About a year ago, the election of Donald Trump revealed to us the distressing geopolitical divide in our nation. The inaccuracies of election predictions and Trump’s surprising victory testified to our ignorance of America’s demographics. Still, rather than proper historical inquiry, antiquated stereotypes often mold our understanding of the South, rendering it impossible to reconcile our diverging visions of what America stands for. Yale Historical Review Editor Serena Cho, MC ’21, sat down with renowned Southern and African American History Professor Glenda Gilmore to talk about her work, the role of activism on and off campus, and the lessons we can draw from the Civil Rights Movement, particularly in relation to the current political turmoil.

Interview by Serena Cho, MC ’21
Photo by Michael Marsland
Yale Historical Review: Let’s start with your education and youth. What drove your interest in African-American history and Southern history? In what ways did growing up in North Carolina shape your interest?

Glenda Gilmore: I was born in 1949, when the Jim Crow South was in full swing. I attended a white school and was brought up in a family of white supremacists to be a white supremacist. In the mid-60s, when I was in high school, there came a time when everybody in my age had to choose which side they were on. I chose to reject white supremacy. This was a common experience of many people my age, and it caused a lot of ruptures in families.

YHR: What made you choose to reject white supremacy? Growing up in such an environment, it might have been difficult to take such a “radical” stance.

GG: Obviously, that was a really long journey. I grew up in Greensboro, North Carolina, where the first sit-ins were, and I saw them every day on the nightly news. I realized that the black college students were acting with dignity and that the white people were really being thugs and tyrants to them. I realized that those mannerisms and terrorist actions were things I’ve been taught not to have or commit. I immediately had cognitive dissonance about which side I was on. It’s a process when you change your mind about something you’ve been taught all your life to be true. I am also really lucky that my family moved near a Quaker community, and so a lot of the people I went to high school with came from very different traditions. Many people in my high school were tolerant and pro-integration. My friends helped me think through this. Also, I read a lot in high school. I read writings by Frederick Douglass and a book called Black Like Me, about a white guy who was terribly abused when he deliberately took a drug that turned his skin black. I began to decide that everything I had been told before was a lie.

YHR: When did you decide that you wanted to study history, particularly Southern and African American history? Given how deeply race influenced your upbringing, did you always know that you wanted to be a historian?

GG: I went to Wake Forest University and majored in psychology. At the time, there was absolutely no African American history being taught. My great grandmothers were born during Reconstruction, so I had heard so many stories from them, but in the mid-60s, there wasn’t any such thing as social history. The most popular professor at my college taught a Glory Days civil war course on the Old South. Most historians neglected to dis-
cuss the experiences of the people and simply glorified the Confederacy.

Later, I found myself in Beaufort, South Carolina teaching high school history, and I began to realize that I knew absolutely nothing about African American history. It was at a school in its first year of integration. My students spoke a dialect called Gullah and lived in the islands off of Beaufort. Obviously, teaching them about the grandeur of Jefferson Davis was not going to work. So, I began to learn from my students.

After teaching high school, I spent 15 years as a corporate human resources executive, because I wanted to participate in the historic application of the Civil Rights Act, which opened up employment to women and people of color. Then, I thought that we were really succeeding; we were really hiring a diverse group of people. Then, when Supreme Court turned around laws mandating that executives pay attention to desegregating the workforce, executives lost interest in the issue. Maybe for the first time in my life, when I was about 32, I learned that progress isn’t linear—that things aren’t going to get better. So, I started taking some courses at night at a local university and began to find out that while I had been out of school, history had changed. It was now social and political history, and there was a whole body of African American history which I was entirely unaware. I began reading and writing again, and that’s when I really committed to working with people studying at the cutting edge of the new African American history.

YHR: You mentioned how witnessing the sit-ins at Greensboro influenced your views on race and history. Could you talk about being a Southern historian living in the Northeast? Do you think it’s important to live at the place you are studying?

GG: Obviously, growing up in the Jim Crow South has guided my research interests dramatically. It’s been an investigative journey to find out all the things that were happening in a place I thought I knew, but didn’t actually know at all. So that’s exciting and interesting. I don’t think, however, that scholarship depends on living in the place that you’re studying. I do think it depends on going there and speaking the language, for example, if you are studying French history, but I don’t think that you have to be a Southerner or live in the South to write Southern history. Nor do I think that you have to be British to write British history. I travel back often, obviously, but in many ways, living outside the South has really helped me get perspective on the place where I grew up: how the system works, endures and still supports virulent white supremacy. Had I never left the South, there are so many things I would never have known. I’ve been living on and off in Ireland over the past 10 years, and that has been really helpful for me to gain perspectives on American history, too.
YHR: What is it like to study Southern history at Yale, specifically? What do you love or not love about teaching here?

GG: I love my students, undergraduate to graduate. I’ve learned so much from my students and continue to. Yale has enormous resources, and that helps both my own research and my students’. Yale students are able to go out into the world to do primary research often at a very early stage in their lives. Of course, because we are an international university, if you’re interested in something like white supremacy, colonialism or agrarian studies, you are going to meet people from all over the world who work on similar ideas, focusing on different regions. Yale’s also a wonderful place for interdisciplinary studies, which has really shaped the way I work. I’m also active in American Studies and in African American Studies. It’s marvelous because you are working with literature experts, anthropologists and sociologists at the same time, and your students are too.

Regarding Southern history at Yale, we’ve had someone who focuses on regional history of the South for a whole century. For example, we had U.B. Phillips, who, in the beginning, was an apologist for slavery, arguing that slavery is a relatively benign institution. C. Vann Woodward was, of course, the most famous historian for his criticism regarding segregation and arguing against inevitability. Yale had a commitment to cover regional American history, because Yale saw itself as a national university, just as it now sees itself as an international university.

YHR: How has your work influenced the south politically and socially?

GG: I published an op-ed in the New York Times today [November 20, 2017] called “Colin Kaepernick and the Myth of the ‘Good’ Protest.” In the article, I argue that Kaepernick and other NFL players who knelt are following a long history of planned protests. I was able to bring a lot of things I teach in Southern history to that op-ed and apply them to the present moment. I’ve written lots of op-eds, and I think my writing has had influence on the South. Several exhibitions have come out based on my works, and I also consult for films. I sometimes will talk to other university officials on naming practices and memorialization.

YHR: Has the rise of Donald Trump influenced your study in any way? In what ways has our country’s current geopolitical divide changed the way you look at Southern history?

GG: I think Southern history is more important now than at any other time I’ve been
teaching it. From the late 80s, when I was teaching in the South, to the age of Barack Obama, people were interested in Southern history, but they were working on different topics. Now, the topic at hand is addressing how we ended up with a majority of white women and roughly 38 percent of the nation thinking that Trump’s policies are the best for our nation. I saw many of the tropes that I studied in the archives gain a new life in the current political discourse in the right. I see Richard Spencer, whose grandfather owned cotton plantations, who grew up in Dallas and went to Duke, start a Nazi-like movement. If anything, I underestimated how much progress we, as a nation, had made and how hard we had to fight to keep decency, civil rights, and a sense of opportunity for everyone. I guess that the decision that I made in the 80s, that progress isn’t linear, has just been repeated and relived today.

YHR: You’ve already touched upon my next question a little bit, but what kind of research are you currently doing in Ireland, and what kind of insights has living abroad given you on American history, Southern history or African American history?

GG: I broadened my work to international research while working on my second book Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, to put the American civil rights movement in context. Now, I’m working on a grant proposal, sponsored by Trinity College Dublin, to compare the African American and Irish freedom struggles from the end of the Civil War in 1865 to the present. It’s not necessarily that African Americans and Irish people were best buddies, but seeing what we can learn from the ways they compared their plights to one another. I’m looking at the quantitative data that talks about sharecropping and tenancy in both places and comparing the greatest migrations of African Americans and the Irish diaspora. I’m also looking at how they theorized freedom and independence. Ultimately, in the struggle in Northern Ireland – in what they call the Troubles – the U.S. African American civil rights movement was a great inspiration. Really, I’m studying how examples of civil rights in one place become embodied in another place, if I get the grant. If not, I’ll still write a book.

YHR: I see that you are also very active in advocating for women’s rights. How has serving as the president of the Southern Association for Women Historians influenced your research? Could you talk about the intersection between gender and the struggle for civil rights?

GG: I learned that the hard way, about incorporating the gender. Gender is central to everything in Southern history, even if women are not present in discourse. I wrote my
master's thesis on a period of time when white people took the right to vote away from black people, from 1898 to 1900. I had never had a women's history course, and I wrote the entire thesis without thinking about gender or mentioning gender. Then, when I wrote my first book, *Gender and Jim Crow*, I recast the entire episode as being about how gender works in relation to political and racial oppression and how women – totally unmentioned before that time – participated in or tried to end the system of white supremacy. There was a moment in Southern history in the 80s, 90s and even the beginning of 21st century when history was sitting there without women or gender analysis. It was really a wonderful moment for historians – and I’m so grateful to have been a part of it – who began to reinterpret what we knew. It was a profound moment to write history, but that’s not to say that that was when I first became a feminist. I became a feminist in the late 60s and joined the National Organization for Women in 1970. There was a vibrant feminist community in Charlotte, North Carolina then. Right now, there’s more need than ever to think through American history by thinking about gender, which doesn’t really just mean women’s behavior, but how men behave and why they behave that way in relation to women.

YHR: In your book *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights*, you discuss the forgotten black and white activists who helped lay a foundation for the later civil rights movement. What do you think is the role of radicalization in activism, and how effective do you think radical movements are in bringing social change?

GG: It’s important to realize that when social change occurs, there’s a full spectrum of reasons that made it come about. It’s also important to recognize that the radicals I write about also span a spectrum of radicalism. Some are Black Bolsheviks who go to the Soviet Union and come back to overthrow the racist government in America, and some are like Pauli Murray, who tried to integrate the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1938. The most important thing to remember is that the definition of “radical” changes over time. Someone today who defies segregation is not considered a radical. Yet, at that time, Murray would’ve been considered a radical. The NAACP was also considered radical and was banned in many places. I do think that the presence of real radicals, for example black communists, gave people who were formerly considered radical more ground to stand on. The NAACP launched a campaign in the South that said, “We are the people you white people want to support, not those Black Bolsheviks; the NAACP is going to work with you.” So, writing *Defying Dixie* gave me a real appreciation for radicals that I didn’t have in the past. I’ve never been a radical. I’ve always been a person who is probably on the left side of the liberal, after my civil rights epiphany. Still, I came to
appreciate the role that radicalism plays in putting ideas that can’t be spoken out there and assisting other people with what they believe in, by providing a comparison to their radical position. I do think that it moves things forward. I don’t think that the civil rights movement would have ever succeeded if it was a communist movement; the number of Black Bolsheviks and their white sympathizers never became big enough to call it a social movement, really. But their ideas propelled the discussions in the 20s, 30s, and 40s.

YHR: You are currently working on a book entitled A Homeland of His Imagination: Romare Bearden’s Southern Odyssey in Time and Space. Could you tell us what this book explores?

GG: Romare Bearden is the most famous African American artist of the 20th century, but no one knows much about his family. I am writing a generational history of the Beardens, using traditional archives—which are few—and his art. Late in his life, Bearden returned to the South to paint, do collage, and work on his art; he saw this as a mystical experience. I’m writing a book about family history and art, and interpreting the art with what I now know about his family. I’m trying to talk about how Bearden’s creative process is imbedded in his family stories, and what Bearden may have been telling us in his work that he really wasn’t even conscious of. I know more about his family now than he did. It’s really interesting; it’s psychological, dealing with trauma. It’s really about art, which I didn’t know much about but was privileged to explore through African American Studies. I will be giving lectures at Harvard in the spring and publishing with University of North Carolina Press probably next year.

YHR: That sounds great. Shifting gears, I want to discuss your activism on campus. Last year, you strongly advocated for changing the name of Calhoun college, publishing articles in The New York Times and the Yale Daily News. In one of your YDN articles, you stated, “Yale students taught us that we’re not slaves to our history.” To what extent do you think it is possible to address the legacy of slavery implicated with Calhoun, while not changing the name of the college? In general, how do we reconcile the celebration of tradition with the changing conception of what is considered “just”?

GG: There’s a long history with changing the name of Calhoun, about half of which I witnessed. I was at Yale for 20 years before the recent controversy, and many people believed for a very long time—many good people, including black masters of Calhoun and famous graduates—that the name should not be changed, but the programming, commemorative events and memorials should address who Calhoun was. We talked about
this for 20 years—that’s a pretty long time—but nothing happened. There was Calhoun, and there was the stained-glass window of slaves picking cotton. Even if we had ever succeeded in commemorating him properly, in the end, we couldn’t ever override that; we couldn’t override the fact that descendants of slaves went to eat every day at Calhoun, sitting under a stained-glass window of enslaved people picking cotton. We couldn’t override the fact that Calhoun was mainly known for two things: one, his doctrine that the United States government should not interfere with states’ rights, and, two, his unequivocal call for the South to betray the Constitution. Now, I don’t think it’s possible, at this point, to continue to honor people who were only known for their endorsement of slavery and treason to the Constitution. I think it was a mistake to name the college after him. Yale didn’t do so until the 20th century. Yale was in a phase at the time; a good example of that phase is that they hired U.B. Phillips as the Southern historian. We only hired him after he got more and more racist, when he visited Africa and began talking about how un-evolved all Africans were. Yale was riding the eugenicist wave in the 20s and 30s, and I don’t think we have a responsibility to honor something that was such a big mistake by perpetuating it. I used to believe, even 20 years ago, that you shouldn’t change history but just interpret it, but that was before I thought about what it would be like to be a student of color or a white ally and have to associate with Calhoun. Ultimately, I began thinking, around eight years ago—my son is African American—how I could ever support not actively changing the name if he were to be in Calhoun. I decided that that would be impossible for me as a mom, and if it was impossible for me as a mom, it had to be impossible for me as a professor.

YHR: In 2010, you published “Am I a Screwball, or Am I a Pioneer?”: Pauli Murray’s Civil Rights Movement. As a Southern historian, what are your thoughts on naming one of the new residential colleges after Murray? Also, before Calhoun was renamed, what was the significance of having both Calhoun and Pauli Murray colleges coexist on campus?

GG: Pauli Murray is a major figure in Defying Dixie as well. I’ve just spent a lot of time with her. Let me illustrate how important it is that this college is named after her by telling you something that she did. All she had ever wanted to do was to go to the University of North Carolina for a graduate degree. She was turned down in 1938, and in the 1970s, the University of North Carolina was involved in a decade-long desegregation lawsuit with the Department of Health Education and Welfare. At the time, UNC offered her an honorary degree, and she was so thrilled—you can see it on her papers. And then, she found out that UNC was not cooperating with the desegregation lawsuit, and
declined to take the degree, which must have broken her heart. But Pauli Murray always stood up for what she believed in. She loved Yale, she loved her time in Yale Law School, and she is such an inspiration to all of our students. I cried when President Salovey told me what was going to happen. At the same time, as soon as there was a Pauli Murray college, she wouldn’t let Calhoun within a hundred miles of her. So I was sure that Calhoun’s name would be changed.

YHR: In this interview, you frequently referred back to your realization that progress sometimes is not linear. In the moments when it feels like we’re backtracking, what can we do to recognize that and prevent it?

GG: Everyone should major in history. Seriously, though, it’s too important not to avail yourselves of what Yale has to offer. I can’t imagine being a young person facing the world without understanding how freedom, discrimination, and opportunity have worked in the American history, particularly in the 20th century and beyond. So, I think that the first thing you could do to prepare yourself for anything is to be educated about that past. But I also don’t think our students need any advice from me. It’s been one of the great joys of the last few years to teach students who are so far ahead of me in understanding the difference that activism makes. I’ve taught many generations of Yale students who would have never protested. I’ve taught thousands of lawyers who probably would have been activists if they hadn’t gone to school in the 90s or the early 2000s, when many thought we had fixed the world’s problems. Nobody thought that we had a structure in America that was going to fail the nation’s highest ideals. Students, starting about seven years ago, came in with a different attitude. Feminists expected to hold the university accountable, African Americans expected to be full citizens, and international and immigrant students expected to have their contributions recognized. When that didn’t always happen, they figured out how to make it happen. So that’s really been the great joy of teaching for as long as I have.

YHR: Is there an issue on campus you would like to be more involved in?

GG: You know, I’m feeling pretty satisfied about the vibrant community we have at Yale, about the discussions that we have and about how invested students are in Yale and not in their mythical future careers. So, I will follow where they lead.