

**Geographies of Justice: A Scholarly and Public Dialogue Series about the  
Contested Terrain and Meaning of Freedom  
in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century World**

**Sawyer Seminar Proposal  
Andrew W. Mellon Foundation**

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Summary Description

“Could there be a topic in Western political theory as thoroughly analyzed—indeed as exhausted—as freedom? But it all depends on whose liberties have been framing your conceptual investigation,” writes philosopher Charles Mills. We propose a Sawyer Seminar that will convene a diverse and interdisciplinary group of scholars, in conversation with public intellectuals and community activists to look at three pivotal sites of political and intellectual contestation, that in a variety of ways, are wrestling with competing meanings of ‘freedom’ in very distinct cultural and historical contexts and geographic locations: Apartheid and post-Apartheid South Africa, Palestine and Israel since the 1967 war; and the U.S. Black Freedom Movement, 1960 to the present. The seminar will involve 22 Chicago area scholars and community based educator-activists as well as 8 visiting scholars. The full seminar will convene four times during the year beginning in the fall of 2016. There will be two planning meetings in the spring of 2016 to which all participants and fellows will be invited.

Overview and Background

The focus of our inquiry will not be the elusive question, ‘what is freedom?’ which is always conditional and fraught, but rather how have struggles for freedom and justice played out differently in these three distinct geo-political landscapes and what can scholars, activists and artists learn from one another across national borders and other divides. We will also explore parallels and intersections between these three sites of “freedom making” and “freedom imagining.” We will organize our inquiry around four axes of inquiry, and will hold four seminar convenings on these themes: 1) Prisons, police, security and violence, 2) Wealth disparity, economics and labor rights, 3) Education, pedagogies, and epistemologies in flux, and 4) Art as protest, and as a space for imagining alternatives.

Why these three geographic locations? UIC has a growing cohort of exciting scholars focused on these areas and in conversation with one another, with colleagues

around the globe, and with a set of dynamic civic leaders. There are also some obvious common threads and themes in the struggles for justice in each of these sites: the role of religion; the role of race and ethnicity; the role of violence by state and non-state actors; and the perennial questions – what is meaningful social change, and what is winning?

UIC is uniquely positioned to undertake this seminar topic because of a growing concentration of faculty with expertise and interests in the areas of social movements and social justice, the U.S. Black Freedom Movement and the two non-U.S. regions we propose to examine.

We are also in a strong position to plan a seminar that is not simply an academic convening but includes some of the critical thinkers and doers who are shaping policy and public opinion through their work. We are not so presumptuous or optimistic to assume that our Sawyer Seminar can actually ‘solve’ longstanding political and conceptual dilemmas related to these three areas of focus, however, by convening a unique constellation of historians, philosophers, artists and practitioners, we will offer some new perspectives, insights and angles from which we can better understand the present injustices and envision alternative futures.

The extensive and highly regarded public programming that has occurred at UIC around “freedom and justice” themes has provided us with a network and a set of ongoing interdisciplinary and community-based relationships that form the foundation for this proposal. UIC’s deepening commitment to a scholarship of engagement enhances our ability to organize an inclusive seminar with an eclectic roster of participants that will speak to multiple publics. Our active institutional role in the Imagining America (IA) consortium, including two of this proposal’s participants’ service as members of IA’s national advisory board, is further evidence of our institutional leadership in the area of engaged scholarship and collaborative community partnerships. We have extensive local community partners and in addition to colleagues we have collaborated with internationally, the Social Justice Initiative has done several important collaborations with the Nobel Women’s Initiative, a human rights group in Ottawa consisting of most of the living female Nobel Peace Prize recipients.

We feel the inclusion of non-academic colleagues and counterparts is a valuable feature of our proposal. A lesson from freedom movements around the world is that in order to affect lasting change all sectors of society must be included in the calculus of defining freedom. Moreover, we accept the notion that there are reservoirs of knowledge and knowledge production that exists beyond the confines of the Academy that need to be tapped, valued and included in our work and dialogue.

The inclusion of social practice artists is also relevant to our inquiry. In his influential work, Freedom Dreams, historian Robin D.G. Kelley looks at the ways in

which black artists and activists in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century deployed and activated a 'radical imagination' that in the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century shaped their demands for particular configurations of freedom. His work underscores the fact that while 'freedom movements' often share agreement about what or who they are against, it is more difficult to build consensus on what they are for. This is the challenge of social movements, reform movements, protest movements and revolutionary movements. It is easier to oust the dictator than rebuild a better government in the wake of that ouster. It is easier to dismantle welfare than end poverty. It is easier to call for an end to the prison industry than to configure systems of justice that keep communities safe and yet do not dehumanize or expel those who violate that safety. It is often artists that help to frame and envision new possibilities not readily apparent to us. The seminar will culminate in a mini-conference open to broader public.

There is a uniqueness to the work we have undertaken at UIC and to the seminar we propose. We have collaborated with and been site-visited by colleagues doing social justice projects on their campuses: Case Western Reserve, Columbia University, Kalamazoo College, and Arizona State University. In each case we have received extremely positive feedback on the breadth and depth of the work we are doing. The seminar represents a culmination of these collaboration and comparative efforts. We anticipate there will be great interest in the mini-conference at the end of the seminar.