

# THE GRIOT

*The African and African American American Studies Program Newsletter*



Photo by Evan Cantwell/Creative Services

## **Culture. Connection. Celebration.**

Welcome to the Griot, the newsletter for African and African American Studies (AAAS). According to West African tradition, a griot serves as a repository to collect and disseminate information relevant to the community. Communication is the goal of this publication. To begin in January, AAAS welcomed program coordinator Amani Walker. Amani's contributions have included representation, collaboration, and positive energy at every level. Next, the Mason community joined global efforts to overcome a pandemic. COVID-19 has disrupted life as we knew it. Our campus experiences ended abruptly, including the cancellation of the AAAS study-abroad to Ghana. We will reschedule the trip. Most important, we encourage everyone to remain safe.

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# Greetings from the Director

## Mark Hopson, PhD

Global communities were also thrust into demonstrations to protest the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, and Ahmaud Arbery, among many others. Undoubtedly, the phrase “Black Lives Matter” rang out around the world. Central to the academic mission of AAAS is to provide students with the opportunity to critically examine and engage social issues relating to the Black experience, national and international events and struggles for global social justice



### **Congratulations to AAAS Award Winners**

Kudos to AAAS award recipients. Kiersten Crawford received the 2020 Dennis-Weathers Award. The \$500 award recognizes a student’s active commitment to increasing awareness of intercultural and cross-cultural understanding at GMU and in the broader community. The award honors the memory of David and Ora Porcher Dennis, and Joseph and Rebecca Rutledge Weathers. Tatiana Orengo received the 2020 Charisse Renee Cecil Award. The \$750 award recognizes a student minoring in African and African American Studies, via the student's outstanding academic essay on an aspect of the African Diaspora. This award is presented in loving memory of Charisse Renee Cecil.



**Kiersten Crawford**



**Tatiana Orengo**

# Program Highlights

AAAS consists of academic courses and programs that define, document, interpret and affirm a dynamic cultural experience. AAAS prepares students to explicate historic/social/political journeys for descendants of Africa. Also, AAAS encourages students to critically examine their national and international experiences.

- In spring 2020 and 2019, AAAS offered a new course titled Black Women's Voices.
- In 2020 and 2019, AAAS increased independent studies, cross-listed courses, and added a new study-abroad course.
- In spring 2020, AAAS joined the Black Graduate Student Association to co-host a forum titled Meet Black Faculty at GMU.
- In spring 2020, AAAS joined Women and Gender Studies to co-sponsor the Sojourner Truth Lecture. The event featured AAAS founder Dr. Maril Mobley and longtime Associate Director Mika'il Petin.
- In fall 2019, AAAS collaborated with sociology and philosophy programs to co-host a conference titled W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke: Activism, Scholarship, and Creativity in Black American Life.
- In fall 2019, AAAS collaborated with cultural studies doctoral student, Chalet Jean-Baptiste to co-host a forum titled Black Intellectualism.
- In spring 2019, AAAS co-sponsored the Sojourner Truth Lecture featuring a collaborative talk led by Keeanga Yamahtta Taylor and Robin Boylorn.

# Program Highlights

- In spring 2019, AAAS collaborated with GMU student groups to co-sponsor the W.E.B. College Men's Health Conference led by Ilyasah Shabazz.
- In spring 2018, AAAS hosted a well-attended lecture by actor/comedian Craig Robinson.
- In spring 2019, AAAS joined with the GMU Black Graduate Student Association to co-sponsor a community forum titled Challenges and Success of Black Graduate Students.
- Ongoing advisory committee members include Rutledge Dennis, Keith Clark, Kevin Clark, Wendi Manuel-Scott, Rose Cherubin, Cynthia Fuchs, LaNitra Berger, Spencer Crew, Lewis Forrest, T.G. Davis, Brandi Blake, Stefan Wheelock, Charlene Douglass, Richard Craig, David Corwin and Angela Hattery. Contact us if you're interested.

These are just a few highlights. Certainly, there is more to share. To learn more, take a class or attend an event. You won't regret it.

Onward,

Mark C. Hopson, PhD

Director, African and African American Studies

# Welcome New AAAS Staff



**Amani Walker**

The African and African American Studies Department at George Mason University is excited to welcome Amani Walker! In February 2019 she joined as the Program Coordinator. Amani earned her B.A. in Political Science with a concentration in Human Rights and International Social Justice with a minor in Gender, Sexuality & Women's Studies from Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). While at VCU, Amani studied intersectional feminism, race, class, and gender in Salvador de Bahia, Brazil. Amani also received her MA in International Education from New York University (NYU). During Amani's matriculation at NYU, she participated in the Education and Social Reform program in South Africa. She studied how higher education institutions formally and informally addressed issues of race and sexuality in a post-apartheid nation. Amani was also a 2010 Fulbright Scholar Alternate for Brazil. Amani brings to Mason professional experience in diversity, equity & inclusion work, student engagement, and community outreach. She's excited to join Mason Nation and connect with this vibrant community!

# Welcome New AAAS Staff



**LaNitra Berger, PhD**

LaNitra M. Berger is the senior director of fellowships in the Office of Undergraduate Education at George Mason University. Throughout her career, she has worked toward helping underrepresented students gain access to transformational education abroad opportunities and careers in public service. Since joining Mason in 2010, LaNitra has helped students secure more than \$2 million in external funding for national scholarships and fellowships such as the Boren, Fulbright, Gilman, Truman, National Science Foundation, and Critical Language Scholarship. She has helped 30 students receive Fulbright awards, many of whom are first generation or minority students. She is the recipient of the Spirit of King Award (2015) and the Margaret C. Howell Award (2018) at Mason. Currently, LaNitra is working with IIE and the US State Department to develop initiatives that support diversity and inclusion in the Fulbright US Student Program, including the Fulbright Noir Instagram platform.

LaNitra is affiliate faculty in the African and African American Studies Program and in the History and Art History Department at Mason. As an art historian, her research focuses on the intersections of art and social activism in the black and Jewish diasporas. In 2018, she designed and led a faculty-led study abroad course in South Africa called, “Monuments, Museums, and Memory in South Africa” that challenged students to look at the intersections of art and social activism in public monuments and memorials.

# Welcome New AAAS Staff

LaNitra serves on several education abroad advisory boards, including as Vice President for Public Policy and Practice for NAFSA: Association of International Educators, the AIFS academic advisory board, and Globalize DC. She previously served as director of leadership and international programs at the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education (NAFEO), where she managed a federal internship program and worked with HBCU presidents to develop campus internationalization strategies. During her tenure at NAFEO, LaNitra organized three national dialogues on diversity in international education, bringing together college presidents, federal agencies, ambassadors, and nonprofit leaders together to improve access to study abroad.

LaNitra received her MA and PhD in art history from Duke University and a bachelor's degree in art history and international relations from Stanford University. She is the author of the NAFSA guide, "Exploring Education Abroad: A Guide for Racial and Ethnic Minority Participants." She is also the editor of a forthcoming book, "Social Justice and International Education: Research, Practice, Perspectives" published by NAFSA. Her first monograph, "Irma Stern and the Racial Paradox of South African Modern Art: Audacities of Color" will be published by Bloomsbury in 2020.

# Rap Session: Graduate School Chronicles



The Black Graduate Student Association facilitated a dynamic discussion about the challenges and successes of graduate school. The event was attended by approximately 50 graduate students, faculty, and staff from the Mason community. Topics included mentorship, service, work-life balance, and the importance of building community while pursuing an advanced degree. The rap session was an inspiring and motivating event, and we excitedly await future opportunities for us to connect again.



# W.E.B. DuBois College Men's Conference



# AFAM 200: Introduction to African American Studies



# Celebrate: A Look at Our AAAS Graduates

**Name:** Leia Sabatini

**Hometown:** Virginia Beach, Virginia

**Major:** Integrative Studies w/ a concentration in Legal Studies

**Minor:** African and African American Studies

**How has being a AAAS minor impacted you?**

I've gotten to learn much about African American History and the true extent of

diaspora. Shout out to Dr. Manuel-Scott for challenging my peers and I, and encouraging us to sit in the "messiness." After adding this minor to my degree program I only want to do more research and examinations of the Black experience and the role systemic racism has played in American history.

**Community involvement**

Sigma Alpha Iota, International Women's Music Fraternity, Mu Epsilon Chapter

**Future aspirations, plans and/or dreams**

To be an immigration lawyer

**Words of encouragement/ favorite quote/advice you'd like to share with the class of 2020**

"Care is the antidote to violence . . . as a potentially powerful feminist frame for abolition."  
-Saidiya Hartma



# Celebrate: A Look at Our AAAS Graduates

**Name:** Sydney Johnson

**Hometown:** Norfolk, VA

**Major:** Integrative Studies w/ a  
Concentration in Elementary Education

**Minor:** African and African  
American Studies

**How has being a AAAS minor impacted  
you?**

Allowed me to discover myself, helped me  
understand my history, and my Blackness



**Community involvement**

National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) Member (Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc.), National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) Executive Board (Vice President) Vice President of my chapter (Zeta Omicron), and Anointed Vessels of Unity (Secretary and Praise Team Director and Mass Choir Member)

**Future aspirations, plans and/or dreams**

Elementary School Teacher

**Words of encouragement/ favorite quote/advice you'd like to share with the class of  
2020**

"Only the BLACK WOMAN can say 'when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed  
dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and  
there the whole Negro race enters with me.'"

-Anna Julia Cooper

# Celebrate: A Look at Our AAAS Graduates

**Name:** Samaria Moss

**Hometown:** Spotsylvania, VA

**Major:** English with a Concentration in Creative Writing

**Minor:** African and African American Studies

**How has being a AAAS minor impacted you?**

I was never afforded an opportunity to learn about African and African American studies until I came to college. Learning

about the history and culture of my people has been something that has always excited me. Now that I am going into the education field, my hope is that I can start establishing African and African American studies as a curriculum or elective option and teach the subject with a sense of pride and authenticity.



## **Community involvement**

I serves as a Patriot Leader and Student Coordinator for the Office of New Students and Family Programs. I played the euphonium in and was a member of Doc Nix & the Green Machine. I was a member of Kappa Kappa Psi, National Honorary Band Fraternity. In Kappa Kappa Psi, I served as Vice President of Service and currently serve as Interim Treasurer. I worked as a Desk Assistant and first-year Resident Assistant for the Office of Housing and Residence Life. I was the Marketing Intern for the Fall for the Book Festival and was also an intern at the Young Readers Center located in the Library of Congress.

# Celebrate: A Look at Our AAAS Graduates

## **Future aspirations, plans and/or dreams**

Continue my education in the fall at George Mason to pursue my M.Ed in Curriculum and Instruction with a concentration in Secondary Education English. Afterwards, I plan on teaching high school English either in the Northern Virginia or Richmond area. I would like to publish my own young adult novels and write/rewrite state English curriculums. Eventually, I would like to pursue my Ed.D in Educational Leadership and become a principal and superintendent. My end goal is to be a successful young adult literature author, public education proponent, and state Secretary of Education.

## **Words of encouragement/ favorite quote/advice you'd like to share with the class of 2020:**

“A little consideration, a little thought for others, makes all the difference.”  
–Eeyore, from Winnie the Pooh

# Celebrate: A Look at Our AAAS Graduates

**Name:** Hunter Nappi

**Hometown:** Virginia Beach, Virginia

**Major:** Psychology

**Minor:** Italian Studies

**How has being involved in the AAAS program impacted you?**

I am not personally a minor of AAAS, but I have worked for the program since I was a freshman. Being a part of this program has



allowed me to see different organizations and hear from some great speakers and be a part of some amazing events held by the program. It has opened my eyes to many different problems in the world and also on the campus that I don't think I would have been aware of if it hadn't been for my position. It has also given me more of a drive to be more involved with the current problems of the world

**Community involvement**

Member of Alpha Xi Delta

**Future Aspirations, Plans and/or Dreams**

After finishing undergrad, take a year off and work as a psych tech and then return to Grad School. I want to earn my doctorate in Clinical Psychology and help all people to have a better understanding and better help when it comes to mental health.

**Words of Encouragement/Favorite Quote/Advice you'd like to share with class of 2020**

Time passes so quickly, try to live in the moment and try to remember that everyone is on a different path so don't compare your success to others.

# Professor Valencia King Long

AAAS had the opportunity to interview the amazing Valenica King Long. Here's what she had to say:

## **What personal and professional experiences led you to teach in AAAS at George Mason?**

The most pivotal and life altering moment in my career that has forever changed me, has been my experience living, teaching and serving in West Africa, Niger. The beauty and bounty of being the majority in every space I occupied was the most incredibly abundant experience.

## **What inspired you to teach the course, Black Women's Voices?**

I was inspired to teach this course, because I knew that this classroom would look much like the landscape in Niger. I could exist with my students, honestly, safely while reciprocating culture and experiences in a way that would provide healing pride, and freedom.

## **What did you want students to learn?**

I wanted them to learn about themselves. I wanted them to hear their voices and claim the uniqueness of their personal stories. I believe that if you can find yourself in what you are reading/studying/writing, it inherently becomes personal, and you then choose to fully invest.



Photo Credit: Prathibha Polapragada

It is my personal teaching philosophy that education should provide exposure, experience and application – they are, in my opinion the best ways to maximize the engagement, excitement and curiosity.

**Who are the Black Women that inform your work and teaching?**

Academically, I am inspired by many of our pioneers: bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins, Maya Angelou, Judith Jamison, Katherine Dunham, Nina Simone [there are so many]– that list is expansive. However, everyday, I am encouraged by the strength and beauty of the women in my family: my mother, Tami Baker, my grandmother, Emily King and my sisters, friends and the women that have mentored me and the young women that I have mentored. Everything that I do is because they live within me. Their bravery and vulnerabilities fuel me.

**How has teaching this course impacted you personally and professionally?**

This course has impacted me in so many ways. Personally, I have been inspired to slow down and examine what matters to me. My students are so beautiful and their stories have inspired me to reignite some projects I had forgotten about. Professionally, it has helped me wipe my slate clean. While there are so many things that I have always wanted to achieve, this course has forced me to reexamine my intentions & my needs versus my wants and my desires.

**What's next for you in your work?**

As of right now I am taking a moment to process all of the information I received over the last five months. I have so many dreams and aspirations – but my desire is to continue to inspire, mentor and provide effective leadership for young people.

### **What are you looking forward to?**

I'm looking forward to completion. This is my first semester as a professor and while I have taught at the primary and secondary level, this assignment came with a much heavier weight. The responsibility has felt much different. I look forward to what my students will become. I look forward to how I am changed as a result of this moment in time; I look forward to their possibilities, for they are infinite.

### **What brings you joy?**

I get so much joy when I see young people live boldly in who they see themselves to be. At my core, I am an encourager. My personal mantra is – Motivate. Inspire. Change. Words that I absolutely live by. I am filled with joy, when I can help someone breakthrough a barrier that has inhibited them – I believe everyone was divinely purposed and when I am able to facilitate that understanding, I am overjoyed. Above all, my joy comes from the Lord; I am so grateful and blessed to know who and whose I am. I get joy from knowing that I was chosen; no mistakes, just lessons. My life is on purpose and my path has been predestined, that brings me joy and peace.

PHOTO BY MARTIN R. SMITH

# Faculty Spotlight: Dr. Kevin A. Clark



## **Title**

Professor of Learning Technologies and the founding Director of the Center for Digital Media Innovation and Diversity at George Mason University

## **Awards**

Being selected as a Fellow for the 26th Annual Television Academy (Emmy) Foundation Faculty Seminar

Being recognized by former President Barack Obama as a White House Champion of Change for his work in supporting and accelerating STEM opportunities for diverse students, schools, and communities

Serving as a member of National Park Service Advisory Board's Education Committee.

## **Publications**

Clark, K. (2020). *Seeing is Believing: Racial diversity in children's media*.

In C. Donohue (Ed.), *Exploring key issues in early childhood and technology: Evolving perspectives and innovative approaches*. New York: Routledge.

## **Presentations**

Clark, K. (2020). *Behind the scenes: A look at innovation in digital media and the implications for the African American student*. Featured Speaker. US Department of Education – White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans. Washington, DC.

Clark, K. (2020). *Diversity in STEM: Believing is seeing*. Keynote Speaker. NC State University College of Science Diversity in STEM Conference. Raleigh, NC.

Clark, K. (2020). *How are educators using edtech to close equity gaps?* Panelist. Learn Launch Conference. Boston, MA.

Clark, K. (2019). *The Role of Diversity in Emerging Innovation*. Speaker. Children’s Advertising Review Unit (CARU) Conference. Marina Del Rey, CA.

Clark, K. (2018). *The XYZ’s of children’s media*. Invited Moderator. The Hollywood Creative Forum – Walter Kaitz Foundation. Los Angeles, CA.

# Faculty Spotlight: Dr. Wendi N. Manuel-Scott

## **Title**

Professor, School of Integrative Studies Affiliate; Women and Gender Studies; African and African American Studies

## **Awards**

Margaret C. Howell Outstanding Achievement Award, 2019

George Mason University Teaching Excellence Award, 2019

Presidential Award for Faculty Excellence: The Karen & Hector Alcalde Medal for Excellence in Diversity & Inclusion, 2017

## **Fellowships**

Women and Gender Studies Faculty Fellow, GMU, 2019-2020

Center for the Advancement of Well-Being Senior Scholar, GMU,  
2018-current

University Life Faculty Fellow, GMU,  
2018-2019



Dr. Manuel-Scott has facilitated multiple well-being and inclusion presentations and collaborated on several grant projects including Learning Historic Places with Diverse Populations with Drs. Jenice L. View and Abena Aidoo. Dr. Manuel-Scott also continues to work with Drs. Benedict Carton and George Oberle on the Enslaved People of George Mason Memorial project. Listen to the two podcasts below to learn more about the memorial project:

*“The Enslaved People of George Mason: Access to Excellence Podcast”* GMU Podcast, February 7, 2020, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-enslaved-people-of-george-mason/id1498236015?i=1000464926497>

*“Why GMU Kept George Mason Name,”* News Radio WRVA, 19 September 2019 <https://omny.fm/shows/richmonds-morning-news/why-gmu-kept-george-mason-name>

# Faculty Spotlight: Dr. Rutledge Dennis

## Title

Professor Department of  
Sociology/Anthropology

## Papers read at conferences

*"The Cultural Sociology of  
Alain Locke"* The Alain Locke  
Conference, Howard  
University, April 12, 2019

*"Alma Barlow, Organizational  
Insurgency, and the Creation  
of the Richmond Tenants  
Association."* Virginia Social Science  
Association,  
Longwood University, April  
13, 2019

*"Dual Socialization  
and the Making of Black Academic  
Intellectuals."* Eastern Sociological Society,  
Philadelphia, February 28, 2020.



## Publications

Rutledge M. Dennis and Kimya N. Dennis. *"W.E.B. Du Bois: The First Public Sociologist."*  
The Sociologist Forthcoming.

Rutledge M. Dennis and Kimya N, Dennis. *"The Politics of Black Lives Matter"* in *The Wiley  
Blackwell Companion to Race, Ethnicity, and Nationalism*. Editors: J. Stone, T. Dennis, P.  
Rizora, X. Hua. Summer, 2020

"Don't let anyone rob you of  
your imagination, your  
creativity, or your curiosity.  
It's your place in the world;  
it's your life. Go on and do  
all you can with it, and make  
it the life you want to live. "

-Mae Jemison