LIFE

‘LIBERATION SUMMER’: LIBERATION ALL YEAR LONG

Liberation: the act of setting someone free from control, confinement or oppression.

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On Monday, Oct. 5, professor of history at the University of Connecticut, Micki McElya, spoke at a book talk for her Pulitzer Prize finalist novel “Liberation Summer: The Moment That Changed the Women’s Movement and the Future of American Politics.”

Nearly 180 students and faculty crowded the Konover Auditorium at UConn’s Dodd Center for Human Rights to hear McElya’s presentation.

Africana Studies Institute Director Evelyn Simien held the event. Her presence on stage immediately gained the crowd’s generous attention as she introduced author McElya as her colleague — but truly as her friend — and expressed the value of the book’s topic.

McElya’s book illuminates a certain day in which the curated standards of female attractiveness and the exclusive power of reigning whiteness in the United States collide; related to the ongoing Miss America beauty pageant that dominated the public view of the ever-glamorous “perfect” American woman in the 1950s and ‘60s.

McElya dove into the moment her novel begins. On Sept. 7, 1968, Miss America pageant contestants routinely awaited the moment every American girl supposedly dreamed of; tears flooding their wide blue eyes as dozens of roses would be thrust into their arms, with a crown placed atop their shellacked heads. Anticipation gripped the entire room, and one billion folks watched at home steadily. Longtime host Bert Parks held unwavering focus in his speech, and not one newscaster’s camera swiveled as a banner reading “Freedom for Women” dropped suddenly from the balcony.

At the same moment, flocks of women flooded the Atlantic City Boardwalk in objection to this very event. They carried signs arguing that beauty and femininity are universal ideals. One in particular asked, “Can makeup cover the wounds of our oppression?”

The audience’s eyes, along with those of anyone walking the streets of New Jersey on this day, jumped to a giant handmade puppet bobbling above the united crowd — one depicting a blonde, white woman, an American flag printed across cartoonish breasts and her face complete with a radiant, white smile.

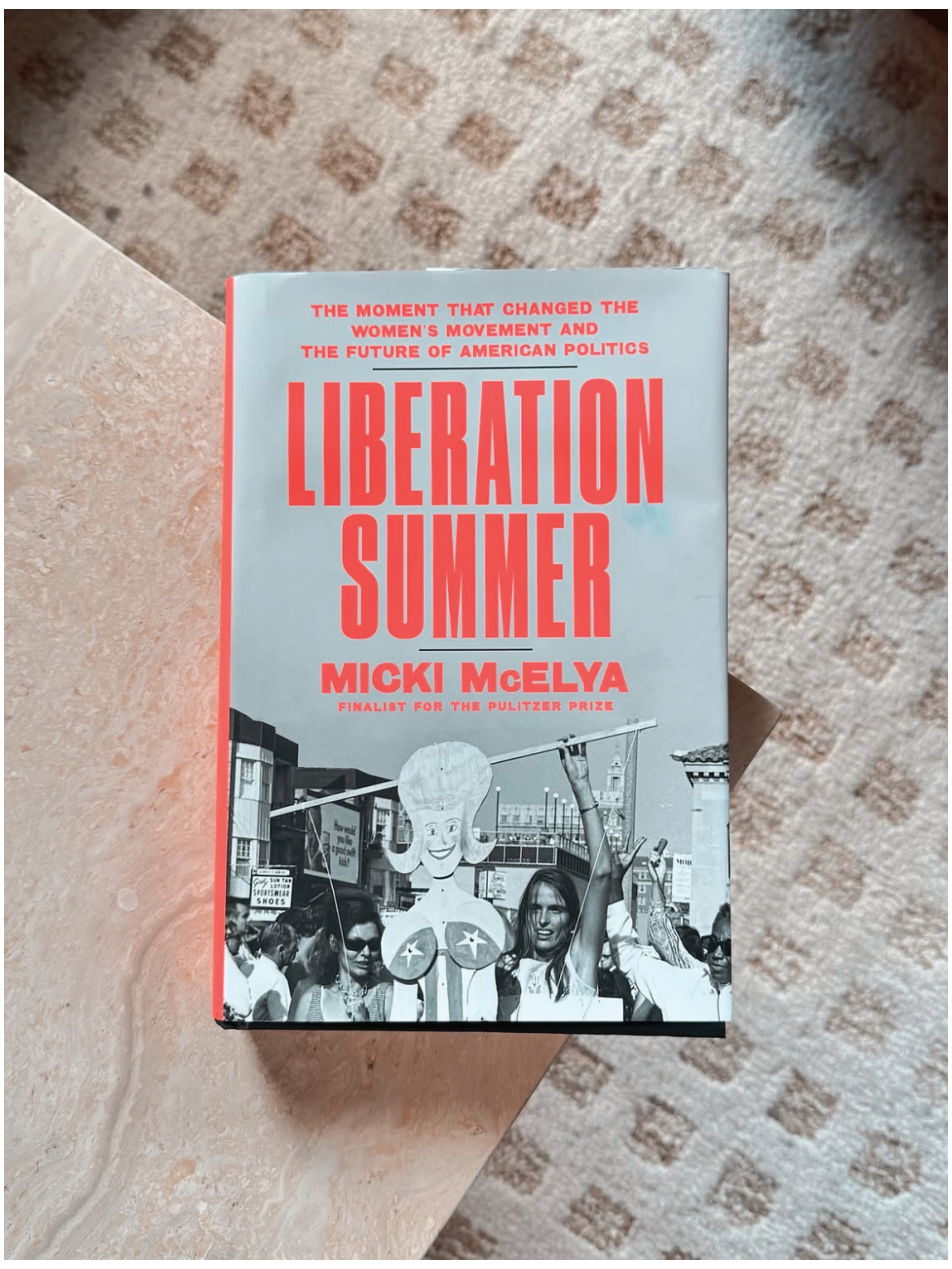
McElya’s disdain was unmistakable as she discussed the ways in which mobs of angry men protested the protestors. At her talk, she presented an image of three men in a frenzy of accusation; thumbs pointing down and tongues sticking out like children. McElya described them as “yelling things like ‘you’re just bitter ugly feminists.’”

The crowd laughed briefly at times, but was brought back to silence as the weight of American sexism and racism sunk in. The claim these hateful men upheld was that feminism was rooted in hatred of men and jealousy of beautiful white women, like the typical Miss America.

The rage fueling these women is not from failure at womanhood, as opponents argue, McElya said. It is instead from the exhaustion of surviving in a nation where only the blandest, most conforming, white, wealthy and “pretty” women are celebrated.

One man in a picture displayed at the book talk held a poster advertising George Wallace, a third-party presidential candidate, who boasted “segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.” McElya made clear that gender-related and racial inequalities have never been unlinked.

McElya beamed with enthusiasm on stage as the rows of seats before her were alive and listening. When describing her motive for telling this story, she explained her feeling of great remiss as a feminist anti-racist professor in United States history when learning of the Miss Black America pageant for the first time, five years into her tenure.



Dr. Micki McElya’s Pulitzer Prize finalist novel “Liberation Summer: The Moment That Changed the Women’s Movement and the Future of American Politics.” McElya spoke at a book talk event at the Konover Auditorium at the Dodd Center for Human Rights.

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McElya said she wrestles with the fact that its existence was “incrementally erased from the dominant narrative of that night.”

During one distinct hour of the long pageant protest, a car containing the soon-to-be-crowned Miss Black America Sandra Williams entered. Men surrounding the vehicle wore African Liberation outfits. Women wore handmade gowns to be worn later at their own pageant. Miss Black America’s coronation was pushed until midnight, to allow the availability of journalists undoubtedly attending the traditional event, or rather white version, earlier that day.

While in some ways both parties on the boardwalk were arguing for the same inclusion, McElya described the “chasm that separates the women in those cars, and the women protesting.”

Kevin Hudson, a Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies student at UConn and attendee of the book talk, said he enjoyed the “really specific way of framing an event in the women’s liberation movement.”

He, along with many others listening, learned about this day for the first time, and appreciated its resonance to his class material and today’s world.

Audience members included but weren’t limited to students from a U.S. History since 1877 class, taught by McElya herself, as well as from a class in the Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies department. Each of them shifted in their seats and looked at each other with shock as each degree of the importance of this 1968 night was revealed.

“There is little better than the opportunity to teach and learn from all of them,” McElya said about the undergraduate and graduate students at UConn who have “lived the writing of this book” alongside her.

After the event, Simien said she felt completely satisfied with the turnout, adding that she “couldn’t be more thrilled” to fill the Dodd Center.

She explained that the attendance rate spoke to the relevance of the Black and feminine experiences in America today.



The Dodd Center for Human Rights at UConn on an overcast day. Dr. Micki McElya hosted her book talk for her Pulitzer Prize finalist novel, “Liberation Summer: The Moment That Changed the Women’s Movement and the Future of American Politics” in the Konover Auditorium at the Dodd Center on Oct. 5.

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