

# THE CONNECT

A Center for Critical Race Studies Newsletter



## A TIME TO REST, RESIST, & REBUILD WE'VE JUST SURVIVED A SERIES OF UNPRECEDENTED EVENTS

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ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF THE CENTER FOR CRITICAL RACE STUDIES  
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In the first issue of **The Connect**, CCRS Fellow and clinical psychologist Dr. Stacie DeFreitas wrote about the importance of self-care in unprecedented times. Since our inaugural issue in April 2020, the word "unprecedented" has been used more times than we can count, and you and I have lived through a **series** of historical events.

We took to the streets demanding justice for George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and countless other Black lives. We saw COVID-19 infections and deaths rise in leaps and bounds. We stood 6-feet apart in lines with masks on and sanitized hands to cast our votes. We held our breath for what felt like weeks while those same votes were being counted and contested. We witnessed a horrific attack on our nation's Capitol in real time. And, just this month, we endured a treacherous winter storm that caused widespread power outages, property damage, and mental and emotional distress. We did all of this while working around the clock to fight for our lives and our livelihood.

Now, we must rest.

Self-care is more than a trend; it is an essential component of political warfare and the ongoing struggle for equality. We cannot be at our best and brightest when we are bogged down by the sorrows of the world. In order to continue resisting the interlocking systems of oppression that influence our day-to-day lives and to rebuild a better future, we must take the time to check-in with our bodies, center our minds, and heal from the hurt and trauma that has been particularly relentless over the past year.

In this issue of **The Connect**, the Fellows of the Center for Critical Race Studies invite you to make caring for yourself a priority and we offer examples of how we model this practice in our own lives. In addition, we explore the significance of Black History Month alongside Black futures. Lastly, we share a preview of this year's Scholar-in-Residence, Dr. Jeffrey McCune, who promises to offer unique insight on how to reimagine the important work of coalition building in the wake of an unprecedented year during his virtual campus visit on March 9-11, 2021.

## CARING FOR MYSELF IS NOT SELF-INDULGENCE. IT IS SELF-PRESERVATION, AND THAT IS AN ACT OF POLITICAL WARFARE

AUDRE LORDE

*A Burst of Light and Other Essays*

*"I have always made it a point to exercise at least four days a week and as a former marathon runner I went back to my first love: shoes on the pavement. I also joined the Peloton family and purchased an indoor exercise bike. I recently celebrated 200 rides on my bike, and I do not see any slowing down in my running or riding."*

CRESHEMA R. MURRAY, PH.D.

SPECIAL ASSISTANT TO  
THE PRESIDENT

*"During times of stress, I become creative and very intentional with my self-care. Lately, I pick one thing first thing in the morning that I will do just for myself and that way I have something to look forward to all day. Today I'm going to go for a walk in the park and listen to a good audiobook."*

STACIE DEFREITAS, PH.D.

INTERIM ASSOCIATE DEAN OF CHSS

*"We are in that troubling point in the pandemic when things appear to have become normalized, so it is more important than ever to be intentional in caring for ourselves. Things that have helped me stay centered: staying connected with friends and family here and overseas, virtual fitness classes, long quiet walks, rereading favorite books, discovering new music, experimenting with recipes, and silly giggling fits with my five-year-old."*

SUCHETA CHOUDHURI, PH.D.

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH



## Q&A WITH PRESIDENT TILLIS

*As his nine-month tenure as interim president draws to a conclusion, Dr. Antonio D. Tillis reflects on his historic appointment in a Q&A with CCRS Fellow Dr. Creshema Murray.*

**CM:** Previously, you were serving the College of Liberal Arts & Social Science at the University of Houston. What was your motivation to disrupt your tenure as Dean and lead UHD during such a tumultuous moment?

**AT:** I was extremely pleased in my role as Dean of the largest college in the UH System. Colleagues and I made numerous accomplishments in undergraduate and graduate student success, faculty diversity, and more. Thus, when Chancellor Khator approached me to consider the role she was confident that I could lead UHD through current crises based on my successes as dean of CLASS, I accepted her appointment and the rest is history.

**CM:** How would you sum up your time at UHD?

**AT:** My nine-month experience at UHD has been a welcomed challenge. Assuming this role amidst the uncertainty of the pandemic sharpened my competencies in crisis management and team development. It taught me the importance of people-centric leadership, decision-making, and flexibility.

**CM:** You are the second Black man to serve UHD as President; what does this appointment mean for Black and Brown Scholars?

**AT:** While I am conscious of my Black male identity as a teacher, scholar, and administrator, I am even more aware of the importance of its representation for Black and Brown Scholars. Many have shared with me what it meant personally to see me at the helm of UHD. My physical presence is evidence of the ability to ascend through the ranks to the presidency for many Black, Brown, and first-generation scholars aspiring to academic leadership.

**CM:** What parting words would you like to leave with the UHD Community?

**AT:** In parting, I'd like to thank the students, faculty, staff, alumni, donors, community partners and other constituencies for allowing me to serve alongside them to advance the mission and vision of UHD. My grandparents taught that when you have an extended stay at someone's home, you want to leave it in better condition than in which you found it. I hope that my interim nine-months as UHD President made a difference in moving the institution forward, and that UHD is a stronger institution than it was when I arrived in July of 2020.



## BLACK HISTORY IS HAPPENING NOW

**BLACK EMPOWERMENT SHOULD BE CELEBRATED ALL YEAR LONG**

ANTOINETTE WILSON, PH.D.

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF PSYCHOLOGY

**Black History.**

**Black Empowerment.**

**Black Liberation.**

**Black Futures.**

In 1926, renowned educator and historian Dr. Carter G. Woodson announced that the second week of February would be recognized as "Negro History Week" in order to acknowledge and celebrate the contributions of Black Americans.

According to [historians](#), Woodson selected the month of February because it contained the birthdays of Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass. In 1976, on the 50th anniversary of Negro History Week, the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History--which Woodson co-founded--would officially expand the effort by making the shift to Black History Month, the annual celebration that we recognize today.

Black History Month is a time for us to honor, remember, and show appreciation for those who blazed the trails before us. Pioneers such as Sojourner Truth, an abolitionist and women's rights activist; W.E.B DuBois, a civil rights activist and scholar; and Thurgood Marshall, the first African American Supreme Court justice, are often celebrated.

But we must not stop there.

Black History Month is not only about reflecting upon the past, it is also about honoring the Black history that is being made right now. It is Amanda Gorman, the youngest presidential inaugural poet. It is Stacey Abrams, a voting rights activist and Nobel Peace Prize nominee. It is Dr. Antonio D. Tillis, the second Black male president to serve at UHD. It is Dr. Kizzmekia Corbett, a Black scientist who co-developed the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine.

Black history is the future.

We take this time to acknowledge where we've been and celebrate where we're going. Although the month may be brief, the impact that the contributions Black folks have made on society is long-lasting. It is essential that we make sure our celebrations match that energy and continue well beyond the month of February.



## GET TO KNOW DR. JEFFREY MCCUNE

### INTRODUCING THE CCRS 2021 SCHOLAR-IN-RESIDENCE

The Center for Critical Race Studies is excited to introduce our **2021 Scholar-in-Residence**, Dr. Jeffrey McCune. McCune will join us virtually to host a series of seminars and programs for UHD administrators, faculty, staff, students, and community partners from March 9-11, 2021.

Dr. McCune is an Associate Professor of African & African American Studies and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Washington University in St. Louis and the author of the award-winning book *Sexual Discretion: Black Masculinity and the Politics of Passing*. In addition, he is presently completing two book projects, *Disobedient Reading: An Experiment in Seeing Black*, and the other on the "wildness" of Kanye West titled, *On Kanye*.

Throughout his formidable career as a scholar and academic, McCune has been published in a variety of journals and also serves on the editorial board of numerous journals. He is the co-editor of the University of California Press's *New Sexual Worlds* book series. For his work at the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality, McCune has been featured on *Left of Black*, *Sirius XM's Joe Madison Show*, *HuffPost Live*, *NPR* and as a guest expert on *Bill Nye Saves The World*.

As of June 2021, Dr. McCune will assume the role as Director of the Frederick Douglass Institute of African & African American Studies at the University of Rochester. In his new role, McCune will bring together faculty, students, and staff from across academic disciplines to collaborate in the study of the African diaspora and offer essential programming that explores and promotes African and African American studies.

During his virtual visit to UHD, McCune's seminars and remarks will center on the theme, **"Begin Again: A New BIPOC Manifesto."** McCune plans to address topics ranging from Kanye West to coalition building, and attendees can expect fresh and timely insights on popular culture, our current socio-political climate, and higher education. We invite you to join us for this highly anticipated week of events. For more information, visit [uhd.edu/ccrs-sir](http://uhd.edu/ccrs-sir).

## 2021 Scholar-in-Residence SCHEDULE

### ALL EVENTS ARE VIRTUAL

For more information and to register to attend, visit: [uhd.edu/ccrs-sir](http://uhd.edu/ccrs-sir).

### TUESDAY, MARCH 9

#### "Disobedient Reading, Disrupting Pedagogy"

Faculty Development Seminar  
2:30 p.m.  
*Space is limited.*

#### Fireside Chat with Dr. Toneisha Taylor

Texas Southern University  
6 p.m.

### WEDNESDAY, MARCH 10

#### "BEGIN AGAIN: A MANIFESTO FOR THE MARGINS" Critical Race Studies Annual Lecture Series

Lecture and Public Q&A  
4 p.m.

### THURSDAY, MARCH 11

#### Scholar Interview

CCRS Interview Series  
10 a.m.

#### Social Justice Engagement with YES Preparatory High School

11:45 a.m.

#### "Lessons from Kanye, The Wild Genius of Hip-Hop"

Student Keynote  
1:15 p.m.

#### "Don't Wait, Act Now: Taking Action Before Difference Knocks at Your Door"

Administrator and Staff  
Development Seminar  
4 p.m.  
*Space is limited.*



Photo Credit: [University of Houston](#)

## IN MEMORY OF DR. JAMES CONYERS

### UH SYSTEM MOURNS THE LOSS OF ONE OF OUR OWN

CCRS DIRECTOR DR. VIDA ROBERTSON PAYS TRIBUTE TO RENOWNED SCHOLAR, ACTIVIST, AND FRIEND—DR. JAMES "JIM" CONYERS

On Monday, January 25, the University of Houston System mourned the death of a racial justice icon, educational equity co-conspirator, professional mentor, and friend, Dr. James "Jim" Conyers. Many know Dr. Conyers as the director African American studies program at UH-Central, but to the Black faculty, students, and administrators (as well as fellow collaborators) throughout the UH System, he was an academic lion, a fearless champion, and unapologetically Black.

After completing a Ph.D. in Africology and African American Studies from Temple University under the tutelage of world renowned scholar Dr. Molefi K. Asante, Dr.

Conyers would go on to teach history and Black Studies at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln and Omaha before making his way to the University of Houston in 2002. Upon arrival, he would passionately lead and transform the state's oldest African American studies program into one of the most respected programs in the nation.

Dr. Conyers tirelessly devoted himself to the betterment of his program, his students, and the field. Countless students attest to his unwavering mentorship, financial support, and bountiful encouragement. His academic colleagues knew him as a profound intellectual and prolific scholar and he is credited with publishing over 35 books and numerous articles. He made great strides in expanding and enriching the research of Black life and culture. And, as an administrator, he was a beloved and capable leader, industrious philanthropist, and distinguished voice.

I cannot express the importance of Dr. Conyers to the University of Houston System and more profoundly to the Black faculty at UHD. So often as Black faculty, we are one or two of forty. One often finds themselves isolated from the thinkers and practitioners of their field because they are pigeonholed as the token. The demands of a Black professor (in a White-dominated institution) can be disorienting and discouraging. For this reason, Dr. Conyers created an intellectual oasis and professional safe house away from the onslaught of systemic and institutional anti-Black sentiment. He offered many of us a place where we (in the words of Langston Hughes) could take off our "masks" and simply be. He brought us together to commune, collaborate, and commend one another. For so many Black souls, Dr. Conyers' African American studies program established a "College of Friendship," and a "University of Brotherly Love."

Thank you, Dr. James Conyers, for your stable vision and dogged strength that has comforted and enlivened so many weary warriors in our long fight for justice. Your life and work have been invaluable in transforming an institution which prided itself in the racist exclusion of Black bodies into a "School for the Better Making of Men." Rest, my dear Alpha Brother. Though now absent, you shall never be forgotten.

**UHD**  
Center for  
Critical Race Studies

**Dr. Kristin Anderson**  
*Professor of Psychology*

**Dr. Jonathan Chism**  
*Assistant Professor of History*

**Dr. Sucheta Choudhuri**  
*Associate Professor of English*

**Dr. Stacie DeFreitas**  
*Interim Associate Dean, College  
of Humanities and Social  
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**Dr. Felicia L. Harris**  
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**Dr. Chuck Jackson**  
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**Mr. Daniel Peña**  
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**Dr. Antoinette Wilson**  
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#### LET'S CONNECT

If you have resources, stories, or inspiration you would like to share with the CCRS community, please e-mail [CCRS@uhd.edu](mailto:CCRS@uhd.edu).

