career in medicine. One of her positions entailed working in the wardrobe department for a theatrical company, which also employed Primus as a dancer – a fortuitous opportunity that allowed her to hone her talents for and love of dance beginning 1941.

Though Primus started dancing late, her debut at the 92nd Street Y in New York garnered the attention of the New York Times. Performing original works such as the "African Ceremonial" and other pieces inspired by blues, jazz and black poets such as Langston Hughes, Primus received very favorable reviews. According to Griffin, she used her dance as a medium of protest by interpreting the work of black writers, political singers, African and Caribbean rituals and racial issues. She went on to perform at a combination of commercial venues, radical events and progressive clubs such as Café Society Downtown, an integrated social venue. During World War II, she danced at Double V campaign rallies. At one rally, she

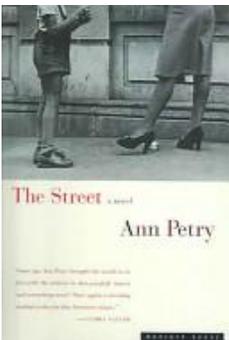
performed a dance titled "Jim Crow Car," which proved that her form of resistance was through her body and art.

Known for physical feats such as jumping five feet in the air, Primus' improvisational dance' played with rhythm and form, gaining notoriety for their grace and power. Also a scholar of dance, she conducted sociological fieldwork in the rural South, the Caribbean and West Africa. In 1944, she traveled to the South and picked cotton with sharecroppers, and in 1948 she traveled to Ghana, Liberia, Senegal, Zaire, Angola, and Cameroon to observe and participate in traditional dances and ceremonies. Primus opened her own dance company, taught at numerous universities including her undergraduate alma mater Hunter College, and New York University, where she earned her doctorate in dance. Primus remained integral in African-American modern dance until her death in 1994. Her contemporaries praised her stance against the discrimination of African Americans, yet Griffin points to the creative work of Ann Petry and Mary Lou Williams as having contributed to the political climate of the 1940s as well.



Ann Petry (image location <http://aalbc.com/authors/annpetry.htm>)

An accomplished journalist and writer, Ann Petry gained recognition for her fictional writings and news reporting. After moving to Harlem in the late 1930s to pursue a career in writing, she enrolled in writing and visual art classes at Columbia University. In 1941, Petry began writing for *People's Voice*, a local Leftist paper published by Adam Clayton Powell. She also wrote for the Harlem-based black newspaper, *Amsterdam News* and *The Crisis* magazine, a popular publication produced and distributed by the NAACP. In 1946 she authored *The Street*, a bestselling novel about the life of a black, urban, single working-class mother, which was the first fictional work by an African American woman to sell over one million copies. *The Street* was both popular and innovative, contends Griffin: it offered an American readership the first nuanced portrayal of a black, urban, single, working-class mother in American Literature.



Although Petry was from a middle-class, African-American home in Connecticut, her writing was influenced by her experiences after migrating to Harlem. Griffin explains that Petry moved to Harlem to escape her social status and the pressure of

having to run the family pharmacy business. Although she had a degree in pharmacy, in Harlem, Petry worked for the New York Foundation to conduct a study on the ways in which segregation affected children in ghettos. She saw first-hand the plight of African-Americans during a period when they struggled not only with the pressures of war, but with the challenge of fighting for full citizenship in the “Double V” campaign. Harlem’s urban landscape was a sharp contrast from the suburban Connecticut of her upbringing, but it became her muse. However, Petry and her husband George moved back to Connecticut when the “McCarthyism” era brought about blacks who were Communists or the government targeted supporters of the leftist movement. They hoped that relocating to suburban Connecticut might obscure Ann’s Leftist leanings, and hinder her from the government’s scrutiny. Today, black women writers including Toni Morrison and Maya Angelou, cite Petry as a strong influence on their own work.

Mary Lou Williams was a composer, arranger, and pianist. Neither a Communist like Primus, nor a writer whose work was laced with political concerns like Petry, Williams was a distinctive figure who Griffin describes as a “spiritual philanthropist” who saw



Mary Lou Williams in 1944
(<http://www.ratical.org/MaryLouWilliams/mlw1944.jpg>)

music as a healing force. When she migrated to Harlem’s Sugar Hill from the Jim Crow South, Williams was already an accomplished musician who began performing professionally at age twelve. A child prodigy, Williams played with and was dear friends with jazz legends such as Duke Ellington and Dizzy Gillespie. Her home became a site where jazz musicians often convened, and she deeply enjoyed allowing them to grow both intellectually and musically. Duke Ellington once commented on Williams’ cooking skills, since she cooked for his band while they were all travelling between performances.



Jack Teagarden, Dixie Bailey, Mary Lou Williams, Tadd Dameron, Hank Jones, Dizzy Gillespie, Milt Orent. In Mary Lou Williams’ apartment, NYC, ca. August 1947. Photography by William P. Gottlieb. (This image is available from the United States Library of Congress’s Prints and Photographs division under the digital ID gottlieb.09291)

In different ways, all three women used their art to forward their own specific artistic and political agendas and left enduring legacies. In the 1960s, black women entertainers began to look to the 1940s for foremothers in political activism, among other things they began to resurrect the careers of Primus, Petry, and Williams. Ruth Feldstein's work, *How It Feels to Be Free*, expands Griffin's project by looking at the lives of several such black female entertainers who rose to fame on the basis of both their art and their politics during the 1960s.

Feldstein's book focuses on six black female entertainers: Nina Simone, Diahann Carroll, Abby Lincoln, Miriam Makeba, Cicely Tyson, and Lena Horne. Their interwoven stories, she argues, help us expand our understanding of political activism in twentieth-century liberation movements. Their careers and influence dramatize the multiple ways in which culture mattered to black activism in the 1960s, while also illustrating the transnational circulation of black politics, and the role of gender in simultaneously developing black activism and feminism.



Nina Simone in concert (image location: <http://www.ninasimone.com/wp-content/gallery/in-concert/NinaSimone.white.dress.jpg>)

The most explicitly political of Feldstein's subjects, Simone was a classically trained singer who moved from North Carolina to New York City in the 1950s. "Mississippi Goddam" (1963) was her first politicized song, which she wrote one month after Martin Luther King's "I Have A Dream" speech. Simone rejected politics of respectability and believed that "black women don't have to behave in a certain way to be deserving." For her, her songs and political ideology represented not just black power, but black female power.



Unlike Simone, the South African singer Miriam Makeba avoided openly politicized lyrics. Makeba emigrated from South Africa to the United States in 1959, where she starred in the successful film *Come Back, Africa* (1959). She also continued to sing and became the first South African to win a Grammy in 1965. Makeba saw strong similarities between the anti-Apartheid struggle in her native land and the Civil Rights movement in America and but her work was apolitical enough to make her popular in the

commercial mainstream in a way that Nina Simone was not. However, Makeba used singing in her native Xhosa language to push back against English-speaking hegemony. For example, one of Makeba's most popular songs was "Qongqothwane," a Xhosa song sung at weddings. Most English-speakers were unable to properly pronounce the song title, and called it "The Click Song" instead.



Diahann Carroll as Julia in 1968. Pictured with Marc Copage as Corey Baker and neighbor Earl J. Waggenerdorn (image location: <http://www.tcf.ua.edu/Courses/Jbutler/T577/Students/daveb.html>).

Actresses Diahann Carroll and Cicely Tyson's activism took place on screens large and small. Between the years 1968-1971, Carroll was the star in *Julia*, a groundbreaking television program depicting the life of a widowed black nurse. Her portrayal integrated television for many white American viewers and showed them a black woman character in a non-stereotypical role. Likewise, Tyson's performance as a hard-working, loving sharecropper's wife in the 1972 film *Souther* depicted another strong black women, providing an alternative to

the negative portrayals of black women in the media in the late 1960s and early 1970s.



Scene from *Souder*, starring Cicely Tyson (image location: <http://thebestpictureproject.files.wordpress.com/2011/01/souder2.jpg?m=300&h=219>)

Griffin's *Harlem Nocturne: Women Artists and Progressive Politics During World War II* (2013) and Feldstein's *How It Feels to Be Free: Black Women Entertainers and the Civil Rights Movement* (2013) both examine the ways in which understanding black stardom can help reshape our understanding of the twentieth-century black freedom struggle. In discussing the insights they gained from the lives of the women they studied, Griffin and Feldstein both note that revisiting their subjects' lives offer revealing insights into the ways in which working in the entertainment industry could politicize some individuals and or further develop political commitments of others. For example, Lena Horne describes Café Society, a New York City club that welcomed integrated audiences in the 1930s and 1940s, as the place where she first became politicized. Exposure to other political-minded people also shaped entertainers' political ideas. For instance, playwright Lorraine Hansberry (*A Raisin in the Sun*) was

partly responsible for helping develop Nina Simone's political consciousness. Both authors also emphasized that the nine women discussed in their books never separated race and sex. Instead, they lived at the intersection of both, and used this convergence to dramatize the challenge of being black American women in the United States in the 1940s and 1960s. Their careers illuminate a linked history of black female activism and entertainment, and require us to appreciate the many forums in which politics take place.

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