

M.A. in Liberal Studies *Newsletter*

Spring 2023

“We’re It!:" Jermaine Archer on Long Island, Race, & 21st Century Black Studies



Dr. Jermaine Archer

Dr. Jermaine Archer has been teaching African-American History and African-American Studies at SUNY Old Westbury since 2008. He led, with several other faculty, Old Westbury’s initiative to found a Black Studies major, and the Sojourner Truth Old Westbury Center for Black Studies, (SOJO.) Archer’s path from Long Island resident, to Historic Black College and University (HBCU) graduate, to working with his Ph.D. advisor, one of the premier historians of the slave experience, and back to Long Island has been a fascinating one. He brings to Old Westbury years of research, including international investigations of slavery in Ghana and the West Indies meshed with an intimate understanding of Long Island’s racialized landscape.

No single event pushed Archer’s interest in the African American experience. His Long Island family nurtured his consciousness of the Black radical tradition from his early youth. His maternal grandmother was a speaker for the International Toastmistress Club (ITC) and a compelling orator; her death as Archer entered high school motivated him to “zone in, as an homage to her.” He has early memories of his mother, Cheryl Owens Archer and uncle Bruce Leslie Owens, being attentive to

liberation struggles. They wore dashikis, placed African masks on the walls, and had Amiri Baraka texts around the house. His uncle a brilliant scholar and activist, attended Brown University, won the national debate tournament, a first for Brown, went on to Columbia Law school, where he chaired the Black Law Student Association, and established the Paul Robeson Scholarship Fund and Film Festival. A successful corporate attorney, he prosecuted for New York’s Southern District before his unexpected death in Mombasa.

Archer’s father, Bernardo Archer, an Old Westbury alumnus, was a union activist in Limon, Costa Rica, in his late teens and early twenties, before he came to the U.S. Archer’s grandfather, a horse and mule tamer, died when his father was a young child of four or five, and so his father was forced to work not long after. He connected with Costa Rica’s labor movement, and played a leading role in the dock workers strike that paralyzed Limon, the nation’s key port.

Archer was raised on the county line of Suffolk and Nassau counties, Massapequa in Nassau County, and Amityville in Suffolk County. He describes “Absolutely a border line type of existence as young black person. Due to redlining and

zoning, I resided in the only diverse part of Massapequa, which was East Massapequa—interestingly, sometimes referred to as West Amityville back in the day.” Redlining was the federal government’s conscious mapping under the New Deal, that labeled neighborhoods, often Black neighborhoods, as risky investments, thereby limiting African Americans from access to FHA loans, and therefore home ownership.

Archer’s parents sacrificed to send him to Catholic schools on Long Island, because such historic redlining left local Amityville schools with a reduced funding base and fewer resources. There were few Black or Brown students in his Catholic school classes, and Archer never had an African American teacher in all his years in school. Archer was popular, an active athlete in junior high and high school, but he recalls that though his schoolmates elected him homecoming king, a few said derogatory, racist things to him. In contrast, the lively hip-hop consciousness that was developing on Long Island lifted him up. One De La Soul member, Posdnuos (Plug 1 or Kelvin Mercer) lived a few blocks from Archer’s home. [Continued p. 2](#)

[Cont. from p. 1](#)

Archer often saw him on his way to the LIRR or the library in Amityville. Mercer even stopped by to chat with Archer as he “shot hoops” outside his home, telling him about “the groundbreaking ‘3 Feet High in Rising’” (1989). For Archer, De La Soul embodied an “appreciation for the vitality of black culture that continues to evolve.”

At Clark Atlanta University, an HBCU, Archer first majored in Media and Communications. He jumped in, headfirst, working with the local public access cable stations, a major force in community TV at that time. When the Olympics came to Atlanta, in 1996, the Atlanta Committee of the Olympic Games and Host Broadcast Training program offered scholarships for students to learn advanced media skills from professional media broadcasters and technicians, and student interns received top pay. The money was attractive to him, Archer found himself less engaged by his classes. He didn’t feel this way in history courses though.

Archer always wanted to contest what he thought “were half-truths, and give voice to silences. I was looking for the Black voices. History was always wanting to give voice” and he found that he “wanted to perform well in these classes.” He took courses in colleges across Atlanta, at Spelman, and Morehouse College. He was incredibly moved by courses by Michael Gomez, founder of the Association for the Study of the Worldwide African Diaspora (ASWAD), now at NYU, and Daniel Black, novelist and African-Americanist, who was featured in a SOJO event at Old Westbury in the Spring of 2023. This was a turning point for Archer. He committed to history and worked on Martin Luther King’s papers under the direction of Clayborne Carson, preeminent historian of the modern civil rights movement. And he spent the summer before graduate school going to Ghana to do archival work for the Ford Foundation funded AUC-Emory University Summer Institute to Promote Minority Participation in Africana Studies. He researched the American Colonization Society, examining the letters of “settlers writing letters back, people who went to Liberia, went to Sierra Leone.” He became fascinated with the question of how the past shapes the present. How might the colonization project, events that transpired in the U.S. and Africa in the 1800s as a result of our nation seeking to dodge it’s history of enslavement, have fed civil wars throughout West Africa in the 1990s?

Archer’s exploration of the transatlantic African diaspora nurtured his graduate studies with Sterling Stuckey at University of California-Riverside. There Archer was again one of the few Black students studying history. He was also the youngest—Stuckey personally recruited him to apply to the program as an undergraduate. He found the workload dramatically heavier than as an undergraduate—students typically read a book per class each week. Though he then felt dread entering into the classroom, in retrospect he knows that most other graduate students share such struggles. In short order, Dr. Archer navigated this new environment at an R-1 research institute, and flourished.

Antebellum Slave Narratives: Cultural and Political Expressions of Africa (Routledge Press, 2009) was the product of Dr. Archer’s graduate studies. He went to UC-Riverside “wanting to do work on maroon communities...on the Dismal Swamp, fascinated by diasporic movements.” His paternal grandfather, from Coahuila, Costa Rica, had worked on United Fruit banana plantations there and in Panama. His father’s maternal side had come from Jamaica, forced to work on sugar cane plantations, ultimately growing cacao as part of the highly exploitative international trade in chocolate. These histories fed his interest in the Black Diaspora. But Archer ultimately moved in a different direction. In writing about Frederick Douglass’s narrative, his advisor encouraged him to dig deeper into the narratives. While literary critics were doing this, “historians were slow to this” study. Stuckey thought Dr. Archer was making critical interventions in seeing African roots to the many forms of African-American voice—in autobiography, testimony, poem, and folklore.

Since publication of his first book Dr. Archer served on the Advisory Board of the digital archive, *Songs Without Words*, developed by Dr. Amanda Frisken, featuring journalism and imagery from Black newspapers in the post-Civil War era. He has also regularly participated as a fellow in the National



Winslow Homer “Dressing for the Carnival,” 1877

Endowment for the Humanities-funded, “Visual Culture of the Civil War.” These activities corresponded to a new direction in his research—imagery. He started with Winslow Homer’s “Dressing for the Carnival,” that shows the formerly enslaved expressing their desire for full freedom.

Dr. Archer’s class for the MALS program, in the fall of 2023 will take up questions of people using culture—visual culture, narratives, music, to express their quest for freedom. “As a son of hip-hop, born in 1975” Dr. Archer wants to consider what it means to make culture outside the dominant culture—abolitionist art such as Homer’s or that of youth in the South Bronx in the 1970s, that seeks liberation. Finding connecting roots between the transatlantic diasporic African and African-American communities remains at the heart of his work.

[Cont. on P. 3](#)

Archer's MALS class for Fall 2023 will correspond with the launching of the Black Studies major and the Sojourner Truth Old Westbury Center for Black Studies, or SOJO which Archer has been intimately involved in developing. He says, "As a Long Islander, as someone whose father graduated from

Old Westbury—he was an immigrant who worked at a gas station, below working class—I couldn't be more excited about it. There's no other Black Studies Center on Long Island...Hofstra has Africana Studies, Stony Brook has powerhouse faculty, but no real center. There's no real center on Long Island. We're it!"

Ian Abraham (2016, 2020) "Finding Connections"

The Master's in Liberal Studies (MALS) program celebrates Ian Abraham (2020) for his acceptance into a Ph.D. program in History. According to the Council of Graduate Schools, only one in five applicants to "high research" institutions like SUNY Stony Brook are accepted. Abraham's individual achievement is also a collective accomplishment for the MALS program and SUNY Old Westbury—Abraham is the program's first student to pursue doctoral studies.



Ian Abraham (2016, 2020)

Abraham describes himself as a military brat. Because his father worked for the Air Force he moved often as a child. He found an intellectual home at SUNY Old Westbury—graduating in 2016 from the History Department with a degree in Philosophy and Religion, and in 2020 from Old Westbury's MALS program. Abraham credits his MALS degree with "enhancing a skill that is lacking in higher education: making connections through various academic disciplines." He developed an "interdisciplinary eye, finding connections where you wouldn't think to look for them." The program "cultivated" Abraham's "natural inclination toward the liberal arts," and showed him that questions could best be pursued from "different angles."

Abraham identified key questions and methods that he hopes to pursue, recalled from two MALS courses. He learned of Anna Mae Wong (1905-1961), in his first MALS course with Dr. Amanda Frisken, *Introduction to Interdisciplinary Studies*. The Chinese-American Hollywood star began her career in the

silent era, and her modern, flapper fashion sense made her iconic. Abraham said, "I found the history of her, and Chinese women within film and within that time frame, fascinating. When it came to her story, it was what her manner of dress said about her, how she was viewed by this country, her role within the social structure. How much a manner of dress could convey what a person feels about themselves, and how that person is viewed within the social structure. Do they choose or it is chosen for them?"

In a course on *Visualizing America* taught by Dr. Carol Quirke, Abraham wrote a paper on Horace Pippin (1888-1946), the grandchild of enslaved people, and a working man, whose folk aesthetic was embraced in the 1930s as the U.S. sought its identity in a time of national crisis. Pippin covered many themes in his work, but as Abraham states, "he was a veteran who used his paintings to overtly or covertly convey his feelings as a Christian and an African-American man, one who has seen the horrors of war." Pippin was disabled from his service in World War One. Abraham appreciated how Pippin could express the "dichotomy of humanity, our search for purpose versus who we can be when we take the mask off—noble creatures, and disgusting ones as well."

For his Ph.D. studies he wants to "delve into culture, geography, and different aspects of US culture and the carceral state...The one solid thread between all of my thinking involves culture." He is intrigued by how certain thinkers, such as conservative Richard M. Weaver, posit a Southern culture, which not only shapes the carceral state, but every aspect of that society. "You've seen in the news, I was born in Florida. Governor Ron DeSantis is reshaping higher education, stripping elements of free thought and academic expression." De Santis's "Individual Freedom Act," passed in 2022, censors the teaching of U.S. history by stating that no teacher or professor can teach that "An individual's moral character or status as either privileged or oppressed is necessarily determined by his or her race, color, sex, or national origin." Florida, a slave state, had, according to the *Jacksonville Times-Union*, the highest per capita rate of lynchings of any state. De Santis's legislation would make teaching actual facts illegal. Abraham observes, "There are no northeastern or western states doing this."

The MALS program bolstered Abraham's love of learning. "The intellectual nurturing and exposure that you get through the MALS program—that was just great. So many ideas and people, not only professors, but different intellectual sources." He thinks "it forced me to engage more deeply in things," making his writing "more refined and sophisticated."

Fall 2023 MALS Classes

Monday, 1-3:15 p.m.

Professor TBA, *MH6120-G01, Psychopathology*, CRN#38040

Monday, 4:45-7 p.m.

Prof. Thomas DelGuidice, *HI6530-G01, Economics: Theories, Tools and Debates*, CRN #38034

Tuesday 4:45-7 p.m.

Prof. Jermaine Archer, AS 6310 Atlantic Slavery and Folklore, CRN# 39006

Prof. Sylvie Kande,, *HI6550-G01 Topics in African History* ,CRN # 39021

Wednesday, 4:45-7 p.m.

Prof. Christopher Hobson, *EL6510-G01 Foundations of U.S. Literature* ,CRN#38020

Prof. Carol Quirke, *HI6510-G01, Topics in US History: Struggles for Justice*, CRN # 37948

Prof. Xavier Marechaux , *HI7500 G-01, Questioning Global History*, CRN# 38033

Thursday, 4:45-7 p.m.

Prof. Margaret Torrell, *EL6520-G01 Foundations of English Literature*, CRN# 38021

Prof. Carol Quirke, LI6000-G01 Introduction to Interdisciplinary Studies, CRN 38557

Fully Asynchronous Internet courses

Prof. Ruben Gonzalez, *ML6520-GNE Masterpieces of Hispanic Literature*, CRN#37933

Prof. Sonia Assa, *ML6810-GNE, Hispanic Art*, CRN#37969

Classes in Yellow are MALS specific courses

If you have completed 15 credits towards your MALS degree, please speak with the Graduate Director, Prof. Carol Quirke, quirkec@oldwestbury.edu to discuss an internship or a thesis.