

## “Coming to Terms:” MALS Student Melisa Wright on Black Lives Matter



*Melisa Wright, a second year MALS student, was galvanized by Ahmaud Arbery's killing to become a Black Lives Matter (BLM) activist. Here she describes her involvement in anti-racism activism on Long Island. She believes the broader perspective and knowledge of history she's gaining through MALS allows her to "work and act in different settings" and enhances her ability to engage in "difficult conversations."*

### Getting Involved

Although I've always been outspoken about racial discrimination in America, I became more vocal this year. I can pinpoint when I became active in the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement—on May 5th of this year, when footage of Ahmaud Arbery's shooting became public. Seeing a man run for his life while he was being hunted down by men in vehicles shook me profoundly. What shocks me most is that Ahmaud was killed months prior, in February. If you haven't seen the video of this modern-day lynching, I suggest you do. I learned that the men responsible for this lynching still walked freely, and that Georgia's own prosecutors hadn't arrested Gregory McMichael, Travis McMichael, and William Roddie Bryan. I was floored: in the year 2020—not 1952—when a black man is profiled and killed in broad daylight, law enforcement still won't fight for us.

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## Vince Trionfo ('17) on MALS & teaching elementary students

Graduating college is just the first step for Long Island's aspiring teachers. Finding teaching positions is competitive given the region's typically generous salaries and benefits. Hence, building up contacts and experience is critical to finding permanent employment. Vincent Trionfo did this, like many, by subbing. He subbed by day in the LI schools, and by night he took courses from SUNY Old Westbury's MALS program. Trionfo achieved a key credential for teaching certification, a master's degree, which is mandated by New York State within five years of obtaining full time teaching. He entered the MALS program in 2015, its first year, and says, he “loved being

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*Images provided by Melisa Wright*

I knew that I had to do more—be more—than I was.

I joined The Action Pac's RunWithAhmaud campaign, which organized petitions, calling lists, and donations that helped spread awareness and aided his family with legal and funeral funds. Action Pac also launched the #IrunwithAhmaud protest. On Ahmaud's birthday (May 8th) people all over the world pledged to run 2.23 miles, the date Ahmaud was lynched, to honor him and spread awareness. It took people like me, protesting in the streets, sharing the footage on social media, calling the Georgia DA's office and the Georgia Bureau of Investigation to get those men arrested.

### Anti-Racism Work on Long Island

Being able to have an open dialogue with people that may not understand the BLM movement and message is a challenge on Long Island. This movement is seen as an "Us Vs Them" or "Anti-Cop" movement. I was met with more backlash and racially charged remarks from residents as I went east on Long Island. Many East Setauket, Smithtown, and Port Jefferson residents met us with anger; some tried to agitate us into violence. Even in Bellmore, not far from my hometown, Freeport, I had intense encounters. I've had open dialogues with residents in towns all over, yet a lot of people do not feel comfortable talking about race in America. When a person hears "Black Lives Matter", if they are unaware of what the movement stands for they can see it as exclusive. The conversations I've had with people on "All Lives Matter" indicate few are aware or don't fully understand racism on Long Island.

Plenty of Long Islanders view their towns, schools, and friend circles as racially inclusive and diverse because

of some small percentage of minorities that live within their community. But Long Island as a whole is extremely segregated. In 2019, *Newsday* found it one of the most segregated suburban regions in America. When you cross from one town to the next, you can see the difference in the demographic—as well as the condition of the community.

The history of Long Island has been more bitter than sweet. Growing up in Freeport I never realized how segregated towns on Long Island actually were until I started my freshman year at Farmingdale State College. I felt like I was in another world. I was the minority. As I began protesting this year that feeling came back to me. So many towns were more like Farmingdale and less like Freeport. A perfect example are the towns of Garden City and Hempstead.

Through protesting I've seen how different these towns really are—and only 2 miles apart. It's a tale of two cities; Garden City, which has a mostly white population, has better funded schools, cleaner streets, and the average household income to be about \$150,000. Hempstead, which is mostly Black and Hispanic, is visibly less fortunate than its neighboring town. Because the average household income is so low (about \$51,000), that means less funds for the community. Instead of the million-dollar homes and aesthetically pleasing stores and restaurants in Garden City, Hempstead has beaten up homes and sidewalks, run down corner bodegas, and higher unemployment rates. I've learned about the restrictive clauses that were made during the early and mid 20th century that prevented non-white families from becoming home owners in certain towns (like Levitt and Sons, which helped build the town of Levittown—which still has a low Black and Hispanic population). These clauses prevented minority families from creating generational wealth, and forced them into poorly-kept and poorly funded communities. The effects of redlining are still present today.

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# Curating: Creating Knowledge

*Curating may be one of the more popular words of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. The [New York Times](#) recently published an article, [Everyone's a Curator Now](#)” Curating has cachet, and a rich, complex history. Visual Arts professor and Amelie Wallace Gallery director, Hyewon Yi, offers MALS students an in-depth examination of how knowledge is produced, and how students might produce knowledge by collecting, selecting and exhibiting artistic objects. Students will leave the Curating course with a clear understanding of how complex this word and activity are, and why it matters.*

Curating is a contextual endeavor. It requires grasping and interpreting sets of knowledge—art practice and history—before beginning to exhibit art. VA6330 *Curating*, a specially designed MALS graduate course, helps students think critically about issues inherent in collecting, selecting, and exhibiting art.

Some questions that Prof. Yi discusses with students are: “Are the objects collected gendered?”; “Can we install art like a Feminist?”; “How and why does a curator create narratives?”; “For whom do we curate?”; “What obstacles and advantages of exhibiting art in an educational institution must be considered?”; and “What challenges and opportunities does the pandemic bring to the practice of curating?”

Students from a diverse range of disciplines contribute their interests and perspectives, and contextualize objects they might curate



**Niki de Saint Phalle “She--A Cathedral,”  
Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 1966.**

within their fields of study (such as history, modern languages, Black studies, etc.). Course participants will design their own exhibitions, starting by investigating their own collections and curating their personal spaces (the first space that renowned Swiss curator Hans Ulrich Obrist curated was his own closet), and ending with an exhibition proposal. Through these hands-on exercises, weekly readings, and class discussions, students will learn to think like a curator. The course will include the following: constructing arguments through objects; biases and historical omissions in the collections of major art and cultural institutions and notable exhibitions; case studies of censorship and controversies; the functions of university art galleries and museums; working with artists; large-scale curating on the global stage; and curating in the digital age.

An extra bonus. Qualifying curatorial proposals will be considered for exhibition on the Amelie A. Wallace Gallery’s virtual website.

**By Hyewon Yi**

## Accidents Make for Passionate Scholars: Deepa Jani and Postcolonial Theory

Deepa Jani joined the Old Westbury faculty in the Fall of 2017 as a literary scholar working in global and postcolonial literatures and critical theory, and this spring will be teaching EL 6540, *Topics in World Literature*, a class for students in the Masters in Teaching program and available to MALS students. Jani’s path to Old Westbury was wonderfully circuitous; she came to U.S.

to study critical theory, after a short stint as a documentary photographer in India.

Her love for critical theory originated in an accident, when she walked into the wrong lecture room as a first-year master’s student at University of Pune, in Maharashtra Province in central India. The class was conducted by the famous

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## Jani and Postcolonial Theory cont. from p. 3



**Prof. Deepa Jani, English Department**

critical theory scholar, Aniket Jaaware, who was teaching Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*. As a literature student, she had not yet been introduced to critical theory and she ended up joining others on the floor of the crowded classroom. That accident led to Jaaware becoming her mentor. After receiving her bachelor and master's degrees at the University of Pune, Jani came to the US. She received a second MA at Carnegie Mellon, and then transferred to the University of Pittsburgh, which awarded her a doctorate. At the University of Pittsburgh, she worked with members of the editorial collective of *boundary 2*, an internationally-renowned journal of critical theory.

Jani's specialty is postcolonial studies; she approaches literature philosophically. She is particularly interested in bringing twentieth-century French theoreticians, Michel Foucault and Emmanuel Levinas into conversation with some of her favorite African authors, especially authors who write novels of ideas, such as the South African, J. M. Coetzee. Coetzee's *Disgrace* is one of her favorites, though she loves teaching *Things Fall Apart* by the Nigerian author, Chinua Achebe. Her article on Achebe's novel was recently accepted for publication in the *Research in African Literatures*. Achebe's novel reimagines Africa after Europe, in the postcolonial era when many African nations were

throwing off, with greater or lesser success, the empires which had colonized them in the nineteenth century, and had extracted resources and enslaved peoples for centuries before that. Achebe wrote his novel in response to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, what many scholars see as the "ur" text of colonialism, i.e. a novel that served as a prototype for others seeking to justify the global North's colonial project. Jani appreciates Achebe's caustic critique of colonialism, but his equally unsparing novelistic eye toward his African subjects. Achebe's novel does not romanticize Africa.

Jani's research broadly focuses on gender and critical race studies, humanism and human rights discourse, and globalization studies. Her research has been published or is forthcoming in *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, *Research in African Literatures*, Routledge Literature Companion and in an edited collection on globalization and postcolonial studies. Her interview on Coetzee appeared in the film and app, *Traverses: J. M. Coetzee in the World*. She is currently completing her first book manuscript titled "J. M. Coetzee: Language, Ethics, and the Critique of Humanism."

How human rights discourses are deployed by writers (and by their critics), deeply engages Jani. In the West, or Global North, a genealogy of human rights usually threads from religious texts, through to Enlightenment era documents such as the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights, to the more recent Universal Declaration of Human Rights. "Decolonizing" literature for Jani includes a rejection of the notion of Western civilization as the primary lens, particularly the notion of the West as having a civilizing mission, and an appreciation of "Third World" literatures and discourses that challenge the canon. How can all have inherent dignity? How can we be equal, but different? How do we find a moral vocabulary, within literature, to address such questions? Jani's courses at Old Westbury, including *Literatures of Africa*, *Literature across Cultures Theory*, *Literature of India*, and *Major Authors*, delve into such questions. She loves teaching at Old Westbury. Students come from across the globe and she believes the diversity of Old Westbury students enriches the classroom for her and for students as well.

Jani's favorite way to relax is by watching crime shows. "Columbo" and the "Sopranos" are two of her favorites. Tony Soprano's nephew Christopher Moltisanti says, "Other people's definitions of you, sometimes they're more about making themselves feel better. You gotta define yourself." She often reminds students to never forget to develop their legitimate strangeness.

## Trionfo Cont. from p. 1

part of something new.” A graduate of Iona College’s Social Studies program, he appreciated that Old Westbury’s MALS program allowed him to draw from multiple disciplines, so that he didn’t have to “pigeonhole” himself into a single discipline. That worked for him, as elementary educators need a broad knowledge base to teach multiple subjects. As he describes it, his first year of teaching full time was “day by day;” challenges were great.

Trionfo is pleased to be teaching in the East Meadow schools, where he had been a student years before—he even encountered some of his teachers. He loves his work, believing that he can have a major effect on his

fourth-grade students, as he spends most of the day with them.

Trionfo credits the MALS program with giving him a greater awareness of the lives of the many new immigrants who are his students—his internship was at Long Island WINS, a local non-profit that focuses on using the media to educate Long Islanders, both immigrant and long-time residents, about local, statewide, and national trends regarding our nation’s changing demographics.

Trionfo adds that he wanted to give the MALS program “a shot,” and for him, getting the MALS degree “was to better myself.

## Wright on BLM cont. from p. 2

### Kinds of Activism

I joined the GrassRoots Law Project, founded by Civil Rights lawyer Mr. Lee Merritt and civil rights activist Shaun King. GrassRoots spreads awareness about systemic racism in government while investing in lower income communities. King and Merritt’s public platforms explore defunding the police (explaining what that actually means) and immigration reform. On a more local level, I joined three different protest movements. The Party for Socialism and Liberation Long Island hosts weekly Zoom study groups where we discuss various social issues: red-lining nationally and on Long Island (we’ve started Richard Rothstein’s *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*, 2017), the history and legacy of the Black Panther Party, to ICE and the forced sterilization (a form of genocide) of women. The Organization of American Unity organizes peaceful protests all over LI to spread awareness. They’ve even had protests in NYC (which was a whole different experience with law enforcement compared to LI!) The third group I’m active in is the YoungLongIslandForJustice, which focuses on local elections, politicians, and policies that affect Long Islanders. It shares information about how to get involved, and who to speak to about community issues, along with running voter registration drives and rallies.

Blackness in America has been stigmatized to the point where even saying black lives matter (not better, not superior, just matter), is too controversial. The history of Blackness in America has only been associated with Slavery, Jim Crow, and a few Civil Rights leaders used as tokens to portray a false idea of progress. Our public education does a disservice to every student that opens a standard textbook because most textbooks don’t teach the harsh history of European colonialism, which promotes white supremacy. How is it that the Founding Fathers declared that “All men were created equal” while keeping men, women’s and children in chains? If we don’t allow students to have the opportunity to face this history—and have those “difficult conversations” in the classroom, we silence the struggles of disadvantaged people and prolong the change we need to come together. Open dialogues, or “difficult conversations”, need to be had, especially with people that may not be aware of the privileges society has granted them.

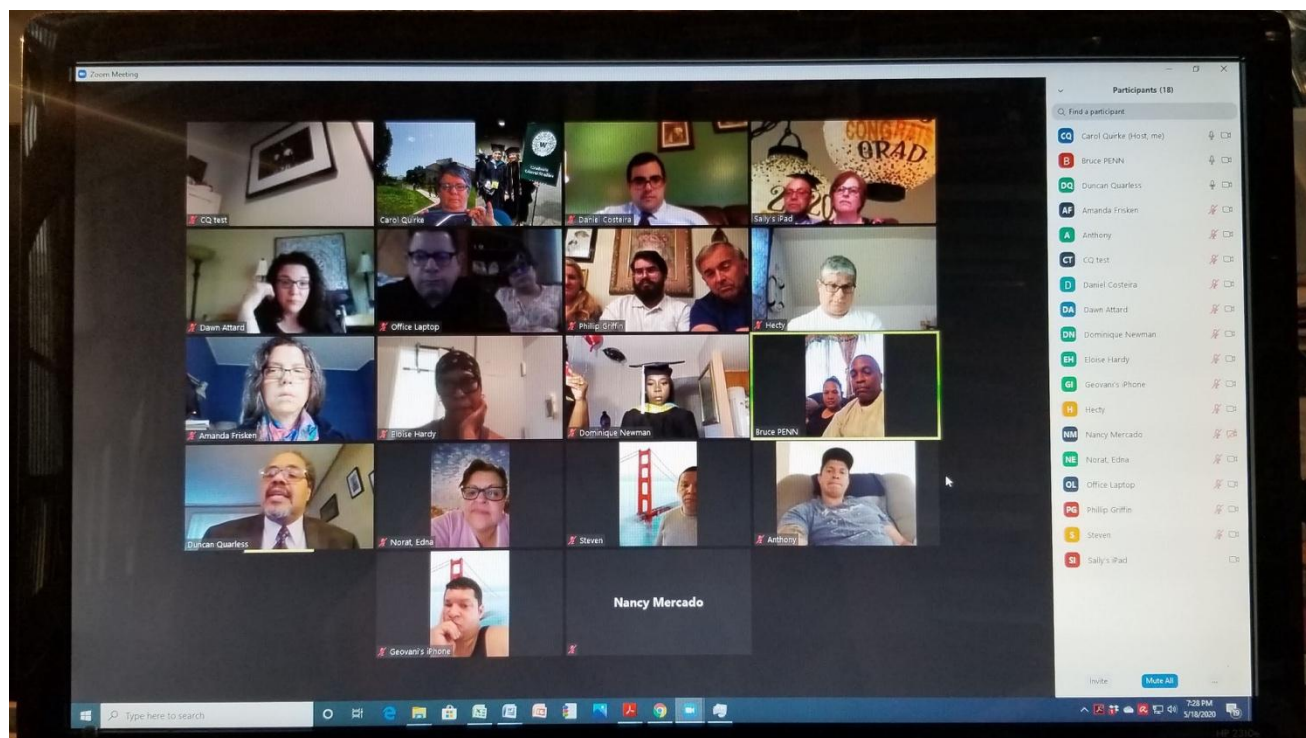
--By Melisa Wright

## Independent Studies and Capstone Courses

Students who have taken approximately fifteen credits of coursework (five classes), can arrange with the MALS graduate director, Prof. Carol Quirke, to create an independent study, *LI 7990 Independent Study*, in conjunction with an interested faculty member. Also, if you’ve completed 15 credits of your MALS degree, it’s time to start planning your Capstone project – either the Internship or the Thesis Option. Internships are available with many of Old Westbury’s many community and nonprofit partners, local and national organizations, and government offices. Advanced planning is the key to finding a successful internship placement. The two-course Thesis Option also requires advance planning, beginning with the selection of a faculty mentor. To find out more about how to pursue either of the Capstone options, consult Prof. Quirke, [quirkec@oldwestbury.edu](mailto:quirkec@oldwestbury.edu).



# Spring 2020 Graduation



Five MALS students graduated in Spring 2020: Dawn Attard, Daniel Costeira, Phillip Griffin, Imani Newman, and Bruce Penn. Graduates enjoyed interesting internships—from the Herstory Writers Project, to the Huntington Historical Society, to developing support videos for Old Westbury's Tutoring Center. Most graduates hailed from LI, but visitors joined from San Francisco and Texas—there are advantages to a virtual graduation. Former MALS Graduate Director, now acting Dean of Arts and Sciences, Amanda Frisken spoke, as did Old Westbury's new Provost, Duncan Quarless.

## Spring 2021 MALS courses

EL 6530 CRN 20394  
 EL 6540 CRN 20395  
 HI 6520 CRN 20396  
 HI 6540 CRN 20937  
 MH 6500 CRN 20398  
 MH 7500 CRN 20404  
 MH 7510 CRN 20405  
 ML 6530 CRN 20391  
 ML 6540 CRN 20392  
**VA 6330 CRN 20735**

Prof. Camarasana *Topics in Multicultural Literature*, T 4:45-7 pm  
 Prof. Jani, *Topics in World Literature* 20395 M 4:45-7 pm  
 Prof. Cocca *US Constitutional and Political History* W 4:45-7 pm  
 Prof. Shields *Topics in European History* M 4:45-7 pm  
 TBA *Lifespan Development* M 10:30 am -12:45 pm  
 TBA *Drugs and Treatment for Addictive Disorders* M 1:00-3:15 pm  
 Prof. Hughes, *Career Development* M 8:00-10:15 am  
 Prof. Guerrero, *Cervantes and the Golden Age* M 4:45-7 pm  
 Prof. Gonzalez *Points of Contact: US and Latin America* fully online  
**Prof. Hyewon Yi, *Curating, R*, 4:45-7 pm**

Courses in **gold** were specifically designed for MALS students. Other courses may require professor's permission. R classes are on Thursdays.