

AMERICAN ARTSCAPE

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This issue

The presence of people of color in the arts—both artists and audiences—has helped shape every facet of our culture. However, these immense contributions have not yet been fully recognized as an essential part of our American story.

We see this moment as an opportunity for the arts sector to rebuild in ways that benefit all Americans. Over the next several months, the National Endowment for the Arts will engage in a process of centering equity and justice—along the lines of race, ethnicity, gender, disability, religion, gender identity and sexual orientation, geography, poverty, and the infinite ways these intersect—in everything we do. This work is just beginning, but we are hopeful that it will bring lasting, system-wide change.

The National Endowment for the Arts strives to use its platforms to amplify the stories and narratives from the communities and cultures that help bring us closer to a more perfect union. So, it's our honor to introduce this issue of *American Artscape*, which lifts up artists steeped in the hard work of building a more equitable future. These stories feature some of the organizations serving Black artists and communities. There are countless incredible organizations across the country whose missions have always been to promote the work of Black artists, to show us that Black art matters, and to use the arts as a tool for racial and social justice.

By showcasing this work and helping share the Black artistic experience, we hope that the Arts Endowment is taking a small step on the long road toward equity in the arts.

AMERICAN ARTSCAPE

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About the cover: Fellows, faculty, and staff at the 2014 Cave Canem retreat, which provides artistic and professional development for Black poets. Photo courtesy of Cave Canem

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De-invisibilizing

Wideman Davis Dance Gives Voice to Enslaved Blacks with *Migratuse Ataraxia*

BY REBECCA SUTTON

When Tanya Wideman-Davis and Thaddeus Davis were conducting research for *Migratuse Ataraxia*, the latest project from their company Wideman Davis Dance, they visited a number of plantations in Alabama, Louisiana, and South Carolina. At most plantations, the tours proved to be deeply problematic, glossing over or completely ignoring the enslaved Black men and women who labored within the estates.

“They totally erased Black existence and were giving these fictitious stories as if it was

a Disneyland tour,” said Wideman-Davis, who founded the company with her husband in New York City in 2003. “They were giving information about the visual culture and the objects in the space, talking about the curtains, and building these very elaborate, phantasmical white narratives and erasing slaves.”

By staging *Migratuse Ataraxia* at plantations themselves, Wideman Davis Dance is reclaiming these historic sites as Black spaces, and “de-invisibilizing,” as Wideman-Davis termed it, the Black lives that are at worst erased, and at best reduced to incomplete accounts of physical labor. *Migratuse Ataraxia* instead

▲ Thaddeus Davis and Tanya Wideman-Davis, founders of Wideman Davis Dance. Photo by Colbert Davis, courtesy of Wideman Davis Dance



▲ Eto Otitigbe, Thaddeus Davis, Darlon McCloud, and John Green in Wideman Davis Dance's performance of *Migratuse Ataraxia* at the Klein-Wallace House in Harpersville, Alabama, in January 2020. Photo by Sean Rayford, courtesy of Wideman Davis Dance

paints a fuller picture, using movement, video projections, and art installations to capture the hopes and spirits, loves and hardships of the enslaved Black people who once moved through the rooms of these very plantations. The project is “an effort to enliven those enslaved Africans so that we can acknowledge that trauma happens to these people in these spaces, but yet they survive,” Davis said. The piece is “not about their bondage, but the humanity of them in spite of bondage.”

Supported in part by the National Endowment for the Arts, *Migratuse Ataraxia* premiered in January 2020 at the Klein-Wallace House in Harpersville, Alabama, after workshops at the Hampton-Preston Mansion in Columbia, South Carolina. While the work speaks directly to the nation's complex history of

race and racism—a common theme throughout Wideman Davis Dance's repertoire—Davis and Wideman-Davis say they didn't initially set out to tackle social justice issues when they founded their company. But as two Black artists living in the South, explorations of social and political issues became inevitable.

“We don't feel like full citizens when we are passing by the Confederate flag, or when we are passing by these antebellum homes that have a strictly white narrative,” said Wideman-Davis, noting that when they first moved to Columbia from New York, the Confederate flag still flew on the statehouse grounds (it was removed in 2015). “The trajectory of our work has always been centered on looking at what's missing in the environments that we live in, and making work around those missing elements to de-invisibilize people, particularly Black folks in the South. Our [work] is putting Black existence on blast in a performative manner.”

The site-specific *Migratuse Ataraxia* leads audience members from room to room of each plantation as if on a museum tour, while dancers perform feet or inches away, sometimes physically drawing audience members into the performance itself. The removal of the traditional distance between audience and performer in part forces audience members to bear witness; there is no option to look away from the Black narratives that many plantations—and many people—still choose to minimize or ignore completely. For white audiences, this might bring a sense of reckoning: “It might mean that they need to confront their white privilege for the first time,” said Gina Kohler, the company's managing director and dramaturge for *Migratuse Ataraxia*.

But for Black audiences, this physical intimacy can create a type of emotional closeness—a communal sense of finally witnessing their shared history celebrated and brought to light. Davis noted that while Black culture is steeped in dance, viewing dance at a theater or concert hall is not necessarily part of that experience. Part of the gift of *Migratuse Ataraxia* is that “it's not taking this work that's about enslaved Africans and putting it on the proscenium stage at a great theater where normal theater-going people get to see it,” said Davis. “This was making a work and giving it to the community and going, ‘This is our work about our existence.’”

The effect on audiences of every background is often overwhelming. As Kohler noted, “It's moved people to tears more than I can describe.” Even the very act of dance itself proved to be powerful



Tanya Wideman-Davis, Petra Everson, Thaddeus Davis, John Green, and Michaela Pilar Brown in Wideman Davis Dance's production of *Migratuse Ataraxia*. Photo by Sean Rayford, courtesy of Wideman Davis Dance

in a way Davis himself hadn't anticipated. "To see Black bodies moving in such a freeing way throughout a space that often does not bring to mind thoughts of Black freedom, emotionally moved a lot of people," he said.

Despite the historic setting, *Migratuse Ataraxia* is as much about our present moment and where we might be heading than it is about the past. Modern elements like video and performative scenes from a barbershop blur the lines between eras, providing a platform for audience members to sift through the evolution (or non-evolution) of issues like disenfranchisement and the objectification of Black bodies, and our own potential role in changing the course of how these issues continue to unfold.

"Working with this history allows us to see the links, the traces of where we are right now and how ideas are sustained in culture, how ideas are sustained in society, how racism is sustained in society," said Davis. "So we use these digital portals and these imaginative spaces to help us grapple with those ideas, to enliven those old ideas in a new way, in an effort to change what's possible for the future."

While the ideas tackled by *Migratuse Ataraxia* are of global importance, the piece draws heavily from the communities where it is performed, anchoring residents to the work and

giving them the opportunity to see themselves personally reflected within a larger historical context.

In Harpersville, for example, video projections recorded by Davis included Harpersville's landscape and tombstones from the Black cemetery as well as scenes from a reunion the Klein-Wallace House had held between descendants of former estate owners and the people they enslaved. An installation by multidisciplinary artist Michaela Pilar Brown incorporated photographs, tools, and other personal objects loaned by members of the community, and performances ended with a dinner curated by Myron Beasley and prepared by local chef Clayton Sherrod, which incorporated ingredients that would have once been planted, picked, and cooked by the people enslaved on the plantation.

"It creates a very intimate experience for the people who are experiencing the work," said Kohler. "It's very personal to them, because it's *for them*."

While *Migratuse Ataraxia* was scheduled to tour other plantations, those plans were upended by the pandemic. The canceled tour included four Arts Endowment-supported performances slated for this spring at the Hampton-Preston Mansion in Columbia in conjunction with a month-long residency. The company has since

▼ Tanya Wideman-Davis, Thaddeus Davis, and Michaela Pilar Brown in Wideman Davis Dance's production of *Migratuse Ataraxia*. Photo by Elizabeth Johnson, courtesy of Wideman Davis Dance



re-imagined the piece for a COVID world, using Columbia’s streets and the exteriors of historic sites as the backdrop for the project.

This new iteration of *Migratuse Ataraxia* will be a mobile performance whose route traces the Black experience in Columbia. Video projections and other performative elements will be installed outside of buildings associated with Black repression and Black liberation, including urban plantations like the Hampton-Preston Mansion and the homes of Civil Rights activists such as Modjeska Simkin.

Residency activities will also continue, including intergenerational dialogues between Black elders and college students that will take place using web conferencing. These interactions will parlay the themes of *Migratuse Ataraxia* into personal conversations, inviting reflections from each generation about the places and situations where they have felt erased, and alternatively, where they have felt Black culture and history are fully celebrated. Wideman-Davis said participants will be prompted to think about,

“Where are the spaces that you feel you belong? Where are the spaces you don't feel like you belong? What are the environments where you feel like your citizenship is taken into account?”

For Davis and Wideman-Davis, addressing those questions throughout their careers has helped them navigate the discomfort, the systemic racism, and the overt racism that have framed their own lives. Yes, Wideman Davis Dance makes dance as a way to engage with audiences and communities. But at the same time, both said the projects they create are also nothing short of a personal necessity that allows them to continue moving through the world.

“We're making the work to try to survive some of the ideas that we're fighting against,” said Davis. Wideman-Davis echoed her husband. “If we can continue to do this kind of work,” she said, “then I, myself, feel like I can exist because I have a voice.”

Rebecca Sutton is the editor of American Artscape.

▼ Thaddeus Davis and Michael McManus of Wideman Davis Dance performing *Migratuse Ataraxia*. Photo by Clark Scott, courtesy of Wideman Davis Dance





BREAKING THE CHAIN

Cave Canem Creates a New Landscape for Black Poetry

BY VICTORIA HUTTER

One of the evocative structures that emerges from the volcanic soil of Italy's ancient city of Pompeii is the House of the Tragic Poet, named for the remnants of wall frescoes depicting scenes from Greek mythology and Homer's *Iliad*. The house also features a mosaic embedded in the floor of the vestibule of a black dog, alert and ready to spring forward but for the chain around its neck. Below this canine guardian are the words CAVE CANEM, Latin for "Beware of the Dog."

Poets Toi Derricotte and Cornelius Eady visited Pompeii and the House of the Tragic Poet

in 1996, a day after they had decided to build a home for Black poets on their own, for their own. And so, Cave Canem became the name and emblem for their literary venture, only in their rendition of the Pompeiian image, the chain that restrains the dog is broken.

Themselves Black poets, Derricotte and Eady saw the lack of representation for poets of color in published books, academic programs and faculties, and among the winners of literary prizes. They wanted to create a place where Black poets could break from their isolation and be with one another, share their work without having to explain or defend it, and that could provide the

▲ One of the early Cave Canem retreats. Photo courtesy of Toi Derricotte





▲ Cave Canem founders **Toi Derricotte** and **Cornelious Eady** (in back) at an early retreat with, from left, **Sarah Micklem**, **Father Francis Gargani**, **Lucille Clifton**, **Sonia Sanchez**, **Michelle Elliot**, and **Renee Moore**. Photo courtesy of Cave Canem

kind of support that would lead those poets toward successful careers.

In the beginning, those who participated in Cave Canem Foundation programs were, as described by Ruth Ellen Kocher—poet and associate dean for Arts and Humanities at the University of Colorado as well as

a Cave Canem participant—“not so much seeking to effect change in the literary landscape as much as we were acknowledging...the exclusivity of that landscape and creating a homestead for ourselves, and that homestead became a sprawling estate with considerable acreage.”

Twenty-five years later, what started as a one-week retreat with about 30 poets has become a sweeping force that has helped change the face of poetry in America. The organization has nurtured almost 500 Cave Canem fellows who have gone on to publish lauded books, to win prestigious prizes such as the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry, and to become valued teachers in community programs and universities across the country. Its Poetry Prize has launched the careers of many, and its myriad other programs touch many more writers and readers every year.

The National Endowment for the Arts has provided support for Cave Canem since 2000, and many Cave Canem fellows have been awarded a Creative Writing Fellowship in poetry from the Arts Endowment.

THE RETREAT

Each year, Cave Canem receives about 300 applications for the 15 spots available for first-time fellows. The remainder of the 40 spots are taken by fellows from previous summers who are able to return twice more. Fellows attend the retreat on an income-based sliding scale and then have access to other opportunities both at Cave Canem and with other organizations. (Because of the COVID pandemic, the summer retreats are currently on hold.)

The schedule is intense. In between shared meals are readings, or a speaker, or a workshop, along with the requirement that each fellow

produce one poem each day, due at 10:00 every morning.

Although poets come to the retreat for professional development, they also come for community. Major Jackson is the author of five books, recipient of an NEA Creative Writing Fellowship in 2015, and is now the Gertrude Conaway Vanderbilt Chair in the Humanities at Vanderbilt University. Jackson was in the inaugural class of fellows in 1996 and said, “Many of us who were there had a very strong sense that this was a unique and historic moment. We may not have understood at the moment the reach of Cave Canem, but the general feeling [was] of kinship, community.”

Kocher reiterates the imperative for her of finding community at Cave Canem. She became a fellow in 2002 and received an NEA Creative Writing Fellowship in 2017. She describes the first night of the retreat that always starts with a welcome circle, each fellow introducing themselves to the group. “As you make your way around the circle, you realize everyone there—I mean almost everyone there—has some narrative to share about feeling like the outsider and how this project has brought them into a place where they feel accepted, and they feel like they belong.”

PRIZES AND PROGRAMS

Cave Canem awards three different poetry prizes, but its signature award is the Cave Canem Poetry Prize. It began in 1999 and recognizes an outstanding manuscript worthy of publishing as an author’s first book. In addition to getting their work published, the winner gets a cash prize of \$1,000. Publishers rotate among three small presses. For 2021, the publisher is Graywolf Press, a longtime NEA grantee.

The list of recipients for the poetry prize is distinguished for its prescience in honoring notable achievement. Natasha Trethewey was awarded the inaugural prize and would go on to receive the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 2007 and serve as U.S. Poet Laureate from 2012 to 2013. Tracy K. Smith’s *The Body’s Question* was selected in 2002; she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 2012 and also served as U.S. Poet Laureate from 2017 to 2019. Major Jackson, who won the prize in 2000, said that it, “launched in earnest my career as a published poet.”

Cave Canem engages its widest audience through its community workshops with nearly 1,000 poets participating since 1999. These sessions are designed for emerging poets who

have published no more than two books and are not enrolled in a literary degree program. Held at different levels of experience, the ten-week workshops are rigorous. Currently, workshops have switched to virtual platforms as have other programs including Writers Worktable, which offers insights into the business of poetry and First Books, a discussion series in which two poets—one emerging, one established—talk about their first book.

Cave Canem has shared its wisdom with other groups of writers and been a model for literary communities seeking to make a larger and better place for their artists to thrive. Among those is CantoMundo, serving Latinx poets, and Kundiman, advancing Asian-American creative writers; both organizations are supported by the Arts Endowment. Jackson said that as a result of this leadership in the literary field, “we have decentered whiteness and particularly white male poets as the sole producers of literature in the country. We understand the wealth of the nation as a result of its art and how that art reflects back to us the power of a pluralistic society.”

CHANGING THE LITERARY LANDSCAPE

Today, the world of poetry by Black writers is indeed very different. In the words of Tyehimba Jess, chairman of the Cave Canem board of directors and a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, it is “furiously flowering,” which is also the name of the Furious Flower Poetry Center at James Madison University, the nation’s first academic center for Black poetry. He notes that young Black poets today tend to have greater “academic sophistication” from attending MFA programs early in the careers but that their poetry is nonetheless “rooted in the soul and the essence of Blackness.”

The growth in poetry’s popularity is reflected in the NEA’s own research. According to the Arts Endowment’s most recent Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, between 2012 and 2017, the percentage of adults who read poetry increased by 76 percent and the share of adults 18-24 years old who read poetry more than doubled. Among racial/ethnic subgroups,

African Americans, Asian Americans, and other nonwhite, non-Hispanic groups read poetry at the highest rates overall.

In recognition of its many accomplishments, the National Book Foundation awarded Cave Canem its Literarian Award in 2016 for service to the American literary community. It was the first time that the \$10,000 prize was awarded to an organization instead of an individual.

Reflecting on the organization’s history, Kocher said, “The writers who first went to Cave Canem went back to their communities and worked as poets...and mentored another generation, who came to Cave Canem and then went back to their communities, and it became very cyclic in that way.... It’s amazing for me to see the landscape of young Black poets now and how they’re really on fire with the confidence and support and community that they gain through the [Cave Canem] Foundation.”

Victoria Hutter is assistant director of the Office of Public Affairs at the National Endowment for the Arts.



▲ Some books by Cave Canem fellows. Photo courtesy of Cave Canem

▼ The 2019 class of Cave Canem fellows. Photo by Marcus Jackson





Joy Is an Act of Resistance

Arts Corps Breaks Down Barriers in Arts Education

BY CAROLYN COONS

All photos by Amy Piñon

▲ Arts Corps teaching artists work with students during the 2018 Arts Liberation and Leadership Institute (ALLI). ALLI is a paid 10-week teen leadership intensive where 25 youth are trained in artistry, social justice and organizing.

Anyone who has endured awkward preteen years understands that middle school embarrassment is particularly acute—that’s why Carrie Siahpush winced as she watched a sixth-grade student trip and fall during an Arts Corps acting exercise last year.

“It took [the adults] right back to middle school and what it feels like. Even when you sneeze

it’s embarrassing,” Siahpush, acting executive director of Arts Corps, said when recounting the incident. There was, however, no teasing, taunting, or laughter. Instead, the student’s classmates cheered. “Yes, he has failed gloriously today,” the Arts Corps teaching artist facilitating the exercise proclaimed.

“It was the most awesome and affirming kind of message,” Siahpush said. “To see that

the classroom can have that support and that community building is really, really critical.”

Building this type of supportive community is essential to Arts Corps’ mission: providing arts education to K-12 students in South Seattle and South King County, Washington, where race is the greatest predictor of whether or not a student has access to arts education. Studies show that students who receive arts education perform better academically overall and have a greater sense of belonging, making equitable access a vital component of racial justice.

Twenty years ago, a group of Seattle teaching artists identified the inequities in arts education access and founded Arts Corps. Many of these artists had children in those schools and witnessed first-hand how low-income Black students and other students of color were left behind. Arts Corps has received 11 grants from the National Endowment for the Arts since 2004 for various multidisciplinary arts projects that aim to close the area’s access gap in arts education. Their programming reaches more than 3,000 students each year, of which approximately 72 percent are from low-income families and 84 percent are youth of color.

“We see equity as the heart and core of our work,” Siahpush said, emphasizing that it is predominantly low-income minority students who do not have permanent arts teachers in their schools.

Over the years Arts Corps has recognized that the same structures that prevent low-income students of color from receiving an arts education also disadvantage teaching artists of color, so the organization prioritizes hiring teaching artists who reflect the communities in which they work in order to combat systemic racism and strengthen community bonds.

“It is a really nice way to build a sense of belonging with young people and also within the families,” Siahpush said. “And we all know that having a strong family community around a school is what has the best academic outcomes.”

Now that schools are closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, existing inequities have been thrown into sharper relief. But Arts Corps adapted quickly to the new reality and has distributed almost 4,000 art kits across South King County to date. Staff go to school, low-income housing, and free meal sites to give

out the kits, removing as many barriers to access as possible.

“We actually want to go directly to where they live so that they can do art anytime,” Siahpush said.

In addition to art kits, in the summer of 2020 Arts Corps teaching artists travelled across the Seattle area to perform pop-up concerts. They would teach dances in parking lots to allow participants to social distance while still experiencing a sense of togetherness during a time of isolation.

Arts Corps has also transitioned some programming online. If students don’t have laptops, Siahpush said Arts Corps works with local partners to get them one.

The organization’s Arts Liberation and Leadership Institute (ALLI), a 10-week after-school program for teens funded in part by an Arts Endowment grant, is one of the programs that was conducted entirely via Zoom this past fall. ALLI is a leadership development program that trains students to utilize art as a means of combating injustice and envisioning a more equitable future. As the Arts Corps’ Social Justice Framework for Teaching Artists notes, “Art develops creative and imaginative capacity, which offers new ways of thinking. All of these lead to social change—and social justice. Making art can feel good, and joy is an act of resistance.”

The theme for the 2020 ALLI program was New Earth Rise, inspired by the poem “For My People” by Margaret Walker. Walker uses the refrain “For my people” to describe the centuries of oppression Black Americans have endured

▼ Students at Mount View Elementary School participate in an Arts Corps class.



and their struggle for freedom. “Let a new earth rise. Let another world be born,” the last stanza reads.

ALLI students were challenged to imagine the possibilities of a new, more just society through their art. Working artists spoke with the students about how they incorporate messaging around racial justice, climate change, and reproductive justice into their work.

Students participating in ALLI could pursue one of three different pathways: music, visual art, or digital storytelling. Arts Corps teaching artist Adam Jabari Jefferson led the digital storytelling pathway and served as the social justice lead for the program.

Jefferson said incorporating art in organizing is important. “It’s honest and it gives [students] a space to be critical, to imagine different ways to live in society, live in a community with one another, live in relationship with our planet,” he said.

“You know, no matter where these students go, they’re thinking about their relationship in community, in society, with the planet, and they’re processing that through a creative means, a generative means,” he added.

In addition to their pathways, students were asked to use creative writing to look internally and tell their own stories. Sharing these reflections helped break down the walls

created by a virtual space, and Jefferson said he was impressed with how the students and Arts Corps staff were able to collaborate and create community through computer screens.

“I witnessed more students open up, show themselves, be seen, literally and figuratively, like show themselves and show up there,” he said.

At the end of the program, the students shared the work they created in a virtual showcase available on the Arts Corps Facebook page. They also received a \$350 stipend from Arts Corps.

Watching the 25 ALLI students’ transformation over 10 weeks was a powerful experience for Jefferson, who said he was inspired by the way they created space for each other to share and learn.

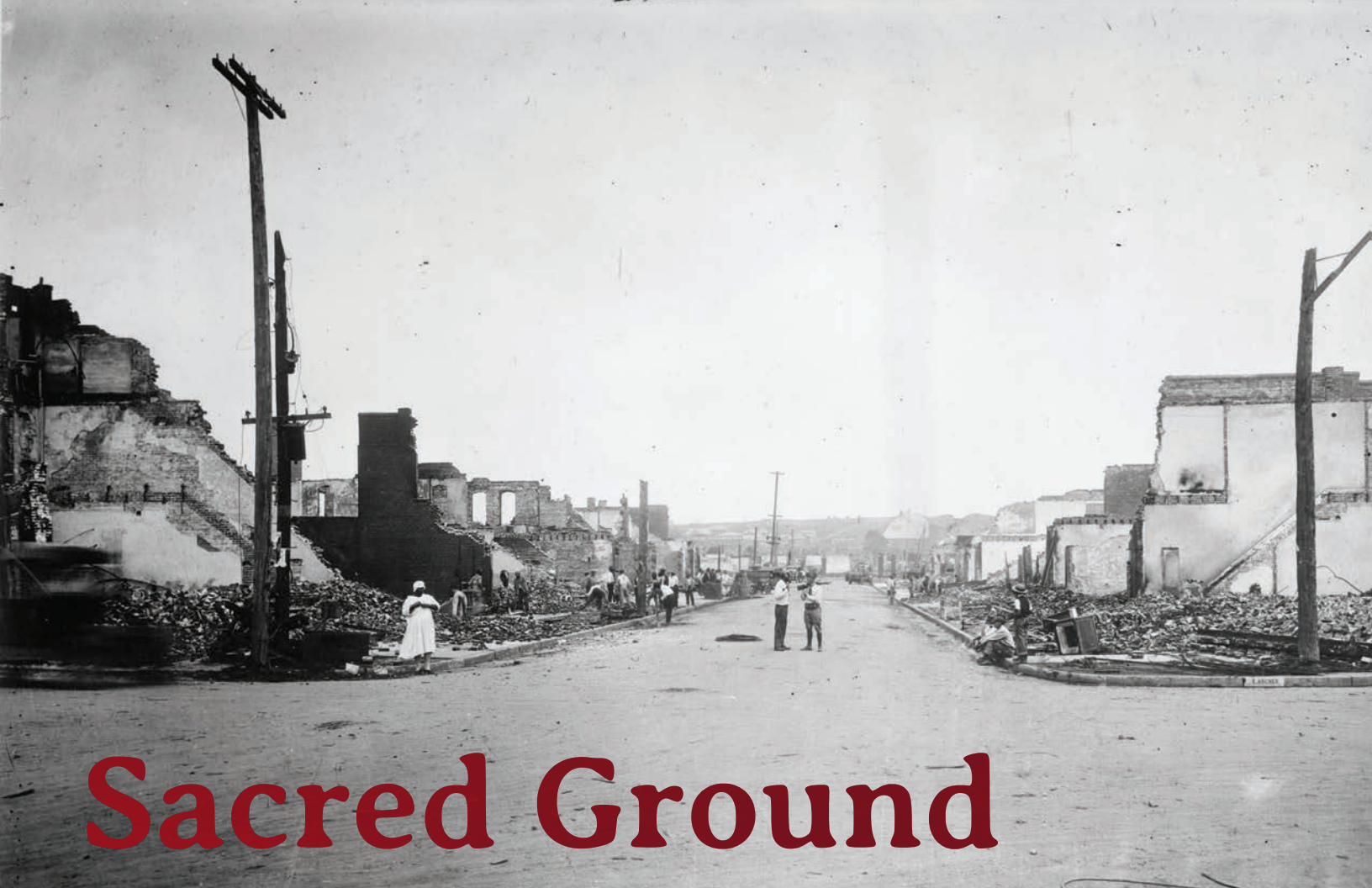
Developing that level of support within Arts Corps as an organization has taken time and practice, Siahpush said.

“It takes our community, and between all of the different identities that exist in our Arts Corps ecosystem, it takes trust to be able to have authentic and meaningful moments where somebody may have a real learning moment, and that they still walk away feeling cared for and loved.”

Carolyn Coons is the staff assistant in the Office of Public Affairs at the National Endowment for the Arts.



► Students participating in the 2018 Arts Liberation and Leadership Institute (ALLI).



Sacred Ground

A Commissioning Project to Commemorate the Tulsa Race Massacre

BY ANN MEIER BAKER

For 18 hours on May 31-June 1, 1921, a white mob attacked residents, homes, and businesses in the predominantly Black Greenwood neighborhood of Tulsa, Oklahoma. The event remains one of the worst incidents of racial violence in U.S. history and one of the least-known—news reports were largely squelched despite the fact that hundreds of people were killed and thousands left homeless.

In 2021, to observe the 100th anniversary of the Tulsa Race Massacre, the City of Tulsa asked a broad range of city leaders to think about ways to mark the anniversary. Bruce Sorrell, executive director of Chamber Music Tulsa, considered several ideas. In conversations with members of the organization's board, they decided to

commission Black composers and mark this centennial with new chamber music, both as an opportunity to bring the Tulsa community together and to ensure that neither this tragedy, nor the lessons learned from it, are ever forgotten. The project, supported in part by the National Endowment for the Arts, also would provide a platform for Black composers whose compositions would help diversify the chamber music canon.

After a good bit of research, Chamber Music Tulsa settled on a group of four Black composers—one woman and three men, each with different compositional styles. (An unanticipated conflict unfortunately required the woman composer to cancel her participation in this project.) Recent conversations with the

▲ *After the race riots June 1st, Tulsa, Okla.* Photo courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, American National Red Cross Collection



▲ Pianist and composer Barron Ryan. Photo by Daniel Folkers

three remaining composers shed light on their thoughts about these important assignments, and about their works that will be presented in various venues in Tulsa beginning on May 31 and June 1, 2021, the centennial of this horrific event.

BARRON RYAN

Pianist and composer Barron Ryan was raised in Tulsa, and he continues to reside there today. Ryan likes to say that he makes music “in which classic meets cool,” because he blends different sounds and styles. “I grew up listening to classical

music and to jazz, funk, and pop and, once I became a professional, I didn’t want to have to choose one of those,” he said. “I wanted to be able to pursue any form of beauty that I thought was worth pursuing. What I’ve tried to do since I launched my career is create my own category rather than fitting into a category that somebody else created for me.”

He’s composed a piece for piano trio for Chamber Music Tulsa, in which he will perform as well. Growing up in Tulsa, he’d heard about the massacre, but to prepare to write his composition he did additional reading, hoping to learn what the people who lived through the massacre had to say about it. In one first-hand account, the author talked about how she went to a bedroom with her mother while the massacre was going on, where they read Psalms from the Bible.

“She didn’t say which Psalms they read, but Psalm 88 is known as the darkest lament of all the Psalms, and I took my title from its third verse—“My Soul is Full of Troubles.” And the piece

itself follows the sonata allegro form. It is a little programmatic, but in a way that I’m not going to reveal. I wanted to produce the feelings that I imagined I would have if I were in North

Tulsa in the Greenwood District during the race massacre. It’s certainly heavier than my other works have been,” said Ryan.

ANTHONY R. GREEN

While Barron Ryan is relatively new to composing, Anthony R. Green’s compositions have been performed in more than 25 countries. The composer, performer, and social justice artist’s creative output includes musical and visual creations, interpretations of original works or works in the repertoire, collaborations, and educational projects. Green is also the Associate Artistic Director of an organization called Castle of our Skins, whose mission is to celebrate Black artistry through music. Behind all of his artistic endeavors are the ideals of equality and freedom. “I was contacted about this and I immediately said yes. I also felt quite a large responsibility to undertake such a project, just myself being Black and growing up reading about the Tulsa Race Massacre but not knowing exactly the details and all of the events surrounding the incident. This was a wonderful chance for me to do research about this event as well as do something creative in honor of the lives that were lost and the people who suffered.”

Green’s composition is for string quartet, and it will be part of Chamber Music Tulsa’s work in Tulsa Public Schools, which reaches 3500+ fourth graders. “I’ve had the opportunity to write music for young audiences and even perform for youth as well,” said Green. “When I was told that this piece would be presented for children, I immediately thought I wanted to create a piece that’s extremely clear, that has clear motives, colors, and textures that children would be excited to follow. But the piece should also have a sound world that is somehow related to the event and to the way that contemporary audiences are responding to it. There actually aren’t that many pitches in the piece, and that’s because I just translated the years 1921 and 2021 into pitches—so the notes for 1921 are C sharp, A, D and then C sharp; and then 2021 is D, C, D, C sharp—and those are the primary pitches of the piece,” explained Green.

His research into the massacre brought up images of shooting, loud noises, and tremor among people that were congregated and fighting. “I interpreted those feelings as tremolos and trills and lots of quick vibrating sounds within the string instruments.” The piece is called “Sacred Ground: We Can Still Feel the Tremors.”

▼ Composer Anthony R. Green. Photo by Ben Semisch



COREY DUNDEE

Like Anthony R. Green, composer and saxophonist Corey Dundee is also writing a piece for string quartet, which will be the first time he's written such a piece. In his writing, he likes to incorporate a lot of extended techniques or non-traditional sounds that instruments can make—for example, tapping on the body of a string instrument or achieving various timbral distortions depending upon where the musician places their bow on the string. He said, "There are just so many really subtle variants of sound that you can get with string instruments, and I like to find ways that I can use this wide range of sonic capabilities in order to enhance a particular narrative. I feel that in a way, there is a generally distinct 'sound' to my music; however I try to approach each piece from a different compositional perspective, depending on its subject matter. I love jazz and similar musical genres, and I feel that this does influence a lot of my writing but not in a way that necessarily makes the music itself sound 'jazzy.' There are certain types of harmonies and gestures, along with other musical influences I've had, that will work their way into a piece of music."

The original plan was for Dundee (who is based in Ann Arbor, Michigan) to visit Tulsa to conduct interviews with families who have relatives that had been affected by the Tulsa race massacre and to see certain historical sites in person. But the pandemic scuttled that plan, and he's had to turn to other source material for inspiration for the piece, which he's still writing. "The music itself will be very relevant to the particular details and experiences of people in Tulsa," he said.

In historian Scott Ellsworth's book about the Tulsa Race Massacre he reports that city residents refer to the event as being "hushed up." Chamber Music Tulsa hopes that this new music will give voice to this important story that should be hushed no more.

Ann Meier Baker is the director of Music and Opera at the National Endowment for the Arts.



▲ Composer and saxophonist Corey Dundee. Photo courtesy of Corey Dundee



◀ The Woods bldg. after the race riots, Tulsa, Okla. Photo courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, American National Red Cross Collection

LET BLACK VOICES RING AGAIN



USING DESIGN TO HELP A COMMUNITY RECLAIM ITS HISTORY

BY PAULETTE BEETE

All photos courtesy of Omar Hakeem

How do you remember and celebrate a city's significant history of Black achievement and accomplishment when many, if not most, of its Black residents have long since moved away? How do you adapt a historically important but dilapidated Black church into a safe and thriving community center for the Black community? These were some of the questions that led the Athens, Ohio-based Mt. Zion Baptist Church Preservation Society to apply to the highly competitive Citizens'

Institute on Rural Design™ (CIRD), a National Endowment for the Arts design initiative in partnership with the Housing Assistance Council that helps small, rural communities tackle their unique preservation and rehabilitation issues for the social and economic benefit of the community.

Since the early 1990s, CIRD has annually facilitated focused, three-day workshops in at least three communities with populations of 50,000 or less to help them with issues ranging from improving walkability to revitalizing Main

▲ Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Athens, Ohio, the focus of a Citizens' Institute on Rural Design (CIRD) rehabilitation project.



Streets to rethinking how public space can better serve community residents, which was the challenge faced by the preservation society.

When the newly completed Mt. Zion Baptist Church was dedicated in September 1909, it was the culmination of four years of hard work by its freeborn and formerly enslaved Black congregants, many of whom literally provided the building labor. The church, one of two Black congregations in the region at the time, was not just a place of worship but also a beacon of possibility for Athens' thriving Black community. Despite the systemic racism that was rampant even in a "free" state like Ohio, in the mid- to late 19th century, Athens County was home to a larger percentage of Black residents than other counties in the state. While the city was known for Ohio University, the first educational institution in the U.S. with a federal endowment, it could also

boast of being part of the Underground Railroad as well as having its own prominent Black-owned-and-operated schools and businesses. Over time, however, much of the Black population left Athens in pursuit of better job opportunities; as of the 2010 Census, the community of roughly 24,000 was only 4.4 percent African American. As Black residents moved away, Mt. Zion lost most of its congregation, dwindling from a high of roughly 200 members to just 10 in 1974, as reported in a 2012 *Athens News* story.

In 1980, the church building was placed on the National Register of Historic Places; the nomination form noted that it was "significant as representing the only major building standing in the city of Athens associated with its Black community." This was not enough, unfortunately, to keep the congregation from formally disbanding in the early 2000s. The

church building's steadfast presence however, did help spark conversations about what role, if any, it could play in ensuring that the history of Black achievement and contributions in the Ohio River Valley was not lost.

Fast forward to 2019 when the Mt. Zion Baptist Church Preservation Society was accepted as a CIRD community participant. NEA Design Specialist Courtney Spearman said that the project was a good fit for the program because of "the combination of the long history of the place, the marginalization and invisibility of that community, and the very strong support and engagement that the [preservation society] has developed."

While there are a number of federal programs that provide technical assistance to rural communities, according to Spearman what sets the CIRD approach apart is the arts and design focus. By participating in a workshop, communities not only receive help in solving a specific community-selected challenge, but they also learn how to apply design thinking to addressing other local issues.

"I think the process of design and the way that you think about things in an iterative or 'try-again' sort of way is really powerful and helps people feel empowered to make changes in their communities," said Spearman. She noted that this type of experience with iterative problem-solving can be particularly powerful in communities of color, which due to historic and ongoing racist practices, are often severely under-resourced as opposed to other areas in their region. Spearman added that design-focused programs like CIRD can help residents in communities of color not only understand how to affect the changes they want to see in their neighborhoods but also give them the confidence to know they can ultimately be successful.

The preservation society came to the workshop with the idea to adapt the Mt. Zion church building into a community center. The group had already cleared one significant hurdle: there was widespread, energetic support from the community and local officials for the project. They needed help, however, in refining their vision for what a community center—specifically one designed to honor the city's past while providing a safe space for current Black residents—should look like. As Ada Woodson Adams, the society's vice president, noted on its website, "What the Mount Zion Baptist Church Preservation Society is trying to do is listen to the voices of our ancestors and bring this church back to meaningful life. We need a space here in Athens where Black people



▲ Omar Hakeem, design lead for the CIRD team, holds a design workshop at the Multicultural Genealogical Center on the vision for Mt. Zion Church Preservation Society's planned rehabilitation of the church.

can congregate again, where they can hear their voices ring again.”

Omar Hakeem, a Washington, DC-based architect and designer, worked as the CIRD design lead for the project. One of Hakeem’s first tasks was assembling the design advisory team, which included experts in rural community development and the preservation of historic Black spaces as well as a local architect. As he described, the goal of the project was to help the society plot out how to take the church building and, “reimagine it as hub for Black history and culture. We spent a lot of time talking about what does that mean for people? What does that look like? What are the components that need to be in that? What are the ingredients in that gumbo?”

While the three-day workshop had initially been scheduled for June 2020, due to the coronavirus pandemic, the CIRD team reimagined the workshop into a first-of-its-kind hybrid model with both in-person and virtual elements. Workshop discussions were facilitated with the help of meeting software that could accommodate the use of tools such as white boards. Site visits followed strict COVID protocols, such as having participants travel to Athens in separate cars.

These in-person visits were especially important to fostering a productive dialogue between the design team and the preservation

society as they helped the advisors understand the heart of the community that was represented by and would benefit from the church’s rehabilitation. As Hakeem described, “We went on this tour with this really amazing historian named David Butcher, and he told us all about his ancestors. They were farming. They were building a community. It was before the end of the Civil War. It was before the Emancipation Proclamation. I think that story of the rugged strength of Black Appalachians isn’t told that much, and it was really cool to be part of something that would help tell that story going forward.”

In addition to assistance with articulating their

vision for the new community center, the preservation society also received what Hakeem described as “a very robust design book.” The made-to-order book includes drawings of what various phases of the project will look like, case studies of similar projects to help the society think about additional partners and funding opportunities, and high-quality pictures to help generate continuing excitement for the project. Hakeem noted one item in particular that’s a key benefit for communities that go through the CIRD process. “We built a really good parametric, three-dimensional architectural model, really state-of-the-art, that can be used for drawings going forward. In the architectural world, that would normally cost between \$50,000-\$100,000 and communities are able to get that through the CIRD program.”

Hakeem expressed that he is excited to see what comes next for the project, and he is honored to now feel like part of the Mt. Zion family. He added that his goal is that CIRD will be involved with more projects like this one. “I think we really need to be able to be there for communities whose culture is threatened. As many of us agree and know, Black culture has always been under some form of attack or assault,” he explained. Ideally, over the life of a project, Hakeem would like CIRD to continue to be a resource to these communities

long after the initial consultation is over. “When things come up, when things change, when things pause, when things restart, then we can be there and be helpful and be a resource because none of these projects happen in a quick linear fashion,” he said.

He would also like to see more design practitioners tackling questions of culturally specific placemaking for communities of color. “I hear practitioners asking more and more of these types of questions, but I think being able to do the work still sometimes feels too difficult, too far away, or somehow not possible,” he said. “I want to see more practitioners be open and willing and feeling empowered to do this work in their own communities.”

Paulette Beete is the social media manager in the Office of Public Affairs at the National Endowment for the Arts.



▲ Excerpt pages from the CIR Design Resource Booklet, showcasing Mount Zion Baptist Church's history and the planned rehabilitation and expansion of the buildings.

► David Butcher, a local historian, leads a tour for the CIR team around the area, including Pioneer Cemetery outside of Athens, Ohio.





The interior of the Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Athens, Ohio, to be renovated into a community center for the area's Black community through the Art Endowment's Citizens' Institute on Rural Design initiative. Photo courtesy of Omar Hakeem