



The *James Weldon
Johnson Institute*
for the *Study of Race
and Difference*

EMORY UNIVERSITY

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Spring Fellows*

Kudos to Our 2019-2020 Visiting Scholars



From left to right | Top Row: Sarah RudeWalker, Kyle Mays, Courtney Baker, Shanté Smalls, Shanya Cordis, Robin Brooks, Magana Kabugi

From left to right | Bottom Row: Iliana Yamileth Rodriguez, Rhonda Patrick, Andra Gillespie, Christle Wright, Justin Shaw

Director's Letter



Dear Friends,

A lot has changed, and much is uncertain. But the work of JWJI continues! How we interact with you may have to change for the next few months, but I write to assure you that JWJI remains committed to our mission of facilitating and promoting cutting-edge, interdisciplinary scholarship on issues related to race and difference.

Had things gone as planned, we would be in the midst of a busy commencement season, where we would have been basking in the success of our Dissertation Fellows, all of whom have or are on track to defend their dissertations by June.

And we would have unveiled the projects from our first class of Undergraduate Fellows, which span a range of topics and disciplines.

This, of course, was not to be. Our plans had to change, but we can still celebrate the successes of our fellows. With this in mind, this newsletter highlights our inaugural class of JWJI Undergraduate Fellows. We wish we had been able to highlight their work in person and on campus. We hope that in the next few pages, you can see their brilliance and rejoice in their success.

We are already thinking of the best way to serve you in the coming academic year. Please be assured that JWJI is adjusting to the pandemic, and we plan to offer engaging and stimulating programming next year that is accessible and safe.

As always, thank you for your support. Please join us in congratulating our fellows and in celebrating their accomplishments!

Sincerely,
Andra Gillespie
Director, JWJI

Introducing the JWJI Undergraduate Fellows Program

JWJI welcomed its first class of undergraduate fellows in January 2020. After a competitive application process in fall 2019, the selection committee (Andra Gillespie, Michelle Gordon, Hank Klibanoff, Daniel LaChance, Karen Stolley, and Carl Suddler) chose an outstanding cohort of fellows. JWJI Undergraduate Fellows participate in their department's honors programs and complete theses under the supervision of an Emory faculty member. As part of their fellowship, students received access to workspace at the JWJI house and access to research funds to help them complete their theses. Below are profiles of the four excellent students who were part of the inaugural cohort:



From left to right: Jocelyn Stanfield, Christina Ocean, Julybeth Murillo and Naomi Tesema

Julybeth Murillo



The first time Julybeth Murillo remembers being confronted with unfairness was when her parents moved, forcing her to switch high schools in California.

But the unexpected move taught her the value of confronting preconceived notions and challenging perspectives.

“When my parents said we were moving to Banning, I felt like my dreams were being torn apart. . . . When something unexpected occurs, you cannot help but dwell in a negative pool of emotions and isolate yourself from the world. Reality is, we all deal with our share of problems and they become part of us,” Murillo told her graduating high school class during her salutatorian speech. “Attending Banning High has allowed me to change my perspective on life and challenge myself to be the best I could be.”

Murillo first planned on studying biochemistry at Emory. Her own transformative experience led her to focus on how the way we see our lives can break negative self-perceptions, inspire us, and change the world. She has concentrated her studies on race through the lens of diversity, power, culture, and poverty.

Now a double major in sociology and Spanish, Murillo was inspired by the work of Natasha Kumar Warikoo, a Harvard University sociologist who examined how Ivy League students conceptualize race and meritocracy. Murillo argues that this type of research is important because, “We have to know how the education system is framing students’ perspectives on race,” and whether education prior to college affects these perspectives. It’s important to know what Emory is doing to construct those frames and know “what perspectives students are gaining when they leave Emory,” she said.

To replicate the Warikoo study, Murillo started observational research to gauge student involvement in race and diversity events on campus. Murillo asked students about their views on the admission process at Emory, what racial and ethnic group they identify with, and whether they participate in organizations on campus that match their racial and ethnic backgrounds. She also probed views on racial discrimination on campus and whether they engage with students from other racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Murillo’s adviser, Sociology Department Chair Timothy Dowd, is excited that she will be taking her research to graduate school and noted that her research holds the keys to building bridges among diverse groups of students.

“Sometimes students are tentative about discussing race and sharing their views on it, and on inequality, and we can see some of the boundaries that are made between people; and this type of research helps break those boundaries on race,” Dowd said.

Murillo will start a PhD program in sociology at the University of California, Irvine in the fall. She hopes to continue studying race and inequality as well as look at the intersections between gender and class. She is also interested in immigration studies, specifically United States and Mexico border relations.

Christina Ocean



Christina Ocean believes she's found a crystal ball.

The English and history double major thinks dreams hold great aspirational and educational potential—and may predict the future too.

Like so many, Ocean became inspired by Martin Luther King's iconic "I Have a Dream" speech. But for Ocean, the inspiration played out in a unique way.

She set out to investigate the impact of King's speech by testing whether it was prescient, actually predicting the future of African Americans in the United States.

She wanted to uncover the truth behind the potential of dreams. Using the notion of Sigmund Freud's theory that dreams are linked to the unconscious, Ocean examined the nature of dreams in slave narratives, black literature, and folk beliefs that recounted dreams or their significance and ability to forecast the future.

Ocean was surprised by the absence of conversation in the classroom concerning dreams within African American literature. She began her inquiry using digital primary sources from the

Works Progress Administration's "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1938" to find instances in which people recounted dreams they'd had.

Ocean also used secondary sources such as Newbell Niles Puckett's dissertation, "Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro," which was useful in helping her deconstruct the meaning of dreams. Ocean excitedly cited numerous dreams that came true, but one dream stood out. She recounted the story of an enslaved woman who dreamed she escaped to freedom, and who later freed herself in real life. That the woman acted on her dream validates Ocean's theory that dreams motivate African Americans to create a better future for themselves.

Ocean's adviser, Andrew Mellon Professor of African American Studies and English Valerie Babb, noted how Ocean is providing a good re-reading of King's speech—an iconic speech everyone thinks they know. She believes Ocean's research will show there are many ways of considering what the speech signifies in American cultural history. Babb added that Ocean has done an excellent job of placing King's speech within the traditions of how African Americans have read and understood what dreams mean, what they signify, and what their work is within life.

After graduation, Ocean plans to go to law school and pursue education law.

Jocelyn Stanfield



"I defended my honors thesis on April 3 and earned highest honors. I couldn't have done it without the guidance and support from everyone at the institute! Also, being able to do work at the JWJI house was so helpful during the process."

—Jocelyn Stanfield (in email correspondence to Andra Gillespie)

Taking a class on drugs and behavior in her junior year inspired Jocelyn Stanfield to research how drugs can impact pregnancy and infant development. As a summer research intern in 2019, she studied the impact of nicotine on infants and found that babies exposed to nicotine had deficits in identifying their own names and in focusing their attention.

Stanfield extended this research in her thesis project, where she studied the effects of maternal marijuana and nicotine use on infant neurodevelopment.

She thought that maternal marijuana exposure would affect health outcomes in her sample of African American newborns. Instead, she found that low socioeconomic status is generally more predictive of health outcomes.

Stanfield also hypothesized that mothers who used marijuana and nicotine together would exacerbate the negative health effects on their children. She was wrong about that, too. She found that marijuana exposure had an insignificant effect. However, she found that nicotine exposure, whether by smoking tobacco or being around it, does cause developmental issues for infants.

The effects of nicotine were exacerbated by class. Children of low socioeconomic status mothers exposed to nicotine had worse health outcomes than children of higher socioeconomic status mothers who were exposed to nicotine.

Stanfield's adviser, Samuel Candler Dobbs Professor of Psychology Patricia Brennan, noted that Jocelyn's findings on class effects gives hope for the efficacy of potential interventions such as increasing resources for families.

Stanfield's findings also are important because they remind us to consider the role of structural inequality in explaining disparities, rather than only focusing on behavior in minority communities.

Stanfield's long-term goal is to pursue a PhD in clinical psychology. She is particularly interested in studying substance abuse and how it impacts vulnerable populations such as mothers, infants, and adolescents. In the fall, she will start work as a research associate at Brown University.

Naomi Tesema



When Naomi Tesema first entered the world of health research, she thought she had made a mistake.

She didn't see herself wearing eye goggles, using pipettes, and staring at petri dishes in a lab all day. That is, until she discovered epidemiology and public health and learned she could work on high-tech projects that connect and help people like her.

The human biology and anthropology double major was shocked when she first learned black women are the second highest group at risk to become infected with HIV.

Reproductive health is important to women in general, and black women face particular challenges because of the major roles racism and sexism play in higher rates of HIV and maternal mortality, Tesema said.

To address this issue, Tesema explored the ways technology can be used to provide health care to marginalized groups. Smartphone use is consistent across racial demographic groups. Could Tesema harness the smartphone to improve the access and quality of care for women of color and increase HIV prevention

through a mobile phone app?

That prototype is part of her thesis titled "Mobile Phone Apps for HIV Prevention among College-aged Black Women in Atlanta: Preferences and Prototype."

She got the idea while working for the past two years as an lab assistant for Rasheeta Chandler, assistant professor of nursing, whose work focuses on HIV prevention for black women.

Tesema also was inspired by the experiences she and her research study participants had with their physicians. She found her experiences during doctor visits matched those of the participants in her research project. Women are vulnerable when they share extremely personal information and concerns about their sexual and reproductive health.

"My experiences when visiting a doctor and interacting with the health care system paralleled the experiences participants in my research project shared. I felt intimately tied to this project because I knew it would be something I, my sisters, and my friends would use," Tesema said.

She wants the users to know the mobile app was developed by a team that understands their concerns because they "live in the same experience."

In fact, the first thing you see when you open Tesema's app is the logo and motto: "A reproductive mobile health app for us, by us."

App features include: finding a nearby specialist who is the same race and sex as you and a menstrual cycle tracker, along with additional health information.

Tesema will be starting medical school at the University of Chicago in the fall. When she finishes, she hopes to focus her practice on women of color and marginalized women. As a future physician, she envisions using technology to increase access to health care for underserved populations.

Kudos!

JWJI wants to highlight the successes of this year's cohort of Dissertation and Visiting Fellows. Please join us in congratulating them.



Magana Kabugi (Dissertation Fellow)

Will be starting a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellowship at Fisk University in fall 2020.



Yami Rodriguez (Dissertation Fellow)

Will receive her PhD in American studies from Yale University on May 18. She has accepted a postdoctoral fellowship in Emory's Department of History for fall 2020.



Justin Shaw (LGS Fellow)

Defended his dissertation in March and will graduate from Emory with a PhD in English on May 11. In the fall, he will start a tenure-track position as assistant professor of English at Clark University in Massachusetts.



Shanté Paradigm Smalls

(Postdoctoral Fellow)

Earned tenure and was named associate professor of English at St. John's University.