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***Spring Happenings: CRE Sponsors Two Films***

This Spring, the Center for Race and Ethnicity sponsored two film nights as part of our ongoing film series. Geared toward an undergraduate audience, these films were screened in the CRE offices, with pizza and soda served. A discussion followed each.

**THE HOST**

On Thursday, March 26<sup>th</sup>, the Center for Race and Ethnicity screened “The Host,” led by Julia Katz, a doctoral student in history and graduate assistant at the Center. The second installment of our “Growing Up Raced” film series included a discussion with activist Juyeon Rhee of the New York City-based organization Nodutdol. The 2006 South Korean thriller, directed by Bong Joon-ho, prompted us to ask how artists appeal to science fiction to convey the experience of life under military occupation. The film, which became the highest grossing in South Korean history, features a toxically mutated sea



monster that rampages through the streets and sewers of Seoul. Tracing the monster’s origin to American military directives to dump formaldehyde into the Han River, the movie brought

popular attention to American hegemony in South Korea, flagging the exploitation, abuse, and suppression experienced by South Korean citizens through fantastic, absurd, and gruesome metaphors. The story follows a family of misfits as they defy the American military establishment and outwit the South Korean bureaucracy to save their youngest member, Hyun-seo, who was captured by the creature and presumed dead by the government. While her father is quarantined in a military hospital after coming into contact with the monster—which, according to American health officials, carries a deadly virus—Hyun-seo is trapped in the bowels of the city and the belly of the beast. Meanwhile, the United States government takes South Korea’s alleged mishandling of the crisis as a pretext to intervene.



Juyeon Rhee facilitated a discussion of the film, speaking about the history of American involvement in Korea since the postwar settlement that divided the peninsula in half. She offered intimate readings of the historical references embedded throughout the movie, from the use of “Agent Yellow” to destroy the alleged virus—an allusion to the napalm bombs dropped on the north during the Korean War—to the central setting of sewer systems, which were built to double as fallout shelters and remain an ever-present, if submerged, reality of the unresolved conflict. She explained that American hegemony in South Korea has compromised the sovereignty, democracy, and freedom of its citizens, who have endured military dictatorships supported by the United States, and face a new wave of political repression under the current president, Park Geun-hye. Rhee cited flashpoints in the popular discourse around American military occupation, including the deaths of two schoolgirls mowed down by an American tank in Yangju in 2002, and a mysterious illness that afflicted Seoul residents in 2013. The illness was traced to possible contamination of a reservoir located in the Yongsan military base, but American officials prohibited the



South Korean government from investigating.

Rhee tied the film’s stirring satire to contemporary activism, describing broad-based movements for demilitarization. Her own organization, Nodutdol, organizes diasporic Koreans committed to peace and reunification in Korea and social justice in their local communities. Transnational networks of artists and activists are pushing back against the United States “pivot” towards the Pacific, and speaking out against the revisionist histories that sanctify American prerogatives in Asia. Still, censorship and surveillance currently threaten political dissent in South Korea. Taken together, Rhee’s comments reveal the local costs of American empire to be both visceral and insidious. But despite the devastating realities of Korean history and the dark imaginary of the film, Rhee elucidated the movie’s redemptive message: against the obscured, absurd, and necropolitical operations of the establishment, the most marginalized characters hold out hope.

## MOOZ-LUM

What does it mean to be an African-American Muslim youth in pre- and post-9/11 America? To answer this question, the Center for Race and Ethnicity held a screening of “Mooz-lum” on April 2, 2015, organized by Hakim Zainiddinov, a doctoral student in sociology and graduate assistant at the Center. The 2010 drama written and directed by Qasim “Q” Basir was the third movie in the “Growing up Raced” film series. The film, whose title comes from a contemptuous mispronunciation of Muslim, revolves around Tariq (Evan Ross), a young man who struggles to find his identity. The movie starts with a touching farewell between a son and his father. But as Tariq drives off to college, he throws his *keffiyeh* out of the car’s window, disobeying his father’s wish that he wear the traditional Muslim skullcap. Once in college, he insists on being called “T,” and begins to drink, party, and socialize with others, dissociating himself as much as possible from his faith.



Through a series of flashbacks, the movie uncovers Tariq’s deeply troubled state. Raised by a devout Muslim father, Tariq is distressed by his parents’ divorce and traumatized after attending a Muslim boarding school where he had been sent by his father to become a *hafiz*—a



person who knows the Qur'an by heart. Bearing the marks of a severe flogging he received by a teacher for befriending a Roman Catholic girl and going trick-or-treating on Halloween, Tariq decides to disengage from Islam. After 9/11, T's new life as a college student falls apart. A sequence of interrelated events, including the disappearance of his sister, an attack on his Muslim roommate, and the physical abuse he suffers, draws Tariq back into the fold. Turning to his family and friends for strength, Tariq rediscovers his faith.

A lively discussion on the politics of representation followed the screening. Audience members praised the movie director for his representation of Muslim women. Against perpetual stereotypes of Muslim women as veiled, passive, suppressed, and abused, the movie depicts Tariq's mother and sister, and his roommate's girlfriend, as spiritually and morally strong. They are active in their personal, social, and religious lives, and ensure that their voices are heard in family and community matters.

Through Jamal, a professor who teaches World Religions 101, director Basir represents a Muslim who kept his faith after 9/11, and, with courage, opposed an intolerant dean who

threatened to fire him. Basir uses Jamal's spiritual commitment to reflect the reality that despite intense discrimination, Muslim Americans as a whole did not abandon their identity after 9/11. Rather, they reasserted it through their physical appearance, personal education, and community outreach, becoming active participants in both religious life and civil society.

Given the paucity of movies about Muslim Americans in general and youth in particular, the audience emphasized the need for more films that accurately portray young Muslim Americans whose search for and experience with Islam differ from those of their parents' generation. Autobiographical of the director's own life, "Mooz-lum" lays a promising path for future film directors and producers of Muslim heritage to use the film industry as an important vehicle in presenting the experience of young Muslim Americans to both Muslim and non-Muslim audiences through the normality of their lives, inspirations, and goals and changing the perception of Muslims by larger American society.

## ***Roundtable Discussion on The Long Shadow of Watts***

It is a strange year that brings us full circle to where we began—one predicted by the ritualized "cycle of police violence" articulated by sociology professor Paul Hirschfield (Rutgers—New Brunswick) at our October Roundtable on "Race and Policing." On Wednesday, April 29<sup>th</sup> political scientist Lisa Miller (RU—NB) convened a roundtable – "The Long Shadow of Watts: Policing, Violence and the Persistence of Black Inequality in the United States," – meant to foster a conversation about the legacy of urban rebellions against state violence and neglect. But a large audience stirred by the uprising in Baltimore refocused the discussion on the immediate outbreak of protest, repression, and reactionary representation now witnessed in our neighboring state. Our interdisciplinary panel came prepared to address these concerns, drawing on their own research into the criminal justice system, and sharing their interpretations of the unfolding unrest.



*Lisa L. Miller (Political Science RU-NB)*

Professor Miller began by asking the presenters to consider the material impact of policy in structuring, and

perhaps undoing, inequality. Patrick Carr, a professor of Sociology (RU—NB), discussed his research across high crime neighborhoods in Philadelphia where he interviews youth of color about their experiences with the police. Carr described an urban landscape where an eroded education system has



*Patrick Carr (Sociology, RU-NB)*

utterly failed its young people, where the drug trade offers the only viable opportunity for employment, and where the criminal justice system has become the primary social net that catches successive generations spiraling through cycles of state neglect. He reported that young people of color described harrowing interactions with police officers who violated their sense of security and autonomy through the perverse intimacy of Stop-and-Frisk searches. Despite these “daily incivilities” and routinized traumas, young people maintained their desire for safety through police reform, envisioning an organization that is respectful and “organic to the neighborhood,” as opposed to a force that is mobilized like an “occupying army.” Carr lamented that despite these calls from young citizens, the city’s police chief remained resistant to change.



*Johnna Christian (School of Criminal Justice, RU-Newark)*

Johnna Christian, a professor in the School of Criminal Justice (Rutgers—Newark), located the intractability of the crisis of inequality in the phenomenon of “secondary prisonization.”

Sharing her research on the family members of imprisoned individuals, Christian illuminated genealogies of incarceration. Pointing to the material burdens and deprivations of families with incarcerated members—the so-called “prison tax”—she argued that the structural inequalities of criminalization become embedded in these families for generations. She called for hope, however, in movements for sentencing reform, which target the specific legal mechanism of perpetual imprisonment, and championed the resilience of families sustaining life across bars.

Miller offered an indispensable theoretical frame for understanding the exponential challenges plaguing urban communities. Her analysis of “racialized state failure” posits institutionalized neglect as the

root cause of poverty and insecurity, which affect communities of color so disproportionately as to invoke analogies of urban space as “another country.” Her concept of “racialized risk” describes the social outcomes of African Americans negotiating a system designed to fail, in which state accountability has been eviscerated by a series of policies over the past forty years. In our contemporary moment, when the rate of violent crime has reached a fifty year low, Miller asked, why do racialized discourses of criminality maintain their salience?



*Melanye Price (Africana Studies, RU-NB)*

Melanye Price, a professor of Africana Studies (RU—NB), reminded the audience that the Watts rebellion of 1965 occurred at a moment of tremendous hope, when federal civil rights legislation appeared to offer the blueprint for a future free of inequality. However, she countered, this was also the beginning of the militarization of urban police forces. Just as black political voices gained mainstream traction, and black politicians garnered the mandate to govern, white city

officials began to arm themselves. And as white residents began retreating to the suburbs, so too did federal capital divest from urban spaces. This national process of “devolution” occurred across Republican and Democratic administrations, from Nixon to Clinton, and yet those condemned to suffer by state neglect continue to be blamed for their own failure to thrive. Speaking about Baltimore, Price made clear that urban violence did not begin at Freddie Gray’s funeral-- it lead to it.

Despite the bleak survey of urban communities and the policies that succeeded in failing them, the presenters and participants converged on a consensus of hope. Fifty years after the Watts rebellion, do we find ourselves on the cusp of meaningful change? Professor Price applauded young people of color who are organizing against police vigilanteism, using Twitter as an alternative grassroots media outlet, and summoning embodied mobilizations from virtual counterpublics. Social movements are successful when “technologies of resistance outpace technologies of oppression.” Viral campaigns to raise consciousness at the margins have forced the center to respond, and now the issue of systemic inequality has been raised to the national level. While the terms of this conversation are subject to reactionary appropriation, we at the Center for Race and Ethnicity—and beyond—will continue to foster spaces of dissent and critique in solidarity for a more equal future.

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