Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Boston College’s Black Studies Program hosted a series of conferences on the history and lived realities of people of African descent in Boston—conferences of such high profile that they attracted prominent figures to deliver keynote addresses, including historians Lerone Bennett Jr. and John Hope Franklin, civil rights activist and politician Eleanor Holmes Norton, and journalist and narrative non-fiction writer Alex Haley. Last held in 2000, the conference will return to the Heights in April 2016.

Held in April 1983, the first conference, “Blacks in Metropolitan Boston,” was organized by the late Amanda V. Houston, the Black Studies Program’s first director, and a twenty-eight person planning committee. Nearly ten years removed from the conflicts over busing and concerned that the “vision of multicultural education for all students that was a legacy of the 1960s” was disappearing from Boston schools, Houston and her colleagues set out to celebrate the history of communities of African descent in Boston, Cambridge, Medford, and Newton. But unlike most academic conferences, the conveners wanted “Blacks in Metropolitan Boston” to have a significant public scholarship dimension. One of their intended audiences was secondary school teachers. They wanted to recuperate local black history that local black educators could integrate into their curriculum.

But the public scholarship dimension went beyond this. The conveners also reached out to black churches and social welfare organizations. They envisioned the conference providing a practical service—teaching skills so that attendees could collect, preserve, and write the histories of their own families, institutions, and neighborhoods. The public history aspect of the conference was additionally represented by the cosponsorship of the Museum of Afro-American History—which also curated an exhibit on blacks in nineteenth-century Boston that was displayed on campus—and its cohosting by Charles Street AME Church in Roxbury, which was celebrating its 150th anniversary.

continued on page 6
Reflections on My Time as an AADS Minor
By Grace West

When I arrived in Chestnut Hill from North Carolina in the fall of 2011, I knew nothing of the African and African Diaspora Studies Program. I declared myself a sociology major, then switched to history in the spring of my freshman year. In the fall of my sophomore year, two classes - African American Writers with Cynthia Young and Gender and Sexuality in African American History with Martin Summers - prompted me to declare a minor in AADS. That decision in October of 2012 was, undoubtedly, the most important decision I made at BC.

I was attracted to the interdisciplinary nature of AADS, and relished the ability to move beyond my major into other departments. I loved how my classes interconnected in ways that began to capture the complexity of the diaspora. As I studied the photography of James Van Der Zee in concert with the history of the Harlem Renaissance, or the works of Toni Morrison alongside the history of African slavery and the sociological framework of intersectionality, my education felt truly integrated and well-rounded for the first time in my life.

I loved how AADS shifted and expanded the conventional canon, centering the marginal in transformative ways that forever reoriented my approach to the history and culture of the world in which we live. In my freshman year Western Cultural Tradition class, I studied the works of thinkers such as Frederick Douglass, bell hooks, James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, Angela Davis, Julius Nyere, Frantz Fanon, and Chimamanda Adichie and was exposed to a body of thought often repressed at universities like Boston College.

My AADS classes and professors have been my favorite at BC, but more significantly, they’ve been the most important. They’ve asked the questions that went overlooked in other courses, initiated discussions that extended far beyond the classroom, provided me with intelligent and inspiring classmates, and forced me to consider my position within society and within the world at large more than any other class. I am eternally thankful to the AADS program for working to correct the curricular imbalances at BC, for making a space for the subaltern, and for broadening my perspective in each and every class session.

When I reflect on my years at Boston College, it becomes apparent that AADS has, in many ways, become my home at Boston College. It is the locus around which my experiences have revolved, and more than any other component of my BC experience, it has molded me into the person standing before you. To the entire African and African Diaspora Studies Program, including the faculty members, staff, and students, I offer my unending gratitude. Thank you for giving me a place to grow academically, for irrevocably expanding and altering my perspective, and for making me more human.

Grace West, class of ’15, was a Presidential Scholar, graduated summa cum laude, and received numerous honors, including the McCarthy Prize for best Scholars of the College honors thesis, and the Morriess College of Arts and Sciences Brendan Connolly, SJ Award.

The AADS Program at BC has helped me grow enormously as both a student and a human being. I feel well equipped to enter ‘adulthood’ as an informed, educated, and active citizen.
Giancarlo Sanchez and Ricardo Alberto

The Romero Scholarship recognizes a Boston College junior who has shown an exceptional dedication to academic achievement, extracurricular leadership, and service to the Hispanic/Latino community both on and off campus. Oscar Romero, the man who inspired the award, was Archbishop of El Salvador in the 1970s and was the personification of Christian charity and love. He was known for preaching and working for justice for all of the poor and oppressed of the country and continued to advocate passionately, despite facing frequent threats from those opposed to his ideas. He was assassinated by a death squad while celebrating the Eucharist in 1980.

Ricardo became interested in social justice during his freshman year, with his participation in the popular Jamaican Magis trip, where he and other Boston College students worked with school children, serving as teaching assistants. The trip was the first real spark for him. “I saw God in the children I was working with in Jamaica... our interactions were inspiring to me,” he recalled. Giancarlo also started early, embarking on the Dominican Republic Learning and Immersion Program in his first year. His group donated school supplies, clothes, and toiletries and visited the school they sponsored. He said it was an eye opening experience for him and his peers: “I saw many injustices in a lens that over there is very magnified... people don’t have equal access to water or education just because they’re a shade darker or because they come from a lower economic background.”

During their sophomore year, both Giancarlo and Ricardo continued their community service and joined the Mississippi Delta trip, a program similar to Jamaican Magis, where they assisted teachers in struggling schools. Their engagement in community service also began to manifest itself more locally. Giancarlo got involved in the Dominican Students Association (DSA), often collaborating with the Haitian Students Association (HSA) on campus to foster discussion around the issues he was exposed to on his service trip. Ricardo joined the PULSE program, volunteering twelve hours a week for Jumpstart, an early education program for low-income students. In the fall of his junior year, Ricardo studied abroad, spending the semester in Buenos Aires, where he continued to become more aware of social injustices. He learned about the shantytowns existing on the fringes of the city, where the marginalized and impoverished of Buenos Aires lived. Giancarlo took a leadership position in the DSA, working with the HSA to bring in speakers. He also did an internship with DREAM, a non-profit organization that teaches high school students how to be financially literate.

Both Ricardo and Giancarlo feel that the AADS minor informed their intellectual growth and commitment to social justice. Ricardo cited Juan Concepcion’s class, “Studies in Race, Law, and Resistance,” as the major reason he decided to pursue the minor. Giancarlo loved his class with Professor Jean-Charles, which explored Dominican and Haitian culture and relations through literature. Giancarlo reflected on his AADS classes, saying, “They gave me insight. They helped me learn about these social movements and how people fought for and advocated for social justice. They helped me form my own way of providing rights for others.” For both men, the minor shed new light on their global and local community service.

The AADS minor will figure prominently in both Ricardo and Giancarlo’s post-graduation lives. Giancarlo is interested in public finance, law or economic development. He also hopes to be a voice for those who have been consistently marginalized by current and past institutions and policies. Ricardo plans to pursue public sector law, specializing in social justice and civil rights. He emphasized the current relevance of such a career: “With everything at the forefront of the nation’s mind, now’s a great time. I can make changes to the system.”

Message from the Director, continued from Page 1

And finally, a new beginning of sorts, is the promotion of Professor Régine Jean-Charles to associate professor with tenure. As anyone who has taken a class with her can attest, Professor Jean-Charles’s rigorous and nurturing approach in the classroom is one of the things that makes AADS such an awesome program to be associated with. The administration’s recognition of the quality of her scholarship, the excellence of her teaching, and the ardor of her service is one of the best things that has occurred in the program this past year.

But 2014–2015 was a challenging year as well. There have been events that bear directly on communities of people of African descent that have unfolded beyond our campus and which have surely made us all recognize our own privilege, place what we are doing here at Boston College within a larger perspective, and think about how what we learn and teach in the classroom might contribute to the larger struggle against racial, economic, gender, sexual, and political injustice more broadly. The beginning of the school year was dominated by media coverage of the Ebola epidemic in West Africa. We were not only confronted with the horrific scenes of illness and death in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Guinea. We were also reminded of the structural inequality that exists in the global South, the ways in which the ineffective response to the pandemic was an artifact of race and the ease with which Americans are ready to racialize and dehumanize the victims of disease, those who are in most need of compassionate care. The Ebola crisis was soon eclipsed by the non-indictments of the police involved in the killings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, and the popular mobilizations that resulted—on this campus and around the nation. In a year during which we should have been celebrating the fiftieth anniversaries of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, we were consistently confronted with the persistence of institutionalized racism—in the deaths of Tamir Rice, Natasha McKenna, Freddie Gray, and countless others at the hands of the state—and white nationalist terrorism—in the massacre at Charleston’s Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church and the apparent growth in the popularity and reach of white supremacist organizations. As I write this in July 2015, other parts of the diaspora are in crisis—from the rise of Islamist extremism in Nigeria to the racist- and nativist-motivated imminent deportations of people of Haitian descent from the Dominican Republic.

Engaging Boston College students around these issues in our courses and in our programming is the raison d’etre of AADS. Through a variety of courses this upcoming year—“Reading Race at the Millennium” (Yats); “Haiti and the Dominican Republic” (Jean-Charles); “Understanding the Social Context of Violence” (C. Shawn McGuffey); “History of Medicine and Public Health in the African Diaspora” (Summers); “Genres of Black Women’s Writing” (Frederick); “New Orleans: Justice in the City” (Copeland)—AADS faculty will continue to encourage students to critically reflect upon some of the knotty social, political, and cultural problems and remarkable resiliencies that have shaped the formation and evolution of the African diaspora. In our New Directions in African Diaspora Studies Lecture series—the theme of which is “Geographies of the African Diaspora”—we will also strive to activate students’ intellectual thirst, imagination, and sense of ethical engagement. On behalf of the entire AADS faculty and office, I invite you to help us make 2015–2016 a positive and enriching year for our program, our university, and the African diasporic communities that extend beyond our campus.
After Sixteen Year Hiatus, continued from Page 1


In 2014, Professor Rhonda Frederick, director of the African and African Diaspora Studies Program, decided to revive the conference. In the midst of the raging debates over immigration, Frederick wanted the conference to explore “what black immigrants and immigration bring to this conversation.” The conference theme, “Black . . . and Immigrant,” is aimed at soliciting presentations on African, Afro-Caribbean, and Afro-Latino immigrant communities in Boston, the state of Massachusetts, and New England as a whole. The theme not only reflects the contemporary import of this issue, but also provides an opportunity to reflect on the fifty years that have transpired since the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Some of the sub-themes that will be explored include: definitions of “black” in sending and receiving countries; citizenship and belonging for black Americans; and immigration as a black civil rights issue.

Similar to its predecessors, “Black . . . and Immigrant” will host both academics and local activists and social service providers who work with immigrant communities in the Boston area. According to Frederick, the conference “will once again assert the vital connection between intellectual and activist organizing across disciplines.”

The keynote speaker for this year’s conference is Violet Showers Johnson, an alumna of Boston College’s History PhD program, and professor of history and director of Africana Studies at Texas A&M University. Professor Showers Johnson is the recent author of African and American: West Africans in Post-Civil Rights America (NYU Press, 2014). The conference will be preceded by a New Directions in African Diaspora Studies lecture by Regine Jackson, associate professor of sociology at Agnes Scott College, and author of Geographies of the Haitian Diaspora (Routledge, 2011).

Professor Jackson’s lecture will be Friday, April 1st, at 4:30 in Devlin 101. “Black . . . and Immigrant” will take place from 8:30-5:00 on Saturday, April 2nd, in Gasson 100. For more information, visit: www.bc.edu/centers/ila/events/blacks-in-boston

Congratulations Class of 2015!