

Linkages

THE DEPARTMENT OF AFRICAN,
AFRICAN AMERICAN, AND DIASPORA STUDIES
THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL

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Photo Credit: Tariq Nasir Grissom

AAAD Welcomes Dr. LeRhonda Manigault-Bryant *Director of the Stone Center and Professor in the Department*

The Department of African, African American, and Diaspora Studies extends a warm and enthusiastic welcome to Dr. LeRhonda Manigault-Bryant, who joined UNC in January 2023 as the new Director of the Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History, and Professor in the Department. Dr. Manigault-Bryant was previously a tenured professor at Williams College, where she also served as Associate Dean of the Faculty. The range of her work is broad and inspiring, covering scholarship on Gullah/Geechee women from South Carolina's low-

country – the subject of her book, *Talking to the Dead: Religion, Music and Lived Memory among Gullah/Geechee Women* (Duke, 2014) – and from there spanning outward to consider questions of religion, spirituality, race, gender, and class. Dr. Manigault-Bryant is also an innovative filmmaker and musician, and her writing has powerfully explored suffering produced by the racialized weight of the Covid-19 pandemic, and grief and dying in a way that exposes systemic issues while remaining highly personal.

Having grown up in South Carolina, Dr. Manigault-Bryant's return to the South also brings her closer to a place where she can be deeply rooted. As the new Director of the Stone Center, she takes over from Dr. Joseph Jordan who led the Stone Center for over twenty years and plans to continue his vision whilst also focusing keenly on student outreach, sustainability, and community-building.

Below, Dr. Manigault-Bryant exchanges a few words on her new role with Dr. Shakirah Hudani, Editor of *Linkages* and faculty member in the Department.

What most attracted you to Carolina in your new role as Director of the Stone Center and as Professor of AAAD?

I think that many of us who center the study of Black life in interdisciplinary ways often feel like we have to choose between prioritizing various aspects of our work over and against interdisciplinarity. What was so appealing to me about joining AAAD and the Stone Center was that I had a very clear sense that the intersections between these two spaces would not force me to choose, but rather seamlessly integrate all of the elements of my life and thinking in a way that is organic and seamless.



Photo Credit: Stone Center Website

I get to continue to be a professor, a writer, a thinker, a filmmaker, a curator, an administrator, a community organizer, an advocate, a leader— all of the aspects of my professional life rolled into one. It's truly an amazing gift, and an opportunity that I'm very grateful for and excited about!

What do you see as the main strengths of the Stone Center today and how do you project its vision for the future?

I am fortunate to have the opportunity to steward a place that has such a storied history

and rich legacy. The Stone Center has touched so many people within and beyond Carolina and has such a beautiful building to symbolize its legacy as an inimitable strength. That it is named after a Black woman who invested her time and energy in this

community is also something that I spend a great deal thinking about. My vision for the future of the Stone Center has everything to do with stewarding its rich legacy—a legacy that I proudly inherit—and doing so in a way that takes seriously what it means to shepherd a space uniquely poised to meet the needs of faculty, students, staff, alumni, and members of our community. That means that I am doing a lot of listening to members of our community, that I am thinking a lot about how to engage folks beyond our community, and all with an eye toward ensuring the Stone Center's continued autonomy and sustainability.

What types of student-engaged and community-engaged work is the Stone Center doing, and what do you envision for the near future?

The Stone Center has long been working at the intersections of student and community engagement and I imagine continuing and amplifying that work. Three existing initiatives come to mind: 1) The Undergraduate International Studies Fellowship supports international study for undergraduates who are aligned with the Stone Center's mission and who, because of socioeconomic or other reasons, may be underrepresented in study abroad programs. 2) The Sean Douglas Leadership Fellows (SDLF) Program provides undergraduates with a semester-long, paid fellowship to work directly with the Stone Center Director and staff to gain practical, meaningful leadership experiences in planning and managing arts, cultural, and academic programming on campus and the surrounding communities. 3) Last, but certainly not least, there is our Communiversity Program, our longstanding (since 1992!) K-12 program that aims to improve student performance through education and practical experience, including service-learning, community building, and social justice outreach. These are just three examples but each is unique in their particular fulfillment of the Stone Center's mission: to encourage and support the critical examination of all dimensions of African-American and African diaspora cultures through sustained and open dialogue.

“ My vision for the future of the Stone Center has everything to do with stewarding its rich legacy—a legacy that I proudly inherit—and doing so in a way that takes seriously what it means to shepherd a space uniquely poised to meet the needs of faculty, students, staff, alumni, and members of our community.

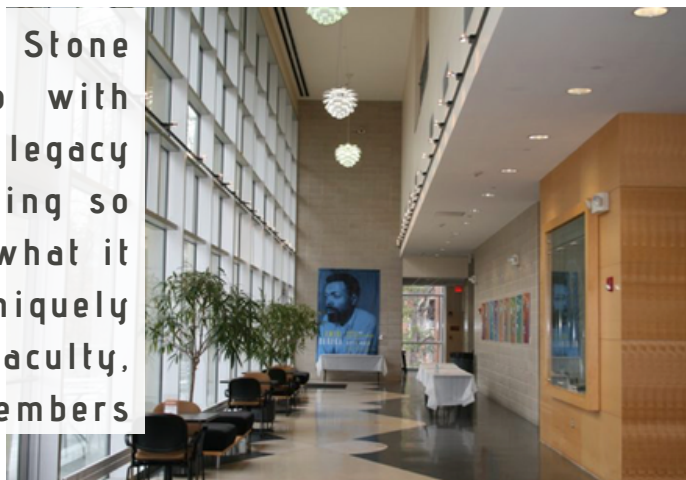


Photo Credit: Stone Center Website



Chair's Message — Professor Claude Clegg

I am happy to have the opportunity to contribute a few words in these pages concerning the achievements of AAAD's faculty, staff, and students over the past year. We are honored to welcome Dr. LeRhonda Manigault-Bryant as a professor in the Department and as the fourth director of the Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History. We are also thankful to have the Center's former director, Dr. Joseph Jordan, join us in his new role as teaching associate professor. During 2022-2023, our faculty members have achieved a great many things in terms of winning research awards, publishing scholarship, offering popular courses, and engaging the public. Several of these colleagues are featured in this newsletter, and there are several others who have brought honor and high praise to the Department. We are grateful to them all.

Further, the Department has been fortunate enough to hire two stellar staff members during the past year who have been essential to the smooth and efficient operation of the unit. They include Lola Tasar, who serves as our business manager, and Velvet Catoe, who fills the position of administrative support associate. An organization is only as good as its members, and we are indeed happy to have such a hardworking and talented staff!

Finally, I would like to recognize the work and contributions of our students who give purpose and meaning to the Department and its mission. The pandemic years have been tough on everyone, and UNC-CH students—like students elsewhere—have had to adjust to a world in which uncertainty is more abundant. However, they have pulled through these challenges with determination and grace, amplifying both the intellectual and humanistic value of the University. Their ongoing commitments to scholarly inquiry and public service could readily be seen in their presentations at our tenth annual Undergraduate Research Conference last March, as well as in the high-quality articles that they published in the seventh edition of our undergraduate research journal, the *Global Africana Review*. But it was ultimately in our classes where their talents, skills, and aspirations have shined brightest, even during the darkest days of the Covid-19 threat. Their commitment to education and to forging a better world continue to make my faculty colleagues and I proud to be educators and for playing some small part in shaping them into the special individuals that they are.

As AAAD looks forward to the future, we continue to be grateful for the support and generosity of our alumni, donors, and other well-wishers.

Claude Clegg

*Lyle V. Jones Distinguished Professor & Chair
African, African American, & Diaspora Studies*

Dr. Lydia Boyd Wins Fulbright Grant for Work in Uganda



Photo Credit: AAAD Department Website

Our congratulations to Dr. Lydia Boyd, who has been awarded a Fulbright Hays Faculty Research Fellowship for her project entitled “Maternal Health Beyond the Clinic: Reproductive Agency in Rural Uganda.” This work follows up on her monograph, *Preaching Prevention: Born Again Christianity and the Moral Politics of AIDS in Uganda*. [Linkages newsletter](#) profiled Professor Boyd’s work in a previous edition.

AAAD Faculty Win IAH Fellowships and Awards

Dr. Kenneth Janken received the 2022 George H. Johnson Prize for Distinguished Achievement by a Fellow at the Institute for Arts and Humanities (IAH) at UNC. This prestigious award recognized Professor Janken's outstanding contributions to the faculty in the arts and humanities. In Spring 2023, Professor Janken delivered the honorary Johnson Prize Lecture at the IAH, in recognition of this accolade.

The Department has also been fortunate to have been awarded another round of Faculty Fellowships from the IAH. The fellowships enable our faculty to work on significant writing projects during a semester-long fellowship on campus. Dr. Alicia Monroe and Dr. Shakirah Hudani were faculty fellows for a semester each in 2022-2023. Dr. Brandi Brimmer, Dr. Lydia Boyd, and Dr. Samba Camara were awarded semester-long fellowships for the 2023-2024 academic year.



Photo Credit: AAAD Department Website

The Department would like to recognize and congratulate all of our 2022 and 2023 graduating majors and minors. We are most gratified by your achievements and look forward to learning about the many ways that you will make the world a better place.

AAAD Majors, Graduating Class of 2023

Darius Lamar Powell
Noah Ali Clapacs
Terri R. Boone
Greear Arthur Webb
Kelse Aaron McAdon
Jorren Louis Biggs
Jarrah B. Faye
Aleenih Shakur Carter-Kee
Julia Silva Clark
Wisdom Ogheneviroro Asaboro
Deseree Suzette Stukes

AAAD Majors, Graduating Class of 2022

Madison Barfield
Nahdi Bropleh
Mekaylah Brown
Sophia Fantauzzi
Amaya Graham
Julia Hayes
Andrea Solera
Saskia Staimpel

AAAD Department Graduation Class of 2023



Photo Credits: Lola Tasar

Welcoming Lola Tasar and Velvet Catoe to AAAD

The Department is proud to introduce two new key staff members, who contribute to our core operations and activities and support faculty and student programming:

Lola Tasar (*pictured left*) is AAAD's Business Services Manager. Since joining our Department, our faculty have come to depend on her excellent work and warm nature. She has lived in Chapel Hill since 2013 and previously held roles elsewhere in the University. In addition to her work at AAAD, Lola is also a member of the Dean's Diversity Advisory Committee, where she says she puts her values of a "supportive and inclusive community" into practice. She enjoys working with Department faculty and staff alike and says she is excited to be part of this diverse and dynamic community.

Velvet Catoe (*pictured right*) is AAAD's Administrative Support Associate and works hard to coordinate Department events, schedule classes, and coordinate with our students majoring and minoring in the Department's offerings. Although she joined the Department last year, Velvet has been with UNC since 1999 and is a 1997 graduate of the University of South Carolina. This year, she says she enjoyed assisting with the Department's Graduation Ceremony and "seeing our future leaders and their family so happy and proud of their accomplishments."

Please join us in welcoming them both and appreciating the contributions they make to the Department!



Photo Credits: Lola Tasar/ UNC College, Velvet Catoe

Professor Claude Clegg Publishes New Book

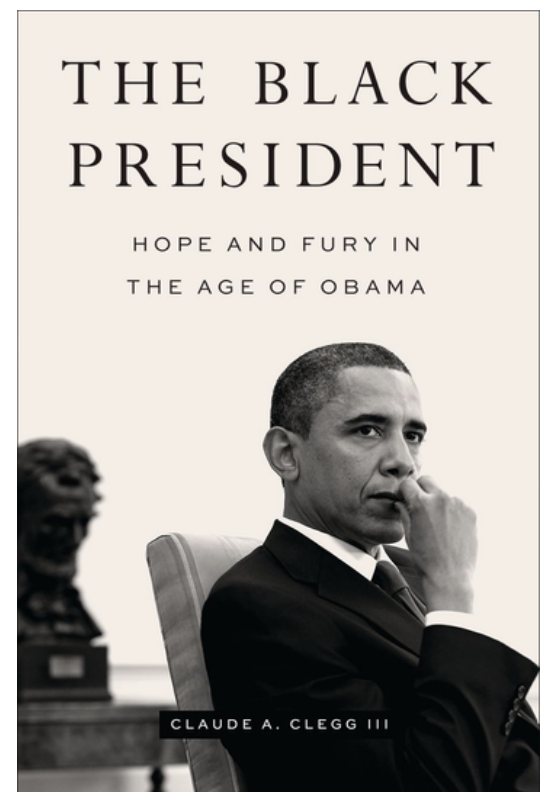
The Black President: Hope and Fury in the Age of Obama (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021)

*Dr. Claude Clegg is the Lyle V. Jones Distinguished Professor of African American and Diaspora Studies, with a joint appointment in the Department of History. He is also the Chair of the AAAD Department. Dr. Clegg is the author of four books including most recently, *The Black President: Hope and Fury in the Age of Obama* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021). Dr. Clegg's recent book has been acclaimed for its treatment of the promises and challenges of the Obama presidency, and its unfinished legacy, including in *The New York Times*. He is currently working on a biography of Marcus Garvey. In this interview, Linkages Associate Editor, Mina Yakubu, talks to Dr. Clegg about the motivations for writing his book.*

This book is said to be the first draft of how history will remember Barack Obama – what inspired you to write this book? Beyond limited hindsight, what were some hurdles you encountered in the research process?

I was originally inspired by the Democratic presidential primaries of 2008 that featured Senators Barack Obama and Hillary Rodham Clinton as competitors. I knew that either way the outcome would be historic, with either the first African American or first woman as the party's nominee. Thus, I wanted to try to write this history, particularly if Obama became president. Both the payoff and challenge of writing recent history is the prospect of witnessing history unfold firsthand. I am a contemporary of Barack Obama and his presidency, which offers me a unique perspective as an observer of unfolding developments during this time period.

However, being so close in time to these events meant that I was in the position of trying to think and write historically about something without the benefit of either historical hindsight or a traditional archive. Thus, it was only in January 2017, when Obama left the White House, that I could start to reflect on his presidential years in historical ways, based on the sizable collection of sources and materials that I had gathered over the previous eight years, along with insights derived from my own experience and eyewitness of the period.



You dedicated the book "To the ending of man's inhumanity to man" — What led you to pick this quote?

The Black President is my fourth book. All of my books have been dedicated "To the ending of man's inhumanity to man." It is my personal wish for a better, more humane world and future for us all.

Your book centers Black communities — do you think these communities will be centered in future retellings of Obama's political rise?

Yes, I hope so, at least in some future works. The Obama presidency—as uniquely featuring the first Black First Family—will always have particular relevance and symbolism for people of African descent. While I believe that there are many vantage points from which to view and analyze the Obama presidency, no serious future work on the topic will be able to credibly avoid how Black people experienced, interpreted, and remembered this time period, though the focus of such books might not be as concentrated on race and Black communities as my own work.



Both the payoff and challenge of writing recent history is the prospect of witnessing history unfold firsthand.



Do you think there is a difference in how Obama will be remembered in Black communities, in the United States, and across the African diaspora, when compared to the larger populace? If so, why do you think that is?

Yes, Obama's presidency was experienced in various ways within and beyond Black communities across the globe. Thus, different people—regardless of their backgrounds—will have different memories and interpretations of that era. There are those Black people who believe that the symbolism of a smart, competent, serious Black man reaching the highest office in the US was reason enough to celebrate. Others thought that Obama should have targeted much more financial relief toward suffering Black communities during the Great Recession and that his Blackness alone was not sufficient grounds to spare him criticism or accountability. For the larger populace, a range of views concerning the Obama presidency were and still are evident, from people who were gratified by the rise of a man of color so high in the political realm to those who never reconciled themselves with the idea of a Black chief executive. This latter group helped pave the way for the rise of Obama's successor.

You referenced many of Obama's speeches in the book like "A More Perfect Union" which came to be known as the March 18 "race speech." If you had to pick one of Obama's speeches that particularly struck you, which one would you pick and why?

I would choose the speech that President Obama gave in the aftermath of the killing of Black teenager Trayvon Martin in 2012. He gave the speech after a bit of public pressure and after realizing that he could not simply rely on local authorities to handle the matter to the satisfaction of an outraged national public. One line in particular captured both the uniqueness of Obama as a Black president and the burden that he carried in the position, unlike any US head of state before him. "If I had a son, he would look like Trayvon," Obama stated empathetically during a press statement, a claim that only he—as a Black president—could make and a sentiment that was pitch-perfect for the pain and trauma of the occasion.



...the idea and reality of a Black president unleashed a fury and a backlash that remains salient in American politics to this very day as we prepare for the 2024 election cycle.



At the start of the book you tell readers about one of your relatives, who you disclose is your father in a subsequent interview, and their historical vote and interpretation of Obama's 2008 presidential election. Can you shed some light on what the Obama presidency meant to you?

My thoughts about the Obama presidency and its times are perhaps best captured by the subtitle of the book: Hope and Fury in the Age of Obama. First, the election—and reelection—of an African American to the top political office of the most powerful country in the history of the world was quite a singular achievement and says something truly significant, even great, about a nation that was founded—contradictorily enough—on the premise that all men are created equal but in the midst of the intergenerational, hereditary enslavement of Black people. Many people, including my late father, never believed that they would ever see such a day. On the other hand, Obama's time in the White House was not celebrated by all and in some stark ways, it brought out the worst in some Americans. Whether one considers the further rightward swing of the Republican Party, the unprecedented number of death threats that the Obamas faced in the White House, the rise of Donald Trump (accelerated by his propagation of the lie that Obama was not born in the US and thus not eligible to be president), or the outcome of the 2016 presidential election, the idea and reality of a Black president unleashed a fury and a backlash that remains salient in American politics to this very day as we prepare for the 2024 election cycle. Thus, Obama's individual achievement of top office must be understood against the background of the emergence of reactionary forces that have gone as far as to recently endanger American democratic institutions in the name of reversing the demographic changes and the potency of the multiracial coalition that made Obama's election and reelection possible in the first place.

10th Annual AAAD Undergraduate Research Conference

By Professor Michael Lambert

On Saturday, March 25, 2023, we celebrated the tenth annual AAAD Undergraduate Research Conference. Inaugurated in 2014, this conference celebrates the mentorship that our faculty members have provided to students and features the original research of some of our most promising students.

The first panel was moderated by Prof. LeRhonda Manigault-Bryant. Jorren Biggs opened with a paper titled “Black Dollar, Mixed City: A Comparative Analysis of Durham NC's 'Black Wall Street' and the Political Philosophy of Booker T. Washington.” Jorren wrote this paper with the mentorship of Prof. Claude Clegg. This was followed by a paper by Aleenih S. Carter-Kee, mentored by Prof. Eunice Sahle, “In Pursuit of a Smaller, Whiter New Orleans: An analysis of the impacts on the African American Community Post-Hurricane Katrina.” The next presentation was by Kelse McAdon, who advised by Prof. Petal Samuel wrote a paper titled “Racist Tropes in HIV Prevention Advertisement Strategies in the USA: Institutional Barriers.” The panel ended with a paper by Selah Grace Piper, who was mentored by Prof. Sahle, “From Enrollment to Quality: Tracking the Right to Education in Tanzania from the Post Colonial Period to the Present.”

The second panel was moderated by Prof. Petal Samuel. Niya Friday, with the mentorship of Prof. Brandi Brimmer, presented the first paper of this panel titled “The Life of Zora Hurston.” The second paper, “Sex in the puritanical paradise: Moral surveillance and queer opacities in Dennis-Benn's Here Comes the Sun” was presented by Noah Clapacs, who was mentored by Prof. Samuel. The panel closed with a paper by Jarrah Faye, who was also mentored by Prof. Samuel, “Beauty Isn't Skin Deep: The Colonial and Socioeconomic Implications of Colorism in Jamaica.”

The final panel was moderated by Prof. Brandi Brimmer. The panel opened with a paper by Mars Quiambao, who was advised by Prof. Shakirah Hudani, “Walking While _____.” Quiambao's presentation was followed by Donna Dyke's paper, “Imagining Transworlds: Some Thoughts on Obstacles and Opportunities in Caribbean Transfeminist Studies,” written with the support of Prof. Samuel. Julia Clark, who was mentored by Prof. Brimmer, then presented the third paper titled “Richard X Clark: Leader in Attica and Muslim Minister.” The conference closed with a paper by Tyler Layne titled “The Caribbean Influence in the Ballroom Scene and Queer Spaces.” Tyler was mentored by Prof. Samuel.

This conference served as a fitting tribute to the outstanding work produced by AAAD students and the mentorship they received from faculty members during the 2022-2023 academic year.

10th Annual AAAD Undergraduate Research Conference



Above: An attentive audience listens to presenters

Below: Student presenters on a panel moderated by Professor Brandi Brimmer



Photo Credits: Michael Lambert

AAAD Students In-Conversation — *Class of 2022*

By Mina Yakubu

Saskia Staimpel, Madison Barfield, and Sophia Fantauzzi graduated from the AAAD Department in 2022. One year after their graduation, I caught up with them to hear about their time in the Department, what they've been up to, and how the knowledge they gleaned continues to inform their respective paths.

Although all three students are in-state residents, their journeys to UNC, and more specifically to AAAD vary widely. Saskia lived overseas for most of her life before moving to Fayetteville at the start of high school and eventually applying to UNC. Sophia and Madison transferred to UNC after spending their first year at different institutions. The three of them initially had no intention of majoring in AAAD – Saskia came in as a Biology major, Sophia was undecided, and Madison wanted to pursue nursing. That is at least until they took their first AAAD courses.

Madison found an appreciation for African American Sci-Fi books when she took her first AAAD course with Professor Priscilla Layne. After hearing Professor Porter speak at her Transfer Student Orientation where he urged students to explore outside the typical majors, Sophia decided to take two AAAD courses – “AAAD 258: The Civil Rights Movement” and “AAAD 201: Introduction to African Literature.” She says AAAD 258 set the course for her academic research in the Department and sparked her interest in the legal field. Professor Porter’s encouragement that students be open-minded and pursue majors that genuinely piqued their interest also resonated with Saskia who at the time was taking his course to satisfy a general education requirement. In Professor Porter’s class, Saskia honed her critical writing skills and gained command of US history and its harsh truths – much of which she, like many others, hadn’t been taught in school.

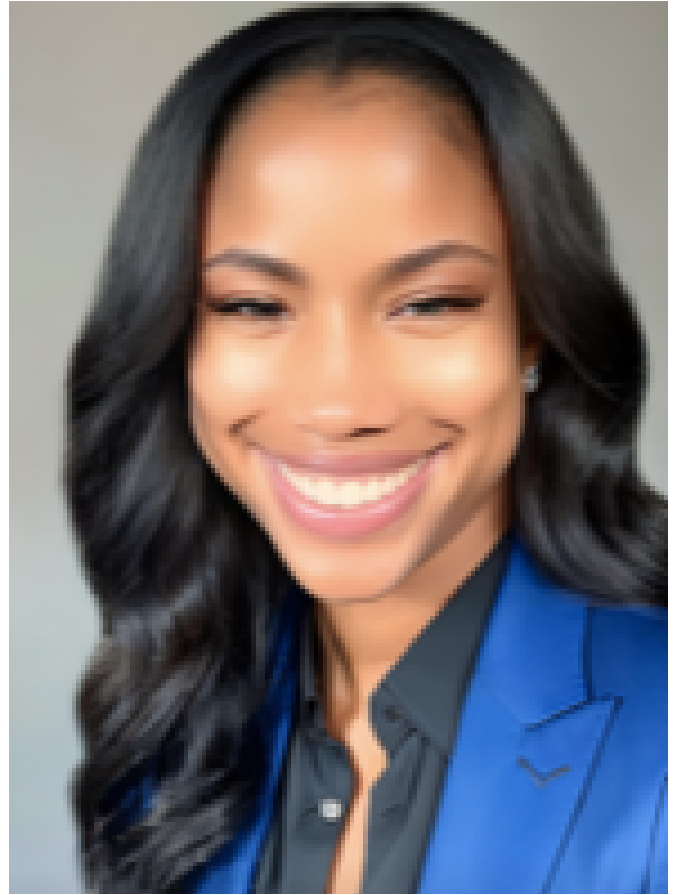
Like Saskia, Madison and Sophia also found that the courses in the Department made them stronger writers and critical thinkers. Sophia recalled how much Professor Janken helped develop her writing as her honors thesis advisor. In reflection, she said, “I have a lot of respect for Dr. Janken. He has formed me into the writer and academic that I am and he has really, really pushed me. And I really appreciate that.” Madison also shared how grateful she is for Professor Janken’s mentorship, in particular, his investment in students’ success evidenced by his thoughtful email responses to her questions about AAAD and her future plans. For Saskia, Professor Clegg’s “Black Nationalism” course helped lay a foundation for strong mentorship that she continues to rely on especially when considering her graduate school plans and career trajectory.

All three students found their time in the Department to be a formative experience, one that as Sophia put it, helped her find her footing. They spoke about the wide array of field expertise and cross-continental diversity within the Department which allowed them to form connections across the local, national, and international spheres and curate their courses to explore their particular interests. Their studies also helped them explore their personal identities and connect their belonging to history and communities around the world. But as Saskia pointed out – these explorations weren't always easy. She recalled how taxing it was to “...learn about the worst things that have ever been done to other people and [know] it's just because they have the same skin color as you, as your dad, as people you love...”

Their time in the Department also informed their career paths. Saskia, who currently works at the Stone Center and plans to become a Black Studies professor, recounted how AAAD changed her trajectory and helped her to find a sense of purpose as a prison abolitionist. For Sophia, her time in AAAD cemented her interest in practicing law and using it to make a meaningful impact in her community. Madison also intends to pursue a public service legal career and hopes to someday be appointed to serve on the highest court in the country – the US Supreme Court – and continue to support young leaders in her community.

In reflecting on their time in the Department, the three students urged current and prospective students to come in with an open mind, open heart, and a willingness to be challenged. Saskia emphasized the importance of AAAD courses as spaces to acquire skills to further collective liberation.

When asked about their hopes for the Department their responses echoed one word – growth. In the coming years, they'd like to see the Department receive recognition for its many contributions to the Carolina community and additional funding to support its research and teaching efforts. The three talked about wanting more interactive physical spaces for the Department's students to engage with faculty and peers beyond the classroom and shared a hope that funding in the future would go towards developing these types of spaces.



*Above: (Top Left) Sophia Fantauzzi with her dog Winston, (Top Right) Madison Barfield
Bottom: Saskia Stämpel at the Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History*



*Photo Credits: (Top Left) Sophia Fantauzzi, (Top Right) Madison Barfield, (Lower Center) Donn Young
for UNC College of Arts and Sciences*

AAAD Alumni Profile – Pierce Freelon

Celebrating Blackness and Centering Creativity “Through Any Mode Necessary”

By Mina Yakubu

For Pierce Freelon, what started as his honors thesis became a transformative experience that laid the foundation for his life’s work. As part of his African and African American Studies honors thesis at UNC, Freelon developed a curriculum titled Blackademics to teach high school students Black history through hip hop. Today, he is the founder of “Blackspace,” an Afrofuturist digital makerspace that centers Blackness and engages local Black and Brown youth through different art forms, from videography to poetry to music production. Centering Blackness is a thread that connects Freelon’s work across various sectors – from a Grammy-nominated musician to an author to a former Durham City Councilman – and that passion was nurtured in his time as a student majoring in the then African and African American Studies at UNC-Chapel Hill.



Photo Credit: Pierce Freelon

As a transfer student from UNC Greensboro, where he said he first saw himself in the curriculum, Freelon joined the now UNC AAAD Department to continue learning about the topics he found were missing in his high school curriculum. In the Department, he found a Black centered affirming space that drew him in and prodded him with questions to consider. He found Black histories he’d only ever heard about from his Black community elders and through rap lyrics. As he puts it, “I found community that really transcended the teacher-student relationship. I found professors that felt more like family than teachers and classes that really spoke to my heritage as a North Carolinian, as an American, as a Black person in the Diaspora...”



“I found community that really transcended the teacher-student relationship. I found professors that felt more like family than teachers and classes that really spoke to my heritage as a North Carolinian, as an American, as a Black person in the Diaspora...”



The multidisciplinary nature of AAAD welcomed all of Freelon’s talents and mediums of expression. So when confronted with numerous exciting opportunities at the end of his undergraduate career – an internship at Bad Boy Records, an assistant position to the legendary Grammy award-winning Niles Rodgers, or graduate school at Syracuse – Freelon chose graduate school at the encouragement of the late Professor Perry Hall and at the urging of his community. His interest in studying at the intersection of his academic, musical, and personal interests led him to Ghana, where he filmed a documentary and engaged with Highlife musicians. Freelon then moved to his first job at the Thelonious Monk Institute Of Jazz (now known as Herbie Hancock Institute Of Jazz), where he traveled to India to organize hip-hop workshops in local community centers. And eventually, in a full circle moment, Freelon returned to UNC where he taught courses, including one he took as a student in the AAAD Department.

In his work, Freelon says he routinely draws from “the well” of the many people who’ve poured into him. He points to his parents, Nnenna and Phil Freelon, as the people who’ve made the most significant deposits. In 2022 Pierce and his mother, jazz vocalist Nnenna Freelon, made Grammy Awards history as the first mother-son duo to receive individual nominations. Pierce described the moment as surreal and an honor to stand alongside his mother, whom he’d attended Grammy Award shows with as a child. In our conversation about what inspired his album, he recalled his late father’s memory and how he used music as a grieving practice. Pierce found that his father’s passing so greatly stirred his well such that each time he found himself writing, he noticed traces of his father’s deposits.



...we serve Black liberation at our highest capacity when we find...alignment with our purpose



Through his work in various sectors, Pierce Freelon is pouring back into the community that gave him so much. He does this work guided by the belief that “we serve Black liberation at our highest capacity when we find...alignment with our purpose” and by the poignant words of Immortal Technique that “no person can do everything, but everyone can do something.” In the spirit of collective liberation, Pierce urges others to consider what they can do – what healing they can create – in their lives and communities to serve humanity.

Africana Faculty Dialogues

Professor and Ambassador Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja

Ambassador Dr. Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja is a Congolese political scientist, diplomat, and Professor in the Department of African, African American, and Diaspora Studies, who specializes in socio-political issues across Central Africa. In his decades-long career as a scholar-activist, Professor Nzongola-Ntalaja has held positions in government and intergovernmental organizations. He has authored numerous books including his seminal work, The Congo from Leopold to Kabila: A People's History (Zed Books, 2002). In 2022, Professor Nzongola-Ntalaja was appointed the Permanent Representative of the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the United Nations. In this interview conducted in June 2023, Linkages Associate Editor Mina Yakubu talks to Professor Nzongola-Ntalaja about his ambassadorship and tenure thus far.



Photo credit: Alejandro Buenrostro, AAAD website

What led you to accept this appointment [as the Permanent Representative of the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the United Nations]? What does this role mean to you as a Congolese person and life-long scholar-activist?

My whole life has been dominated by politics. At the start of my secondary school education in 1958, the fever of decolonization and independence had caught the people of Africa. We heard on the radio and in newspapers of the First All-African People's Conference in Accra, Ghana. The conference, held from December 5-13, 1958, was the first Pan-African conference on African soil. We learned of Patrice Lumumba, a rising political activist from the Belgian Congo who spoke at the conference alongside host and then Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah, President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, and other major leaders of the Pan-African movement.

On January 4, 1959, a pro-independence revolt took place in Kinshasa, then known as Léopoldville. Following the revolt, the Belgian colonialists announced they would start the process of decolonization in the Congo. A year later, in April 1960, students at my secondary school rioted against their American teachers, who were disparaging our political leaders as being incapable of governing a country. As the elected leader of the second-year class, I was expelled from the school as one of the leaders of the pro-independence movement on campus. After continuing my secondary school education elsewhere in the Congo and completing my senior year of high school in the United States, I was invited by Davidson College in 1963 to become the second Black student (and second Congolese) to integrate the College which was all-White until 1962 and

all-men until 1972. I accepted the admissions offer. As a student, I joined the USA-Canada chapter of the General Union of Congolese Students (UGEC) and served as editor of the chapter's newsletter which, like the organization, was politically Lumumbist in orientation.

While teaching in the Congo as a university lecturer from March 1971 to December 1973, I ran into trouble with the Mobutu regime. After a self-imposed exile in the US between January 1974 and July 1991, I joined the Congolese democracy movement led by the late Etienne Tshisekedi wa Mulumba. As a prominent member of the Sovereign National Conference (CNS), a national convention held in 1991-92 to interrogate the past and chart a new future for the country, I chaired two subcommittees of the Political Affairs Committee. One of the subcommittees dealt with current affairs and the other subcommittee revisited major events in our country's history since independence in 1960 and assessed what happened, why it happened, and what should be done to prevent similar events from happening again. After Tshisekedi's election as Prime Minister for the transition by the CNS in August 1992, I served as his diplomatic advisor from September 1992 to October 1993. In 1996, I was recalled to public service as the first vice-president of the National Electoral Commission, though I resigned eight months later in September 1996.

All of the above indicates why I did not hesitate to accept my nomination as the Ambassador of the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the United Nations. From my training in philosophy at Davidson College, I learned an important lesson from Plato's "Seventh Letter." Even though this text is controversial, it supports an idea dear to my thought that a scholar should not remain in the Ivory Tower; they ought to get their hands dirty in attempting to solve real societal issues. This is why I left academia on occasion to do consulting work for my own country and international organizations. In my time away from academia I spent seven years working for the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), with two years in Nigeria as Senior Governance Advisor for the Federal Government of Nigeria in Abuja (March 2000 to May 2002), three years as the Director of the UNDP Oslo Governance Center (OGC), a think tank on governance, and the de facto representative of the United Nations in Norway, August 2002 to July 2005. In my role as UNDP Senior Director, I also spent two years setting up the African Governance Institute (AGI), an independent African think tank for African states in Dakar, Senegal. In 2009, I took my first research and study leave at UNC to serve as the Interim Executive Director of the AGI.

My current role representing the DRC at the United Nations is a very challenging job, as my main task is to try to convince the international community to help us end the expansionist and predatory aims of Rwanda to occupy territories in Eastern DRC and to plunder our strategic minerals and other resources. This aggression has resulted in 10 million deaths and 500,000 raped women and girls since July 1994.

What have you been up to in your role, and what have you learned about navigating the UN as an ambassador?

With its 193 member states, the United Nations is a wonderful place to work and learn about the world. I have met great colleagues from the states that emerged from the disintegration of the Soviet Union like Estonia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Slovenia, and others. Our Africa Group, 54 members strong and the largest region at the UN, is well organized and meets once a week. Linda Thomas-Greenfield, the U.S. Ambassador, is a colleague I met in January 1974 while writing my dissertation in the graduate program in political science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. We also have sub-regional groups, like the Southern African Development Community (SADC), of which I am currently serving as Chair from August 2022 to August 2023, the period in which the DRC President Félix Antoine Tshisekedi Tshilombo is the Chair of the organization. We participate in all six commissions of the General Assembly, elect non-permanent members of the Security Council for two-year terms, and other members of the numerous UN agencies and bodies. People outside the system would be surprised by the campaigns and reciprocal deals made by member states to advance the chances of their respective candidates in the very competitive campaign for prestigious appointments and other UN posts.

What issues have you focused your tenure on? Given recent developments pertaining to historical conflicts in the Eastern DRC region, what have you learned about managing conflict and its many complexities?

As I mentioned in an earlier response, the main issue I have focused on is the carnage in Eastern DRC, where innocent men, women, and children are being massacred daily by terrorist groups supported by Rwanda such as the 23rd of March Movement (better known as M23) and criminal gangs supported by mafia groups to plunder the DRC's strategic minerals. The major aggressor in this area is Rwanda, which is currently the number one gendarme of Western powers and multinational institutions for breaking up the big Congo and its enormous minerals and other forms of wealth. Last year, I concentrated my interventions in the Security Council debates on fighting against the hidden arms embargo under the guise of "notification." This meant we were no longer restricted as to what arms and ammunition we purchased, but the furnishers of these items and their transporters to the DRC had to "notify" the UN Security Council of what they were sending to the Congo. In effect, this was still another kind of embargo because some furnishers and transporters refused to abide by the requirements, for fear of losing business with major powers or DRC's adversaries. I led the campaign to abolish the "notification" requirement in February 2022, with the support of President Tshisekedi and our Foreign Minister. We finally succeeded in December 2022. So far, we have not succeeded in convincing the major powers, namely, the US, the UK, and France to impose sanctions on Rwanda.

We've also spent time advocating as it relates to climate change and the advancement of women and girls in all areas of human development. On the former, the DRC is an indispensable partner in fighting this issue given its massive equatorial forest that covers over 60 percent of the country's land. As it relates to women's rights advocacy, the DRC is among the leading countries globally with 30 percent female presence in the national cabinet. Moreover, nearly half of the 16 women in the DRC central government hold important portfolios like environment and sustainable development, planning, mining, investment, justice, employment, and professional training. The major problem in managing conflict in the world today is the hypocrisy of major powers, who preach peace and negotiations but are unwilling to impose sanctions on countries like Rwanda, which has never respected any of the agreements its leaders sign in negotiations. For them, the only way of resolving conflict is by force, and Rwanda has succeeded in this way since 1994.



*Professor Nzongola-Ntalaja's book featured in "Star Spangled African Banner" on display at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art
(Photo Credit: Mina Yakubu)*

What do you hope your legacy is in this role? What advice would you give to students who are inspired by your work and want to follow a similar path?

My main legacy is being able to bring a scholarly perspective to UN debates, particularly in the Security Council. As many of the experts working for the 15 members of the Council have remarked to diplomats in our Mission, I bring history to the debate thus clarifying and challenging some of the clichés and untruths people tend to use when they honestly cannot defend what they are saying. In the General Assembly, my delegation has voted for all the resolutions on Ukraine (barring one when I was absent) that were brought to it when the Council could not vote for them because of the Russian veto. In voting for the resolution against Russia's annexation of parts of Ukraine, I made a statement to the Assembly justifying our vote in defense of UN principles of respect for national sovereignty and territorial integrity, but I deplored the hypocrisy of countries within the Assembly who have done so elsewhere and continue to ignore such acts by their allies.

Students interested in UN work should know that while unpleasant things may be tolerated by states eager to advance their national interests, there are many pleasant occasions to enjoy serving the human community in doing everything possible to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, to come up with a new blueprint for the future of our children and grandchildren, and to have a world at peace on all continents.

Africana Faculty Dialogues

Professor David Pier

*Dr. David Pier's research focuses on music, art, literature, and cultural politics in Africa and the African diaspora. His first book, *Ugandan Music in the Marketing Era* (Palgrave, 2015), was an ethnographic study of folklore performance, corporate arts sponsorship, branding, and grassroots entrepreneurialism in contemporary Uganda.*

In this interview with Dr. Shakirah Hudani, Dr. Pier discusses his existing work, his new research, and his motivations for teaching with a keen musical sensibility.

Tell us about the focus of your research work to date, and the subject of your first book on popular music in Uganda. What drew you to this work and what were some of the main arguments of your book?

My first book, *Ugandan Music in the Marketing Era: The Branded Arena* (Palgrave, 2015) was an ethnographic study of a traditional dance competition in Uganda which was sponsored by a beer company and which demanded that participants—mostly farmers from rural villages—compose and perform original advertisements for the beer, voluntarily, without payment. African musicians, in Uganda and elsewhere, have been helping corporations with their advertising for a long time—there is nothing new about this—but what interested me was the way these people were being encouraged to imagine marketing as a whole paradigm for personal, local, and national development. You are supposed to become creative and empowered through brands the way you were once supposed to become empowered through the idea of the nation.

We are seeing this living-through-marketing theme in diverse fields, in diverse strata of society, e.g. in the rise of influencers online. Overall, this fits with neoliberalism with its market-entrepreneurial boosterism. It is interesting, however, to think about how these practices of branding and profile-cultivation have also saturated fields that aren't typically associated with commercialism, such as the field of NGO-based rural African development. As an ethnomusicologist, I was particularly interested in how these contemporary self-promotional ideas were being refracted specifically through music-and-dance activities, which have their own rich and complicated history in modern Uganda.



Photo Credit: David Pier

Please tell us what your new research is focused on.

Since then, much of my research has been focused on a Ugandan guitar-based popular music genre known as *kadongo kamu*; that is the subject of the book I am working on. “Kadongo kamu” means “just one guitar” in Luganda, and kadongo kamu guitar-singers are like “one man bands.” They go from bar to bar busking for tips, providing complete entertainment for people sitting around drinking. Their intricate guitar patterns can make it sound like a whole band is playing, and they specialize in very dense and overstuffed lyrics, with a lot of traditional proverbs and puzzling allusions. Similar guitar-singing music is found all over East and Central Africa, and most of it seems to have emerged around the same time, the years immediately after the end of World War II. The guitar then was seen as an excitingly modern instrument, but it also was an instrument that worked well for refurbishments of old, traditional African bardic practices. Before kadongo kamu singers went from bar to bar with their guitars, traditional lyre players would go from wedding to wedding, singing advice to the newlyweds. This research has also been ethnographic, in that I have been following artists around and interviewing them. I’ve had to learn the guitar, which is a new instrument for me, and that in itself has been a rewarding experience. Meanwhile, I have been writing articles about other Ugandan cultural topics. I’ve recently published a piece about Ugandan digital influencers, which builds upon my earlier research into marketing culture. I’ve also written about the 2021 Ugandan presidential election, in which popular music played an outsized role because the main challenger candidate, Bobi Wine, was himself a reggae singer.

What courses do you teach in the Department?

I teach AAAD 101 “Introduction to Africa,” AAAD 318 “Politics of Art in Africa,” AAAD 320 “Introduction to African Music,” AAAD 53 “First Year Seminar on Global Black Experimentalism in Music and Performance,” and IDST 113 “The Idea of Race.” Of these, I may find the “Politics of Art” class most rewarding, because by the end, students have produced a substantial research paper, with original analysis of an art work, a literature review, and so on. They often feel a sense of accomplishment and so do I. Recently, I have enjoyed developing “The Idea of Race” IDST class because the topic is so large, important, and historically interesting, and because it involves working with two other professors from other departments: Daniel Matute from Biology and Mike Terry from Linguistics. It is stimulating to do collaborative teaching with other faculty.

How do you aim to incorporate your musical sensibility into your teaching?

I think we could all stand to be more musical in our interactions with one another. That is to say, aware of how our voices carry in a room, how our utterances and bodily movements have rhythm, how we shift in and out of sync with each other kinetically and emotionally....I try to teach with this in mind. Certainly, I was attracted to teaching in the first place because I recognized it as a kind of performance, akin to music. Musical performance, teaching, and parenting (something else I do) are all hard, and you have to keep trying to get better.

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Anna Agbe-Davies, Associate Professor, Anthropology
Renée Alexander Craft, Professor, Communication
Lisa Calvente, Assistant Professor, Communication
Youssef Carter, Assistant Professor, Religious Studies
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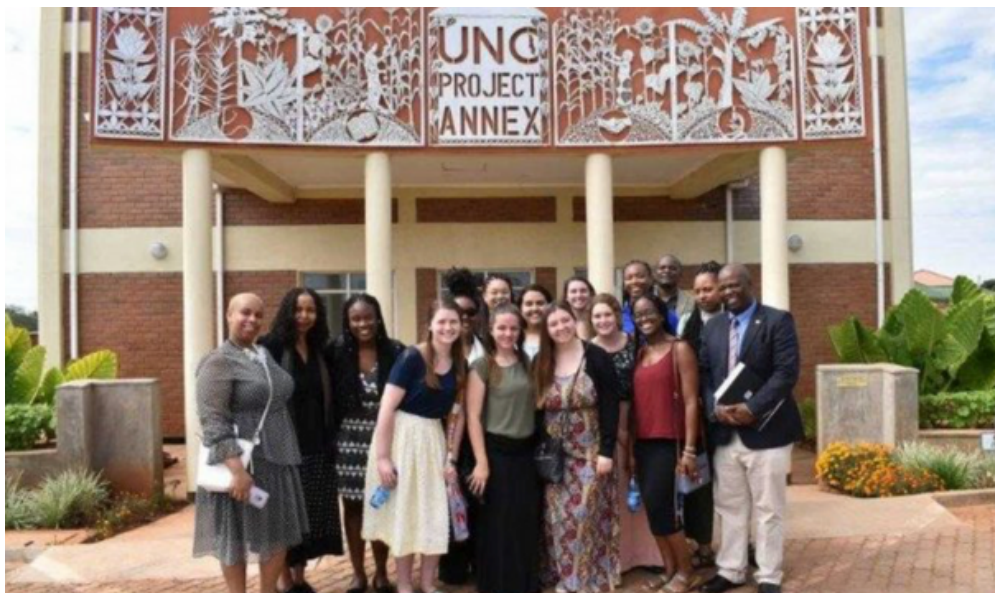


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