Opening Remarks by Karla Slocum, IAAR Director
at the IAAR Opening Event
August 29, 2013

I am delighted to become the fifth permanent director of the Institute of African American Research in the 18 years that the unit has been on this campus. The role means a lot to me as the IAAR has contributed to my scholarly growth and career development during my 12 years on UNC’s faculty. It was in the IAAR that I co-directed the Moore Undergraduate Research Apprentice Program (MURAP) and first cut my teeth administering a program in which making space for race and race-related issues in the academy was a goal. I also benefited from mentoring opportunities that the IAAR provided to junior faculty and postdoctoral fellows. And too, the IAAR is also where I have participated in rich and dynamic conferences related to African Americans and blacks in the diaspora, which was helpful to me as an anthropologist whose academic research spans looking at how afro- and indo-caribbean farmers grapple with economic transition and how race and history figure into the identities of historically black communities in the U.S. southwest. I look forward to leading the IAAR to become similarly important and useful to more UNC faculty and graduate students whose research interests include the study of African Americans but also some dimension of people of African descent elsewhere in the world.

I believe strongly and firmly in the IAAR as a unit that can and should be engaged actively in the production, dissemination and facilitation of research. The IAAR has a history of reaching
across disciplines and schools: One of my goals is for the Institute to broaden its reach to include and work with faculty in units and schools across our campus.

I also strive for the IAAR to demonstrate the vitality of research on, about, by, for and with blacks as a means to address the central issues, questions, and debates of our times with the foremost and current modes of inquiry and approaches to scholarly and engaged investigation. For, research concerning blacks typically brings in broader national and global issues about history, society, health, education, politics, etc. And inquiries in these areas that center or bring in blacks also can and have worked with the latest approaches. Our 2013 fall panel series is structured to demonstrate our objective to frame the IAAR in this way. The three panel events that I have organized focus on current “hot” topics on civil rights; institutional, social and historical dimensions of racism; and HIV prevention. Next month, to look at research insights on the contexts surrounding the configurations of and perspectives on racism today we explore the now well-known Trayvon Martin Case. In October, to look at social and medical dimensions of HIV/AIDS prevention, we hear from medical science, social science and community research collaborators in a participatory project in Durham’s black community. And of course, today, to look at civil rights we engage the latest developments here in North Carolina regarding legislative changes and civil engagement. Our fall panels explore these topics to reveal what insights we can gain from the latest and most up-to-date areas and methods of inquiry among scholars in the Triangle. Black Americans –for the fall panels at least-- become an important lens through which we can explore these issues that are centrally important to all Americans and people in the world. In future panels and speaker events we will bring the black diaspora similarly to interrogate other timely issues, questions and debates.
Let’s move to tonight’s program. I was away all last year on research leave in Santa Fe, New Mexico and it wasn’t until I returned to North Carolina that I appreciated the impact and responses to the policy changes happening in our state. When I interviewed for this job last March I said that I wanted the IAAR to be a space that engaged with very current issues as they relate to the IAAR’s focus and the topic for today’s symposium seemed ripe for working toward that goal. We know that the impact of some of the recent policy changes is felt directly and in some cases especially by blacks in the state. We know that the leader of the organized protests against the legislative changes is an African American whose strategies for protest are inspired by the Civil Rights movement. And, of course, we are now at the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington, and so this topic seemed not only ripe for interrogation by researchers but ripe for interrogation by the IAAR.

We are fortunate to have tonight three leaders in research related to some of the policy changes and protest strategies emerging around us. Dr. Kareem Crayton, Associate professor of Law, is a foremost scholar of voting rights in the US. Dr. Isaac Unah, associate professor of political science is at the cutting edge of research on the race and the death penalty and he has been speaking actively on the racial justice act. and Andy Andrews, professor of sociology who is renowned in his field for work on social movements and black freedom struggles in the US. These panelists are well published and have long records of accomplishments. I’m thrilled that they could join us tonight. We begin the program with a presentation by Dr. Kareem U. Crayton.