

In this Issue:

CRE Hosts Events on Politics,
Student Activism, and
Biography

Race, Gender, and the 2016 Election

#studentblackout: A Teach-in Event on
Student Protest and ResistanceFilm Screening: "What Happened, Miss
Simone?"***CRE Hosts Events on Politics, Student Activism, and
Biography***

The Center for Race and Ethnicity hosted three events in November, 2015. The first was a roundtable discussion addressing the role of race and gender in the upcoming presidential elections. The second was a teach-in event on student resistance and protests on college campuses. The last one was a film screening of "What Happened, Miss Simone?" Collectively, the three events drew over 120 people to the CRE.

RACE, GENDER, AND THE 2016 ELECTION

On November 17, 2015, the Center for Race and Ethnicity hosted a roundtable discussion addressing the role of race and gender in the upcoming presidential elections. Speakers included Kelly Dittmar, Assistant Professor of Political Science at Rutgers-Camden and Scholar at the Center for American Women and Politics at the Eagleton Institute of Politics, and Louis Prisco, Assistant Professor of Africana Studies and American Studies. Melanye Price, Assistant Professor of Africana Studies and Political Science and Associate Director of the CRE, moderated the event, which was attended by a diverse group of both undergraduate and graduate students.



Kelly Dittmar, Political Science, RU-Camden

Kelly Dittmar began the discussion by describing her work with the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP). Dittmar explained that the CAWP monitors national elections closely, keeping track of not only who is running, but also who is voting and why. Some of the information that the CAWP collects

can be found on its recently launched website, "Presidential Gender Watch 2016" (<http://presidentialgenderwatch.org/>), which "tracks, analyzes, and illuminates" the gender dynamics in the current presidential race—as seen in polls, social media and other public forums. By asking how gender pervades the election process, the CAWP staff hope to elevate the discourse about gender in the race. "We are not just reacting to what is happening," Dittmar explained: "We are also conducting analyses, commenting on things as they are happening and actually creating the dialogue."

Dittmar also made a few observations about the ways in which race is likely to figure in the upcoming election. “There won’t be a women of color on the ballot, unless we have a vice presidential nominee,” she noted, before going on to suggest that black women voters will nonetheless be very important to its outcome. The turnout for black voters as a group has increased in recent years, and black women have voted in the higher rates than members of any other group for the last two election cycles. “What does that mean for the candidates?” Dittmar asked. “Will they develop positions that respond to Black women’s issues?” Dittmar also highlighted the racial division seen in the support for Democratic candidate, Bernie Sanders. “Bernies bros,” as Sanders’ follower have come to known, are primarily young white men.



Louis Prisock, *Africana Studies*, RU-NB

Louis Prisock began his talk by asking, “What challenge does race pose for Democrats and Republicans, particularly as it relates to the Black Lives Matter movement?” Prisock addressed the movement’s impact on Democratic Party’s candidates for president first, focusing on frontrunners Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton. The Black Lives

Matter movement will be a challenge for Bernie Sanders, Prisock contended, because of the record of police brutality in his home-state of Vermont. “When Bernie Sanders was cutting his teeth in Vermont,” Prisock explained, “he softened his tone around the actions of the police and around gun ownership, because of Vermont’s rich history of gun ownership. Instead of demonizing the police, he constructed the police as labor. He tried to explain the problem around the idea of *economics* rather than *race*.” Prisock argued that by calling for support for the police as “labor”, Sanders avoided taking a hardline on police brutality. Prisock also highlighted the fact that Sanders voted *for* Bill Clinton’s Crime Bill. Passed in 1994, this legislation greatly increased federal funding for prisons and police. Prisock reminded the audience of its effects, saying “It was this *very* bill that has produced the problems we have today with mass incarceration because it gave states financial incentives to build more prisons.”

Prisock also emphasized that, as the election progresses, both Clinton and Sanders will need to deal with the Black Lives Matter movement while also not being framed as “bleeding heart liberals.” Prisock argued that the main reason behind the Democrat’s success in the last presidential election cycles was

their ability to maintain a “healthy distance” from their base constituency, i.e. African-Americans. “Democrats feel that they cannot be perceived as being captive to this special interest group.” Prisock then asked, “How can they win but also keep Black folks within their fold?”

Prisock then turned his attention to the Republican Party, stating that “the Republicans have not been able to solve the race issue.” Even though the Republican Party has had Black candidates in the past, like Herman Cain, those candidates have been unsuccessful. Weighing in on Ben Carson, the sole Black Republican candidate, Prisock argued that “he is attractive to Blacks because he overcame everything, all of these difficult odds. And as a doctor and a neurosurgeon, he entered these spaces where Black folk don’t typically go and find themselves.” Prisock also finds Carson to be attractive to whites because he is a champion of this “personal responsibility” schema. In essence, Carson’s story confirms the model minority trope, and that “if you work hard enough, all things are possible.” Prisock emphasized that Carson’s success and “no excuses” worldview fits in well with narratives of American exceptionalism and has an especially strong appeal for his white supporters.” It confirms to them that there is in fact no such thing as structural racism, and it liberates them from any type of guilt.”

A dynamic Q and A session followed Dittmar and Prisock’s remarks. An undergraduate student, who pointed to the fact that illegal immigration was at an all-time low, asked whether the

Republican Party’s hyper-focus on this issue was really an effort to ramp up voting. Melanye Price responded by acknowledging that Donald Trump has been guiding the dialogue. She also noted that Trump and other Republican candidates tend to lump Latinos, Muslims, and other minorities together as “The Other.” She argued that “the problem that the Republicans face is that they need to continue to speak to that fear and sentiment within their party while also not alienating their Latino constituency, which was their undoing in the last election.” Prisock agreed, adding that Trump “is tapping into a sentiment that has been bubbling over in the Republican Party.” Prisock warned that Trump cannot be simply dismissed nor can he be labeled as an outlier any longer. Price also cautioned against casting Trump’s rhetoric as ridiculous, arguing that his media coverage is directly related to the content of his speeches. “The media tracks his words. The more outrageous the things he says, the more media coverage he gets, so he will just keep amping it up. It’s working.”



*Melanye Price,
Africana
Studies/Political
Science, RU-NB*

An interesting debate broke out between the panelists about the role of identity politics in this election. Price noted that Hillary Clinton has begun to say “I am a woman.” Prisock questioned how far “the gender card” will take Hillary this time. Meanwhile, Dittmar took issue with these comments, saying “it is frustrating that people are using the gender card when talking about Hillary. Men have been playing the gender card too!” Another question from the audience addressed Clinton’s policies around welfare reform. A graduate student asked, “In terms of her policies, what is she actually doing for women?” Dittmar argued that while Clinton *has* brought some issues to the table, she has not been pushed to address many other important issues, including her stance on welfare reform, the Iraq vote, the Black Lives Matter town hall meeting, and her recurring response “I met with the mothers” to questions about her criminal justice reform and gun control plans—a reference to her meeting with a collection of African American parents whose children have died in shootings, including the mothers of Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, Michael Brown and Tamir Rice.

The event ended with the panelists’ predictions of the winners of the 2016 election. Dittmar predicted a Bush and Clinton race, with a victory for Clinton. Prisock predicted a

Clinton-Rubio race. He said, “Hillary will win, but barely. It will be extremely close.” Finally, Price predicted a Kasich and Clinton race, with a victory for Clinton.

#studentblackout: A TEACH-IN EVENT ON STUDENT PROTEST AND RESISTANCE

On November 18, 2015, the Center for Race and Ethnicity hosted a student teach-in event addressing student protest and resistance on college campuses. Speakers included Khadijah White, Assistant Professor in the Department of Journalism and Media Studies, who was the initial organizer of the event; two of the CRE’s Associate Directors, Brittney Cooper, Assistant Professor of Women’s and Gender Studies and Africana Studies; and Melanye Price, Assistant Professor of Africana Studies and Political Science; Katy Gray, Doctoral Candidate in Women’s & Gender Studies, and the President of Rutgers Graduate Student Association; and Jackie Phillips, Adjunct Professor in the School of Social Work. The teach-in was attended by over 70 people, who were mostly undergraduate students.



*Khadijah White,
Journalism and Media
Studies, School of
Communication and
Information, RU-NB*

Khadijah White opened the discussion with an explanation of the tradition of teach-ins as a space

The Center for Race and Ethnicity Presents

#studentblackout

Protest and Resistance on College Campuses
A Teach-In Event featuring faculty from Rutgers



Khadijah White (Journalism and Media Studies, RU-NB)
Brittney Cooper (Women's & Gender Studies, RU-NB)
Melanye Price (Political Science/Africana Studies, RU-NB)
Katy Gray (School of Social Work/GSA President, RU-NB)

Wednesday, November 18, 2015
7:00—8:00 pm

191 College Avenue, New Brunswick, NJ 08901
(light refreshments provided)

The Center for Race and Ethnicity
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
191 College Avenue, 1st Floor / New Brunswick, NJ 08901
Phone: 849-932-2181 / Fax: 732-932-2198
Email: raceethnicity@cas.rutgers.edu
raceethnicity.rutgers.edu

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for teaching and learning about current and relevant social issues outside of the traditional classroom dynamic. White focused on current events, including the University of Missouri student protest, hunger strike and boycott by the football team which resulted in President Tim Wolfe's resignation on November 10th. White then spoke to the racist media reaction to the attacks on Paris, and the subsequent swelling of anti-Muslim attacks and protests on campuses. White also brought attention to local student movements, including those led by Rutgers students, such as #RUforblacklives, and the push to diversify the school mascot. White pointed to the fact that Black students near and far are vulnerable and under attack, including students at Kean University in NJ, who began to receive death threats from an

anonymous Twitter user after they rallied to raise awareness of national racial unrest.

Brittney Cooper reflected on the current state of student protest and resistance, framing recent student activism as a source of hope and inspiration. She noted that recent protests have included including sit-ins at Princeton University, Towson University and the University of Alabama, as well as a student movement calling for renaming of buildings at Georgetown

University.

Cooper stated, "What's really remarkable about this moment: students are making demands and administrations are LISTENING to those demands."

Cooper shared some words of wisdom with students who are interested in changing their campuses to make them more inclusive: "you must think about where the nodes of power are on campus." She urged students to look to established movements and learn from them. "What Black Lives Matter has taught us: we don't have to accept that Black death is inevitable. We don't have to accept state-sanctioned violence. We don't have to accept institutional

violence. We can make demands from institutions that we are part of."

Cooper also encouraged students to lead the charge on making change, rather than relying on faculty for leadership. "This is a place that belongs to you. *You* have to figure out what you want it to be. We, as faculty, follow you guys, this is your institution, we are here to educate you guys, so what kind of education do *you* want to receive?" Cooper also exhorted students to think critically about the tension between freedom of speech and the safety of students of color. She pointed to the fact that the constitution was created to protect *white* freedom of speech.



*Brittney Cooper,
Women's &
Gender
Studies/ Africana
Studies, RU-NB*

Finally, Cooper introduced and explained the concept of the neoliberal university. She asked students to think critically and to try to reimagine a different type of university, one that does more than give students skills for jobs that no longer exist due to the economic reality of the current moment. She asked students to reconceive of a university that would foster ideas that can help students change their analysis of the world, and give them a set of tools to change the world—a set of tools to fight injustice and inequality.

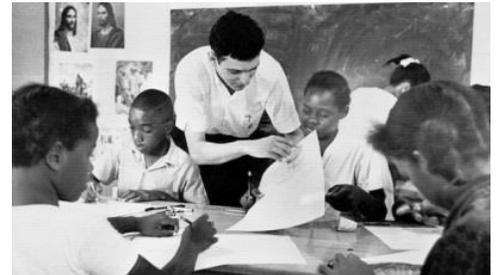
Katy Gray, president of the Graduate Student Association, gave a narrative of the activism that is happening on campus. According to Gray, GSA leaders are primarily working on labor organizing on campus. Gray stated, “Labor activists on campus came together - we see a systematic targeting of departments that are informed by social justice movements.” She also noted that “Teaching Assistant and Graduate Assistant lines are being cut largely in departments that have significant percentages of faculty and graduate students of color.” Gray commented on the fact that Rutgers students have the potential to enact something similar to Mizzou, but that students are not capitalizing on it. Gray spoke of the some of the challenges and barriers to student organizing on campus, including the fact that the campuses are spread out, which creates a disjuncture between activist groups. Gray comments, “Physical dispersal at this university results in conditions that make solidarity difficult. Commuting also makes this difficult. It is actually a crucial stumbling block on a logistical level.” Gray also pointed to the fact that undergraduate student activists at Rutgers are better connected and organized than their graduate counterparts.

Jackie Phillips, who teaches in Rutgers’ School of Social Work, opened her presentation by acknowledging that most of the people in the room were undergraduates. Phillips contextualized her own background as a “child of the 60s from the South”. She spoke directly to the students in the room, saying: “People don’t understand this

generation. They think you’re selfish, and you don’t care.” Pointing to the number of students in the room, she commented on the fact that this was not true. “We are the people we have been waiting for.” Phillips spoke about the current waves of activism among students and young people around the country. “Trayvon Martin’s death did something to us as a nation. It was our Emmet Till. We can’t predict moments like that, but we can honor them.” Phillips spoke to the psychological toll fighting racism and organizing for change can take on people. “Racism eats at individuals and races and a people. And we have to go somewhere and we have to be made whole.” She encouraged people to think about the toll that activism can take on peoples’ psyche. “People pay a price every day. And where do you go to get healed?”

Melanye Price, whose work is primarily concerned with Black politics, explored the connections between current student movements, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s, and the anti-apartheid movement of the 1980s. Price spoke about the pressure that the latter placed on universities to divest from South African businesses. In terms of the Civil Rights Movement, Price stressed the enormously important role that students played in the movement as a whole. She challenged the

audience to think about “what might we learn from earlier student movements?” In considering this question herself, Price highlighted the fact that activists “put their whole bodies on the line” and “did their homework” and also pointed to the importance of education. During the Civil Rights movement, activists not only taught themselves and established freedom schools, but they also shared their knowledge with others. In doing so, such activists pursued a deliberate strategy of “thinking big and small.” they worked not only to “change the world” but also “change the people right around them.” And finally, Price also contended that earlier organizers and activists “stayed for the long-haul”, and ensured that they involved younger students in the movement.



Civil right activist Bruce Solomon—a schoolteacher from Brooklyn, New York—teaches at a Freedom School in Jackson, Mississippi, in August 1964.
<http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/06/the-depressing-legacy-of-freedom-schools/373490/>

Price then turned her attention to what the earlier movements could have done better, pointing in particular to their shortcomings on dealing with issues of gender and sexuality. “They could have been less homophobic, less misogynist, less transphobic. You have the opportunity to get that part right.” Price challenged students to think critically, not only about the ways that race is working, but also about how people of

color are experiencing marginalization in other ways. Price ended her talk with words of wisdom for the students in the audience. She encouraged them to think always collectively, no matter how much of a “star” they might become in the process. Price also echoed Jackie Phillips’ call for self-care; urging students to beware of the toll activism can take on a body and soul. “You don’t want to end up so depleted that you’re no good to anyone or any cause in the future.”

Panelists and students engaged in a lively Q and A session. An undergraduate student asked if organizers can overcome the lack of knowledge of movements and activism on campus, and inform other students and get them involved. Melanye Price responded, “It’s about personal recruitment. That’s how the Civil Rights Movement was built.” Brittney Cooper pointed to the existing competition between student organizations which is counter-productive, and suggested that they need to work together. Price compared the disjointed nature of current student movements to the Civil Rights Movement. “I would like dispel the myth of unity in the Civil Rights Movement. Those activists fought all the time and had drama all the time, but when it came to political organizing they stuck together.” Another student asked for suggestions on how student activists can build ties with administration and work alongside them. Price suggested that students attend the administration meetings which are often open to the public, to learn how things work, and

to stay abreast of the administration’s activities. Khadijah White gave advice to students on getting their demands from the administration met. “Don’t waste an opportunity to do work when you get people together in a room like this. Don’t just talk about feelings, have an agenda and come up with demands.” Brittney Cooper commented on the repercussions of the Mizzou protests. “All the presidents of universities were watching Mizzou in horror. They understand what’s going on.” One faculty member who was in the audience commented, “This is an historic moment. It is time to push.” Organizers and student leaders built on these sentiments by introducing themselves and announcing upcoming meetings.

FILM SCREENING: “WHAT HAPPENED, MISS SIMONE?”

On November 30, 2015, the Center for Race and Ethnicity hosted a screening of the documentary “What Happened, Miss Simone?” The event was attended by 18 people, including several current and retired Rutgers professors who have been longtime fans of Nina Simone’s music. Ruth Feldstein, Professor of History at Rutgers University Newark, and author of the award-winning book *How it Feels to Be Free*, served as the discussant for the event.



The film, which gets its title from a Maya Angelou essay which was published in *Redbook* in 1970, tells the story of Nina Simone, the so-called High Priestess of Soul. A classically trained pianist from a small town in North Carolina, Simone enthralled the world with her rapturous performances, unique musical style, impeccable technique, and unapologetic activism. The film traces Simone’s life from her modest childhood in the Jim Crow South into international celebrity. The film also highlights Nina Simone’s activism and involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. In 1970, Nina Simone left the United States. She was exhausted from the loss of so many black lives in the Civil Rights Movement (which was punctuated by the assassinations of activists such as Medgar Evers, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and also inflicted collateral damage on movement stalwarts such as Lorraine Hansberry, who succumbed to pancreatic cancer at age 34), burnt out as an activist and unwilling to continue to put up with her husband’s relentless abuse. So she fled, resettling in Liberia, and later in France.

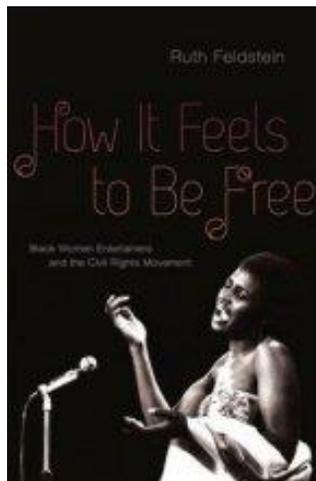
Simone had two brief, but popular comebacks in 1987 and 1994, which were both primarily driven by financial necessity since her ex-husband retained all of her assets. While Simone is best known for her music and activism, the film centers around Simone’s difficult family life and her eventual mental health struggles, which are palpable in the recordings of her later performances.



Ruth Feldstein, *History/American Studies*, RU-Newark

Before the film began, Feldstein urged the audience to consider the power of storytelling, and in particular how the narrative was constructed and whose voice is privileged throughout the film. Feldstein asked, “Who has authority at different parts of the movie?” and “Who gets to tell Nina’s story?” As it turned out, Nina Simone, who died in 2003, was not central in this telling of the story of her life. Instead, the story is primarily told from the perspective of her somewhat resentful daughter Lisa Kelly Simone (who is also the film’s executive producer), and her abusive and controlling ex-husband and manager, Andrew Stroud. By selectively presenting random excerpts of journal entries and letters, and playing with the chronology of Simone’s life, the documentary seems to suggest that it was her activism that ultimately ruined her career.

Feldstein maintained that the film is inaccurate in this regard. Some of Simone’s most fiercely activist songs were written in the early 1960s—at the height of her popularity. Among them was her wildly provocative song “Mississippi Goddam”, which was released in 1964. Simone wrote the song in response to the murder of Medgar Evers and the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing that killed four little girls in 1964. Furthermore, Feldstein argued, “Nina was *much* more popular than her ex-husband made her out to be in the film. She is being framed here as a much smaller star than she really was.”



Ruth Feldstein authored the book *How it Feels to Be Free: Black Women Entertainers and the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford 2013), which won the *Hooks Institute for Social Change National Book Award* in 2014

After the film, Feldstein invited the audience to share their own interpretations and thoughts about the film. A lively discussion ensued. Ann Gordon, Professor

Emeritus of History at Rutgers, pointed out the absence of women in the film. Gordon commented, “I caught onto Nina Simone in my twenties. We *needed* a Nina Simone because we needed to yell in the 60s. There ought to have been some women in this film.” Other audience members commented on the related absence of Nina Simone’s song, “Four Women” in the film, which contains no reference to Simone’s haunting ode to the strength of black women. One of Simone’s most famous and memorable works, this song celebrates four archetypes of Black women with particular power, voices, and pain rooted in America’s ugly history of slavery.



Abena Busia, *Women’s & Gender Studies*, RU-NB

Abena Busia, Professor and Chair of Women’s & Gender Studies, disagreed with this perceived gap of particular music in the film. Busia argued, “Given the story that is being told here, the choice of music to dramatize the moments of the narrative was superb. We may have wanted a *different story*, but the selection was good for this one.” The audience also debated the problematic nature of crystallizing Nina Simone’s legacy into a narrative about a star with a sad personal life. Particularly troubling was the insinuation that her radical activism was a result of

mental illness. Audience members discussed how the film was overtaken by the conventions of “a star is born” and then later “she’s on the skids.” This hyper-focus on her “descent” oversimplified Simone’s wonderful artistic and civil rights contributions, and boiled it down to a tragic undoing of a star.

The Center for Race and Ethnicity

Mailing Address:

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
191 College Avenue, 1st Floor
New Brunswick, NJ 08901

Telephone: 848/932-2181

Fax: 732/932-2198

Email: raceethnicity@sas.rutgers.edu

Website: raceethnicity.rutgers.edu

Director: Mia Bay (History)

Associate Director: Naa Oyo A. Kwate
(Human Ecology/Africana Studies)

Associate Director: Melanye Price (Africana
Studies/Political Science)

Associate Director: Brittney Cooper (Women
& Gender Studies/Africana Studies)

Senior Program Coordinator: Mia Kissil

Graduate Assistants/Editors: Jesse Bayker
(History); Sally Bonet (Graduate School of
Education); Grace Howard (Political
Science); Rosemary Ndubizu (Women &
Gender Studies); Hakim Zainiddinov
(Sociology)