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***Inaugural Fall Roundtable Looks at Race and Policing***

The CRE presented a roundtable discussion on policing and race on Friday, September 26, 2014. Troubled by this summer’s police killings of unarmed black citizens in Missouri and in New York, we invited colleagues Taja-Nia Henderson from the Rutgers-Newark School of Law, Paul Hirschfield from the Rutgers-New Brunswick Sociology Department, Andres Rengifo from the Criminal Justice department at Rutgers-Newark, and Beryl Satter from the History Department at Rutgers-Newark to share insights on the long history of policing and violence, particularly against unarmed black men. Presentations sparked lively conversation and debate in a standing-room-only crowd.

Several compelling themes united these varied perspectives. Chief among them were the challenge of imagining an ideal police force, innovating strategies for reforming policing, and moving forward from this summer’s violent events. The need for comprehensive data, organized social movements, and meaningful state cooperation drew consensus from the participants, whose engaged debates left questions of political strategy open to the audience.

**A “LONG HISTORY” OF POLICING**

Professor Henderson began with an historical account of the development of policing in the United States. The first police forces were organized to protect property, whether of northern capitalists or southern slaveholders. Police did not serve the general public, she argued, but worked instead to “protect the interests of capital against the vicissitudes of the poor and unruly.” In the antebellum South, policing ostensibly aimed to curtail threats posed by rebellious slaves, but rarely differentiated black subjects by legal status,



*AP Photo – Ferguson, Missouri*



*Professor Taja-Nia Henderson, School of Law, Rutgers University-Newark*

establishing a long pattern of racial profiling. These foundational histories of policing practices have left their trace in contemporary acts of violence against the poor and racialized. Discriminatory violence is engrained in police training—a systemic issue and not a matter of a few bad eggs. What we see in Missouri, Henderson asserted, is one of the many ways that “the law works to incapacitate unwanted members of society.” We need to keep this long history in mind if we are to understand our contemporary situation, which involves both the militarization of the police force and the expansion of the carceral state.

Professor Hirschfield also traced the legacy of the criminalization of blackness in the United States. Describing the shooting of Mike Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, this summer as a “painfully familiar... peculiar and ugly ritual,” Hirschfield addressed some of the ways that “racially disparate policing” is both incentivized and recursive. He set out clear patterns in police practices that actually encourage the over-policing of black subjects, and justify police

brutality through public rituals of condonement. Because the police system rewards quantitative results—arrests, successful prosecutions and incarcerations—police officers deliberately target black citizens. Black subjects are more likely to have suspended licenses and warrants, so a simple stop can add to an officer’s number of arrests. In part because they are more likely to have prior convictions, judges and juries are more likely to convict and sentence black offenders, and those defendants are less likely to contest charges and challenge the discriminatory criminal justice system.



*Professor Paul Hirschfield, Sociology, Rutgers University-New Brunswick*

Hirschfield explained that police brutality and public response unfold in a repetitive cycle that can be broken into predictable steps. First, a police officer kills a person of color. Second, the event gets a routine treatment by a police investigation and is either quickly forgotten or draws media and public attention. Third, there

is some judicial proceeding which generally results in “...no accountability beyond a slap on the wrist. If the case generated controversy and unrest, maybe some superficial reforms are instituted.” Each new act of killing renews the cycle, which is largely animated by media coverage. Journalists typically rely on police accounts to frame events, portraying them as “discreet” and “isolated” incidents. Victims are sometimes subtly racialized as inherently dangerous, while the offending officer is treated as an anonymous professional—or worse, a sympathetic “vigilante” serving law and order.



*Professor Beryl Satter, History, Rutgers University-Newark*

Professor Satter, an award-winning historian of postwar Chicago, explored race and policing from a different angle. She has been researching the Afro-American Patrolmen’s League (AAPL), established in Chicago in 1968 by black police officers who organized to combat police brutality at its origins. Satter described an entrenched notion of “anti-blackness” in American political discourse that enables the criminalization of black citizens and justifies police brutality. In her work, long-running structural patterns of discrimination

appear in visceral detail. In 1970, for example, 43 Chicagoans were killed by police officers. Throughout the decade, killings continued at a ratio of six black victims for every one white victim. The AAPL traced police brutality back to Chicago's power structure, asserting that violence was a manifestation of vast structural inequalities. Satter's own research on Chicago posits issues of police brutality as one facet of a Democratic "political machine" that discriminated against black residents in housing and public services to the advantage of white citizens.

Professor Rengifo studies comparative policing in the United States and throughout the postcolonial world. He has focused on countries in Africa, South Asia, and the Caribbean. While police often discipline marginalized populations, such as youth, women, immigrants, refugees, gays, lesbians, and gender-nonconforming people, experiences differ by country. In the last decades, police forces in the



*Professor Andres Rengifo, School of Criminal Justice, Rutgers University-Newark*

United States have adopted military tactics and military hardware, shifting from "blue" to "green," as he put it.

Countries in the developing world have tried to move in the opposite direction, increasing civilian control over police forces. The United States, he said, might learn from reform efforts in Bangladesh, Jamaica, and Colombia that recognize the potentially abusive power of the state. We might also begin by compiling better data on police killings.

### **STRATEGIES FOR REFORM**

Hirschfield's presentation of the repeating patterns of police brutality and public reaction prompted a conversation about strategies for reform, and the mix of over-policing and under-policing that has long been the experience of many black communities.

Rengifo argued that although advice often flows in the other direction, the United States has much to learn from other countries about police reform. Studying community initiatives that identified excessive force as an "operational problem" in countries like the Dominican Republic and Jamaica, for example, helps illuminate inequalities in United States

policing practice and insufficiencies in grassroots agitation. According to Rengifo, these cooperative projects that involve active police participation offer solutions to some of our own policing problems. Rengifo, like Henderson, Satter, and Hirschfield, suggested that legislative changes are ineffective in the absence of major structural reforms and community mobilization. His work also indicates that the United States could benefit from broadening its reform scope, specifically by incorporating a critique of daily police abuses into the broader struggle against mass incarceration.

Professor Hirschfield acknowledged that police violence is a function of white racism, but he suggested that framing the issue in racial terms risks alienating white publics mired by indifference. One strategy for mobilizing the white public for long-term resistance involves re-framing the issue of police brutality in broad terms. Hirschfield contends that if confronted with more images of imprisoned and brutalized whites, the white public might care more about the issue of police brutality and mass incarceration. With foundations rooted in racially disparate policing practices, police departments can be "resistant to reform," Professor Henderson said. She insisted that including discussions of race in reform work was important, even when the issues were complicated.



*Panelists engage with each other and the audience (L-R: Professors Henderson, Rengifo, Hirschfield, Satter)*

As an example, she noted that images of white female protestors harassed and brutalized by the police during the Occupy Wall Street protests in 2011 had sparked outrage over “stop and frisk,” as though the practice mattered only when targets were white and female. Taking a broader view, Satter emphasized the AAPL’s call for a thorough restructuring of governance. The black police officers understood that to change the way that the police were operating in Chicago, the municipal power structure needed to be transformed.

## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Professor Hirschfield suggested that Michael Brown’s death felt different from many previous incidents of police brutality and perhaps offered a way out of the endless cycle of police violence and futile public response. Sustained protest against Brown’s death has opened a conversation about the connections between violence and racist policing practices, and the relationship between neighborhood segregation and institutionalized racism.

Professor Rengifo drew hope from grassroots reform movements that have helped convince governments in



Standing room only at the Race and Policing Roundtable

smaller countries that just, civilian policing produces a public good: trust in government institutions. Evidence suggests that in the long run, trust in the honesty and efficacy of government institutions reduces crime rates and even public hostility toward the police.

Professor Satter proposed that by taking advantage of information, activists on the local level would be better able to document discrimination, trace its structural causes, and engineer sustained legal reform. For example, as Henderson noted, a recent study in Missouri indicates that on average, every household in Ferguson has three police arrest warrants. Black residents are more likely to be charged with minor infractions that result in fines; unpaid fines result in court summons; failure to appear or to pay fines results in jail time or additional fees. When actually aggregated, these fines from minor offenses constitute the second highest revenue source for the city, indicating that the racist system of policing in Ferguson has indeed become normalized, institutionalized, and incentivized. Data like this can be used to challenge the constitutionality of local policing practices, and illuminate paths towards substantial change.

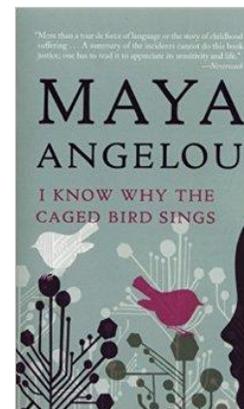
Professor Henderson found encouragement in the protests inspired by the summer’s events.

Despite the fear of retaliation and harassment, people have begun to take collective action to end discriminatory policing practice. Satter, Hirschfield, and Rengifo, too, suggested that as more people discover the impact of racist policing practices on their own lives, they will join together to work for change.

## CRE Roundtable Celebrates Life of Maya Angelou

On October 7<sup>th</sup>, the Center for Race and Ethnicity convened a memorial for the late Maya Angelou, who passed away on May 28, 2014 at the age of 86. Although her legacy defies precise categorization—she was a singer, dancer, poet, autobiographer, historian, intellectual, activist—three of our university’s most esteemed English professors gathered to assess the impact of her life and work.

Professors Cheryl Wall, Evie Shockley, and Abena Busia offered selected readings from Dr. Angelou’s canon, framing each excerpt by explaining its personal resonance and expounding upon its broader social, cultural, and political impact. Professor Busia was





Rutgers University-New Brunswick faculty gather to discuss the life and legacy of author Maya Angelou (L-R: Ann Fabian, History/ Acting Director, CRE; Cheryl Wall, English; Eric Shockley, English; Abena Busia, English/Women's & Gender Studies)

dressed in the white Akan cloth of jubilant mourning for a life fully lived—perhaps the best frame available to contemplate an icon.

## HISTORY AND INTERSECTIONALITY

Professor Wall chose an early passage from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), the first of Dr. Angelou's seven autobiographies. She offered a reading of the bodily alienation experienced by a young Marguerite, imagining herself as an immaculate white princess as she stands before her congregation in shabby clothes. Here the author gave voice to the vulnerable girl, wanting desperately to be beautiful in segregated, Depression-era Stamps, Arkansas.

Dr. Angelou's insistence on grounding herself in Stamps, claiming pride and lesson in her humble beginnings, lent an authenticity to her works that resonated with a youthful generation grasping for bold representations of difference at the time the work was first published. Her compassion and candor endeared her to Professor Wall, who thanked the late author for "telling [her] story right."

Wall had the privilege of interviewing the young author shortly after the

book's release, noting the singularity of Angelou's efforts to pen a memoir as a

Black woman writer. Angelou explained that autobiography was really her method of writing history from a localized standpoint. She understood before most academics that history and subjectivity were mutually constituted, pioneering intimate narratives of marginalized America even as she wrote about its impact on her own becoming. Angelou spoke from the intersections of a shifting, situated, multi-faceted Black womanhood, and from a pluralized first-person that called countless readers home.

## PEDAGOGY AND PERFORMANCE

The intersections of the panelists' lives with Dr. Angelou's were telling. Not only did Professor Wall meet the budding autobiographer, Professor Shockley taught at Wake Forest University during Angelou's tenure, and Professor Busia elaborated a genealogy of artists that connected her to Angelou by way of the renowned Ghanaian playwright Efuia Sutherland.

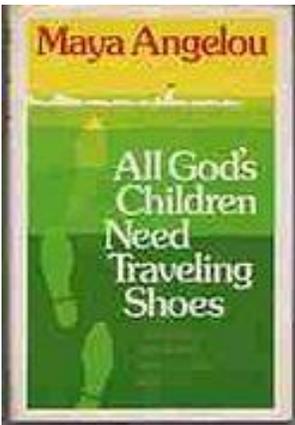
Professor Shockley situated her reading within the silences of Angelou's work, the deliberate self-crafting that claimed power through omission and calibrated

truths. She cited Marguerite's brusque sexual encounter near the end of *Caged Bird*, which resulted in a pregnancy and birth that was granted limited space in the text. The unceremonious affair was framed by the narrator's mystification by gender and sexuality, an open questioning of binaries that remained unprecedented in academic theory.

Dr. Angelou, Shockley explained, was a performer even as she professed, and had mastered the art of "living one's life as one wants to be understood," a skill she passed on to her students. She was uncompromising in her narration of personal and historic truths, and embodied Black feminist poetics and epistemologies of experiential knowledge. This pedagogical practice remains in tension with mainstream academic culture, its enduring challenge emphasizing the tremendous need for more scholars like Dr. Angelou.

## BELONGING AND EXILE

The question of belonging was raised throughout the proceedings, perhaps most poignantly by Professor Busia, who read selections from *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes* (1986), a recollection of Dr. Angelou's time in Ghana. Angelou arrived in the 1960s, settling among such notable expatriates as W. E. B. DuBois and Julian Mayfield, who had made the conscious effort to return to a homeland bearing the added promise of recent independence. But it was Angelou's honest portrayal of non-belonging, her despair that most natives did not reciprocate her longing for incorporation, which drew Busia to the text.



*Maya Angelou*

Dr. Angelou critically engaged the question of home and belonging in diaspora throughout her life, and across a stunning array of disciplines. She found mentors to guide her, including the dancer Pearl Primus, and, of course, Efua Sutherland. In the latter she found home, if only by moments, recalling the celebrated dramatist's words: "You need someone to watch you weep." That recognition of sisterhood and solidarity stayed with Angelou, who was able to see, through people, the enchantment of places.

Stamps, then, was never just a dusty town in the depressed South, but a place full of people carrying expansive and speculative genealogies—perhaps Mende, perhaps Bambara—certainly, connected to a sacred elsewhere. And Accra, Ghana, despite its periodic rejections, remained alluringly haunted by unquantifiable souls who yearned to return to it. This was the wide world of Maya Angelou, who, through her myriad gifts, offered us spectacular glimpses of who we have been and who we yet could be.

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