

Department of African American Studies

Dear Friends of African American Studies,

It is with great pleasure that we launch our inaugural department newsletter. Our goal is to use this platform to keep our colleagues, alumni, and supporters abreast of the fine work that is taking place in our department. African American Studies is a place of vibrant intellectual engagement. I am especially proud of the fact that students taking our courses and working with our faculty are applying what they are learning in current protests surrounding racial profiling and police brutality in America.

This issue includes photos from the peaceful Emory protests that erupted in the aftermath of the Eric Garner grand jury decision in Staten Island, New York. African American studies majors and Mellon-Mays Undergraduate Fellows have been extremely active in this movement. We also highlight the academic work of our students and faculty. Please enjoy reading about Michael Harris's latest book project on the intriguing subject of "code switching" and a review of Carol Anderson's latest book, *Bourgeois Radicals: The NAACP and the Struggle for Colonial Liberation, 1941–1960*. If you will be in the Atlanta area in January or February, please come to one of our events for King Week or Black History Month.



We hope that this newsletter is the start of a dialogue between you and us. We welcome you to our events and encourage you to reach out to us with any questions, comments, or concerns. Thanks for reading, and we look forward to a productive and intellectually engaging 2015!

Sincerely,

Andra Gillespie

Interim Chair, African American Studies

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

*Michael Harris
on Blacks and Sanctuary*

2

*Former Student
Now a Prosecutor*

4

*Review of
Bourgeois Radicals*

7

*Events
of Interest*

8

Michael Harris on Blacks and Sanctuary

by Nathan McCall



Icon of Love by Renee Stout

Code switching. On its face, the term might suggest hints of government intrigue, but it is actually the reverse.

Michael Harris is nearing completion of *Sanctuary: A Black and Blues Aesthetic in African American Art*, which illuminates the issue of code switching. Harris posits that code switching is a complex form of communication developed by blacks to evade the perils of oppressive whites, be they government officials or slave masters.

“A significant, almost defining, aspect of life in the African Atlantic diaspora has been slavery and its subsequent levels of segregation or apartheid and social stratification,” he said. “Force and violence often accompanied these circumstances and blacks sought sanctuary, a sense of safety and comfort, in social spaces.”

The idea of code switching is not entirely new. However, in his work-in-progress Harris brings a novel twist to it. An art historian and artist, Harris explores the phenomenon through the prism of the arts, examining the historical relationship between visual artistic expressions and other black art forms, including blues, jazz, and gospel.

“These sanctuarial spaces—in many cases, religious or musical performative settings—became, in my argument, places where blacks could be themselves, express themselves, and reimagine, reinvent, or liberate themselves collectively,” he said. “This ‘collective privacy’ has been a source of codes, references, and insider identification, and its references are signs and tropes allowing insider communication or emotional identification.”

Citing visual artists Romare Bearden and Renee Stout, Harris said, “Both artists draw from deep African American cultural references in their work, often including subtle signs, symbols, and references that speak to those inside the culture, as well as creating work that has the art historical savvy and technical virtuosity to stand among the great art of their day.”



Conjure by Romare Bearden

In a recent presentation of his work in the Department of African American Studies, Harris also drew correlations between the blues and various expressions of visual arts as reflections of the ways in which black people used communication as sanctuary from slavery and oppression, subtly communicating messages that they could not openly express for fear of retribution from whites.

Harris anticipates debate about *Sanctuary*'s premise. He insists that the book be understood on its own terms, by its intended audience, rather than being lumped into broad, simplistic categories that overlook the nuances in the work.

This is a different emphasis from the body of art by African Americans which engages racial antagonism, struggle, and aspirations of inclusion. The work I am investigating acknowledges a black audience more so than a white one. Such a reading can allow the identification of idiomatic streams of visual expression similar to the ways that [black music] has been rooted in African American life and experience, including strains and elements that might be a part of African cultural practices and residues. This book will build upon previous projects to move the discussion of African American art from racial assumptions—art done by blacks—to a cultural reading.



In his previous book, *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation*, Harris investigated the role of visual representations in the construction of black identities, both real and imagined, in the US. He focused particularly on how African American artists have responded to—and even utilized—stereotypical images in their own works.

He hopes readers of his latest book will make the ideological connections between *Sanctuary* and *Colored Pictures*. “I am positing that sanctuarial performances provide elements for identifying African American visual expression and begin to differentiate it from or within mainstream art.”

A member of the artist collective AfrCOBRA, Harris has published more than 30 essays in books, magazines, and journals in the US, Canada, and England. He has served as curator or cocurator for more than 26 exhibitions, including the Smithsonian National Museum of Art and the High Museum. Harris will serve as the keynote speaker at the Cleveland Museum of Art in April.

Nathan McCall is a senior lecturer in the department and a former reporter for the Washington Post and Atlanta Journal-Constitution. His autobiography, Makes Me Wanna Holler: A Young Black Man in America, was a New York Times bestseller. His third book, Them, was cited by Publishers Weekly as one of the best books of 2007 and nominated for several awards, including the Ernest J. Gaines Award for Literary Excellence, the 2008 Hurston/Wright Legacy Award for Debut Fiction, and the 2008 Townsend Prize for Fiction.

Former African American Studies Major Now a Prosecutor

by Nathan McCall

Through the years, Jamar R. Brown 06C had felt a trace of a calling to practice law. As much as anything else, his time as an African American studies (AAS) major at Emory helped him take the critical steps toward heeding that call.

Brown now works as a prosecutor for the Office of the State's Attorney for Baltimore City. He credits his experience as an AAS major, among other influences, for helping him prepare for that role. "African American studies prepared me to communicate effectively," Brown said in an email recently. "Intellectually, so much of my job is about communicating persuasively—convincing a judge or jury not only to adopt, but also champion, my position. Through the extensive writing required as an AAS major, I learned how to articulate a complex idea simply and make a logical, cogent argument."

Brown's interest in law was first sparked at Loyola Prep in Shreveport, Louisiana, where he was born. In his high school senior year, he enrolled in a law class taught by the school's board chair, who was a former prosecutor.

"That was my first real exposure to courtroom advocacy," said Brown. "I found it to be extremely engaging and rewarding."



By the time he entered Emory in 2002, Brown had a pretty good idea of what he wanted to do.

It didn't hurt that Brown had a "distant relative" who was a prominent attorney. It was none other than Johnnie L. Cochran, the attorney known for successfully defending former football great O. J. Simpson in a 1990s celebrity murder trial that still resonates worldwide today. "We are cousins on my maternal grandfather's side of the family," indicated Brown.

By the time he entered Emory in 2002, Brown had a pretty good idea of what he wanted to do. Still, he had not yet figured out how to make it happen. He eventually settled on a double major in AAS and political science.

Through AAS he got a chance to do an externship at the Georgia Capital Defenders program (GCD), which provided legal help to death-row inmates in the state who were challenging their convictions in appellate courts.

"This opportunity became my first real exposure to the criminal justice system," Brown noted.

After graduating from Emory, Brown landed a job as a project assistant at one of Atlanta's most prominent law firms, King & Spalding. The job exposed him to what he called "big law." King & Spalding represents some of the country's top businesses.

He later worked as an assistant paralegal in the Habeas Unit of the Federal Public Defender Program in Atlanta. The public defender's job was similar to the kind of work he had done at GCD, taking on death-row clients who were appealing their convictions in federal court.

He earned his JD at the University of Maryland law school, where he thrived as a student. In 2010 he was a finalist in the National Institute for Trial Advocacy tournament. He emerged as a finalist in the American Association of Justice Regional Student Trial Advocacy Competition in 2010 and 2011.

"I'm confident that each of these experiences were made possible—directly and indirectly—through opportunities afforded me as an AAS major," said Brown. "AAS, my externship at GCD in particular, provided me real-world exposure to the social and systemic factors and consequences at play in the administration of the criminal justice system. For example, at GCD I learned research shows that, historically, individuals who are convicted and sentenced to die for a capital offense are disproportionately black, poor, or have an intellectual disability—or some combination thereof. My awareness of not just this fact, but other social and societal implications of the criminal justice system, informs my role as an administrator of our justice system and, as is my hope, makes me a better prosecutor."

He joined the Office of the State's Attorney for Baltimore City in 2012. He has argued more than 100 cases in district and circuit court in Baltimore and boasts a success rate of about 70 percent.

Though he has been away from Emory for several years, Brown still maintains ties to the university. He serves on Baltimore's chapter of the Emory Alumni Board and attended the Emory International Alumni Leadership Conference in 2013.

Although he prosecutes criminal cases as an assistant state's attorney, Brown is deeply concerned about structural inequities in the criminal justice system that disproportionately affect black Americans. As he commented:

For anyone who has read and examined closely Michelle Alexander's book *The New Jim Crow*, it cannot be overstated that this issue is the single greatest problem facing the American criminal justice system. I applauded Attorney General Eric Holder for making the focal point of his administration the overincarceration of black men through the country's failed War on Drugs policies. We have to get smarter about our criminal laws and their application regarding simple possession of drugs, such that these laws don't result in the disproportionate incarceration of blacks, when research shows us the rates of use are essentially the same among varying races. We have to stop criminalizing drug addiction and treat it for what it is—a chemical dependency. Finally, we have to provide opportunity. We know that the greatest deterrent to crime is having an opportunity that gives one an alternative to crime, and too many African Americans suffer from a lack of opportunity—both real and perceived.

Emory Student Protests



Photos by Bryan Meltz, Emory Photo/Video

African American Studies majors, including Jomo Wilson (*in rear holding sign aloft*), joined other Emory students in staging “die-ins” on campus. Held this past December, the student demonstrations followed controversial grand jury decisions not to indict police officers in the killings of two black men. The deaths of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and Eric Garner in Staten Island, New York, were two in a string of police killings of blacks in America that have sparked ongoing nationwide demonstrations by protesters demanding changes in the country's criminal justice system.

BOOK REVIEW

Carol Anderson's *Bourgeois Radicals: The NAACP and the Struggle for Colonial Liberation, 1941–1960*

by Susan Carini

All the hallmarks of the reporting in Anderson's previous volume, *Eyes Off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944–1955*, are again in lively evidence: the courage to challenge conventional wisdom, meticulous research, and a persuasive argumentation style. Anderson is, without doubt, unrivaled in her deep knowledge of the history of the NAACP and determined to correct troubling aspects of its history, as written, that demand revision.

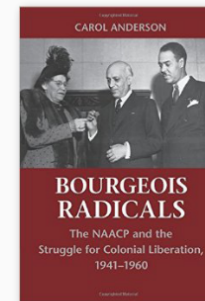
One misconception is that the NAACP's anticolonialism began and ended with W. E. B. Du Bois, whose tenure at the organization, despite being a cofounder, was—as Anderson says—“four brief, tumultuous years, 1944–1948.” Du Bois left in disgust and anger, condemning the NAACP as a “bourgeois set-up afraid to do anything that is not respectable,” and in so doing he cemented an erroneous view of the organization that scholars have repeated faithfully through the years.

Until now. According to Anderson, the NAACP did not shirk its responsibilities, did not fool itself into thinking that what happened to blacks in this country had no bearing on those elsewhere in the world, and vice versa. The group operated on a budgetary shoestring, yes, but it correctly saw the freedom fight for people of color as taking place on a global scale.

With all the expertise that the organization had built with regard to investigating injustice, publicizing it, and lobbying against it, the NAACP did play a vital role in delegitimizing white rule in South Africa, Italian colonialism in Ethiopia, and Dutch colonialism in Southeast Asia. In the end, whether it was Mississippi or Eritrea—they were one: as the *Pittsburgh Courier* wrote in 1945 about NAACP leadership, “They have realized that politics at best is a rough and tumble affair and have fashioned Uncle Tom's walking cane into a rapier to impale white supremacy. . . . They have called the white man's bluff.” Anderson, in this masterful volume, adroitly calls a few bluffs as well.

For more on Carol Anderson, see aas.emory.edu/core/anderson.html.

Susan Carini is a writer and editor and executive director of Emory Creative Group.



“They have realized that politics at best is a rough and tumble affair and have fashioned Uncle Tom's walking cane into a rapier to impale white supremacy. . . . They have called the white man's bluff.”

2015 Events of Interest



Photo by Michael Lisnet, Math for America

january 20

Bob Moses

“Constitutional People:
The Algebra Project and
the Mississippi Theater
(1960–1965) of the Civil
Rights Movement”

MLK Lecture

january 20

Bob Moses (MLK Lecture), 4:00 p.m., Winship Ballroom

Moses is a legendary figure in the mid-twentieth-century civil rights movement. As one of the co-organizers of the 1964 Freedom Summer, Moses helped register blacks to vote in the Mississippi Delta. He also helped to organize the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, which challenged the all-white delegation to the 1964 Democratic National Convention. For his activism, Moses was awarded a MacArthur “Genius” Grant in 1982 and used those winnings to create the Algebra Project, an organization committed to narrowing the quantitative achievement gap in underserved communities.

january 27

Nagueyalti Warren, Emory University, Dark Tower Lecture Series, Noon,
207 AAS Conference Room, Candler Library

Warren is professor of pedagogy in the Department of African American Studies at Emory. A specialist in black women’s literature, Warren is an accomplished poet and author or editor of numerous books about literature written by black women. She teaches the introductory course in African American politics, as well as numerous courses on black women and poetry, black women and literature, and Alice Walker.

Ruha Benjamin, Princeton University, 6:00 p.m., Room 102, Rita Ann Rollins Building

Benjamin is assistant professor of African American Studies at Princeton University. A sociologist by training, Benjamin studies the relationships among race, science, and ethics. She is the author of *People’s Science: Bodies and Rights on the Stem Cell Frontier*.
Cosponsored with the Department of Sociology

january 29

Carol Anderson, Life of the Mind Lecture, “Bourgeois Radicals: Crushing the ‘White Man’s Burden,’” 4:00 p.m., Jones Room, Woodruff Library

Carol Anderson, associate professor of African American studies and history, discusses her book, *Bourgeois Radicals: The NAACP and the Struggle for Colonial Liberation, 1941–1960*, with Brett Gadsden, associate professor of African American studies and history. The Life of the Mind lecture series is sponsored by the Office of the Provost.

february 3

Nathan Connolly, Johns Hopkins University, Dark Tower Lecture Series, Noon,
207 AAS Conference Room, Candler Library

Nathan Connolly is assistant professor of history at Johns Hopkins University. He studies the role that property laws have played in perpetuating white supremacy in the United States. He is the author of *A World More Concrete: Real Estate and the Remaking of Jim Crow South Florida*.

february 10

Nick Jones, Emory University, Dark Tower Lecture Series, Noon,
207 AAS Conference Room, Candler Library

Jones is visiting professor in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at Emory. He studies the ways racial identity developed or was imposed in early-modern Spain and Portugal. He is

currently at work on a book titled *Transoceanic Blackness: Fala de preto/Habla de negros and the Performance of Black Diasporic Identity in Imperial Iberia*.

february 17

Jelani Cobb, University of Connecticut, Black History Month Lecture, 4:00 p.m., Oxford Road Building Auditorium

Cobb is associate professor of history and director of the Africana Studies Center at the University of Connecticut. The author and editor of four volumes, Cobb has written extensively on issues as varied as hip hop and popular culture to the significance of the election of Barack Obama. Since 2013, Cobb has been a regular contributor to the *New Yorker*, where he writes regularly about race, politics, and culture. He is currently at work on a book about the role of anticommunism in the mid-20th-century civil rights struggle in the US.

february 19

Jeffrey Ogbar, University of Connecticut, Dark Tower Lecture Series, Noon, 207 AAS Conference Room, Candler Library

Ogbar is professor of history and founding director of the Center for the Study of Popular Music at the University of Connecticut. The author or editor of four books, Ogbar focuses on twentieth-century African American history and currently is researching black political empowerment in Atlanta since 1973.

february 24

Marla Frederick, Harvard University, Dark Tower Lecture Series, Noon, 207 AAS Conference Room, Candler Library

Frederick is professor of religion and African and African American studies at Harvard University. An anthropologist by training, Frederick studies how religion in black communities is mediated by various gendered, social, and economic commitments. She has authored or coauthored two books and is currently at work on a third project, *Colored Television: Religion, Media, and Racial Uplift in the Black Atlantic World*, which examines the ways that black televangelists throughout the African Diaspora engage the prosperity gospel to reach out to poor constituents.

february 26

Leroy Davis, Emory University, Dark Tower Lecture Series, Noon, 207 AAS Conference Room, Candler Library

Davis is associate professor of African American studies and history at Emory. He specializes in twentieth-century black nationalist history. As a followup to his award-winning book about educator John Hope, Davis is working on a manuscript titled “Without Apology: The Life of Mariamne Samad, 20th-Century Black Nationalist in Harlem and Jamaica.”

april 21

Nadia Brown, Purdue University, Grace Towns Hamilton Lecture, 4:00 p.m., Oxford Road Building Auditorium



february 17

Jelani Cobb,
University of
Connecticut

“The Two Browns:
Civil Rights in the Age
of Ferguson”

Black History Month
Lecture