

Resilience

JWJI

ANNUAL REPORT
2021-2022



EMORY
UNIVERSITY

The James Weldon Johnson Institute
for the Study of Race and Difference
Emory College of Arts and Sciences

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LETTER FROM THE **DIRECTOR**



Dear Friends,

The transition from one year to the next is always a time of reflection, and this is especially true for JWJI and the world. Last year, we all faced the challenges of living with the COVID virus. For us, that meant learning how to continue our work virtually. This past year was another year of adaptation and experimentation. While we still continued to hold our public events virtually, we tried to create space for our fellows to have in-person community as well.

We are proud of our resilience this year. We welcomed a wonderful group of visiting scholars who made significant gains on their research projects. Online, we continued to host outstanding speakers who represented the best and brightest research findings on race and difference. Our goal was to create meaningful intellectual community, and I think we succeeded.

We are humbled to enjoy your continued support in these trying times. In the next few pages, we elaborate on our successes as it illuminates our future trajectory. We hope that you enjoy the profiles of this year's outstanding group of fellows. And we thank you for your continued support of JWJI.

Sincerely,
Andra Gillespie
Director

NEW HIRE: ACCOUNTANT



Before joining James Weldon Johnson Institute for the Study of Race and Difference as its accountant, **Regina Simpkins** sought better career and life balance with room to grow.

Now, a little more than a year later, Simpkins calls the job a wonderful blessing allowing her to enjoy her two passions—math and people. She has also improved her personal health and is pursuing another graduate degree.

“It’s been a good transition for me. I was quite unhappy in corporate America. It was so stressful. And my passion is for people. I enjoy helping people, so moving into this position gives me more support and interaction,” said Simpkins who joined JWJI in August 2021.

Simpkins oversees the day-to-day accounting for the office, including grant funding for fellowships, making sure everything gets paid timely and staying within the budget. She analyzes and interprets financial reporting. The job includes ensuring speakers and fellows get their stipends, honorariums for travel and any other funding with ease.

Simpkins said she’s known what she wanted to do since fifth grade but always remained flexible enough to try new things.

“Coming up in middle school, I loved math. I still love math. And what I love about math is that it’s always the same. Two plus two is always four. One plus one is always two. You can’t get around it,” Simpkins said. “And I had a favorite teacher, Mrs. Roberts. She taught social studies but I loved her anyway. One day I told her I also wanted to be a teacher to help the children who were struggling with math. She told me, ‘You don’t want to be a teacher. Teachers don’t make any money and you’re always going to be worried about these bad children.’

“So my heart was crushed. I thought what else can I do where I can still mess around with these numbers and do something that makes sense to me? When I got to college, I learned this field called accounting. I love it.”

Simpkins completed her bachelors of business administration from Fort Valley State University and worked as a corporate accountant in the health care industry for many years before deciding to complete her Masters of Business Administration.

Now a mother of five children and grandmother to six, Simpkins earned her Masters in Accountancy from Mercer University in December. Eventually, Simpkins’ goal is to one day reach controller or vice president level.

2021-2022 At a Glance

6

Visiting Scholars

4

Undergraduate Fellows

20+

Public Programs Hosted

500+

Total Attendance



YEAR IN REVIEW

Milestones of 2021-2022

August 2021: Cohort Thirteen arrived.



Rava Shelyn Chapman



Peggy Lee



Nicholas Bloom



Brittany Frederick



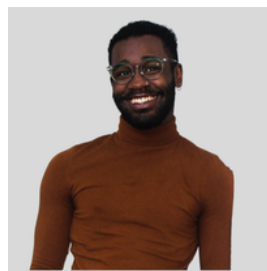
Celeste N. Lee



Shari C. Mackinson



Hailey Greenstone



Amon Pierson



Sabrina Jin



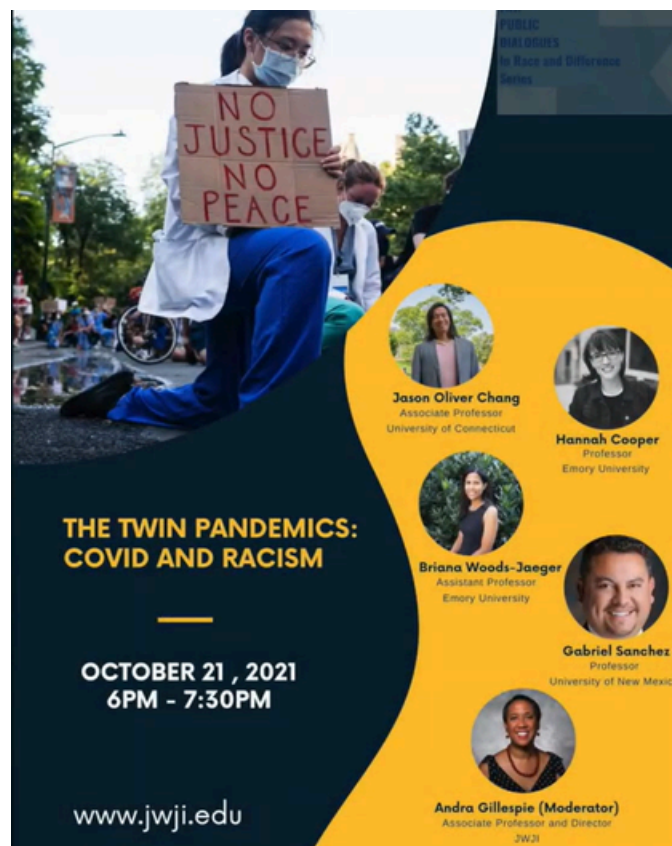
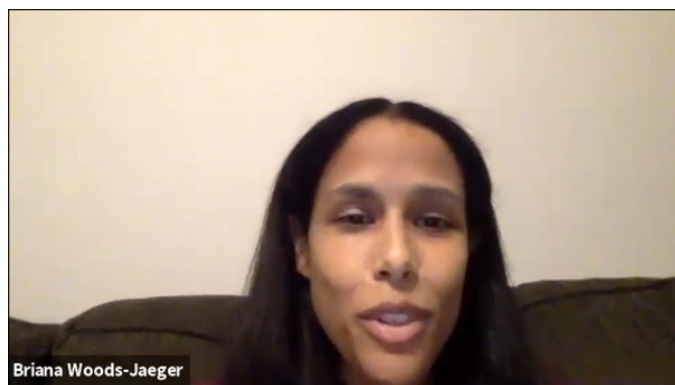
Annie Li

YEAR IN REVIEW

Milestones of 2021-2022

October 2021: JWJI hosted Public Dialogue titled “The Twin Pandemics: COVID-19 and Racism”.

Panelists: Jason Oliver Chang (University of Connecticut), Hannah Cooper (Emory University), Brianna Woods-Jaeger (Emory University), Gabriel Sanchez (University of New Mexico)
Moderator: Andra Gillespie (Emory University)



YEAR IN REVIEW

Milestones of 2021-2022

April 2022: JWJI welcomed Dr. Dianne Pinderhughes (University of Notre Dame) to give the annual James Weldon Johnson Distinguished Lecture, “Racial Dynamics in the American Political Context, and Anniversaries in Civil Rights Politics”.



2021-2022

FELLOWSHIP COHORT



Ravá Shelyn Chapman
Mellon Post Doctoral Fellow
Clark Atlanta University

Ravá Shelyn Chapman loved her time at James Weldon Johnson Institute for the Study of Race and Difference so much she's returned to Emory for a second post-doctoral fellowship.

In June, Chapman began her second yearlong fellowship, the 2022-2023 James T. Laney post-doctoral fellowship at JWJI in conjunction with the Bill & Carol Fox Center for Humanistic Inquiry.

She recently completed her doctorate in Humanities with a concentration in Africana Women's Studies at Clark Atlanta University. She also holds a masters of public administration from the University of Colorado and bachelors in psychology and African American studies from Alabama State University.

Having grown up with a strong sense of community service, Chapman worked at a non-profit in Colorado for homeless women involved in the sex industry after completing her undergraduate degree. The experience of seeing how black, Chicano and Latino women were treated led Chapman to pursue graduate studies.

"It just felt like we were missing something and I couldn't put my finger on it. That's why I decided to get this degree in Africana women's studies and humanities. I felt like there was a human element that we were missing," she said.

Chapman had already begun research for a dissertation about sexual violence on women when she began volunteering for a black community garden in Atlanta. She had always enjoyed gardening with her grandmother.

It was during her first JWJI stint as an Andrew Mellon post-doctoral fellowship in 2021-2022 that she decided to switch her dissertation topic: "In Our Mother's Garden: Ethnobotanical Agency and Wellness Among Black Women Gardeners Born Between 1950-2000."

"There is a community engagement piece of my work. I want my research to have real life, real time implications. Having that connection with people who are boots on the ground—helping guide their efforts—is really important to me," she said.

Chapman spent most of her time working on the manuscript by conducting a survey to accompany statistical data.

"I wanted more depth and storytelling," Chapman said.

She surveyed about 100 women, about a dozen of whom were black and native. They included farmers, gardeners or ranchers across the U.S. The surveys revealed that while most of the women suffered health issues they described their health as "good" or "excellent." The surveys showed that when women put their hands in dirt and plants they find enjoyment.

"There's a sense of well-being when engaging in gardening," Chapman said.

Chapman is also interested in how botanical knowledge is gained and shared. To that end, she spent some of her JWJI time developing a digital, public-facing research lab called “The Womanist, a Digital Humanistic Research Lab,” womanist.org. It’s a collection of black women researchers working for cultural preservation and environmentalism.

For the Black Ecology Culture course she taught for Emory’s African American Studies Department in spring 2022, Chapman obtained a community engagement grant from the university’s Center of Faculty Development to conduct two service projects with 10 students. One of the projects involved the Forest Festival working with the West Atlanta Watershed Alliance. The other was working with children as part of a community garden project with the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA).

“They were able to engage directly with the community and do some reflective assignments,” she said. “The students contributed to a digital platform and presented some of their research and experiences on the service projects on that platform.”

Emory’s Herbarium, a library of plants used for research and medicine, offered supplies so Chapman could collect plants for the project. There she learned about a conference in Jamaica.

Chapman attended the Society of Economic Botany and International Society of Ethnobiology joint Conference at the University of the West Indies Mona Campus in Kingston, Jamaica. There she presented her paper, “Black Women’s Ethnobotanical Agency: Resistant Strategies for Care.”

“It was a really good experience,” she said. “I wouldn’t have gone if it not been for their recommendation that I be a part of it.”

Also in 2021-2022, as part of JWJI’s Colloquium Series, Chapman presented, “The Womanist Humanistic Research Lab Presents The Black Ecology Study.”

Currently, Chapman is using her 2022-2023 post-doc fellowship to transform her doctoral dissertation into a book. She is conducting interviews and working on new additional chapters including one on black women and mental health. She hopes to have the book published in 2024.

The book focuses on ethnobotanical agency and the influence of women on the use of plants primarily in the southern U.S. and Caribbean, including a specific focus on Jamaica. As woman of black Muskogee heritage, Chapman is committed to the cultural preservation of plants and environment of all peoples, she said.

“Ethnobotany is a cultural or human approach to plants and how, based on your culture, you relate to the environment. Every culture around the world engages with nature based on their geographical location and history,” Chapman said. “I’m looking at how these black women are intentionally using plants for spiritual purposes.”

Examples might be using a special tea for a spiritual ritual or preparing for a baptism in the river. The purposes could be religious, medicinal or dietary.

Chapman plans to do four-hour interviews of several US and Jamaican women asking about experiences involving plants to include relaxation, reproduction, cleansing rituals or alternative medicines.

“I’ll ask what they cook on special occasions like funerals, weddings and baby showers,” said Chapman.

She is also committed to work around healing the violence against women and children.

“How do we create healing and how do we ensure that people are able to be okay after experiencing these traumas? I knew how gardening is healing and restorative. I got involved in horticulture therapy and started exploring that,” Chapman said. “Solutions around environmentalism and human rights issues can be found by honoring and learning from the diversity of cultures on the planet.”

JWJI helped her partially fund equipment to record the interviews which she hopes to produce a short documentary. Emory libraries also provided some unexpected support.



Peggy Kyoungwon Lee
Mellon Post Doctoral Fellow
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

Lee is a writer and scholar of race and gender in contemporary American literature, performance, sound, and media. At JWJI, she is working on her first book titled *Politics of Dis/Composure: Performing Racial Femininities in the Post-Civil Rights Era*.

In her project, composure generates a distinct method and challenge for studying racialized femininities that interrogates the ethical questions of survival, racial injury, and liberal sentimentalism. She has scholarship published or forthcoming in *TDR: The Drama Review*, *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly*, and *Transcript Verlag's Sound Studies Series*. She is also an essay contributor of the "hacked" *DSM* in the *Asian American Literary Review's* special issue on Asian American mental health titled "Open in Emergency", now in its second edition.

Lee earned her Ph.D. in American Culture from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, M.A. in Performance Studies at New York University, and her B.A. in Women's Studies from the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Her work has been supported by fellowships from the American Council of Learned Societies, University of Pennsylvania Provost's Predoctoral Fellowship for Excellence through Diversity, Institute for Research on Women and Gender Studies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and Mellon Foundation.



Nicholas Farrell Bloom
Mellon Dissertation Fellow
University of Texas Austin

This fall, on the heels of his James Weldon Johnson Institute for the Study of Race and Difference fellowship, Nicholas Bloom is a newly minted visiting assistant professor at the University of Rochester.

There he teaches a range of subjects including U.S. and African-American history, cultural and intellectual history and political thought.

Bloom credits JWJI in part with helping him land his new position—including a professional workshop on elevator pitches.

He recently graduated with his doctorate in American Studies from the University of Texas at Austin. He also holds a bachelor degree in English with a concentration in history from Columbia and his masters in American studies from the University of Texas at Austin.

Last spring Bloom spent his JWJI Mellon predoctoral fellowship completing his dissertation, "Scripting the Unthinkable: Black Revolt and Democratic Vistas in U.S. Political Imagination, 1770–1860."

The racial segregation in the small-town where Bloom grew up ignited an interest in questions of race and white supremacy.

"I am interested in the black political and cultural struggles that have formed American society," Bloom said. "In terms of this project, I have been really interested since an undergraduate student in the question of political imagination."

The dissertation examines how perspectives of the pro-slavery dominant institutions, groups and political imagination of figures in U.S. history shaped national laws and practices.

"It's about the way various groups of people in the first century in the United States thought about and talked about slave revolts," he said.

Based heavily on early canonical documents including the *Federalist Papers*, Declaration of Independence and the writings of founding fathers including Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, John Jay and Alexander Hamilton; the dissertation's subject hasn't received the historical recognition it deserves, Bloom said.

“They made laws about slave revolts and used slave revolts as a kind of metaphor for their own predicaments and problems. They related their desires for revolution and freedom to the slave revolts that they were actually trying to suppress at the same time,” Bloom said.

For example, Patrick Henry’s “Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death” speech employs slavery as a metaphor. Bloom also argues that some of the language of the Declaration of Independence may have originated in the Haitian Declaration of Independence.

His dissertation also analyzes legal documents and newspaper articles from the 1811 Louisiana Slave Revolt.

“My argument is that the founding fathers were trying to reconcile this language of liberation they were trying to harness, using the metaphor of slavery, with their desire to maintain slavery and suppress the black revolt,” he said. “By the end, it became untenable as they were facing increasing abolitionist challenges.”

The second half of the dissertation looks at how enslaved people perceived the slave revolts and the meaning of their own actions as well as abolitionists and other anti-slavery groups.

“I tried to show how their narratives interacted with, contested or sometimes reinforced the narratives of dominant institutions and figures,” Bloom said. “How was it that abolitionists could narrate stories and advocate for revolts in ways that did not necessarily encourage the same kind of apocalyptic thinking?”

Bloom traces several approaches abolitionists and prominent black figures took regarding the black revolt narrative, including Frederick Douglass.

The American rejuvenation model, championed by Douglass, showed how black and slave revolts could transform the United States into a more perfect version of itself and become a revolutionary, racially egalitarian and anti-slavery place.

Bloom used both biographical documents like “The Confessions of Nat Turner” and fiction including Herman Melville’s “Benito Cereno,” Frederick Douglass’ “The Heroic Slave,” and Lydia Maria Child’s short story, “Slavery’s Pleasant Homes.”

“Fiction was the best way of showing, especially when they couldn’t actively come out and write about this, why you should take up arms and kill your masters,” Bloom said. “I think a lot of abolitionists came to a conclusion that kind of a romantic way of telling the story of black liberation isn’t quite adequate because you—whatever it is that you create—is inevitably going to repeat some elements of the people trying to escape. And so leaving a kind of open-ended possibility for what might come is what you need to do when you are narrating a revolution.”

A key takeaway is the importance of imagination in how it shapes our thinking and actions both in constraining and liberating ways.

“Imaginations are always going to be somewhat affected by the world that you live in, this kind of dominant political, cultural or social imagination that you’ve been saturated with your whole life. So thinking about imaginations and narratives and how they really shape our lives and what we think is possible is important,” he said.

Bloom originally planned to graduate in 2021 until he learned he received the JWJI fellowship.

“It allowed me to expand and improve the dissertation overall,” Bloom said.

Since he had already completed most of the primary research, Bloom spent most of the fellowship time writing the dissertation.

He also completed an article, “The Reactionary Romance of American Slave Revolt: Telling the Story of the 1811 German Coast Uprising,” published in the December 2022 edition of *American Quarterly*.

The fellowship funded a research trip to Louisiana to several plantations where the slave revolts occurred and a trip last June to France to present, “Paying My Dues: The Question of Moral Responsibility in James Baldwin’s post-1970 Political Thought,” at the International Conference on James Baldwin. The fellowship also provided much appreciated support, camaraderie and place to work.

Bloom is grateful that Director Andra Gillespie connected him with his faculty mentor George Yancy, the Samuel Candler Dobbs Professor of Philosophy.

“It was just sort of amazing to get to talk with a scholar of his stature. He was really generous, curious and kind,” Bloom said. “Andra was really prescient in thinking that we would get along and have stuff to say to each other because we really did. His work on whiteness was really instructive.”



Brittany Frederick
Mellon Dissertation Fellow
University of Texas Austin

Every time Brittany Frederick described the project she worked on during her James Weldon Johnson Institute for the Study of Race and Difference fellowship, she heard, “Oh, you’re an anthropologist,” or “I see, you’re in education,” or “Of course, you’re in black studies.”

“And I answer, ‘I’m a historian,’” said Frederick who graduated in May with her doctorate in history from the University of Massachusetts. She also holds her bachelor’s and master’s degree in history from the University of Albany, State University of New York.

For Frederick, one of several blessings of the JWJI fellowship was the community of fellows with diverse academic perspectives.

“What’s really cool about it was that they purposefully put together cohorts of people with different intellectual focuses. Everyone is from a different academic department. So, when you go into the community and talk about your project, you get different perspectives or directions your project can go in than you would have necessarily thought about yourself,” she said. “It was really helpful for me to think about how my research can be legible to people in other departments—to someone in anthropology and women’s studies, in education or in black studies.”

A pre-doctoral fellow for JWJI, Frederick worked on the remaining two chapters of her dissertation by collecting oral histories. She said Emory’s library was an important resource, especially using census records. Frederick said the fellowship gave her valuable time to dedicate towards finishing her dissertation without other responsibilities.

“I’ll forever be thankful for just getting the opportunity to come here, be a part of the community and completely devote myself to finishing my dissertation,” she said.

Entitled “‘The Capstone of My Education: Black Women, Student Power, and the Freedom Struggle in Higher Education,’” the dissertation examines the contributions of black women educators to higher education and how civil rights activism empowered them. It also aims to ensure these histories are not lost.

A consultant for the Smithsonian Institute, Frederick, who primarily thinks of herself as an oral and public historian, focused on the experiences of four women gathered over 24 hours of interviews each. She then moved to her secondary interviews with people who were significant to each of the four women—mentors, colleagues, friends, students and classmates.

“Doing oral history has helped me realize how much is lost to public memory. We create narratives, national narratives, as a public. How much is lost to history when we don’t talk to people who have experienced it?” Frederick said.

Esther Terry, one of the four women, was a major contributor to the development of Black Studies. She co-founded the W.E.B. Du Bois department of Afro-American Studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. This is the same university where she earned her doctorate degree and worked as faculty and administrator for decades. Terry was the chair of the Du Bois department from 1988 to 2007. Under her leadership, the department started a doctoral program in 1996, the second in Afro-American Studies established in the country.

Like Frederick’s other interviewees, Terry started her college career as an activist. As an undergraduate student in the 1950s, Terry participated in the famous Woolworth lunch counter sit-in protesting African American college students being denied service after sitting at a “whites only” counter. The sit-in lasted six months and drew hundreds of community members—ultimately leading to the desegregation of the lunch counter in 1960.

The women Frederick interviewed are essential to the history of higher education as leaders and program founders in the 1960s and 70s. They were also older and vulnerable to COVID-19.

“It was just sort of amazing to get to talk with a scholar of his stature. He was really generous, curious and kind,” Bloom said. “Andra was really prescient in thinking that we would get along and have stuff to say to each other because we really did. His work on whiteness was really instructive.”

“I had to change my protocols in the middle of my dissertation research once Covid happened. I’d been trying to interview Esther Terry since 2019. I finally got to interview her in April (2022). We did about six sessions and those interviews really helped me finish my dissertation,” Frederick said. “All in all I probably interviewed 30 people. I got a lot of content. In a way, Covid helped me because, originally, I planned to interview everyone in person. I amended my protocols to interview some people over the phone or on Zoom. So that actually helped me interview more people.”

Frederick said she entered grad school knowing she wanted to be a public historian. She was always fascinated with nontraditional education for historians. She learned specifically about oral history in grad school and decided to include it in all of her future studies.

“So I was adamant that when I did this dissertation project I wanted to speak to women who were still living so that they could share their perspective and their recollection of what happened to them,” she said. “And it’s also challenging. Memory is really fickle. So I can speak to someone. They recollect something and when it’s checked against the data it says something happened five years earlier or in a different city than they remember. It’s like piecing together a puzzle. I like that aspect of it too.”

Frederick continues using her oral history experience by reviewing and auditing oral history transcripts for the Smithsonian Institution’s American art archives.

She furthers her sharing of black women’s role in higher education through the Women Also Know History project’s website. There, she posts about history books including these women and non-binary scholars.

And, since August 2022, Frederick is a postdoctoral scholar for the Africana Research Center of Penn State University



Shari C. Mackinson
Laney Dissertation Fellow
Emory University

For Shari Mackinson, 2022 was an extremely busy year.

While finishing her Ph.D. at Emory, Mackinson finished her 250-page dissertation on incarcerated black women, mentored undergraduate James Weldon Johnson Institute for the Study of Race and Difference fellows and she and her wife welcomed a new baby to their family.

In the spring, she graduated from Emory with a doctorate in religion: ethics and society. She holds a masters in divinity in theology and ethics from the Candler School of Theology at Emory, a masters in public health in health and behavior and health education, a masters in social work from the University of Michigan and a bachelor of science in chemistry from Howard University.

In the fall, Mackinson started her academic teaching career as an assistant professor of religion at Texas Christian University, focusing on Christianity in the United States.

The 2021-2022 JWJI pre-doctoral fellowship provided Mackinson with much-needed time to write her dissertation free from teaching.

“Compared to some of the other fellows, my last year of writing I had a lot of other things going on,” Mackinson said. “I really am grateful to JWJI because I don’t think I would be prepared to take my new job if I had been teaching and grading papers at the same time. That was the biggest blessing. They allowed me time to write.”

The fellowship also allowed Mackinson time to mentor JWJI undergraduate fellows.

“I was really proud of the prep for their thesis defenses,” said Mackinson, who enlisted help from some of her colleagues to help the undergraduates. “It was probably one of my best experiences with JWJI in being able to put together some encouraging words and support for them.”

Mackinson also prepared them for those unexpected “random questions” designed to challenge students during a thesis defense.

“I told them not to take the bait. Later, I talked to one of my students and he remembered what I said and said he didn’t take the bait. I had some small part of making sure these very brilliant young people were not completely stressed out and that makes me feel good,” Mackinson said.

Mackinson was particularly impressed by the JWJI’s orientation and how research librarians at different institutions created folders for each fellow with specifically crafted bibliographies.

“I thought that was just going above and beyond the call of duty to welcome us,” she said. “The professional development JWJI offered us was some of the best I’ve ever had—based in concrete career skill and knowledge. That will be helpful for me in the next couple of years as I work my way to tenure.”

Mackinson focused her pre-doctoral fellowship on her dissertation—“Inclusive Blackness: A Postcolonial Framework for Black Well-Being.” In it, she argues for a more inclusive black community calling for first acknowledging black people’s presence in America as the result of slavery. Due to the colonial nature of power, society wouldn’t have been able to function without the labor and capital produced by enslaving black people, she said.

“If we think of ourselves as a post-colonial society, we have even more of a commitment to become inclusive and resist any form of demonizing behavior in our theology and ethics. So I focus first on incarcerated black women because they represent an oppressed community,” Mackinson said.

Interviews were conducted with formerly incarcerated and some incarcerated black women in Georgia state prisons providing examples from a marginalized black community that often gets systematically dehumanized.

“I build on the black liberation tradition and some black feminist theology and argue that postcolonial studies helps the black liberation tradition expand our notions of the black experience to be more inclusive of marginalized black identities,” Mackinson said.

Mackinson was working as the director of the theological studies program housed in the Lee Arrundale State Prison for Women when she got the idea for her dissertation.

“I’m bringing in these women’s voices to answer questions about the black experience in black theology and whether or not we are thinking of the experiences of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated black women,” Mackinson said. “I’m interrogating whether or not black religious communities, specifically black Christian communities, do a good job of embracing black women when they come back home.”

Those she interviewed feared telling people they had been incarcerated because of their judgement. The interviewees said the community was not living up to the ideals of faith espoused by the Black religious community.

“The community isn’t as inclusive and welcoming and treating them as a fellow neighbor as the religion calls,” Mackinson said. “People seem to lose sight of everything else that they know about the women and can only focus on the fact that they used to be in prison.”

Mackinson says an important takeaway is how pervasive incarceration is in black and brown communities. Most black or brown people have a family member or close friend who has spent time in jail or prison and don’t know it.

“You really should try to figure out where incarceration is in your life because it’s probably there and you don’t know it,” Mackinson said. “In our churches we say a whole lot of things, but in practice it really hard to live that stuff out.”



Celeste N. Lee
UNCF-Mellon Fellow
Spelman College

Assistant sociology professor for Spelman College and Emory alumna Celeste Lee came full circle academically last spring when she became a post-doctoral fellow for the James Weldon Johnson Institute for the Study of Race and Difference United Negro College Fund Mellon Mays Faculty Residency.

Lee, who was mentored by the late Rudolph P. Byrd, the founding director of JWJI, holds her bachelors and doctorate in sociology from Emory.

When she began her JWJI fellowship, she initially focused on how nurses talk and think about race and how it impacts maternal health outcomes such as mortality rates and post-birth complications.

However, likely due to nurses being overwhelmed by the demands of the COVID-19 pandemic, she quickly realized she would not get the survey data she needed to write, produce and share her findings.

So after about a month, she returned to her doctoral dissertation topic to do additional research and analysis in pursuit of new submissions for publication. Eventually she hopes to publish the revised and updated dissertation as a monograph.

Like the nursing project, this study explored racial ideologies, but this time it was based on interviews with 61 black students from two prestigious—based on acceptance rates—public universities in Atlanta and Los Angeles. The interviews were conducted during the Obama administration, at a time widely regarded as a “colorblind era.”

Lee defined colorblind ideology as cultural racism where people basically say racial disparities are the result of something that the groups at the bottom are doing wrong. So, if looking at education data they might say that black people don't value education or Latinos are more concerned with their children working than securing a high school diploma.

“The work that I did during the fellowship honed in on one chapter that explored black millennials' understandings of racial inequality,” Lee said. “How do they make sense of racial disparities in wealth outcomes? How do they make sense of racial disparities in educational outcomes? And how do they make sense of disparities in the criminal justice system and incarceration rates? So like incarceration rates? What are the narratives and stories they tell?”

She said the big takeaway from the dissertation is that black college students do not buy into overt colorblind ideology—things like race doesn't matter anymore or that the U.S. is a colorblind society.

“They don't buy into those kind of overt, direct statements,” Lee said. “But when asked to explain racial equality, they oftentimes defaulted to colorblind ideology to explain the disparities. So, for example, the wealth disparity, many participants would say things like, ‘They don't work hard enough or they're more focused on the now instead of planning for a future.’ And those responses reflect a colorblind ideology because they don't draw on historical or even contemporary racial practices that lead to these wealth disparities like redlining or discrimination in terms of FHA allocations or even the bias in how credit scores are calculated.”

Instead, they base their perspectives on individual experience in how they understand a larger pattern of racial inequality.

In her research, Lee found four particular ways young people talk about race, but much of that research focused on white millennials.

“And so in this article, I argue that black millennials are less likely to say that racism is a thing of the past, but more likely to say disparities are the results of groups at the bottom not working hard enough,” she said. “I also argue that they are relying on a fifth frame that I call happenstance.”

She explained this happenstance frame, or a way of talking about race and racial outcomes, relies on chance occurrences and are totally detached from a historical understanding of how race is structured in society.

“Those who use this frame might say, ‘It is what it is,’” she said. “With the happenstance frame, (respondents) don't interrogate the values of the group. They don't see the history of slavery as impacting today. It's kind of like an acceptance of the status quo of life. This is just how things are. And when they are pushed to explain how we got here—it's not necessarily about race or racism. This is just how the chips fell.”

Lee posits that the reason black college students might lean toward a colorblind ideology is that they do not want to believe racism matters.

“They want to believe that regardless of skin color they have boundless opportunities,” she said. “The narratives that they used to explain racial inequality, helped them affirm and support that. Many of the black students interviewed also talked about their own life experiences in school and feeling uncomfortable or not wanting to talk about slavery.”

During her time at the fellowship, Lee primarily focused on her happenstance frame on racial disparities theory. The largest gift the fellowship gave her was time to focus on her research.

“I am untenured but on the tenure track and I teach three classes each semester. It's oftentimes difficult to find time to just sit and write and think and theorize. I'm also the mom of two small children, ages four and seven. So when I'm not teaching, not on campus, they usurp the rest of the time,” she said.

Another important benefit was a weekly Zoom writing group she formed with some of the other fellows with the goal of having accountability partners. The Institute also purchased a software package allowing her to perform deeper dives into her data for analysis.

Monthly fellow meetings, primarily focused with teaching fellows about being a career academic, actually helped Lee too even though she is further along with her career than most. She particularly benefitted from media training, putting together a power talk and professional branding.

As a faculty fellow, Lee presented her work for one of the colloquiums. That served two purposes for her—having a hard deadline and getting useful feedback.

For example, questions from the Q&A led to ideas for further research.

“One of the things that I would like to do is interview students from HBCUs. So all of my participants were from predominately white institutions. And I am wondering, if sampling both from minority-serving institutions may reflect a different type of racial ideology,” she said.

Racial ideology among black students may be different after the Obama and Trump eras.

“I think also it's important to revisit this work post Trump's presidential era,” she said. “I interviewed students during the time period that Obama was president and rhetoric, discourse and media portrayals of race in the U.S. were highly tied to this notion of the U.S. being a colorblind society. Trump's presidency kind of blew that all up. So it would be interesting to kind of compare pre and post.”

Lee's article stemming from her time with the fellowship—“Beyond the Four Frames of Colorblind Ideology: Theorizing the Impact of Colorblind Racism on Black Millennials' Racial Views”—was recently published in *Phylon*.

While teaching a classes in sociology and statistics for Spelman, she is passionate about learning data science and making data science tools more accessible for marginalized communities, particularly black women and women of color through the Atlanta University Center Data Science Initiative.



Hailey Greenstone
Undergraduate Honors Fellow
Emory University

Hailey Greenstone transformed a family low point into inspiration for her undergraduate thesis which garnered highest honors.

Greenstone, originally from Charlottesville, Va., graduated magna cum laude in May with bachelors degrees in both sociology and neuroscience and behavioral biology from Emory University. She plans to study public health and become a medical doctor.

While at Emory, Greenstone received an undergraduate thesisfellowship from James Weldon Johnson Institute for the Study of Race and Difference resulting in her 37 page undergraduate thesis, “Beyond the Virus: How Ethno-Racial Preterm Birth Disparities Interact with COVID 19 Indicators.”

Greenstone, the oldest of three siblings, was in eighth grade when her mother was pregnant with her younger brother. The memory of her mother's struggles stuck with her.

“There were a lot of concerns throughout the pregnancy, a lot of different scares. That is where my interest in pregnancy came from,” she said.

Greenstone has known she wanted to be a doctor since she was seven years old. She had good experiences with her doctors, especially one who eventually worked for Doctors Without Borders.

“I was really inspired by the idea that he wanted to make a bigger difference and help people who didn't have access to the care I'd been getting,” she said. “I wasn't afraid of the doctor or getting shots or anything because he knew how to talk to kids really well. Having someone in primary care who was so good at making something intimidating feel comfortable was a big motivation for me.”

Greenstone arrived at Emory planning to study neuroscience and discovered her passion for sociology while there.

“I started taking classes and fell in love with understanding how inequities function,” she said. “As a white woman, I need to understand intersectionality and how my privilege harms other people. I need to know those things so that when I am a doctor I can do my part to reduce that harm, become an advocate and fight back against the system.”

The JWJI fellowship provided a community of other similarly-minded thesis students who were interested in studying race and difference but from different perspectives, Greenstone said.

“I found that was really powerful to be around. It was a great opportunity to connect with students who are outside of my major and they gave me extra support for my thesis as well,” she said. “It was really nice to know I wasn't going through it alone.”

JWJI graduate fellow Shari Mackinson offered support for undergraduate fellows, helping with both thesis and career transition support including monthly workshops on resume writing and interviewing skills, Greenstone said.

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“She also helped us prepare for life outside of Emory and our next steps, whether it be grad school or finding jobs. She was always reaching out and checking in on us,” Greenstone said. “I was going through some pretty hard times. To have that additional understanding and support really meant a lot.”

Originally, the plan for her thesis was to interview mothers who experienced birth trauma but COVID-19 struck creating significantly limited access to healthcare settings so Greenstone pivoted to a more quantitative approach.

Her thesis was based on two data sets. The first set, from the Georgia Department of Health, included the hundreds of thousands of Georgians who reported symptoms for COVID-19 in 2020. The second data set showed the racial and ethnic composition of pregnant people in Georgia in 2019 and 2020.

“I wanted to use 2019 as a kind of pseudo comparison to 2020 because there are obvious differences between those years—the main one being that, in Georgia, there was no real risk of COVID-19 in 2019 and in 2020 there was,” Greenstone said.

Her research focused on the intersection between COVID-19 and pregnancy outcomes and race in Georgia from a quantitative perspective.

“I wanted to see how the pandemic could have affected pregnancy. The virus itself could affect health. But also, with resources directed towards helping COVID patients, I wondered how COVID-19 exacerbated the existing racial disparities in pregnancy outcomes,” Greenstone said.

“

With the U.S. Supreme Court's reversal of *Roe v. Wade*, Greenstone believes the study of pregnancy disparities and women's health is essential, especially across the social determinants of race and class.

"I think it's going to become increasingly critical as women will have reduced access to the things they need to stay healthy," she said.

Greenstone is now pursuing a medical and a master's of public health degrees at Tufts University School of Medicine in Boston. She with hopes to improve public health using research, medicine and sociology to test out interventions.

"I think sociology and neuroscience give very different understandings of how to look at people. In neuroscience, it's how our brains actually function. Sociology shows how people influence people and cultures, create inequities and shape how we live," Greenstone said. "A person has cellular needs as well as social and environmental things happening that are affecting their health. I think looking at the whole person will help that."



Sabrina Jin
Undergraduate Honors Fellow
Emory University

Before using James Weldon Johnson Institute for the Study of Race and Difference's fellowship to complete her undergraduate honors thesis: "New Perspectives on Race and Racism among Brazilians of Asian descent," Sabrina Jin didn't think her academic career would include the study of race and difference.

"I came into college wanting to study environmental science. Studying anthropology was something that was way out of my mind," she said. "I never thought I'd focus on Asians or anything related to Asia."

But it was that realization that led her to examine her own set of biases, thus fueling her research, she said.

"My parents did not like that I was studying anthropology and especially the part about Asians. I think that speaks more to the biases that I came in with as an individual of Asian descent. My parents are first generation immigrants from China. I think I've always struggled a bit with the model minority narrative," Jin explained.

It was her connection to a team focusing on health and immigration in Brazil through the Emory Global Health Institute that made her rethink her research goals.

"My mentor brought up the idea of studying Asians, especially because of the racist rhetoric about COVID-19," she said. "Doing this project helped me discover a lot of the ways that I've been impacted negatively by the model minority narrative."

Jin was with the research team studying health and immigration in Brazil when the racist violent attacks on the Atlanta spas happened.

"I had to navigate the tension between doing something I care about and the burden of sitting with problems that hit close to home," she said.

Jin discovered there isn't a lot of scholarship and research surrounding the study of Asian Brazilians and racism since most of it's focused on the black-white binary.

She started the research not really knowing anything about Asians and Brazil, not even realizing Brazil had a significant Asian population. Her research focused on the topic of anti-racist activism. Due to the pandemic, she wasn't able to travel to Brazil. Her research subjects were members of a Facebook group for Asian Brazilian scholars and activists. She performed 21 interviews on Zoom.

"My questions became more specific about looking at how anti-racist activism has changed or not changed in Brazil during the COVID-19 pandemic," Jin said.

She also asked them about their family immigration history, their own experiences with racism and activism because everyone interviewed self-identified as an anti-racist activist. Most identified as middle class and were connected to a higher education institution as a student or researcher.

She discovered three main challenges that hindered activity solidarity—racism or prejudice ideologies, different national origins particularly Chinese and Japanese and generational perspectives.

Jin explored how the model minority narrative affected many Asians in Brazil and the United States through stereotyping. It also included the racial democracy theory widely accepted in Brazil. This theory holds that racism doesn't exist in Brazil because of centuries of racial mixing. Jin wanted to learn how these concepts influenced Asian Brazilian efforts with anti-racist activism.

"Sometimes Asians and Brazilians don't identify as Asian, they identify as white, which, to me is also indicative of a form of racism. There's pressure to associate with whiteness, which is also a sense that racism exists, but there's just many different factors going on there," she said.

"They might say there's some form of discrimination, but they wouldn't call it racism, or they don't believe Asians suffer as much compared to Afro-Brazilians. So they don't feel like they can call it racism," she said. "But it's also complicated by racial democracy, racism can't exist in Brazil because race doesn't exist—skin color has many gradients. It's not as much of a black-white binary as we see in the United States."

Jin was also curious about whether the interviewees experienced intergenerational conflict related to their activism.

"Oftentimes, older generations are hesitant to consider themselves as victims of racism, and that makes it so they don't understand why their children are engaging in activist efforts. I spoke to more than one person who told me that they had to move out because their parents didn't want them spreading this new type of ideology among their family," Jin said.

Jin recounted a story illustrating the complexity of the struggles. A participant, who is Japanese and Brazilian, was accused of being responsible for the pandemic. Her first reaction was to say that she is not Chinese. She was ashamed by this reaction because she was trying to protect herself by wielding model minority privilege. She was also unhappy with her reaction because she wants to stand in solidarity with Chinese people.

"And all of this has historical precedents during World War II when Chinese Brazilians and Americans, actually advertised they were not Japanese to avoid losing business," Jin said. "So this model minority stereotype was used as a tool that, depending on social circumstances, different populations wield to their advantage."

Jin completed her 110-page thesis in office space provided by her JWJI fellowship. As most of her work was conducted during pandemic isolation, having a space where she could work, meet one-on-one with her mentor and other fellows doing similar types of research was beneficial.

"Because the JWJI fellowship specifically looks at race and racism, it was very encouraging at a time when I was frustrated," Jin said. "It's difficult thinking so often about racism against your own people. You don't want to think about it. It's also difficult when there's not much conversation within the anthropological community. It was the first time I've written something of that length or spent such a huge amount of time devoted to one topic. I really benefited from that mentorship and just consistent encouragement."

Jin made friends with another fellow who was studying Asian Americans and civil rights.

"I think anti racist activism among Asians is a relatively new concept that still faces a lot of backlash among our communities. Like our parents, there's not many peers in my Asian-American community who talks about it," Jin said. "So having her was very important during the times that I wanted to give up."

Jin who graduated in May with a bachelors in Anthropology and Human Biology.

Jin plans to attend medical school and earn a doctorate in medical anthropology. She wants to look at how racism gets internalized into health disparities.

"I also want to practice the medicine so I can offer something more tangible to the community. I want the practice of medicine to ground my future research in anthropology," Jin said.



Annie Li
Undergraduate Honors Fellow
Emory University

While most scholarship on the civil rights movement is focused on black activism, Emory honors graduate Annie Li wants to shine a spotlight on the work of Asian-American Christians.

In May, Li graduated summa cum laude with a bachelor's degree in History and Sociology from Emory University. A recipient of the Marshall Scholarship, Li is now earning her master's degree in theology with a concentration on ecclesiastical history from the University of Oxford in the United Kingdom.

"History is humbling because you really have to step outside of your own mindset and life and go back to whatever context your history research is taking place in," Li said.

Li received her undergraduate James Weldon Johnson Institute for the Study of Race and Difference fellowship in time to focus on her more than 80-page honors thesis—"San Francisco Chinatown to the American South: Chinese American Christians in the Civil Rights Movement, 1963-1966."

The thesis is the culmination of her undergraduate studies. She said a sophomore course on the civil rights movement with African American Studies professor Carol Anderson changed her "whole understanding of the history of race in America."

"It was also one of the first places where I learned about historical research," Li said. "I think that class, paired with Asian-American history, which I took the following spring with history professor Chris Suh, inspired me to declare my history major. It also planted the seeds of my honors thesis research. What I really wanted to do was see where the overlaps were between the civil rights movement and Asian-American activism, which is traditionally portrayed as a black-white only movement."

In the following summer, Black Lives Matter protests re-emerged because of the killing of George Floyd. Also, there was increased media attention on Anti-Asian hate because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"That's when I started to think about what black and Asian solidarity looks like in our present time and then also in history," Li said. "I think a lot of the current history research on Asian-American activists has focused on radical activists who held tightly to Marxist and Maoist ideologies and aligned themselves with the Black Power Movement. This was a bit more radical than the earlier generation of civil rights activists that began with church people and clergy members."

She learned that four Christian activists, all coming from the Presbyterian Church in Chinatown, San Francisco, Calif., attended the March on Washington in August of 1963, traveled to the demonstrations for civil rights in the South, created a social service community in conjunction with their church and eventually established the ethnic studies program at then-San Francisco State College, now a university. Those activists are Franklin Fung Chow, Doreen Der McLeod, Marion Kwan and the Rev. Larry Jack Wong.

The first part of the thesis sets the scene, historical context and upbringings of the activists including their families and education. The second part focuses on how they were involved in the civil rights movement in the South. The third section explores what activism they worked on when they returned to the West Coast, including fighting for inclusion in higher education programs. For instance, Wong established the ethnic studies program at San Francisco State University.

"I think the Asian-American movement is traditionally understood to be a secular movement that had radical underpinnings. But what was really crucial for me to understand was that there was a Christian Asian-American led movement in the West Coast," Li said. "I'm a person of Christian faith. So I was very dissatisfied and frustrated with the way that religion was being used as a tool for political power and oppression of other groups. With my thesis, I asked the question of what Christian faith looks like that strives towards social activism, racial reconciliation, or these visions of justice, equity, shalom and peace that are themes in the Bible."

During her senior year, Li used her first semester of the JWJI fellowship to conduct research, acquire documents and travel planning for the project. She also used the JWJI stipend to first purchase books for the project.

“(During the fellowship) I learned a lot about the process and the difficulty of historical research because I had been planning to visit Berkeley’s library which holds a lot of the archives of the church and Chinatown at that time period. But that research trip got canceled twice because of the Delta and Omicron variants. I had to kind of pivot and learn how to do research, not using a document that I had thought would be so crucial. So I think that definitely was challenging, but also opened up a lot of new creative avenues,” Li said.

The spring semester was dedicated to writing, practicing presentation of her work, defending her thesis and doing revisions.

Each cohort session had a different topic to help fellows, including ones on having an elevator pitch, how to introduce yourself and your research and presenting and defining your work, Li said.

“It was really helpful,” Li said. “I think it was nice having that space with other scholars who are doing research on the topic of race and difference. We all had such different projects, but I feel we had the same energy and heart behind the work that we were doing.”

Li also enjoyed the colloquiums especially the panel on black Asian solidarity.

“It was very intellectually enriching for me,” Li said. “Having a community that helped walk me through this process of writing or doing independent research and how to present and promote your research to the world was important. You don’t really get in a in class how to take the work that you produce beyond school.”

She presented her work at several Emory programs including an Emory undergraduate research summer symposium, Emory’s Institute for Global Research and JWJI. After graduation, she traveled to Los Angeles to present as a part of a works in progress workshop at the Asian Pacific American Religions Research Initiative Conference.

Li also learned from the non-academic work she did for Fair Fight Action, an organization founded to address voter suppression in Georgia and across the country

“That was actually really cool because I got to work during the 2020 election and the runoff in Georgia. I think that helped me to engage with the legacy of the civil rights movement and this fight against voter disenfranchisement, but in the contemporary setting.”

She also worked with a local Christian nonprofit and learned nonprofit management and the narrative change aspect of social movements.

“I think those two are very different work experiences that really complemented the central interest that I have in racial reconciliation,” Li said.

“One of the most helpful pieces of the JWJI fellowship was our cohort meetings,” Li said. “I think it was just really nice having that space with other scholars who are doing research on this topic of race and difference. We had such different projects, but I feel like we had the same energy and heart behind the work that we were doing,” she said.



Amon Pierson
Undergraduate Honors Fellow
Emory University

Amon Pierson wants to understand how violence impacts the lives of black women, an academic journey inspired by the lives of his mother, aunt and sister.

In May, Pierson graduated summa cum laude from Emory University with a bachelors in comparative literature. He’s now pursuing his doctorate in English literature at Princeton University.

Pierson’s research interests include Black nihilism, psychoanalysis, black feminist theory and 20th-21st century African American poetry. As a black, gay, non-religious man from Utah, Pierson knows first hand many aspects of race and difference. But it is the life he does not live, that of a black woman, that fascinates him and prompted his honors thesis: “Reading the Hieroglyph: The Em Dash in Action.”

Pierson began working on his honors thesis first as a Mellon Mays fellow and then a James Weldon Johnson Institute for the Study of Race and Difference fellow his senior year.

“This project is a theorization of the existence of black women within the symbolic, where I refigure the em dash (—) as a hieroglyph. The hieroglyph as the em dash is representative of an irrecoverable nothing that is the figure of the black woman. As such, black women’s existence is defined by an indeterminacy,” he said. “My project is basically a theorization of the space that black women occupy in society.”

During the JWJI fellowship, Pierson specifically worked on the introduction which dissects the nuances of the “hieroglyphics of the flesh,” as proposed by literary critic Gertrude Conaway, Vanderbilt Professor Distinguished Research Professor Emerita Hortense Spillers, and “Speaking the Hieroglyph” by Selamawit D. Terrefe.

The origin of Pierson’s project sprang from his relationships with the black women in his family.

“It began with my mom and my sister, actually my whole thesis is dedicated to them because I just watched my mom, my aunt and my sister interact with the world and with themselves internally,” he said. “They’re my number one. Without them I literally would not know what to do. I am here because of them. So I always want to give to give back to them because they’ve given me so much. And the best way that I could do that is writing a piece for them.”

Pierson explained that his father is an integral part of his life but he feels that black men and their relationship to violence is already given much academic attention while violence in the lives of black women remains undefined.

“I wanted to understand how that violence impacts the way black women exist. My mom was telling me the story about a man she dated who kept throwing things at her while they argued. Or the story of being followed around in the grocery store or not being heard or recognized in hospitals. Being physically, sexually and mentally assaulted,” he said. “I just I saw these things and I’m like, whoa, somebody has to write about this. So my project is basically a theorization of the space that black women occupy in society.”

As a black man, Pierson said he is aware of the gaps in his understanding of the experiences of black women. “I know there’s something that I’m not going to understand or something that I’m always going to be missing, but I really want to provide care and understanding to this project.”

After “Dispossessed Self: The Question of the Self and the Other in June Jordan’s ‘Poem about My Rights,’” was published in the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship Journal by Harvard University Press in 2022, Pierson felt confident in his decision to work in the space of “black womanhood, black women’s subjectivity and the existence of the black woman.”

The JWJI fellowship also provided an important intellectual space and the practical skills he needed.

“It gave me another community of scholars, another way to relate to people that think like me or who are interested in the same questions or just doing some similar things,” he said. “Scholarship can be really isolating and extremely solitary. I was really excited to get to know other people that do research and network. People don’t tell you how hard networking can be sometimes.”

Pierson found the nature of the fellowship enriched his study in ways perhaps only JWJI could.

“Being in that space of JWJI was so generative for me,” Pierson said. “Even being in the office, in the space itself, interacting with the people there, especially the black women there, that is what really stuck to me.”

Honing in on the concepts of race and difference also informed Pierson’s work.

“I wanted to take this, the study of race and difference to heart and really wanted to think about what that meant. They had different sociologists, different historians come and talk to us about their work,” he said. “I think that JWJI really fulfilled that idea that I had of difference in how important difference can be and, at the same time, how we need to almost dispel those categories of difference.”

From the theoretical to the practical, JWII aided Pierson's growth in becoming an academic. "We had a professionalization series where Shari (Mackinson) would go over the elevator pitch. How do you explain your research in so many words in a way that makes sense to everybody? We worked on networking tips for conferences, how do you structure a thesis? What a thesis looks like," he said.

During his graduate work, Pierson, who won the Tate-Taylor Prize in African American Studies and a Presidential Fellowship at Princeton, looks forward to deepening his understanding of the intersection between Afro pessimism, black nihilism and psychoanalysis.

"I'm a theory kind of guy. I want to look at literary theory and, more specifically, I really want to delve deep into black feminist theory. I have so many project ideas I want to do in grad school. For example, I want to do a project on black women's talk shows and how it represents the end of the therapeutic space between the analyst and the one analyzed."

JWJI ALUMNI UPDATES



Derek Handley
2017-2018 Cohort

James Weldon Johnson Institute for the Study of Race and Difference Fellow Alumnus Derek Handley isn't your traditional academic.

He spent 10 years in the U.S. Navy before working in higher education as an interdisciplinary professor of African American rhetoric, rhetorical history and urban studies.

Today, he is an assistant professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee where he's been teaching since 2020. He is affiliated faculty with the African and African Diaspora Department and urban studies. In 2021, he received a UW-Milwaukee discovery and innovation grant.

When Handley applied to JWJI, he was still on active duty and teaching at the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md. He was working on his dissertation when he was accepted into the JWJI pre-doctoral fellowship.

"I wasn't a working academic," Handley said. "Going to Emory, being part of that fellowship and being with those assistant, associate and full professors just opened me up to the world of academics and research. To have all those speakers come every week to have lunch and listen to those presentations was tremendous for me."

Handley's academic journey began as the only English major in ROTC at Hampton University. He always had a love for African American literature. When he was in the Navy, he would read books like Cornell West's "Race Matters."

"I'd read his book and kept a dictionary right next to it because he used all these words that I didn't understand at the time," he said.

Once he left active duty, Handley returned home where he earned a masters of fine arts in creative writing from the University of Pittsburgh, but it didn't feed his intellectual curiosity. He took a class on rhetorical education which opened up a new field of English studies for him.

He pursued a doctorate in rhetoric and writing studies at Carnegie Mellon on the G.I. Bill while teaching at the Naval Academy. In 2017-2018, Handley was one of two pre-doctoral Mellon fellows.

"It was a wonderful time for me. It set the foundation for what I was trying to do," Handley said. "I grew exponentially in understanding what was expected of a person who wants to do research and what could be published."

In September 2021, Handley submitted his dissertation, now book, to Pennsylvania State University Press with the working title: "Struggle for the City: Rhetorics of Citizenship and Resistance in the Black Freedom Movement."

"The Biggest thing for me was having time and space to write. I wrote a stronger dissertation because of that exposure to scholars, different ideas and different approaches. It stimulates the brain," he said.

The book explores how African American communities responded to urban renewal in the 1950s and 60s.

“In the 50s, we link the civil rights movement to the South, rightfully so, but similar things were happening in the North,” Handley said. “The book is about what was happening in small northern cities during the time of the civil rights and black power movements.”

The book focuses on Pittsburgh, Pa., Milwaukee, Wis. and St. Paul, Minn. when the Fair Housing Act of 1954 gave cities unprecedented power to level neighborhoods making way for urban centers and then highways with passage of the 1956 Federal Interstate and Defense Highways Act. The book time frame ends with the 1968 passage of the Fair Housing Act.

Urban renewal projects displaced African Americans from their homes using eminent domain to build city projects including highways or stadiums.

Handley cited a quote from his research: “there weren’t many black people in Minnesota but the highway found them.”

Cities used eminent domain to purchase properties under market value and disproportionately displace African American families. The book chronicles the trend up through the federal fair housing act in 1968. Pittsburgh was the first city to become an urban center.

“There were restrictions on where you could live. There wasn’t enough housing for the people who were displaced and they couldn’t move into other neighborhoods because they were white only,” Handley said. “And this is in the North. So what happens? It becomes overcrowded in those black areas.”

The inspiration of Handley’s book came from his parents’ experience living in the Pittsburgh Hill District.

“This was before my time, but I heard stories about what was lost. The neighborhood was torn down to build an arena. That spurred questions like ‘Why did they do that?’ and ‘Didn’t anybody try to stop it?’” he said. “The book was personal. I wanted to find examples where people actually did fight back. We always learn about Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks. I wanted to find ordinary people who were using rhetorical skills, taking in information and making the argument. What arguments were they making? How were they presenting themselves in the public hearing?”

The JWJI fellowship not only provided Handley the time to write his dissertation but he also received mentoring and advice on how to apply and interview for jobs, write research statements, conduct effective presentations and prepare for tenure.

“To have them tell me—this is what works and this doesn’t. That was huge for me. It completely changed the trajectory of my academic career,” Handley said. “When I went on the job market I had all this knowledge of how to present and handle myself.”

All that preparation paid off for Handley who had five job offers and several postdoctoral opportunities, including the Chamberlin Project Fellowship he accepted at Amherst College in 2019.

Advice including obtaining and post doctoral fellowship to have more time to write or finish a book and always be thinking about the second book proved to be invaluable, Handley said.

He is currently working on a collaborative project, “Mapping Racism and Resistance in Milwaukee County,” where he is identifying racist language in housing. The project is developing a website with maps of Milwaukee County racist housing real estate locations.

“They’re kind of hidden in plain sight so it’s really fascinating work,” he said.

Handley also did archival research about the United Negro Improvement Association and Marcus Garvey which is the basis for a paper last summer at the International Society of the History of Rhetoric At Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands.

That paper, “Rhetoric of return: African or American? The Emory archive of Thomas W. Harvey/U.M.I.A. Collection,” presented last summer, is the foundation for his second book.

“Something I learned while at Emory was to already be thinking about the second book project,” Handley said. “Hiring committees want to make sure you are not a one hit wonder.”



Trimiko Melancon
2008-2010 Cohort

An award-winning author and filmmaker, Trimiko Melancon discovered the freedom to pursue her true academic identity as an intellectual activist, public critic and scholar as one of the James Weldon Johnson Institute for the Study of Race and Difference's inaugural fellows.

That academic awakening began after she had already served as a J. William Fulbright Scholar of American Literature and American Studies in Berlin, Germany and while an assistant professor of English, Women and African Studies at Auburn University.

"The experience at Emory enabled me to realize how you cultivate a healthy type of academic identity, how you envision it, and you can go out to manifest those things," said Melancon, a JWJI fellow from 2008 to 2010. "It enabled me to step out and make my work visible to a larger public."

As a public intellectual, Melancon is a frequent speaker, book reviewer, media expert and cultural critic. She, or her work, has appeared in the *Washington Post*, *Elle*, *Wired*, *Huffington Post*, NBC and the BCC.

Last year, she joined Michigan State University as a professor of African American and African Studies.

Her first book, "Unbought and Unbossed: Transgressive Black Women, Sexuality, and Representation" published by Temple University Press, was named co-winner of the 2016 College Language Association Creative Scholarship Book Award.

Melancon is also the co-editor of "Black Female Sexualities" with Joanne M. Braxton from Rutgers University Press.

She's received numerous prestigious fellowships for her work from Andrew W. Mellon, Nellie Mae, Ford, and Ruth Landes/Reed Foundations, as well as the Social Science Research Council and Fulbright Commission.

An emerging filmmaker, Melancon's feature documentary "What Do You Have to Lose?" won Best Documentary Feature Audience Award at the 2020 Indie Memphis Film Festival.

When Melancon joined the first JWJI cohort, the institute had a different name—James Weldon Johnson Institute for Advanced Interdisciplinary Studies—under its founding director, the late Dr. Rudolph P. Byrd.

Later, the institute merged with the Race Diversity Initiative to become the James Weldon Johnson Institute for Race and Difference.

When first founded, interdisciplinary studies weren't as included into academia as they are today, Melancon said.

"Back then, academia really didn't have a good way of really incorporating it so it operated as rhetoric. So I think (the institute) was really cutting edge," she said.

To name the institute for James Weldon Johnson was also a forward-thinking and significant.

"He is a seminal poet but I lot of people didn't know him. James Weldon Johnson is the one who wrote and designed what we think of as the black national anthem ("Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing"). He embodies precisely the best," she said.

At the time of the institute's founding, those pursuing interdisciplinary studies such as women, gender, sexuality and African-American subjects found them in foundational disciplines like English or history. And there weren't many of them, Melancon said.

"I've seen such a shift in my career. I think it speaks to a certain moment in academia and the institute itself because it was able to change but still encompass all of those different dynamics," she said.

The inaugural year hosted three fellows, each in different stages in their academic career, plus a United Negro College Fund (UNCF) fellow.

"The beauty of being in that inaugural cohort was seeing it manifest from the ground up. Dr. Byrd was such a visionary, you saw the ways of dreams and visions concretized," she said.

JWJI was critically important because there weren't many fellowships of its kind.

“I remember it being new. You could name the ones existing because there were so few,” she said. “There were dynamics at play in terms of how to cultivate and foster a particular type of intellectualism and scholarship that’s built with rigor.”

JWJI’s vision was “historic and expansive.” The institute partnered with the Fox Humanities Center at the time creating the first weekly JWJI Colloquiums.

“(Back then) they had their own set of fellows and we would have colloquiums. It was the foundation that became the intellectual hub,” she said.

Colloquiums then and now include academic presentations with lunches for guests from across the university.

“You can have a completely different subject matter but there’s something instructive and pedagogical about seeing other people present their research and see how they make an argument stick,” she said.

Melancon treasures key fellowship milestones including when internationally celebrated author Alice Walker visited Emory when the institution acquired Walker’s papers, she said.

“It was such a beautiful time and, for me, so instructive,” she said.

Melancon also met poet Natasha Trethewey who later served two terms as the nineteenth U.S. Poet Laureate.

“It was this sort of intellectual power that (Byrd) created and still exists. It’s really important and Andra Gillespie has done a fine job of making sure the students and everyone knows the vision and purpose,” Melancon said.

“I don’t think you have other institutes exactly like this one. But, as they say, often imitated but never duplicated.”

For Melancon, her JWJI fellowship had one key goal—transforming her doctoral dissertation into a book. It’s where she experienced the transformation from sourcing others as experts in a dissertation into becoming an authority herself.

“I had to realize the stripping down of quoting from other people because now you’re the authority figure, right? You’re the expert,” she said.

She performed archival research, restructured the book, wrote a new introduction, added two chapters and a conclusion.

“I looked at transgressive black women and African-American women’s fiction.

My time at JWJI really allowed me to use those interdisciplinary muscles because the book became a completely different manifestation of itself. It kept those same sort of ideas, but it stretched me and it allowed me to really add all these various other elements,” she said. “I really ran with that intellectual freedom and license.”

Melancon said the fellowship also gave her time to look at the larger totality of race, gender and sexuality in terms of the transgressions of black women’s sexuality, black bodies and its representation. She explored magazines of the 1970s including *Fade*, *Jet*, and *Ebony*.

“It really allowed me to do things that I never would have really done before,” she said. “How do you want this book out into the world, right? What kind of mark do you want it to be? I think that that was really the beauty of it. And even with every project after that, I thought it was going to include and consistently be more and more interdisciplinary, making it as expansive as possible.”

Melancon said the JWJI fellowship also was formative in her early career development.

“It gave me the opportunity to learn not only how to write a book but how to navigate academia,” she said.

“It gave me an intellectual maturity and confidence. I’m not saying I wasn’t confident or mature, but when you go from grad school and a dissertation to then being an author, things change. I had to develop that authoritative voice.”

Melancon also applied and received a second year JWJI fellowship.

“It was just phenomenal,” she said. “The second year was just the icing on the cake because I got so much done the first year.”

Years later, she returned to present at JWJI on her feature documentary project.

“I remember thinking this place always has a special place in my heart because of what the time there meant and what it did in terms of enriching me and my career,” she said. “My time there gave me this intellectual community and I’ve never been in a space like that. It was so dynamic and thoughtful and productive. In terms of academia—it’s really a gem.”

Melancon, who earned her bachelors degree in English, her masters and doctorate in African American Studies, has also taught at Rhodes College and Loyola University. At Loyola she served for several years as the co-director of Women Studies and the director of African and African American Studies.

She hopes to pass on the lessons of interdisciplinary work learned at JWJI to her current students.

“I’m looking for my students to be global citizens who are going to change the world,” she said.

2021-2022 Colloquium Series

Fall 2021

Date	Speaker	Talk Title
9/20	Heidi Kim UNC Chapel Hill Department of English	Illegal Immigrants/Model Minorities: Asian Americans and the Afterlives of Political Stigma
9/27	Catherine Ramirez UC Santa Cruz Department of Latin American & Latino Studies	Assimilation: An Alternative History
10/4	Margaret Chin Hunter College Department of Sociology	STUCK: Why Asian Americans Don't Reach the Top of the Corporate Ladder and the Role of Race
10/18	Tamika Nunley Oberlin College Department of History	At the Threshold of Liberty: African American Women's Strategies of Survival and Self-Making
10/25	Richard Boles Oklahoma State University Department of History	Interracial but not Integrated: Race and New England's Colonial Churches
11/1	Sharon Monteith Nottingham Trent University Department of History	Organizing for Civil Rights: SNCC's Activist Writing and Literary Legacy
11/8	Rafael Ocasio Agnes Scott College Department of Spanish	A Bristol, Rhode Island, and Matanzas, Cuba, Slavery Connection: The Diary of George Howe
11/15	Zakiya Luna Washington University in St. Louis Department of Sociology	When the Law is not Enough: Race, Human Rights and the Reproductive Justice Movement

Date	Speaker	Talk Title
11/22	Deborah Willis New York University - Tisch Department of Photography & Imaging	Re-telling stories in Photography about The Black Civil War Soldier
11/29	Nikol Alexander-Floyd Rutgers University Department of Political Science	Turbulent Futures: Social Change in the "Post-Politics" Era

Spring 2022

Date	Speaker	Talk Title
1/24	Michael Mendez University of California, Irvine Department of Urban Planning and Public Policy	Climate Change from the Streets
1/31	Jill Fisher UNC Chapel Hill Department of Social Medicine	YOUR HEALTH IS YOUR WEALTH: The Role of Race and Social Inequality in Healthy Individuals' Participation in Phase I Trials
2/7	Claudrena Harold University of Virginia Department of History	Sunday Comes: Gospel Music in the Soul and Hip-Hop Eras
2/14	Niambi Carter Howard University Department of Political Science	Finding Freedom: "Back to Africa" Movements and Black Emigration (1820-1865)
2/21	Brandon Windford University Tennessee, Knoxville Department of History	Our Good Fortune: A History of Black Banking in the American South
2/28	Keneshia Grant Howard University Department of Political Science	Relocation & Realignment: The Political Impact of Black Migration and Politics

Date	Speaker	Talk Title
3/14	Caleb Elfenbein Grinnell College Departments of History & Religious Studies	Race and Fear in Public Life: What Islamophobia Tells Us about America
3/21	Rafia Zafar Washington University in St. Louis Department of African and African American & American Studies	Recipes for Respect: Black Empowerment through Foodways
3/28	David Oh Ramapo College of New Jersey Department of Communication Arts	Whitewashing the Movies
4/4	Gregory Parks Wake Forest University School of Law Department of Law	A Pledge with Purpose: Black Sororities and Fraternities and Racial Uplift
4/11	Rava Shelyn Chapman JWJI Fellow Clark Atlanta University	The Womanist Humanistic Research Lab presents The Black Ecology Study
4/18	Celeste Lee UNCF JWJI Fellow Spelman College.	“We Can’t Blame it on ‘The Man’ or Can We?”: Black Millennials’ Explanations of Racial Inequality in A “Post- Racial” Era

2021-2022 Programming Calendar

Date	Category	Topics and Speakers
Tuesday 8/10-8/12	Orientation	Orientation (Various speakers)
Wednesday, 9/8 10 – 11:30am	Fellows Meeting	Professional Development Session
Monday, 9/20 12 – 1:30pm	Colloquium	Heidi Kim Departments of English and Comparative Literature UNC-Chapel Hill
Monday, 9/27 12 – 1:30pm	Colloquium	Catherine Ramirez Department of Latin American and Latino Studies UC Santa Cruz
Monday, 10/4 12 – 1:30pm	Colloquium	Margaret Chin Department of Sociology Hunter College
Thursday, 10/7 10 – 11:30am	Fellows Meeting	Professional Development Session
Monday, 10/18 12 – 1:30pm	Colloquium	Tamika Nunley Department of History Oberlin College
Thursday, 10/21 12 – 1:30pm	Public Dialogue	The Twin Pandemics: Racism and COVID
Monday, 10/25 12 – 1:30pm	Colloquium	Richard Boles Department of History Oklahoma State University
Monday, 11/1 12 – 1:30pm	Colloquium	Sharon Monteith Department of Literature and Cultural History Nottingham Trent University (UK)

Date	Category	Topics and Speakers
Wednesday, 11/3 10 – 11:30am	Fellows Meeting	Professional Development Session
Monday, 11/8 12 – 1:30pm	Colloquium	Rafael Ocasio Department of Spanish Agnes Scott College
Monday, 11/15 12 – 1:30pm	Colloquium	Zakiya Luna Department of Feminist Studies UC Santa Barbara
Monday, 11/22 12-1:30pm	Colloquium	Deborah Willis Department of Photography and Imaging NYU
Monday, 11/29 12-1:30pm	Colloquium	Nikol Alexander-Floyd Department of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Rutgers University
Wednesday, 1/12 10 – 11:30am	Fellows Meeting	Professional Development Session
Monday, 1/24 12 – 1:30pm	Colloquium	Michael Mendez Department of Urban Planning and Public Policy UC Irvine
Monday, 1/31 12 – 1:30pm	Colloquium	Jill Fisher Department of Social Medicine UNC Chapel Hill
Wednesday, 2/2 10 – 11:30am	Fellows Meeting	Professional Development Session
Monday, 2/7 12 – 1:30pm	Colloquium	Claudrena Harold Departments of History and African American & African Studies University of Virginia
Monday, 2/14 12 – 1:30pm	Colloquium	Keneshia Grant Department of Political Science Howard University

Date	Category	Topics and Speakers
Monday, 2/21 12 – 1:30pm	Colloquium	Brandon Winford Departments of History and African American Studies University of Tennessee
Monday, 2/28 12 – 1:30pm	Colloquium	Niambi Carter Department of Political Science Howard University
Wednesday, 3/2 10 – 11:30am	Fellows Meeting	Professional Development Session
Monday, 3/14 12 – 1:30pm	Colloquium	Caleb Elfenbein Departments of History and Religious Studies Grinnell College
Monday, 3/21 12 – 1:30pm	Colloquium	Rafia Zafar Departments of English, African American Studies, and American Culture Studies Washington University in St. Louis
Monday, 3/28	Colloquium	David Oh Department of Communication Arts Ramapo College
Monday, 4/4 12 – 1:30pm	Colloquium	Gregory Parks Wake Forest University School of Law
Wednesday, 4/6 10 – 11:30am	Fellows Meeting	Professional Development Session
Wednesday, 4/6 4:30 – 6:00pm	Public Dialogue	Annual James Weldon Johnson Distinguished Lecture: Dianne Pinderhughes (University of Notre Dame)
Monday, 4/11 12 – 1:30pm	Colloquium	Rava Shelyn Chapman (JWJI Fellow) Clark Atlanta University
Monday, 4/18 12 – 1:30pm	Colloquium	Celeste Lee (UNCF JWJI Fellow) Spelman College

Contact Us



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