

# M.A. in Liberal Studies Newsletter

Spring 2024

## Feminist Inquirer: Prof. Crocker on Invisible Work



[Prof. Jillian Crocker, Sociology](#)

Professor Jillian Crocker, an Associate Professor in the Sociology Department, is the current Director of the university's Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies (WGSS) major and also the WGSS Center. She didn't get her bachelor's degree expecting this field to shape her academic career, but both her teaching and her intellectual project have been defined by an attention to gender. She attended University of Richmond in Virginia, thinking she wanted to be a doctor. But classes she took on social movements, on the body, and on globalization and sex led her to switch course. As a sociologist she found her "happy medium," the ability to do "feminist inquiry with the data collection tools and methods I appreciated in the sciences.

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## George Cienfuegos Awarded SUNY Graduate Diversity Fellowship

SUNY Old Westbury's MALS program attracts Old Westbury graduates, but many MALS students are alumni of other public and private colleges and universities. George Cienfuegos received his BA in English Education from SUNY Stony Brook. He describes a tough experience there, where a Teacher's Assistant (TA) couldn't be bothered to pronounce his name. As he wrote in his fellowship application. "Uhm, Is there a George... Uhh... George something... George. Whatever...Here..." This is probably one of my most vivid memories of me at Stony Brook University, a high-powered, prestigious SUNY School... Although this TA called other names with ease, my name was too *exotic*, for this person." He recalls there being few Latino students at that institution.



[George Cienfuegos, 2024 MALS Graduate](#)

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### Cienfuegos Cont. from p. 1

Cienfuegos finds the heterogeneity of Old Westbury students invigorating. The mix of ethnicities, races, educational backgrounds, and ages in the program make it feel more equitable than his earlier experiences in higher education.

Cienfuegos, a thirty-something, new father, is a Language teacher in the Wyandanch High School, after previously teaching at Hempstead High School and Manhattan's The Child School. His students also come from many backgrounds, and he advises them that being the only Latino or Black face at a predominately white institution (PWI) can challenge, or worse, intimidate. He suggests that students be conscious when choosing the kind of college or university they want to attend.

Appreciating Old Westbury's inclusiveness, he also lauds the rigorous education provided in the MALS program and the breadth of classes that students can take. In a traditional master's program for an English teacher, one takes language and pedagogy classes. As a MALS student he could fulfill his requirements for certification; New York teachers must earn a masters by their fifth year of classroom teaching. His Area of Study will provide the content courses he needs for his teaching specialty, and he can take more varied courses in media history, television, U.S. history, social movements, or the sociology of music. Cienfuegos has pursued investigations into the modernist Dutch artist Mondrian in a class on New York City, and women in solitude in a Multicultural Literature course.

The MALS program and our university is pleased to support Cienfuegos's educational quest through the SUNY Graduate Diversity Fellowship.

**In consultation with the Graduate Director, students with 15 credits may take an Independent Study with an interested professor. Please contact the Graduate Director as you near your final 8 credits to determine if an 8-credit thesis or a 4-credit internship is the right course for you.**

## Alumni Spotlight: Imani Isoke Johnson (2022)

In Fall 2017 Prof. Carol Quirke was teaching *HI6510 Struggles for Justice*, a master's-level course for current High School social studies teachers, soon to be teachers, and MALS students, about the impact of social movements in U.S. history. Midway through the class, Imani Isoke Johnson asked her fellow students, "Just when should students learn about slavery, and about the Black fight for freedom?" She felt the young people in her life knew very little about critical aspects of U.S. history. In a state where history has been less politicized than perhaps Oklahoma,

Indiana, or Florida, many students felt that such subjects could not be taught until students were older, given "the sensitivity" of the topic. A few thought that only parents should teach about racism. Johnson had made a critical intervention in this class—even in an ostensibly liberal state, many future teachers shy away from the uglier parts of U.S. history, treating history more as a mythmaking process than an investigation into all aspects of our past that allows us to be knowledgeable citizens.

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## Real vs. White-Washed History

Johnson graduated from Syracuse University where she majored in Political Science and African American Studies. The latter she says was an “accident,” as many of the political science classes she took focused on black people. She says, “By the time I went to meet with my advisor, he said, “you’ve already met the requirements for African American Studies, take these other classes and you’ll have this major as well.”

She loved the major as it ensconced her in the histories of Black Americans, the Black diaspora, and the politics of Africa. She petitioned to take a class on transnational capitalism and imperialism which allowed her to “study abroad in Jamaica, to study sex tourism, which I didn’t know a thing about until then.” She loved understanding the broader context of the African diasporic experience.

As a teacher at Democracy Prep Charter High School, just down the block from Harlem’s historic Schomburg Library, Johnson has taken advantage of her MALS degree to teach students the sweep of global history. She starts in the paleolithic period and she takes students through to the Protestant Reformation—more than twelve thousand years. She states, “The essential question that we ask—what is power, and how do humans utilize it?” Students focus on “enduring issues.” Major topics they explore are religion,

war, power, the lack of resources, and adaptation to environmental change. There is a mix of western and non-western history in her curricula, and students move from humankind’s beginnings in Africa, to their ancient civilizations in Egypt, and then Mesopotamia, the Indus River Valley, and the Yellow River in China. The curricula focuses much on Asia, with some discussion of Africa, for example the West African empires of Songhai, Mali, and Ghana along with the East African city states engaged in the Indian Ocean trade. She also examines Christopher Columbus and the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. She believes in “connecting the current day to historical moments,” saying, “I never want them to have a time where they say, ‘What are we learning this for, Miss Johnson, what is this relevant to?’”

Old Westbury’s MALS program strengthened Johnson’s deep knowledge of the history she now teaches, and it also provided her pedagogical training that has come in handy as a high school teacher. She notes Writing Center Director, Jody Cardinal’s course on Rhetoric has guided her in supporting students’ writing. She believes herself privileged to “have the ability to teach real history versus white-washed, palatable history. That conversation in *Struggles for Justice* made sure that I always



Imani Isoke Johnson at SUNY Old Westbury’s Graduation at the Nassau Coliseum, May 2023

share these uncomfortable conversations. There are the things people don’t want students to know, and this is why it’s important for them to understand.”

# In the News: Old Westbury MALS Program

Naiya Edwards '23, a 2022-3 SUNY Graduate Diversity Fellow, has been accepted into a Ph.D. program at Morgan State University for Fall 2024. She defended her Master's thesis, entitled: *The Plantation is Everywhere: African American Solidarity with Haitian Immigrants, 1978-1995*, in December, under the supervision of Prof. Llana Barber.



Naiya Edwards '23



Front (L-R): Professors Diana Papademas, Carol Quirke, Gilda Zwerman. Back (L-R) : Lisa Payton, Amanda Friskin, Danielle Lee, Samara Smith, Annessa Babic.

SUNY Old Westbury housed the Feminist Press from 1971-1985, and Professors Carol Quirke (MALS Graduate Director) Samara Smith (MALS Faculty) Amanda Friskin (MALS Founder and Faculty) and Danielle Lee (English, SAS Associate Dean) were featured in a March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2024 *Newsday* article “Printing Books to Save the World,” about the Feminist Press, and Old Westbury feminist activism.

## Crocker, Invisible Work, Cont. from p. 1

Crocker hails from Massachusetts, so the University of Richmond, with its sex-segregated dormitories and gender segmented college administration—a separate judicial office, dean’s office and staff—was a shock. The university’s history was Baptist; Virginia was southern and “culturally more conservative.” Crocker attended Westhampton College (the women’s college on the other side of the lake) after it had merged into the University of Richmond, yet those historic divisions were still experienced. Men couldn’t visit a woman’s room without keeping the doors open and the visitor and resident must have three feet on the floor. Crocker observed the paradox that the college’s gender-segregated administrative structure left room for women faculty, administrators, and students to have more leadership, allowing for a progressive politics.

After graduation, Crocker wanted to continue her study of social movements, particularly queer-aligned social movements. She discovered a home at the University of Massachusetts which had faculty doing critical research

on sex education and culture wars, on pay inequality, and on sexuality. While there, questions of the family and work caught her interest; as she says, “you meet new people, get taken by new ideas.” She had the opportunity to be a Research Assistant on National Science Foundation funded research on workplace inequality in health care occupations. One project compared four different job categories: Physicians, Registered Nurses, Nurse Practitioners, and EMTs.

Crocker was intrigued by this opportunity. Raised in Worcester, a “post-industrial city,” many worked in health care. Crocker had worked as an EMT and her circle of friends included many those in nursing-related or health care fields. Nursing was considered an excellent job that could support a family, and this is the

[Crocker, Invisible Work, Cont. next page](#)

first time Crocker found her working-class upbringing the subject of sociological investigation.

But jobs in the health care industry can be challenging: overwork, cost-cutting measures, protocols for care that cannot be met. She became interested in “agency and resistance: how do people push back—it clicked for me. Resistance is not just in the streets but in our day to day lives.” She sought to articulate this resistance “in different ways and contexts.”



Working in Paterson Project collection, 1993-2002 (AFC 1995/028), American Folklife Center, Library of Congress

One form of resistance that fascinated Crocker was “the ways in which workers support one another as they broke rules at work.” As she explains, “for a nursing home to work, there are lots of policies to keep residents safe. But to get the work done, in poorly-staffed hospitals, workers must violate policies.” She notes that “institutions are complicit in this.” For example, “Workers leave early, or take a longer break. They provide care to residents that others are not able to provide.” Nurses aides (NA), for example, are trained that it is their responsibility to “socialize with the residents to make sure they have emotional support. But that work looks like sitting with someone and watching *The Price is Right*.” A supervisor might think they were

malingering—but the NA does this based on their professional judgement. A worker might choose not to interrupt a resident’s lunch for a scheduled shower time, to make their work more tolerable, to support their colleagues, and to give residents more dignity. Breaking rules in this way is critical to making institutions work, though the institutions can rarely admit this.

Since writing her thesis on this subject, completing it for her Ph.D. in 2014, she has published her research in *Social Problems*, *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, and *Sociological Perspectives*. Crocker is now investigating volunteer work. Historians and political scientists have written much on the subject, but there is much less sociological research. It has been perceived as “the silly thing that middle-class women do.” Some sociologists have seen it as an entry point for political activism by women (who still are not represented equally in political office, or in corporate boardrooms.). Crocker is curious about how social change activism, for example supporting a local food pantry or soup kitchen, can simultaneously address a social problem—hunger or food insecurity, while reproducing social inequality—i.e. people can “episodically” volunteer, feel as if they’ve addressed the problem, and walk away. She wants citizens to think more deeply and critically about how service-learning projects, or civic engagement, gives voice to the recipients of those projects.

For her class *SY6340 Invisible Work* Crocker will have students look at a range of jobs and the complex reasons they are devalued or uncompensated. She says, “We expect women to care for children because we see nurturance as a natural quality that women just have, so it is often not valued.” She will explore how “work can be economically invisible, for legal reasons, the work needs to be hidden. For example with undocumented labor, or sex work, or drug dealing, this labor is hidden. Or work happens in prisons, or it’s “dirty,” working with garbage, or with peoples’ bodies.” Crocker intends to “make the familiar strange,” and while students will not be expected to have any previous social science background, they will leave the class having a better understanding of how social scientists think, the kinds of questions they ask, and how they conduct their research.

Crocker was the first in her family to attend college. When she first arrived at university, she “loved the ideas in philosophy,” but she was less familiar with “what gave people the authority to make claims, without evidence.” Her studies and research allowed her to “find her voice,” understand the “authority that comes with evidence.” Students in *Invisible Work* will receive a master’s class in critical thinking about the world.



Spring 2024, Prof. Frisken's *Media as History* course, (Left-Right): George Cienfuegos, Joshua Piche, Michael Kosina, Ryan Smith, Kimberly Johnston, Lillian Horn, Lily Mancini, and Christian Sandoval.

## Classes—Master's in Liberal Studies—Fall 2024

### Monday

**MH 6120 Psychopathology, (CRN91039) Prof. Cooper, 8:00-10:30 am**

**HI6530 Economics: Theories, Tools and Debates, (CRN 91033) Prof. DelGuidice, 4:30-7 pm**

**SY6340 Invisible Work, Prof. Crocker, 5:15-7:45 pm \***

### Tuesday

**HI6550 Topics in African History, (CRN 92016) Prof. Kande, 4:30-7 pm**

**ML6810 Iberian and Latin American Cinema (in Spanish), (CRN 90968) Prof. Lara, 4:30-7 pm**

### Wednesday

**EL6510 Foundations of U.S. Literature (CRN 91019) Prof. Williams-DeLuca, 4:30-7 pm**

**HI6510 Struggles for Social Justice: Topics in US History (CRN 90947) Prof. Frisken, 4:30-7 pm**

**HI 7500 Questioning Global History (CRN 91032) Prof. Marechaux, 4:30-7:00 pm**

### Thursday

**LI6000 Introduction to Interdisciplinary Studies (CRN91556) Prof. Quirke, 5:15-7:45. pm \***

### Online-Asynchronous

**ML6520 Masterpieces of Hispanic Literature (In Spanish) (CRN 90932 ) Prof. Gonzalez**

\* courses designed specifically for Master's in Liberal Studies students.