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SARAH HALEY

Q&A WITH NEW ASSISTANT PROFESSOR IN WOMEN'S STUDIES



A NEW FACULTY MEMBER in the Department of Women's Studies, Sarah Haley came to UCLA in Fall of 2011. She received her Ph.D. in African American Studies and American Studies from Yale University in 2010 and was a post-doctoral fellow at Princeton University's Center for African American Studies from 2010-2011. She is working on a book entitled "Engendering Captivity: Black Women and Punishment in Georgia After the Civil War." This project is based on the research in her dissertation, which received the 2010 Lerner-Scott Dissertation Prize in U.S. Women's History from the Organization of American Historians. She is currently teaching "African American Women's History; Race, Gender, and Punishment; and Power." Recently she generously agreed to talk with *CSW Update* about her work and about being at UCLA.

WHAT ATTRACTED YOU TO UCLA AND THE WOMEN'S STUDIES DEPARTMENT HERE?

I think of myself as an interdisciplinary historian, and my work focuses on the intersection of race, gender, and class in US history. I was trained in the interdisciplinary fields of African American Studies and American Studies, and my research has always focused on women and gender. The Department of Women's Studies at UCLA was so attractive because of the interdisciplinary and innovative work on gender and race that faculty in the department were doing; so, I was inspired and excited to join an intellectual community with such warm and brilliant colleagues. There were also many overlaps in my intellectual interests and those of the other faculty, who are researching questions of gender and state violence, women of color feminism, and black feminism, and critical examinations of the archive. I also felt so lucky to join one of the few Women's Studies departments in the country with a doctoral program; so, the possibility of mentoring and teaching graduate students in the field was very exciting. It really is a unique and vibrant department and I feel very fortunate to be part of it.

WHERE DID YOU GROW UP? WHAT'S IT BEEN LIKE ADAPTING TO SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA?

I grew up in Brooklyn, New York, which is very different from Los Angeles. Los Angeles has been

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a real adjustment, but I'm enjoying it more and more as I get to know the city. I miss living in a dense city, where the streets are filled with tons of people who are all very different. But what I'm enjoying most about LA so far is getting to know the different neighborhoods; it takes a bit more work than New York but it's a fun project. What I love about LA is the slower pace, and at UCLA everyone has been so warm and generous that I'm really beginning to take to the city.

WHAT WERE YOUR EARLY INFLUENCES? TEACHERS? MENTORS? WAS FEMINISM PART OF YOUR UPBRINGING?

I was lucky to have several important teachers and mentors early on. My father and grandmother were the most important influences; my father introduced me to a wide array of books

and both he and my grandmother encouraged me to read avidly and to push myself to do what I loved. I was raised by my father and I'm not sure he would consider himself a feminist but he was always rereading one of the following authors: Karl Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, Leon Trotsky, Shakespeare, Sylvia Plath, Virginia Woolf, Mary McCarthy, James Baldwin, and Richard Wright. So, it was an eclectic group of literary and political figures that certainly included an influential and particular group of feminists, and I was influenced by all of his interests. One of my most important early reading experiences was when I spontaneously picked up the Autobiography of Assata Shakur from his bookshelf. That book changed my life. It was hugely important to my ultimate decision to study race, gender, and punishment.

My grandmother may not have described herself as a feminist, but she combatted gender and racial discrimination with such ferocity that her example remains critical to the personal and scholarly decisions I make. I had an early mentor, Nicole Sanders, who introduced me to the world of African American women's literature, which changed my life, and undergraduate professors Dianne Harriford and Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina, who taught me to read critically and analytically and who introduced me to feminist theory. So I benefitted from a wealth of teachers, inspiration, and encouragement.

WHAT DREW YOU TO GENDER AND RACE STUDIES?

I knew for a long time that I wanted to do feminist and antiracist work. When I was in college, I decided I wanted to pursue prisoners' rights law, and after I graduated I worked as a paralegal with the federal defender division of the legal aid society in New York. Indigent criminal defense work is so vital but I felt trapped doing that work. I found myself consistently appealing to racial and gendered stereotypes in order to help a client receive the lowest possible prison sentence. It is such essential and difficult work, and work that can change people's lives dramatically, but I eventually decided that I wanted to pursue research that analyzed the relationship between racial and gender ideology and carceral violence.

The prison industrial complex is one of the defining issues of our time. Are we, as a society, going to tolerate historically and globally unprecedented rates of captivity? What does this mean about who we are? How is this driven by the economic exigencies of neoliberalism?

WHAT DO YOU FIND COMPELLING ABOUT STUDYING INCARCERATION AND CAPTIVITY?

The prison industrial complex is one of the defining issues of our time. Are we, as a society, going to tolerate historically and globally unprecedented rates of captivity? What does this mean about who we are? How is this driven by the economic exigencies of neoliberalism? How is this historically new or similar to previous moments? Unless we understand and reconcile these issues we will not be able to fully solve the problems of extreme economic inequality, gender violence, political disfranchisement, draconian immigration policy, and what scholar Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls the "organized abandonment" of American cities. Imprisonment creates the

condition of possibility for all of these transformations, which are all racial and gendered, and disproportionately impact working class people. Understanding and ending the prison industrial complex is undoubtedly critical to comprehending and changing a number of today's most pressing political and economic problems. And that's to say nothing of the carceral regime's extreme violence and cruelty.

WHAT ARE YOU WORKING ON NOW?

I am working on "Engendering Captivity," which is a historical study of imprisoned black women in Georgia after the Civil War. I'm also working on a project that examines African American women's participation in the US labor movement in various sectors.