

unity



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## A tip of the hat to milliners

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Unity is published in February (African-American History Month), March (Women's History Month), May (Asian-Pacific American Heritage Month), June (Sustainability Issue), September (Hispanic Heritage Month) and November (Native American Heritage Month).

# A tip of the hat to female milliners



Mae Reeves' ocher-colored suede hat is on display at the National Museum of African-American History and Culture.

What do you remember most about Aretha Franklin's performance at President Obama's 2009 inauguration?

Was it The Queen of Soul's riveting rendition of "My Country 'Tis of Thee"?

Or was it *that hat*? You know, the gray, big-bowed creation festooned with Swarovski crystals?

Franklin's hat ended up with its own Facebook page (and 90,000 fans) and racked up 10,000 tweets on inauguration day. So, there's a chance that you paid a tad more attention to the famed chapeau with the bow than to Franklin's singing.

And that's OK. After all, hats have always held a special place in the hearts of African-American women. Books like "Crowns: Portraits of Black Women in Church Hats" and exhibits like the one at the National Museum of African-American History and Culture are testaments to that. When NMAAHC opened in 2016, its collection included vintage turbans, caps and fascinators from the shop of one woman – Mae Reeves, one of the first African-American women to own a milliner store in the U.S.



Pioneering milliner Mae Reeves, far right, opened her first hat shop in 1942. Photograph by Hall and Hall Photo Service

Reeves opened Mae's Millinery in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (her first shop) with a \$500 bank loan. She helped dress some of the most famous African-American women in the country, including Marian Anderson, Ella Fitzgerald and Lena Horne. Reeves died a few months after the exhibit about her shop – which included a recreation of the store – opened at NMAAHC. She and her hats are still featured in displays at the museum.

Reeves set the standard for other African-American female milliners. One of the most recent to enter the field, the Rev. Georgiette Morgan-Thomas, is the owner of a hat factory in Philadelphia.

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# For laureate, mission is to make poetry accessible

America's 2017-2018 poet laureate follows in the footsteps of other acclaimed poets – including Rita Dove, the first African-American to be awarded that title.

In a 2017 interview on “CBS This Morning,” Smith said she was “excited about taking poetry and the conversations it fosters about life to different parts of the country.”

Smith is a Pulitzer Prize winner, a professor of creative writing and the Roger S. Berlind '52 Professor in the Humanities at Princeton University. She directs the creative writing program in the Lewis Center for the Arts. She succeeds Juan Felipe Herrera as poet laureate.

A native of Falmouth, Massachusetts, who grew up in Fairfield, California, Smith earned a bachelor's in English and American literature and Afro-American studies from Harvard University, and a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing from Columbia University. She was a Stegner Fellow in poetry at Stanford University, and taught at Medgar Evers College of the City University of New York, the University of Pittsburgh and at Columbia.

Smith has penned three books of poetry, “Life on Mars (which won the 2012 Pulitzer),” “Duende” and “The Body's Question.” Her memoir, “Ordinary Light,” was a finalist for the 2015 National Book Award.



Tracy K. Smith believes poems are good at “closing all kinds of distance and making us feel like we have come into contact with something.” Photo by Denise Applewhite

The Library of Congress Poetry and Literature Center is the home of the poet laureate consultant in poetry. A federal law passed in 1995 declared that the position, which originated in the late 1930s, is the equivalent of poet laureate of the United States.

During their terms, poet laureates seek to increase appreciation of poetry. For example, Rita Dove brought together writers to explore the African diaspora through the eyes of its artists. She also championed children's poetry and jazz with poetry events.

The poet laureate currently receives a \$35,000 annual stipend, plus \$5,000 for travel expenses.



Professor Tracy Smith teaches a creative writing class at Princeton University. Photo by Frank Wojciechowski

## Don't You Wonder, Sometimes?

By Tracy K. Smith

After dark, stars glisten like ice, and the distance they span  
Hides something elemental. Not God, exactly. More like  
Some thin-hipped glittering Bowie-being – a Starman  
Or cosmic ace hovering, swaying, aching to make us see.  
And what would we do, you and I, if we could know for sure

That someone was there squinting through the dust,  
Saying nothing is lost, that everything lives on waiting only  
To be wanted back badly enough? Would you go then,  
Even for a few nights, into that other life where you  
And that first she loved, blind to the future once, and happy?

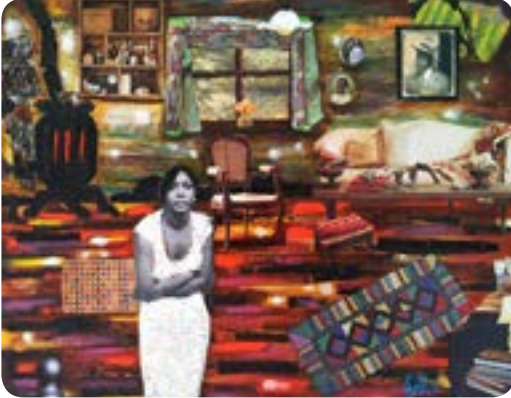
Would I put on my coat and return to the kitchen where my  
Mother and father sit waiting, dinner keeping warm on the stove?  
Bowie will never die. Nothing will come for him in his sleep  
Or charging through his veins. And he'll never grow old,  
Just like the woman you lost, who will always be dark-haired

And flush-faced, running toward an electronic screen  
That clocks the minutes, the miles left to go. Just like the life  
In which I'm forever a child looking out my window at the night sky  
Thinking one day I'll touch the world with bare hands  
Even if it burns.

Source: Poetry Foundation

# Homage to ancestral heroes

The artists in this edition of *Unity* express authentic sentiments about their cultural roots through the use of color, mixed media and ancestral images.



"In-law's House" by Najee Dorsey

## NAJEE DORSEY

Born in Blytheville, Arkansas, Najee Dorsey became a professional artist at age 5 when he started selling his artwork to his mother to pay for candy. During high school, Dorsey received a partial scholarship to Memphis College of Art (now the Memphis Academy of Art) in Tennessee.

Dorsey implements a variety of mediums to include mixed and digital media collage and one theme that remains paramount in his work are nostalgic scenes from African-American life especially in the South. His mantra – "Stories untold are stories forgotten" – is evident in the piece, "In-law's House," that speaks

to growing up in the South in a nurturing home and supportive family.

Family legend has it that Dorsey's great-grandmother was a full-blooded Cherokee. "Cherokee Black" pays tribute to his Native American heritage and personal histories. "'Cherokee Black' is a warrior and he is me," Dorsey declares.



"Cherokee Black" by Najee Dorsey



"Nicole" by Najee Dorsey

"Nicole" incorporates contemporary photography with digital and mixed-media elements. Dorsey says the piece "embodies beauty and strength immersed in flowers and vibrant colors."

Dorsey's work has been shown in solo and group exhibits, television broadcasts and print publications. His works are also in institutions and private collections across the U.S.

## PRINCESS CURETON

Princess Cureton grew up in Washington, D.C., and attests that her path to becoming a professional artist stems from the encouragement and support of very strong African-American women, particularly her mother, who recognized her innate ability and passion for the arts when she was young. Cureton graduated with a BFA and an MS in art education from Pratt Institute of Art and Design in Brooklyn, N.Y., and an MA in Learning from Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Connecticut.



"Thomas" by Princess Cureton

Cureton's work featured in *Unity* are acrylic and mixed media. She is an avid collector of African fabrics, sand, stones and shells, and those elements add a sculptural relief that brings Cureton's "Thomas" to life. She says the sun and the mountains represent hope.



"Dancing as Fast as I Can" by Princess Cureton

"Dancing as Fast as I Can" depicts a woman dancing on stage under a spotlight of scrutiny. Her dress of swirled layers of fabric, paper, doilies, paint and crinoline suggest the many layers of a busy life, much like Cureton's. The dancer's foot, leg and arms come off the canvas, showing a 3-D sculpting relief and her necklace are of actual stones. "I made her eyes recessed," says Cureton, "and as a result, she follows the viewer from any angle of a room."

"Enlightened Path" explores the theme of life's journey. The woman is leaning out of the lavender pillars, but holding on to the familiar as the sun illuminates the path summoning her to come forth.



"Enlightened Path"  
by Princess Cureton

"As an artist and educator," Cureton says, "I strive to expose my audience and students to different cultures and to develop a more global perspective to the arts outside of their community."

## RICHARD WILSON

Richard Wilson grew up in the small town of Conetoe, North Carolina. He remembers watching his dad at the kitchen table effortlessly drawing him and his two brothers. Wilson's dad was also a sign maker and designed patterns at a clothing factory. "Growing up with a creative father," Wilson says, "gave me a love for fine art and graphic design and inspired me at an early age to become a professional artist."

Wilson's love for creating images that honor trailblazers can be found in his Shadows series, a collection of paintings that highlights young



"In His Shadow – Muhammad Ali" and "Faithful Journey" by Richard Wilson

children standing in the shadow of pioneers. "In His Shadow – Muhammad Ali" was created in honor of Wilson's deceased father who was a big fan of Muhammad Ali. Before he died, Wilson put paint on his father's fingertips and pressed them onto six sheets of blank drawing paper. The green marks near Ali's chest are those fingerprints and the butterfly on the little boy's glove symbolizes Ali's quote, "Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee."

Paying homage to her heroism, "Bessie Coleman" is a collage of newspaper articles featuring events surrounding the life and death of the pioneer aviator. "I drew my daughter in a leather aviation jacket and eyewear to illustrate that she can see and realize her dreams just as Bessie Coleman did," says Wilson.

One of Wilson's most popular artworks is "Faithful Journey," which he says is a reflection of him stepping out on faith to pursue a full-time artist career. The look on the little boy's face symbolizes the uncertainty and the confidence of the little girl leading him by the hand, suggesting that a higher power is in control and will direct his path.

Wilson regards himself as a storyteller who conveys emotion and imagination through his art. His work has appeared in movies, books, and numerous public and private collections.



"Bessie Coleman" by Richard Wilson

# What's on inventive chef's menu? Lots of Gullah-Geechee goodness



Chef Benjamin Dennis is an expert on Low country/Gullah cuisine. Photo courtesy of Benjamin Davis

Southern cooking's latest amalgam has its roots in the low country of South Carolina, home of personal-chef-and-caterer Benjamin "B.J." Dennis.

Born and raised in Charleston's historic Maryville neighborhood, Dennis pays tribute to the Gullah-Geechee culture that pervades the region as well as just about every dish he creates.

West Africans brought the Gullah-Geechee culture to the Americas, and then propagated it throughout the West Indies and the American South. Dennis desires to reconnect "the dots in the Caribbean, eventually in West Africa, and bring the food ways all back together to Charleston. That's my end goal."

A graduate of the Culinary Institute of Charleston at Trident Technical College, Dennis has earned culinary

cred and gained visibility by serving popup dinners throughout the Charleston area; creating dishes for high-profile regional restaurants; participating in regional food festivals; and appearing on Bravo's "Top Chef," CNN's "Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown," and the PBS programs "Moveable Feast With Fine Cooking" and "Sarah's Weeknight Meals."

Dennis spent four years in the Virgin Islands, "not knowing that it's (the cuisine) similar to my cultural food. I loved it." He recently discovered another culinary link, this one between Charleston and the Caribbean, during a trip to Trinidad and Tobago.

"The rice that was there was indigenous to Africa, (and later) traveled to South Carolina and Georgia," he says. "Nobody thought the seed still existed in the Western Hemisphere."

He also encountered an island treat known as "monkey meat," which he learned to make. "It's very similar to the candy you see in African-American culture," Dennis notes.

In late 2017, he was compiling material to publish a cookbook that will undoubtedly contain recipes featuring okra – Dennis' favorite Low country/Gullah food that he eats all year. Asked which authentic Low country/Gullah meal he would cook for someone who's never been to the American South, Dennis was quick to respond:

"Fried okra, sautéed with onion and garlic; shrimp, local rice or okra soup (Low country gumbo)."

Dennis envisions opening "four or five establishments" in Charleston someday, where local storytellers can entertain guests as they sip on libations created by mixologists and dine on a variety of Low country / Gullah dishes – including those featuring his beloved okra.

## Sautéed Corn and Okra

- Olive or vegetable oil
- 4 cups of 1/4-inch slices of okra, preferably using small pods
- 3 cups fresh white or yellow corn kernels
- 1/2 cup onion, small dice
- 1 teaspoon garlic, minced
- 1 teaspoon hot pepper, minced, seeds removed (or keep them for more heat)
- Kosher salt and black pepper, or your favorite seafood-spice mix

Add just enough oil to cover the bottom of an 8-inch skillet and heat it over medium heat. Add the okra and cook, stirring frequently, for 3 to 5 minutes, or until browned and tender. (This might take a little longer if your okra pods are large.)

Remove the okra from the skillet and reserve. If needed, add more oil to the skillet and heat. Add the corn kernels and cook for 1 minute. Add the onion, garlic and hot pepper and cook, stirring frequently, for 2 minutes. Put the okra back in. Heat for 1 minute, or until hot through. Season to taste with salt and pepper or your desired seafood-spice mix.

*Makes 3 to 5 servings*

# Activist gardener's roots run deep and strong

In 2010, Ron Finley decided to turn a strip of city-owned land into a community garden in South Central Los Angeles. After a citation, fine and warrant for his arrest over the garden, word began to spread about Finley, aka the "Gangsta Gardener."

Thanks to a powerful Ted Talk he delivered in 2013 and a 2015 film, "Can You Dig This," Finley's message – that gardens are the key to inner-city health and other problems – gained a global audience.

"Most people don't get it. It's not just about food," Finley told *Unity* magazine. "It's not just about the gardens. A lot of people don't know they have the opportunity to change their lives. It's right underneath them. We have to have people realize that life comes out of the soil. We have to change culture ... food just happens to be part of our culture."

Legendary chef and food activist Alice Waters, among others, have shown their support of Finley's work.

Finley continues to spread his message about the merits of community gardening during talks around the world. He runs The Ron Finley Project, a nonprofit, and his Gangsta Garden yields such crops as sugarcane, Japanese sweet potatoes, artichokes, onions and cotton.

"I get to have these kinds of experiences in my life that are pretty incredible," Finley says. "I'm honored to be where I am, to know that I'm able to effect change."

*Unity* magazine spoke with Finley in late 2017. Here's more of what he shared.

**Q. Prior to becoming the "Gangsta Gardener," were you a gardener?**

A. No. I'm a fashion designer by trade. It (gardening) wasn't something that was burning in my heart. This just came basically from realizing how bad things were ... leaving my community (to buy healthy food) and realizing this is not normal.

**Q. How much time do you get to spend on your personal garden these days?**

A. Quite a bit, not what I want, but quite a bit.

**Q. Which fruit, vegetable or plant do you find the most challenging to grow?**

A. Ginger. (But) ginger can't beat me.



"We have to have people realize that life comes out of the soil," says Ron Finley. Photo courtesy of The Ron Finley Project

**Q. Do you have any idea how many seeds you plant – or how many fruits, vegetables and flowers you yield – each year?**

A. I don't, nor do I care. I leave that for the academics. ... I don't really need that quantifier. I already know that it's happening in Great Britain, Brazil, from Africa to Korea ..."

**Q. Is there one food item (snack, dessert, etc.) that you regularly ate before becoming the Gangsta Gardener that you've eliminated from your diet?**

A. I don't eat potato chips like I used to, that's for sure. ... I stopped eating fried food years and years ago. ... I try my best to eat clean.

**Q. Do you plan to write a book or cookbook? Any plans in the works for a regular TV show?**

A. Children's book, cookbook, book about myself. I'm not doing nothing until it's the right time and the right place. This is not a paper chase (and) I'm not motivated by money.

For more information on Finley and The Ron Finley Project, visit [www.ronfinley.com](http://www.ronfinley.com).

# A tip of the hat to female milliners

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Georgiette Morgan-Thomas' company, American Hats, manufactures hats in Pennsylvania. Photo courtesy of Georgiette Morgan-Thomas

Morgan-Thomas possesses more than 100 hats, which she stores in a small bedroom that's now a hat closet. Hat boxes, she says, are stacked two and three deep.

Not one of those hats was purchased in a department store. "I am very particular about my hats," says the longtime resident of Harlem. For years, Morgan-Thomas purchased hats from friend and designer Doris Ward. "I would go (to Ward's place) on Sundays after church ... and try on hats and end up buying three, four. I bought the majority of my hats from her and had hats made for me" by others.

In 2015, one of Morgan-Thomas' other friends tipped her off about Philadelphia's famed S&S Hat Co., which was up for sale. Without hesitation, Morgan-Thomas bought the failing company, invested more than \$100,000, took control in 2016 and rechristened it American Hats. Almost immediately, the company lost a \$32,000 annual order and one of its managers.

These days, three women design American Hats' products and a total of 12 workers produce and sell them. Production takes place at the factory in Pennsylvania; hats are sold to wholesalers and other small businesses, and to the public in a Harlem showroom and at <http://americanhatsllc.com>.

Morgan-Thomas commutes to the factory every Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday, immersing herself in a range of responsibilities: "handling many of the orders, making sure that the tickets are written up for production, doing the bookkeeping, ordering the supplies," she says. "I (also) field calls when individuals call to get information."

The company sold 5,600 hats in 2016; in late 2017, it was on par to sell about 7,000.

Hats for women are its mainstay, naturally, but there's something for male customers, too: a hat collection that debuted in 2016. Morgan-Thomas says the men's line "is not anywhere near our women's hat market, but the wonderful thing about it is that men are just showing up to buy" from American Hats' line of toppers for guys.

Morgan-Thomas says the Philadelphia factory has "the capacity to hire 34 to 36 people. We have the stations already set up. It's just a matter of bringing people in. A big part of this (business venture) is to train people in this art form to keep it alive, and to provide jobs."

She's also engaged in talks about opening a factory in Harlem. If all goes well, that facility could open in spring 2019.

On the day that Morgan-Thomas spoke to *Unity*, she was sporting a black fedora embellished with satin, metallic-coated ribbon. A recognizable figure in Harlem because of her high-profile professional and community roles – and, of course, her hats – there's only one way for Morgan-Thomas to avoid attention on the streets.

"If I don't want to be seen," she says with a laugh, "I go outside with a ponytail" – and no hat atop her head.



Hats and African-American women go hand in hand.