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Madeline (https://mainecampus.com/author/mgernhard/)

I am a third year English Major at the University of Maine. In my free time I can be found playing rugby, working out, or enjoying a good book.

Campus & Community News (https://mainecampus.com/category/news/campus-community-news/), News (https://mainecampus.com/category/news/) | March 15, 2021

The University of Maine philosophy department in collaboration with the College of the Atlantic hosted a discussion on "Black Studies and Questions of Institutional and Structural Change" on Monday, March 8. Professor Kirsten Jacobsen from UMaine's philosophy department and professor Netta Van Vliet from the College of the Atlantic's department of cultural anthropology organized the event.

The discussion hosted guest presenters professor Charisse Burden-Stelly and professor Jonathan Fenderson. Burden-Stelly is an assistant professor of Africana studies and political science at Carleton College; she is currently a visiting scholar in the race and capitalism project at the University of Chicago. Fenderson is an assistant professor of African and African American studies at Washington University in St. Louis. He has notably published a work titled "Building the Black Arts Movement: Hoyt Fuller and the Cultural Politics of the 1960s."

Burden-Stelly spoke first on her interests in the capitalist exploitation of the Black community. Her work investigates race and class and how those issues are related to both anti-Blackness and anti-radicalism in the modern capitalist society.

"In a broad sense, my work interrogates how to bring together class, or more specific, anti-Black racism and capitalistic exploitation," she explained. "First, I interrogate the conjunctures of anti-Blackness and anti-radicalism, and it is really this sort of interrogation of those entanglements that brought me to racial-capitalism."

Her work is grounded in these intersections of racism and classism and how they are at work in capitalism. She explained that her own work builds off of the work done by Claudia Jones, W.E.B. DuBois, Walter Rodney and other thinkers whom she describes as early theorists of what is now called racial capitalism. She explained that this racial capitalism is most often found in something called "super-exploitation."

"[Super-exploitation] is a form of capitalist exploitation that goes over and above the exploitation of the working class. So they're really interrogating structural and material conditions at the intersection of exploitation and oppression," Burden-Stelly explained.

She also explained the necessity of combating white-supremacy and challenging neo-colonialism.

Fenderson spoke next, explaining that his interests were similar to Burden-Stelly's.



"My work emanates from three areas. One is intellectual history, one is trying to think through the connections or political relationships between folks in the diaspora and folks on the African continent, and also the diaspora within Africa and then my last major point of interest is social movement history," Fenderson said.

He explained that Black intellectual history developed from a defense mechanism against more conservative administrations in education who did not see the need for Black studies departments in the early foundations of these programs. He also attributes his own interests in the field of Black intellectual history due to social movements.

"I actually came to Black studies by accident," Fenderson explained. "Not because I was familiar with the field but because I was engaged in various social movements which were taking place in Los Angeles, different types of community organizations. I found that Black studies was a type of rest haven or a place where I could go to extend these conversations that I was having in the community and have them in the classroom."

He spoke to the importance of his work as a questioning of various conversations which are still ongoing in modern discussions of race relations. He cited his book about Hoyt Fuller as a moment in which these questions of race relations and reparations were really being brought to the forefront of the Black Arts Movement. He explained the issue of how these conversations were absorbed from community spaces into academic fields and into corporate America.

The speakers were then given time to ask questions about each other's work and to continue the conversation at hand. Fenderson asked Burden-Stelly about how she encountered the issue of Marxism.

"Unlike Jonathan, I don't have an activist background, I am just an academic," she explained. "All of my consciousness-raising came through study, books and courses."

She cites that one of the first courses which inspired her to explore political economy was a class called "The Making of Modern Africa." She claims that Walter Rodney's work especially raised questions for her on the issue of political economics. She was inspired to continue exploring these issues through further courses. She came to understand how economics was essential to understanding the African diaspora, and when she later tried to connect political economism to Black studies, she found that there were very few academics who worked in that field of research. This sparked further curiosity, and her research grew from there.

Burden-Stelly then asked Fenderson about the issues of celebrity culture and the reliance upon an elite class to understand Blackness. She wanted to understand what a rigorous and engaged Black studies curriculum and analysis would entail.

Fenderson spoke to the importance of including Black Marxist thinkers as well as engaging with Karl Marx's work on its own. The incorporation of political economy and texts that deal with it is important, he explained.

"But also I think it's important to not fall completely back on texts," he went on. "Part of it I think is also getting our students to engage with the world around them and thinking of the ways political economy impacts them directly."

He discussed the importance of engaging with work that might frighten students or deter them. He particularly spoke to the issue of Marx's work on capital and labor as an intimidating or boring course of study, even though these issues directly impact the lives of every student. Fenderson also explained the importance of arts and culture as they are tied to questions of classism and political economy.

The event wrapped up with questions from the audience, which was made up of both students from UMaine as well as the College of the Atlantic. The questions mostly centered around the issues of how the Western university can be challenged in its relationship with Black studies and how it may better itself going forward in conversations on race and politics.

Fenderson and Burden-Stelly both cited the importance of community vigilance and awareness of the political and social climate around them as a way in which individuals can combat the issues of institutionalized racism.

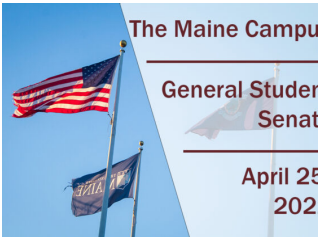
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