The People's Court
Bryan Wagner

Dr. Bryan Wagner, associate professor of English at Berkeley and author of *Disturbing the Peace: Black Culture and the Police Power after Slavery* (Harvard University Press 2009), will survey the development of the police court in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Police courts were tribunals where officials resolved disputes and punished misdemeanants, such as vagrants, prostitutes, and petty thieves, outside formal jurisprudence. They were also popular entertainment. The municipal records are sparse, but we have access to a rich secondary archive -- satirical newspaper columns and cartoons, mock-epic poems and theatrical set-pieces, vaudeville recordings and sheet music, radio transcriptions and courtroom anecdotes collected as folklore -- that helps us to reconstruct these proceedings in substantial and often lurid detail. These previously neglected sources reveal the extent to which popular knowledge of law has been mediated by popular entertainment conventions. At the same time, they offer insight into the social life that persists in the shadow of law.

Monday March 21, 12-1.30
Richter Third Floor Conference Room
Co-sponsored by the English Department, Africana Studies, and American Studies