

The Center for Research on Race and Ethnicity in Society presents:

A CRRES Speaker Series Lecture

“When and Where I Enter: Marian Anderson, Florence B. Price, and a Womanist Musical Rebuttal of UnSisterly White Women’s Movements”

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“When will we listen to black women?” was the rallying cry echoed throughout the streets, in journalistic think pieces, and on social media in 2017. These reactions followed the polling results revealing black women’s collective voting power in arguably the most contentious elections in the twenty first century, thus far. In an era of black women-founded movements such as #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, and #SayHerName, some use messianic language to characterize them as “saving the day,” despite being marginalized in various predominantly white women’s movements. Thought-leaders are noticing the socio-political inaudibility of black women liberators highlighting the bias woven into the fabric of the U.S. popular imagination.

However, this socio-political observation does not account for black women’s agency and ingenuity in creating spaces for themselves in musical performance and quotidian life throughout history. Prompted by activist Anna Julia Cooper’s famous quote as a womanist ethnomusicological framework of utterance (say/sing), time (when), space (where) and access (enter), this presentation constructs a genealogy of black women’s audibility strategies by answering the question: In what ways have black women empowered themselves to sound the (un)quieted, undisputed dignity of womanhood on the world’s stage?

Despite black women’s persistent socio-political inaudibility, especially in U.S. women’s suffrage movements, contralto Marian Anderson’s narrative reveals a longstanding legacy of black women embodying and amplifying black women composed works as evidenced by her 1939 recital at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC. Although she was refused concert space at the Daughters of the American Revolution Constitution Hall in DC, Anderson accepted first lady Eleanor Roosevelt’s invitation to sing at the Lincoln memorial. During that recital, Anderson displayed Black sisterhood and challenged the parameters of women’s suffrage when she closed the concert with an arranged-composition of the Negro Spiritual “My Soul’s Been Anchored in the Lord” by black woman composer Florence B. Price. As Anderson envoiced Price’s composition as the “final say” on the moment, she provided a musical rebuttal through which both Anderson and Price entered into the concert domains predominantly comprised of white male decision makers, an exclusionist industry bolstered by unsisterly white women patrons.