E. Victor Wolfenstein Memorial Lecture

“Fugitives’ Democracy: The Political Worlds of Toni Morrison’s Essays and Fiction”

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UCLA Faculty Center

Abstract

“I can’t wait for the ultimate liberation theory to imagine its practice and do its work.” Challenging both the wishful thinking of liberal color-blindness and the cynicism of post-civil rights era complaints that it is time to “get over” race, Toni Morrison asks what democracy demands of us in the shadow of slavery and Jim Crow. This lecture traces Morrison’s political thought by focusing on the work of fugitives and the meaning of responsibility in her art. Morrison draws on the heritage of the fugitive slaves—whose self-authorization not only produced the rich literary tradition of which she is a part but also played a pivotal role in redefining American freedom—to track how African Americans have contended with white attributions to them of both the absence and the excess of responsibility. At a time when the political language of “personal responsibility” plays a crucial role in reinforcing the racial hierarchies it denies, Morrison charts a more democratic course and elicits readers’ judgment of our responsibilities as citizens and human beings.

Bio

Lawrie Balfour is Professor and Interim Chair of Politics at the University of Virginia. She is the author of Democracy’s Reconstruction: Thinking Politically with W. E. B. Du Bois, The Evidence of Things Not Said: James Baldwin and the Promise of American Democracy, and numerous articles on race, democracy, and literature. Balfour has held fellowships from the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for Afro-American Research, the Center for the Study of Values in Public Life at Harvard Divinity School, the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. A recipient of multiple teaching awards, she has served as a visiting professor at Princeton University and the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris. Currently, she is writing a book about reparations for slavery and Jim Crow.

E. Victor Wolfenstein Memorial Lecture

Established by the friends and family of E. Victor Wolfenstein following his death in 2010, the Wolfenstein Memorial Lecture brings a leading scholar to UCLA each year to speak on a subject in one of Victor’s many fields of research, which included African-American thought and politics, Ancient Greek political theory, psychoanalysis and Marxism among others. The lecture creates an opportunity for faculty, students, and the broader community to come together to consider the fundamental questions of justice, race, history, and their representation in theory, music and literature that animated Victor’s work. The lecture also serves as a venue to recognize undergraduates who have excelled in the Political Science 10: Introduction to Political Theory, a staple of Victor’s teaching. In addition to being named as Wolfenstein Fellows, these students have the opportunity to meet with the lecturer at a private dinner.

E. Victor Wolfenstein was Professor of Political Science at UCLA from 1965 to 2010. During that time, Victor taught political theory, critical thinking, and radical ideas to generations of UCLA undergraduates. With his unique teaching style that at times included his guitar, Victor won a strong student following and numerous university teaching awards. He was also a renowned scholar and author of seven books and many shorter works, most importantly The Victims of Democracy, Inside/Outside Nietzsche, A Gift of the Spirit and Talking Books.