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Faculty Q&A: Professor Farah Griffin Examines Three Pioneering Women Artists in 1940s Harlem



When **Farah Griffin** asked her mother what she remembered about World War II, her response was, "All the handsome soldiers who drove the buses in Philadelphia." Griffin, the William B. Ransford Professor of English, Comparative Literature and African American Studies, was perplexed. Then she thought, of course, she was a teenager, she remembers handsome young men! It was only while researching her new book set during the period, *Harlem Nocturne: Women Artists and Progressive Politics During World War II*, that Griffin put it all together: During the war, white transit workers went on strike over integration of their union, causing a nationwide uproar, and black soldiers were brought in by the federal government to drive the buses.

The 1940s have always held a special allure for Griffin, who grew up hearing "stories about the era that just made it very interesting to me, very glamorous and mysterious," she says. While researching the book, she unearthed lots of evidence of the many anecdotes and stories her mom had shared. Griffin, whose previous works have focused on Billie Holiday and other jazz greats, says her mother has also always been one of her most important early readers. This was especially true in the case of *Harlem Nocturne*, which is dedicated to her mother.

Q. One of the things you teach is African-American studies. Is your approach strictly historical or do you also look at contemporary culture?

Contemporary racial issues always come up in my classes, even though my classes are very historically based. My approach is to tackle a question with the resources of a number of different disciplines. I teach literature as well but from a historical basis. What I try to give my students is a long view, a historical context for the things that they see happening. I hope that after having been in my class they understand where things fit historically so that they can engage in conversations about contemporary issues with the kind of knowledge that will make their analysis and understanding much richer.

Q. We often hear about Harlem in the context of the 1920s-era Jazz Age and Harlem Renaissance. What was happening in Harlem in the '40s, the period you explore in your new book?

The Harlem Renaissance is perhaps the most popular historical period for people who are interested in the history of Harlem or African-American studies because it was so vibrant. The 1940s were just as exciting in many ways – Harlem had come through the Depression, which brought with it a kind of radical politics that had always been there but became more prominent as people tried to address the economic devastation that the community had suffered. So we have the remains of that kind of radical politics in the '40s, but also a new sense of possibility as the country goes to war—a war for democracy, a war against fascism. African-Americans begin to press for their own rights, and Harlem is central to that.

Q. Your new book focuses on three female artists. Why did you choose them?

Harlem Nocturne focuses on three African-American women during the war and immediately after: the novelist Ann Petry, the choreographer/dancer Pearl Primus and the composer/pianist Mary Lou Williams. They were all innovative artists, but they were also very politically engaged. I decided to write about them because I realized that very few contemporary audiences were aware of them. Yet during the '40s they were very well known. I think they fell into semi-obscurity as the times became more conservative, as people who had left-wing politics were silenced. And aesthetics change. They went out of style, so to speak. 20, 2013

Q. *Harlem Nocturne* shows how these women helped pave the way for the civil rights movement. You talk about several different kinds of movement in the book. Can you elaborate on that idea?

Movement, the very notion of movement, basically gives the book its momentum. I think about movement in a number of ways. We often think of the civil rights movement as culminating in the 1960s after the Montgomery bus boycott in the '50s. What I wanted to do was extend that sense into the '40s to show that many of the things that we associate with the '50s and '60s – boycotts and freedom rides and sit-ins – were actually starting in the '40s. These women were very much aware that they were taking part in a movement. It was a political movement that gave them a sense of purpose and a vocabulary and a set of goals. Then, as an interdisciplinary scholar, I always try to look for ideas that let me talk about different forms of expression together. It's hard to talk about dance with music with writing. Yet in all three of these forms, movement is very important, whether it's the movement of one dance step to another, or the movement from one note to another, or movement in writing. The last definition of movement involves the mass migration to Harlem from the Caribbean and the American South.

Q. You also write about the "confinement of mobility." What does that mean?

In the last 20 or so years many of us who work in African-American studies have emphasized the importance of movement and migration in the experience of peoples of African descent, starting with the Middle Passage and then various labor migrations and even runaway slaves. Movement is the dominant way of thinking about that experience. But there's been a recent turn where we've begun to consider the ways that these people were also confined. For instance, think about the Middle Passage as a movement of thousands upon thousands of people in the holds of ships, or enslaved people who were being chased by bounty hunters and dogs, or the confinement of urban populations into residentially segregated neighborhoods. Movement is very important, but we can't conflate it with freedom or freedom of movement because there's a kind of confinement that goes on at the same time.

Q. Are we still in the civil rights movement?

I do think that we are still engaged in what we call the black freedom struggle, without question. I think that sometimes we tend to think that it's over because so many of us seem to have arrived at

places like Columbia. But I think that the long-term view teaches us to be forever vigilant of where that struggle moves and how we have to always continue to be engaged in it.

Q. These women would be thought of today as practicing “high art.” Now we live in a culture that’s very celebrity-driven. Can popular culture spark the type of political movement you write about?

Although we look at these women as practicing forms of high art today, I think all of them saw themselves as engaging in forms of popular art. Mary Lou Williams produced music that was performed at Carnegie Hall. To us, that’s high art. At the time, though, jazz was seen as a popular art form, dance music. The black press in particular followed her in the way we follow contemporary pop culture celebrities. Ann Petry, because she’s trying to write very sophisticated literature, might be seen as engaging in high art forms, but she’s also trying to write short stories which were being read the way people read blogs today—short stories which could be read on a subway ride and published in journals and magazines that people would carry in their purse or back pocket. Pearl is dancing in a modern dance context, but it’s not entirely on the concert stage, she’s dancing in nightclubs. Any art form can engage in and be part of a political movement. It’s challenging because popular art is also commercial art and has to have a commercial appeal, but I don’t think that that necessarily means that it can’t be engaged in political movements as well.

Q. Did these women know each other? Did their lives intersect?

Pearl Primus and Mary Lou Williams knew each other, they worked together at Café Society, they were friends. Mary Lou even dedicated one of her songs to Pearl. Pearl danced to Mary Lou’s music. They performed together. I have no evidence that Ann Petry knew either of them. She knew who they were but she did not know them, and she didn’t really socialize in the same way that they did. She was a writer and that’s a pretty solitary pursuit.

Q. These women helped usher in the civil rights movement. Did they also have an impact on feminism?

Yes, definitely, even when they weren’t consciously trying to do so. Ann Petry was aware that she was also writing about gender issues. She gives us characters who are facing problems because they’re black, they’re poor and they’re women. Mary Lou Williams is very much aware that she’s a woman in a male-dominated field, but she’s not calling attention to her difference. She’s trying to compete on masculine terms. I don’t think that she’s as conscious about being feminist – she might even reject that term. But because she is such a pioneer, she certainly is opening doors for women that would not have been opened without her.

Q. Do you think Harlem is still so central to African-American life in America today?

I think Harlem will always be central to African-American life, if only because of its significance historically. I don’t think that it is necessarily the center of black life in the way that it was in earlier decades. That center has moved, there are multiple centers. A place like Brooklyn, for instance, has a kind of vibrancy, as do global centers that have access to media in ways that Harlem had in the past. So Harlem shares its centrality now in ways that it might not have before, but it will always have a central place.

Q. Columbia’s Institute for Research in African-American Studies is celebrating its 20th year. You were once its director and still do work there. What has the institute meant for the University and for your work?

The **Institute for Research in African-American Studies** is actually one of the younger African-American studies programs in the country. It was founded in 1993 by **Manning Marable** and immediately became one of the most significant institutes in the field. The level of scholarship, but also the level of engagement with the public, made it a very important unit, both nationally and locally. It made Columbia a nationally recognized place for African-American studies. It absolutely influenced my work, especially this project. I don’t think this book would have been quite the same

had I written it anywhere else. My conversations with the late Dr. Marable, **Steven Gregory** and Robin Kelly helped shaped the emphasis on politics in the book. While politics would have always been a part of it, I don't think that it would have been as central had I not been engaged in those conversations.

—Interviewed by Wilson Valentin