Professor Recounts Book Tales In Biography of Medgar Evers

By ELAINE CAWELEY WEINTRAUB

Evocative images of murder on a hot Mississippi night, institutionalized injustice and the fragility of history were the themes presented by professor Manning Marable at an evening of discussion held last week at the Katharine Cornell Theatre.

The subject for the program was "The Autobiography of Medgar Evers," which Mr. Marable — a professor of public affairs, political science, history and African-American studies at Columbia University — wrote with Evers' widow, Myrlie Evers Williams. The seminal book is the first to explore Evers' life through his own writings, letters and speeches, and gives shape to the life of a man known primarily for his untimely death at the hands of an assassin.

The Friday night event was sponsored by the Bunch of Grapes Bookstore.

In his introduction, store manager Robby Bick drew parallels between the world in which we live now and the one of the 1960s era of Ronald Reagan and the bell curve theories which purported to give biological credibility to gaps in intellectual achievement between Caucasians and people of color. For him, Mr. Marable's prolific work has been a voice in the wilderness, speaking the truth about the experience of race in the United States.

Speaking to an attentive audience, Mr. Marable recognized the work of his wife and often co-author, Leith Mullins, and Islander Sara Graham, whom he spoke of as his confidante and invaluable assistant.

He then took the audience to Mississippi in the 1950s and 1960s. It was in that place in that era of white supremacist politics that Medgar Evers grew to manhood dreaming of things that did not yet exist. A veteran of World War II and an educated man, he was surrounded by violence both random and institutionalized. At that time in the state of Mississippi, citizens' rights were not determined by educational achievement or property ownership but rather by the simple fact of the color of one's skin. There, more than in any other part of the United States, racism was proudly acclaimed.

Mr. Marable explained that following the murder and lynching of Emmett Till in 1955, Medgar Evers became the field secretary for the NAACP and became actively engaged in the struggle for justice. Evers was not a pacifist, and

AUTHOR MANNING MARABLE, known — 15 senators refused to endorse the resolution.

Noting that white supremacist violence had been supported by the law and that law enforcement officials had often participated in lynchings — as in the case of the murder of the three civil rights workers, Andrew Goodman, James Chaney and Michael Schwerner, in Mississippi during the Freedom Summer of 1964 — Mr. Marable addressed the question of legal complicity in enforcing racial policies. He has an active involvement with the African Criminal Justice Project, which works with young African-American and Hispanic men at Rikers Island in New York.

Referring to the policies of the state of Florida as "civil death," Mr. Marable pointed out that 800,000 Floridians are permanently disenfranchised because of a felony conviction. Noting that criminal facilities are often placed in rural, Republican areas so that prisoners can be outsourced to them, he urged the audience to challenge discriminatory practices in voting and to be aware that the most important civil rights steps to take are to work for the rights of those convicted of a felony to become participants in U.S. democracy.

Reflecting on why Medgar Evers has not been included in the popular imagination as a great civil rights activist, Mr. Marable noted that African-American history is very fragile.

"The fact that the NAACP threw out most of his files and papers meant that we had very little with which to reconstruct his life," he said. "Unlike Dr. King, who has become an international icon for all those who are oppressed, and Malcolm X, whose autobiography is read worldwide, we had to reconstruct Medgar Evers' life through recollection."

Responding to a question on the importance of history, Mr. Marable noted that the true lessons to be learned are that courageous women and men can make a real difference in the struggle to resist oppression.

"Medgar grew up in a state where hundreds of blacks had been murdered," Mr. Marable said. "He had seen his friends killed and yet he courageously organized and fought for justice in the face of death, and in the end — although he sacrificed his life — he paved the way for a dramatically different future for both black and white people. That is what we learn, and we honor him."

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AUTobiography OF MEDGAR EVERS.