



EMORY UNIVERSITY

Department of African American Studies

Emory College of Arts and Sciences

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Dear Friends of African American Studies,

This past year has required that “we specialize in the wholly impossible.” We are confronting a series of brutal realities. A pandemic, allowed to go virtually unchecked, which has led to 1 in 735 African Americans dying from COVID-19. A summer spent in search of accountability as African Americans and their allies demanded justice for the state violence that killed George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Rayshard Brooks, and ignored the murder of Ahmaud Arbery. An election where African Americans’ right to vote remained under assault and those key voters’ legitimacy relentlessly questioned in Philadelphia, Detroit, Milwaukee, and Atlanta. A staggering crisis of growing economic inequality -- rooted in a history of racial discrimination and exacerbated by callous public policies and COVID-19 -- increased the vulnerability of those without the safety net or wealth to cushion the blows.



This newsletter indicates how, against this backdrop of societal challenges and upheavals, the Department of African American Studies continued our dual mission of academic excellence and harnessing that endeavor in service to the community. Our scholars have secured major grants to work with our partners in Atlanta and in the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor, written books that unpack the basis and consequences of often overlooked but important civil rights struggles in the United States, and recognized the brilliance of one of our students whose research explores mass incarceration. We also welcome our newest colleague, Professor Kali N. Gross, whose expertise in Black women’s history and the criminal justice system is a major addition to AAS’s curriculum and intellectual community. And we honor our dear friend and colleague, Dr. Pellom McDaniels, III, whose contributions to the department, the Rose Library, and the scholarly community were priceless.

Sincerely,

Carol Anderson

Welcoming New Faculty, Kali N. Gross

Despite the challenges brought on by COVID-19, the Department of African American Studies welcomed Dr. Kali N. Gross to its core faculty. Arriving at Emory in Fall 2020, Gross is a Professor of African American Studies, having earned her B.A. from Cornell University in Africana Studies and her Ph.D. in History from the University of Pennsylvania. Gross's research explores Black women's history with an emphasis on their experience in the U.S. criminal justice system.



Kali N. Gross

Describing Emory as a world-class research institution with all the benefits of being in Atlanta, Gross remarks that she is excited to join the Department of African American Studies. She adds, "I am eager to be a part of the kinds of things the department is trying to build, such as a Ph.D. department and its work on strengthening its ties with and finding ways to positively impact the Atlanta community."

Perusing the pedagogy of her new colleagues in AAS, Gross says, "You can see how well-thought the faculty are in their teaching."

Connecting with Faculty

Joining the faculty at a time when disconnection and disruption is imminent, Gross found unique ways to learn about and connect with her new colleagues. She says her immediate involvement in one of the department's newest projects allowed her to get to know the AAS core and associated faculty in an unconventional way. As part of administering the department's newest project, Gross was tasked in collecting past syllabi from the department's core and associated faculty where she was able to read about her colleagues' works and their pedagogical practices. "In spite of everything, I have actually felt really connected with and really in awe of the faculty," she noted. "You can see how well-thought the faculty are in their teaching. Not all syllabi are crafted the same so you can see how seriously they take teaching with the kind of sources that they assign for their courses. It was a great way to learn about them outside of departmental meetings or even coffee."

The same sentiments could be shared about Gross's exceptional academic credentials and award-winning research. She is the Publications Director for the Association of Black Women Historians (2019-2021) and a Distinguished Lecturer for the Organization of American Historians where she is an expert on race, gender, and justice in U.S. history. Her expertise and opinion have been featured in major press outlets such as *Vanity Fair*, *TIME*, *The Root*, *BBC News*, *Ebony*, *HuffPost*, and *The Washington Post* and has appeared on venues such as ABC, C-Span, NBC, MSNBC, and NPR. Gross's most recent accolade is a nod from the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, naming her co-authored book with Daina Ramey Berry, *A Black Women's History of the United States*, a finalist for their 2021 Book Prize.

Connecting with Students

Aware of the necessity of going virtual, Gross is optimistic about remote learning for this Spring 2021 semester. She mentions that the substantive nature of her Spring 2021 course helps in overcoming the challenges that come with a virtual classroom. Gross says her course, “Topics in Black Women’s Studies: Black Women Who Kill in U.S. History,” explores a niche topic that typically attracts curious, motivated students. She hopes their passion for learning the course topic and its reading material would help drive their discussions, decimating the detachment one would be prone to in a virtual learning environment. Gross will also rely on a unique and effective way of teaching, which she says is allowing for flexibility in the assignments in the course and inviting her students into the process of building the discussions. She says that she hopes to work with her students in developing the final assignments of the course, merely using her syllabus as a framework that outlines their topics of discussion. Gross is keen on seeing what works for her students and what doesn’t, especially in a space that necessitates resourcefulness and creativity to achieve a successful learning experience.



Gross's co-authored publication featured by @wellreadblackgirl on Instagram

Getting to know Kali N. Gross

Who is your favorite author?

“I have so many favorite authors, but for pleasure I love reading Tananarive Due—brilliant prose with complex, often chilling stories.”

What is your favorite book and/or novel?

“My favorite book is called *Moses Ascending* by Sam Selvon. Selvon is mostly known for his first work, *The Lonely Londoners*, which I also enjoyed, but I like this story about an aspiring Caribbean immigrant who takes on a rundown house in Shepherd’s Bush because it’s full of irreverent humor and tragic ironies. Selvon as wry, raw kind of wit.”

What would you like the Emory community to know about you?

“I am passionate about studying Black women’s history and documenting their experiences in the criminal justice system and I am honored to be joining such a vibrant intellectual community. I am looking forward to working in partnership with students, colleagues, and the greater University community.”

AAS Student Kassie Sarkar receives Rudolph P. Byrd Scholarship

In its fourth year since its inaugural endowment, the Rudolph P. Byrd Memorial Scholarship was awarded to Kassie Sarkar in recognition of her accomplishments at Emory. The Rudolph P. Byrd Memorial Scholarship recognizes a student in African American Studies who demonstrates leadership in activities that address social, political, cultural, and professional issues in the African American community at Emory. Sarkar is an Independent Studies major with a minor in African American Studies. On receiving the scholarship, Sarkar says, “I am absolutely honored to be the latest recipient of the Rudolph P. Byrd Memorial Scholarship. The African American studies department has been invaluable to my experience at Emory—honestly, invaluable to how I hope to make an impact on the world. What I want to do now is live up to the scholarship’s namesake and use all of my training to do meaningful work.”

An Early Exploration of Race

Sarkar’s commitment to investigating issues related to race and power can be traced back to her upbringing in a small, suburban town in NJ, where residents consisted mostly of white, middle class families. Growing up here, Sarkar remembers that her identity as a brown, mixed-race woman caused a lot of confusion and frustration for her. “I could clearly feel the effects of being a racial ‘other,’” she reflects. “I ended up gravitating toward other people of color around me who were just as conscious or sensitive to race.” When Sarkar entered Emory, the need to confront race in both herself and her environment became ever more important, not only as a means to understand her ambiguous, biracial South Asian-European identity, but, even more, to understand how she can be a force for pursuing racial justice and equity where she was.

Sarkar declared a minor in AAS as a sophomore at Emory’s Oxford College, after a transformative summer internship with the prisoners’ rights non-profit, Prison Watch of the American Friends Service Committee, in Newark, NJ. Here, she worked closely with Bonnie Kerness and Ojore Lutalo, the former an abolitionist activist trained by Civil rights leaders in the 1970s and the latter a formerly incarcerated political prisoner and member of the Black Liberation Army. Sarkar says she gained a new kind of learning and mentorship in this revolutionary space, understanding the centrality of African American voices to American history and the need to elevate marginalized experiences. “It was that type of community education that really opened me up to understanding how I, as a non-Black person of color, can understand or relate to African American history in multiple contexts,” she says. “It really equipped me with the desire to further understand a history that I don’t normally have access to [in a traditional curriculum].”

Open Conversations in African American Studies

Using this experience to further her inquiry on race, power, and marginalization, Sarkar committed to the academic courses offered by the Department of African American Studies at Emory. After graduating early from Oxford



Kassie Sarkar OX18 C21

Kassie Sarkar continued

College, Sarkar enrolled in multiple AAS courses, including, AAS 262: Survey of African-American Literature Since 1900 with Dr. Michelle Gordon and AAS 385: Black Atlantic Crosscurrents with Dr. Walter Rucker. Sarkar says working closely with Dr. Gordon and Dr. Rucker had introduced her to non-traditional methods of researching and studying topics in race and its history, specifically centering literature and the arts as a means to resist white supremacy and begin decolonizing research, history, and academia.

Accessibility in Academia

Sarkar is now applying these unconventional methods to her own research projects. Such projects include her senior honors thesis, an examination of identity, resistance to white supremacy, and community belonging in biracial South Asians, as well as her role as lead-curator for “Voices from the Other Side: Artist Books from Phillips State Prison,” an exhibition in Woodruff Library which featured material created by the incarcerated men in a prison education program, run by the non-profit Common Good Atlanta, at Phillips State Prison in Buford, GA. Because these materials are housed in Rose Library, Sarkar and



her classmates who were enrolled in ENG 468: Digging into the Archives & Developing an Exhibition designed the exhibit to demonstrate the powerful role that representation and education can play for people from all different backgrounds.

Sarkar was also motivated to develop the exhibit as part of her larger effort to make scholarship and academic space more accessible to non-academic communities. “It’s really important that my work is made publicly accessible through an interactive and creative way,” she remarks. “I knew that there were [the Phillips State Prison] materials in the [Rose Library] archive which I wanted to use, but I didn’t want to just do a traditional research project.” Though the pandemic set in right after the exhibit opened in March, it is still on view on the first floor of Woodruff Library.

Future Plans in Academia and the Arts

With the conclusion to her undergraduate career approaching, Sarkar says she plans to stay in academia. Prior to the pandemic, Sarkar had planned to apply to Ph.D. programs in an interdisciplinary department such as American or Ethnic Studies. However, because of the paucity of programs accepting admissions for Fall 2021, Sarkar is now turning her efforts towards applying to MA and MFA programs in Exhibition Design or Creative Writing. “I’d like to think of this ‘in between time’ as a time to get practical experience,” she comments on her plans. “But I’m really excited for and hoping to get into an MFA program in Poetry, because I’ve always felt that my academic self, creative self, and activist self are constantly pulling me in different directions. It would be nice to just focus on poetry and creativity for now.”

Remembering Pellom McDaniels III

In a year of unfathomable difficulties, the Department of African American Studies was devastated by the loss of Pellom McDaniels III, curator of African American collections at the Emory's Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, and a devoted supporter of the department, who passed away suddenly at his home on last spring at age 52.

Following a career as a National Football League defensive lineman for the Kansas City Chiefs and Atlanta Falcons, McDaniels's path at Emory began with the graduate program of the Institute of Liberal Arts. While attending an Emory event featuring scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr., he met the late Dr. Rudolph Byrd, who served as Emory's Goodrich C. White Professor of American Studies and former director of African American Studies while it was still a program. Byrd told him about Emory's graduate program in the Institute for Liberal Arts. McDaniels obtained his masters of arts in 2006 and a Ph.D. in 2007 with a dissertation that investigates the influence of race, class and sports participation in African American masculine identity. He then joined the Emory faculty in 2012, after serving as an assistant professor at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. He was an assistant professor with the department and the associate curator of African American collections for the Rose Library.



Pellom McDaniels III



AAS Chair, Carol Anderson, sharing a moment with McDaniels

In 2018, he became the full-time curator of the African American collection where he quickly identified opportunities to share Emory's collection with the Atlanta community by launching a traveling exhibition for Atlanta community schools. This was but a continuation of the community education work he has conducted throughout his professional life.

McDaniels's tenacity and vision for sharing his knowledge and stories of African American lives will move forward with the students he inspired and the colleagues who will continue to carry his passion and his projects forward. Within a week of his death, the Pellom McDaniels III Research Award Endowment was created to fund work in the Rose

Library's African American collections by Emory students, faculty and staff, and visiting researchers. Similarly, the Department of African American Studies has established the Pellom McDaniels III Award for best undergraduate research paper written in an AAS course that uses the African American collection at Rose. The work that results will continue McDaniels' efforts to document and celebrate African American lives, history and expression.

McDaniels is survived by his wife, Navvab McDaniels; daughter, Sofia; and son, Ellington.

Recent Mellon Foundation Grants Awarded to AAS Faculty

The Department of African American Studies is pleased to announce its faculty have been awarded major grants from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Vanessa Siddle Walker, Samuel Candler Dobbs Professor of African American Studies, and AAS assistant professors **Janeria Easley** and **Jessica Stewart**, along with support from doctoral students, Camille Goldmon and Aleo Pugh from the Department of History, are part of a national network of nine geographically dispersed and organizationally different colleges and universities that were awarded the \$5 million grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation led by the University of Michigan's Center for Social Solutions for the Foundation's Just Futures initiative.



Vanessa Siddle Walker



Jessica Stewart



Janeria Easley

The grant's project, "Crafting Democratic Futures: Situating Colleges and Universities in Community-based Reparations Solutions" will involve community fellows as well as local organizations in a collaborative public history reckoning designed to offer tangible suggestions for community-based racial reparations solutions. The project emerges from the Center for Social Solutions' focus on slavery and its aftermath, and is informed by three generations of humanistic scholarship and what that scholarship suggests for all seeking just futures. The Center is led by former Emory Provost Earl Lewis.



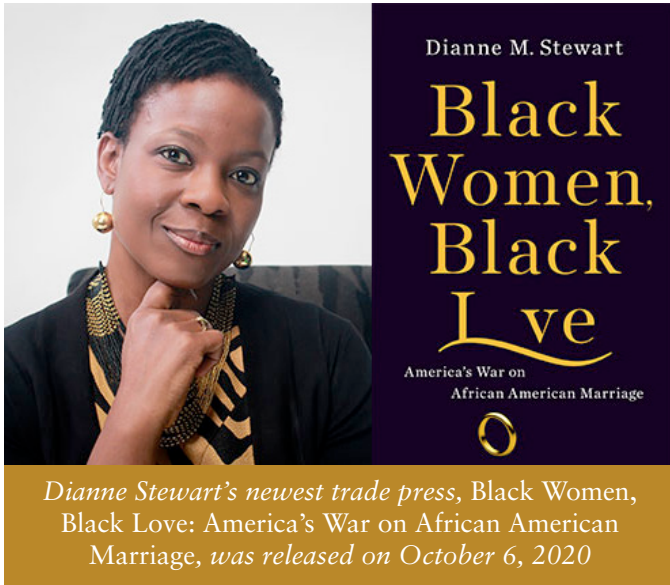
Valerie Babb

Valerie Babb, Andrew W. Mellon Professor of African American Studies and English, was a co-PI of a \$1 million grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation given to the University of Georgia's Willson Center to partner with Penn Center, one of the nation's most important institutions of African American culture. The project, "Culture and Community at the Penn Center National Historic Landmark District" will include a range of programs: community-based artist residencies, in-place studies for students at UGA, Emory, and other partner institutions, and a series of public conversations.

Located on St. Helena Island within the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor, a National Heritage Area established by the U.S. Congress to recognize the unique culture of the Gullah Geechee people (descendants of formerly enslaved West and Central Africans who have traditionally resided in the coastal areas of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and Florida), Penn Center is a nonprofit organization committed to African American education, community development, and social justice.

Latest Faculty Book Release: Black Women, Black Love: America's War on African American Marriage

In this analysis of social history, Dianne Stewart, associate professor of Religion and African American Studies, examines the complex lineage of America's oppression of Black companionship. Prodigiously researched and deeply felt, *Black Women, Black Love* reveals how white supremacy has systematically broken the heart of Black America, and it proposes strategies for dismantling the structural forces that have plagued Black love and marriage for centuries.



Personal stories sourced from contemporary letters, diaries, and interviews illuminate each example as Stewart documents the affronts to Black love endured over generations, in forms both brutal and bureaucratic: from slavery, through Reconstruction, the Great Migration, and the present era of mass incarceration. She critically examines Eurocentric, patriarchal family structures that require a man to be “head of the household” and chief breadwinner, showing how these expectations clash with economic discrimination that Black men face. And she looks at the painful persistence of colorism and phenotypic stratification (CPS) and its psychological impact on the

entire Black community, but especially dark-skinned women.

Finally, Stewart explores ways that public servants, the religious community, and allies can join Black women in beginning to undo the legacy of forbidden black love: proposals for creating pathways to financial stability and wealth building, strengthening the range of prosocial kinship networks beyond the nuclear family, and combatting deeply internalized bias against dark skin.

She writes: “Owing to the centuries-long structural violence against Black persons, the theft of their labor and resources, and the grievous violations of their human and civil rights in this American democracy, Black women’s testimonies of stolen love and stolen legacies are legion. However, portraits of love’s revolutionary and sustaining power in Black women’s lives allow this book’s stories of trauma to be accompanied by stories of hope and resilience...

“Through practices of love, Black women have fashioned a womanist grammar of belonging, indeed a womanist ‘love language,’ that this nation must now learn to speak fluently. As we mobilize with allies who want to see new possibilities for Black women and Black love in America, this is the heritage we must remember and uphold.”

Black Women, Black Love: America's War on African American Marriage is now available where major books are sold.