

Feminists Respond to Mass Incarceration in FGSS Symposium by Brenna Diggins

The FGSS program's annual Fall Symposium was dedicated to the theme of feminist responses to mass incarceration. The symposium, featuring Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Joy James, enjoyed an audience of about 120 students, faculty and alumni. Gilmore, Professor of Earth and Environmental Science at the Graduate School of the City University of New York, offered a comprehensive look at the systems of power that enabled a crisis of mass incarceration to develop in the U.S. James, Professor of Humanities at Williams College, discussed the dangers for social movements in mystifying the state. The event was moderated by Lori Gruen. Gruen is Wesleyan's William Griffin Chair of Philosophy, Professor of FGSS, and chair of the faculty advisory committee for Wesleyan's Center for Prison Education.

Gilmore's talk took a comprehensive approach to the prison-industrial complex and addressed how capitalism and state power intersect with racism to create the conditions for mass incarceration. She urged listeners not to be distracted by great displays of power (the militarization of police, high profile shootings) as the only targets for critique, but rather to take a closer look at more ordinary and endemic forms of systemic racism in the U.S.. Gilmore is the author of *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (2007), which the American Studies Association (ASA) recognized with its Lora Romero First Book Award. The ASA has also recognized her with the Angela Davis Award for her work on prison abolition.

Joy James's talk focused on the power of knowing. Using Sun Tzu's *Art of War* as a starting point, James discussed the identity of the activist, scholar, and student as positioned in contrast with a perceived enemy. James argued that it is essential to understand state power to its fullest capacity in order to make meaningful social progress. Past social movements and uprisings have failed to comprehend the undisciplined and violent nature of state power and as a result, have experienced great shock and trauma in the face of civil conflict. James emphasized the importance of framing demands and expectations with a thorough understanding of the oppressor.

Professor Gruen closed the presentations with a passage from *The New Abolitionists*, addressing the condition of the prisoner and his/her relationship to capitalist structures responsible for imprisonment. The symposium ended with a dynamic conversation between the panel and the audience.

Gruen and her students have created a blog on multiple forms of captivity; for a discussion of mass incarceration as a feminist issue, see their blog post on "Women and Mass Incarceration" at <http://ethicsofcaptivity.weebly.com/women-and-mass-incarceration.html>.